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Introduction: New British Feminist Scholarship and Contemporary Politics

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Introduction

Kristin Aune¹ and Celia Roberts²

This issue contains winning and short-listed entries from the Feminist and Women's Studies Association's 2004 annual essay competition. The competition was established to encourage a new generation of feminist scholars and to provide a prize and space for publication for student writing that is innovative, interdisciplinary and grounded in feminist theory and practice. The prize is £200 and a year's membership of the FWSA. This year's winner in the postgraduate category was Karin Webster, and in the undergraduate category, Sara Howe. The other papers published here are the five runners up.

The publication of this issue provides a suitable forum to remark on the contemporary nature of 'young' academic feminism in the UK context. In the UK, articulations about the demise of feminism and young women's complicity in this are ubiquitous. Whether uttered in journalistic comment, through the (implicit feminism-is-over) Girl Power rhetoric of popular culture in which the goals of feminism are considered satisfied by contemporary consumer culture, or by established feminist scholars, young women are regularly proclaimed dissociated from feminism.³ Sometimes they are perceived in generational terms as the rebellious, ungrateful daughters of their purer feminist mothers, as the watered-down third wavers who unthinkingly combine botox and birth control or pole dancing with politics.⁴ Young women's lack of involvement in student feminist politics is also bemoaned, when factors entirely other than disinterest in feminist or women's issues are responsible. The decline of traditional student feminist politics is more due to the changing nature of higher education, the loss of the grant and students' need to get part-time jobs to support themselves. And the other side of the story remains, that the National Union of Students' Women's Campaign is alive and kicking, the student-run yearly FEM conferences a recent, and welcome, arrival. The demise of undergraduate women's studies in the UK is sometimes associated with young women's lack of interest, when complex high-level management decisions at higher education institutions, poor marketing at secondary and post-16 level, and a push towards more obviously career-oriented degrees bear more responsibility.

And often, when young women do and say all the 'right' things, it's still not enough. Young academic women are considered just that – young. Unlike their feminist foremothers (who, ironically, started their academic careers on the whole far less qualified than today's young scholars), their expertise is considered insufficient. The difficulty of taking young academic women seriously: often lacking tenure or PhDs, their early jobs are short-term contracts for periods as short as nine months or they are sessional lecturers paid by and for the hour they teach. And we must not forget that the demise of undergraduate women's studies also represents fewer jobs for young feminist

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³ McRobbie (2005) is a recent example of this. For a longer critique and discussion of the central issues see Looser & Kaplan 1997.

⁴ See Tyler 2005 for an analysis of media representations of contemporary feminists as narcissistic.

scholars, many of whom are trained in a field we can no longer find employment in. The creativity involved in repositioning oneself into another discipline is familiar to many of us. Becoming published has become harder in these days when the RAE is all-important and publishers even more likely to decline proposals based on Ph.D. theses in preference for marketable text books written by more established figures.

It is both surprising and regrettable that young feminists are criticized when held back by structural issues beyond their power to change. These structural factors, strengthened by those questioning our academic feminist legitimacy, position – even silence - young academic women as less than legitimate despite our desire to continue, and pioneer in new areas of, feminist scholarship.

The FWSA has an important role to play in supporting new and young feminist scholars, and to continue to promote the vibrancy of feminist scholarship and women's studies as a discipline. Indeed, the organization is predominantly run by younger and more junior women, providing excellent opportunities for the development of skills and networking. Our members are also increasingly younger scholars: in 2004-5 we gained 85 new members, 62 of whom are students. The FWSA's postgraduate seminar series has been one of our most successful ventures in recent years in recruiting student members and working to develop the postgraduate feminist community. Postgraduate students at the London School of Economics and the Universities of Lancaster and York organized three linked day seminars in 2004-5, all of which were extremely successful events. These seminars focused on the future of women's studies, sexuality and identity, and feminism and fashion. The most recent postgraduate seminar, 'From Pornography to Politics', organised by a group of young feminist academics at the University of Newcastle, revisited a core topic of feminist scholarship and activism in the 1980s and beyond.

It is not just postgraduates in gender and women's studies and junior employed academics who continue to demonstrate a strong focus on the core concerns of feminist and women's studies. As evidenced by the essays published here, undergraduate students are working on feminist topics, with feminist methodologies and theories, in diverse disciplines including English literature, history, politics, philosophy, sociology, law, and cultural and media studies. The popularity of gender and feminist modules within such disciplinary locations is a significant phenomenon that belies the suggestion that young women are not interested in feminist issues.

The essays

The FWSA is committed to investing in new scholars: indeed, the essays in this volume represent the fruit of some of this investment. The topics covered here show that both undergraduate and postgraduate students continue to be deeply engaged with core issues in feminist theory and politics and in continuing to challenge the nature and extent of feminism itself. Questions are raised here as to what feminism is, what it has to say about significant life questions and contemporary political situations, and how it can grow to fit new generations and new cultural configurations.

Five linking themes run across these essays, namely sexuality, bodies, difference, reproduction and representation. These themes are addressed at numerous levels and sites, ranging from the personal, intimate experience of embodiment to questions concerning national and international level politics. In each case, the writer engages with

existing feminist work in the area and opens up new questions based on empirical examples: life stories and experimental writing (Lobo); legal judgments (Webster); political activism (Rodie); popular culture (Howe); literature (Davies and Evans), and international humanitarian aid (Gurd).

Natasha Lobo's essay is a witty and theoretically informed experimental piece. Her use of lyrics from popular music and humorous personal confessions mediate a contemporary form of *écriture féminine*. This text takes the reader into a space of youthful feminist embodiment, raising important questions about sexuality, biology, pleasure and anxiety and their relations to normative femininities.

Like Lobo, Sara Howe, Karin Webster and Nicola Rodie all deal with questions of sexuality, bodies and reproduction, but approach these from different disciplinary angles and through other forms of writing practice. In an analysis of the 'motherist' politics of the Argentinean group, the Madres de la Plaza Mayo, Howe asks how women's reproductive bodies and identities as mothers (of disappeared adult children) produces a particular kind of feminist politics. Do these activists produce an exclusionary or essentialist approach to the vexed question of the significance of female embodiment to feminism?

Webster's essay, which analyses two recent legal cases concerning the use of embryos in reproductive medicine, also raises questions concerning women's reproductive bodies. Arguing that British law conceived women's bodies in normative terms (as forms of nature), Webster demonstrates how the labour involved in undergoing IVF is systematically belied in legal debate about new reproductive technologies. IVF, she argues, provides a significant challenge to the normative conception of bodies within contemporary legal discourse.

Rodie's work addresses the representation of women's bodies in popular visual culture. Critically analyzing several episodes from the television sitcom, *Sex and the City*, Rodie argues that the series creates a space for the contemporary single woman living in New York through its creative use of highly sexualized clothing. Mimicking a kind of transvestitism, *Sex and the City* figures contemporary femininity as something that can be played with, enjoyed and transgressed, but that nonetheless signals an underlying 'truth' of female sex/ sexuality.

Questions of representation of a female identity or self are also central to the essays by Rachel Evans and Ceri Davies. Coming from feminist literary studies, Evans and Davies raise conceptual issues through close examinations of literary texts. Evan's essay discusses women's self-representation within the Romantic period, analysing the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen. These writers, she argues, were concerned to represent themselves and other women as capable, rational beings. By so doing, Evans argues, they subverted contemporary gender categories, producing a space for creative questioning of restrictive social norms.

Davies' essay takes these questions into contemporary literature, asking how sexed bodies are represented in Scottish writer Jackie Kay's *The Trumpet*. This novel, about a cross-dressing trumpet player named Joss Moody, explores issues relating to sexual identity, personal and public modes of embodied, gendered performance, and questions of trust, love and loyalty. Davies' astute reading of this novel provides a valuable critical discussion of this important book, exploring in particular the ways in

which Joss' wife, Millie, deals with her feelings about her relationship after Joss' death exposes their shared secret (that he is biologically a woman).

In some senses, Kiri Gurd's piece on humanitarian aid stands apart from the other essays in this volume. Concerned with political questions in the area of development studies, and theoretical concerns around 'the incommensurable', this essay takes a broad angle view, unafraid to try out arguments about an enormous and extremely significant field of contemporary life: how the developed world can best provide assistance to the developing world. There are important links here with the other essays around the question of politics and activism, and how these relate to questions of embodiment and difference.

In each case, these essays inspire faith in the future of feminist and women's studies in Britain. We hope you will enjoy reading them!

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