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Celia Roberts

Melanie Waters

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Identity, Difference and New Feminisms: Introduction

Winning and short-listed entries for the 2005 Feminist and Women's Studies Association, U.K. Annual Essay Competition

By Celia Roberts¹ and Melanie Waters²

Feminist scholarship continues to have a high currency within and beyond the academy, and for this reason, there remains an unprecedented demand for spaces in which this scholarship can be shared, questioned, and evaluated. The organizers of this year's Feminist and Women's Studies Association's (FWSA) 20th Annual Conference, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, for example, received almost two hundred abstracts in response to their recent call for papers. Similarly, the *New Femininities* conference, sponsored by the Economical and Social Research Council, and coordinated by staff at the London School of Economics, filled its delegate quota within a matter of days. This special issue of the Journal of International Women's Studies showcasing new feminist scholarship from across the UK and Ireland provides another such space. The essays that feature here are the winning and short-listed entries for the 2005 FWSA annual essay competition—a competition designed specifically to encourage and give voice to a new generation of academics whose work is anchored in feminist theory and practice. The short-listed essays, which explore issues of gender through reference to areas including international politics, the media, literary fiction, and new technologies, both reflect the interdisciplinary character of the FWSA and testify to the high standard of feminist scholarship that is being produced across these various disciplines. This is nowhere more apparent than in the winning essay, Corinne Fowler's examination of gender and journalistic praxis in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom.

As in previous years, this special issue goes to print amidst ongoing concerns about the current state of feminism and women's studies, both within and beyond the academy. Article after article suggests that young women are disillusioned by, or simply apathetic about, the concerns and objectives that structure feminist theory and practice. This disillusionment, if it exists, is not evident here. Rather, these essays demonstrate the enthusiasm and rigour with which new scholars continue to engage with the principles, politics, and problematics of feminist thought; furthermore, they gesture towards the ways in which the discursive parameters of feminism might be extended to take account of the impact of new technologies upon the role and representation of gender within contemporary cultures.

The Essays

While the essays reproduced here accurately reflect the diverse face of feminism in the early years of the twenty-first century, they are nonetheless striated by some common concerns—concerns that swirl around the convergence of gender with issues of race, religion, sexuality, new technologies and, most overwhelmingly, representation.

¹ Celia Roberts is a lecturer in sociology at Lancaster University.

² Melanie Waters is a doctoral candidate at Newcastle University.

The winning entry, Corinne Fowler's 'Journalists in Feminist Clothing: Men and Women Reporting Afghan Women during Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001', productively reconsiders the contemporary cultural significance of the *burqua* alongside its representation in the Western media. Taking into account the complex and dynamic interaction between global politics and gender politics, Fowler examines the ways in which the *burqua* has come to function within certain sections of the media as an unambiguous symbol of female oppression. While foregrounding the centrality of the *burqua* to the rhetoric of liberation that has been used to justify the presence of U.S. and U.K. forces in Afghanistan, Fowler usefully complicates conventional readings of this controversial garment and the women who wear it.

Like Fowler's work, Alexandra Murphy's essay, 'The Missing Rhetoric of Gender in Responses to Abu Ghraib', is inspired by the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and, more specifically, how this conflict and its various consequences have been mediated to Western audiences. Focusing on the widespread press coverage of photographs depicting the torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of American soldiers in the Abu Ghraib facility, near Baghdad, Murphy interrogates the absence of gender as a category of analysis in journalistic and critical interpretations of *what is happening* in the images.

In 'As You Wear: Cross-dressing and Identity Politics in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*', Alice Walker outlines and interrogates contemporary theoretical approaches to cross-dressing and identity through detailed reference to Kay's fictional text. As Walker demonstrates, the act of cross-dressing is not classifiable through recourse to the binary oppositions that structure Western metaphysical space; it is, rather, an act that destabilizes these binary categories by foregrounding the potential plurality and fluidity of individual identity.

The relationship between identity and literature also forms the major focus of Stephen Howard's essay, 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: Reflections on the Self in Virginia Woolf'. Here, Howard analyses the role of reflection in Woolf's writing through close readings of Woolf's autobiographical memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past', and her 1931 novel *The Waves*. It is in her use of reflective imagery, he argues, that Woolf illuminates the vexed relationship between identity, gender, language, and self-representation.

Identity is explored in a very different context in Terri He's essay on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) online communities in Taiwan. Providing a fascinating and detailed account of LGBT use of the internet and the responses of the Taiwanese government and police to such use, He argues that studies of online communities need to pay much greater attention both to LGBT users and to communities in 'non-western and non-dominant' countries like Taiwan. This argument is convincing and He's paper constitutes an important step forward in opening up the field of internet studies to feminist, queer and Asian critical scholarship.

Amy Hinterberger's essay, 'Feminism and the Politics of Representation: Toward a critical and ethical encounter with "others"' examines cultural constructions of non-Western people in a more philosophical vein. Working with a number of key feminist and post-colonial theorists, Hinterberger investigates the risky terrain of engaging with 'others' and explores how feminist theorists might represent 'others' in ways that both recognise difference and foster ethical connections or conversations. These are perennially difficult questions for feminist theory, but ones that have taken on new

significance today, Hinterberger argues, as feminist arguments about the oppression of women are taken up in the service of other interests (as discussed in Fowler's essay). Like Fowler, Hinterberger suggests that feminists must engage critically with discourses that claim to represent 'others', and attempt to re-imagine what a relation of ethical representation might look like.

We hope readers will enjoy these essays and that students will feel inspired to submit their own work for consideration in next year's competition. For more information, please go to the FWSA website at www.fwsa.org.uk.