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Waters and Fay, Introduction

Politics, Sexualities, and New Feminist Scholarship
Winning and short-listed entries for the 2006 Feminist and Women's Studies
Association (UK and Ireland) Annual Student Essay Competition

By Melanie Waters¹ with Michaela Fay²

This special issue features the winning and short-listed entries from the 2006 Feminist and Women's Studies Association (FWSA) annual student essay competition. This competition – now an established institution within the feminist community – seeks to promote innovative and interdisciplinary work by a new generation of feminist scholars. Open to candidates at all British and Irish universities, at any stage of study, the competition plays an increasingly vital role in supporting new feminist scholarship, and in doing so it provides an excellent insight into the state of feminist theory and practice within the academy.

Now in its twenty-first year, the FWSA is more committed than ever to investing in upcoming scholars; as an organization, it not only administers the Student Essay Competition, but also sponsors a number of postgraduate seminars, which have worked to nurture close links between junior scholars working in different institutions. While the mainstream media persists in criticising feminism for its failure to appeal to young women, the student essay competition has, since its inception, revealed the extent to which feminist discourses inform the work of those who fall squarely within this demographic. Despite the gradual disappearance of dedicated women's studies programmes from academic curricula, then, the latest generation of scholars, working across a range of disciplines, are continuing to engage with feminism in varied and inventive ways.

The Essays

While the essays in this special issue are fully reflective of the vibrant diversity by which the field of contemporary feminist scholarship is characterized, they are nonetheless vexed by some common concerns: What is the scope of feminism in the early years of the twenty-first century? How can it assist in illuminating the complex convergences of gender and politics? To what extent has feminism come to inform the operations of formal and informal political institutions? Equally, each of the short-listed essays works to excavate the ways in which gender intersects with ethnicity, sexuality, empowerment, and cultural representation.

In the winning entry, “‘The darkness is the closet in which you lover roots her heart’: Lesbians, Desire and the Gothic Genre”, Sarah Parker brings contemporary scholarship by Eve Sedgwick, Patricia Smith and Gayle Rubin to bear upon two Gothic novels: *Nightwood* (1936) by Djuna Barnes and *Affinity* (1999) by Sarah Waters. Foregrounding the threat that lesbianism poses to the cultural order, Parker productively reconsiders the representation of sexuality in *Nightwood* and *Affinity* in relation to the

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Gothic elements of these narratives. More explicitly, Parker argues that Barnes and Waters each deploy Gothic tropes in their fiction in order to 'subvert the repressive system that keeps lesbianism in its place'. Utilizing material gleaned from her personal correspondence with Waters, Parker usefully explores the author's rendering of the relationship between sensuality and spirituality in *Affinity*, and interrogates the ways in which both she and Barnes engage with the concept of the 'apparitional lesbian'.

Zoë Brigley, in 'Confessing the Secrets of Others: Pascale Petit's Poetic Employment of Latin American Cultures and the Mexican Artist, Frida Kahlo', analyzes the politics of women's 'confessional' writing through detailed reference to Petit's *The Zoo Father* (2001) and *The Wounded Deer* (2005). Drawing attention to the vexed relationship of femininity and victimhood, Brigley examines the strategies by which Petit attempts to problematize gendered distinctions between activity and passivity, public and private, and truth and fiction. Focalizing Petit's deployment of imagery from Latin American mythology, and the life and work of Frida Kahlo in particular, Brigley proceeds to show how Petit's transposition of her intimate disclosures to new cultural settings works to transform 'private wars' into 'public conflicts'.

In 'Body and the Text/Body of the Text in Mina Loy's *Songs to Joannes*', Lucia Pietroiusti considers the eponymous poetic sequence through the lens of theoretical paradigms developed by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. More specifically, Pietroiusti proposes that Loy's fragmentation of the love lyric in *Songs to Joannes* (1917) constitutes a self-conscious attempt to develop a poetry that confounds traditional, 'linear' strategies of reading. Here, Loy's fragmentation and reconfiguration of the love lyric – both at the level of content and form – is understood as giving rise to contradictions that gesture towards the poet's anticipatory engagement with questions regarding the relationship between women and language that would later become central to second-wave feminism.

Cera Murtagh's essay explores the political landscape of Northern Ireland through close reference to the interplay of formal and informal spheres. Re-imagining the meanings of 'public' and 'private', Murtagh investigates the relationship of gender and politics through the rise and fall of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC). Foregrounding the ways in which women have been alienated from formal political structures, Murtagh shows how, despite the odds of an adverse, polarized political climate, Northern Irish women seized the opportunity for public involvement.

Emily Marchese's 'No Women Allowed: Exclusion and Accountability in Men's Anti-Rape Groups' examines the implications of women's physical and discursive exclusion from men's anti-rape organizations. In this powerful account, Marchese demonstrates how the exclusionary manoeuvres of these groups can work to drain the gendered issue of rape of its feminist political identity. Marchese proceeds to argue that the various discursive framings which result from this segregationist approach to activism not only risk negating the important intersections of gender, power and inequality that take place within acts of rape, but also work to subvert and/or foreclose the possibility of potentially helpful anti-rape work.

Finally, Sofia Sanchez-Grant's essay, 'The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and the *Edible Woman*', examines the increasing currency of the concept of embodiment within ongoing debates about femininity and popular culture. Drawing on

recent scholarship by Susan Bordo, Barbara Brook, and Katie Conboy, Sanchez-Grant investigates the extent to which the fiction of Margaret Atwood seeks to interrogate traditional patriarchal formulations of the female body, and the space it occupies within the world. With close reference to two novels – *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) – Sanchez-Grant analyzes Atwood's attempts to offer new, alternative accounts of female embodiment, and asks whether or not these imaginative reconfigurations of the sexed body represent the feminist re-scripting of patriarchal culture more broadly.

We hope that the following essays will go on to inspire students to submit their own work for consideration for next year's competition. For more information on the FWSA, and the student essay competition in particular, please go to the FWSA website at www.fwsa.org.uk.