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Introduction: Winning and Short listed Essays from the Second Annual Essay Competition of the Feminist and Women's Studies Association

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By Kristin Aune and Karen Throsby¹

Introduction

This special issue showcases the winning and short listed essays from the second annual essay competition of the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK and Ireland) (FWSA). Formerly the Women's Studies Network (UK), the renaming in 2004 of the organisation as the FWSA represents a number of changes that are currently taking place in the constituency and work of the organisation.

Firstly, the relaunched organisation includes those working in feminist and women's studies in Ireland, expanding its overall constituency and recognising explicitly the mobility of people, scholarship and activism between the UK and Ireland. Secondly, the new name represents an attempt to include more explicitly the large number of people involved in feminist research and activism outside of the specific context of women's studies departments. Thirdly, the transition to the FWSA marks the expansion of the activities of the organisation. This includes, for example, increased engagement with the media and the creation of a new seminar series organised by, and run for, postgraduates. This is in addition to the continuation of existing member benefits including an annual international conference, a biannual newsletter, access to an e-mail discussion list and, of course, the essay competition.

The final catalyst for the relaunch of the organisation is the ongoing struggle for institutional recognition and support faced by women's and gender studies centres in the academy in the UK. Unfortunately, although it is still possible to take a wide variety of excellent women's and gender studies courses in higher education institutions across the country, in 2004 we witnessed the demise of the only remaining single honours undergraduate degree programme, meaning that it is now no longer possible to leave university with a degree in women's studies. However, the story is not all gloom, and women's and gender studies courses and degrees at graduate level continue to recruit strongly, although often without adequate institutional support, requiring extraordinary commitment from the staff involved. The FWSA, therefore, aims to promote feminist research, teaching and studying at the level of policy, the media and institutions, whilst hoping to facilitate the conditions for support and productive collaboration among feminists in the academy. It is for this reason that the opportunity to publish this special issue in the international context of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* is so important to the FWSA and its members, since it provides students with an opportunity to locate themselves within the wider international community of feminists through which those networks can develop.

Whilst our representation of the state of feminist and women's studies may seem a little bleak, the essay competition offers much cause for optimism, highlighting reach of feminist scholarship across disciplines and fields of study. The promotional material for the competition asks for 'work that carries on the Women's Studies traditions of innovation, interdisciplinarity and feminist challenges to mainstream academic

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conventions' – a remit that is clearly met by the winning and short listed entries included here. There were two judging categories – undergraduate and graduate – with prizes of £100 going to the winner of each category. In particular, special thanks go to Irene Gedalof, who co-ordinated the competition, and to Margareta Jolly for acting as the external judge on the final judging panel, which also included FWSA executive committee members Karen Throsby and Louise Livesey. At the end of the process, and after much discussion, our two winners were finally announced: in the undergraduate category, Penny Halliday, and in the postgraduate category, Michaela Fay. Our warmest congratulations go to both of them. Their essays were selected from a shortlist of three from each category, which also included, in the undergraduate category, Roxanne Grimmatt and Rachael Wright, and in the postgraduate category, Cate Barron and Eliza Sellen.

These six essays are included in this special issue, and are presented in alphabetical order by surname in order to avoid any suggestion of hierarchical ordering between undergraduate and postgraduate, or between short listed essays that did not win. The following section introduces briefly each of the essays, and this is followed by a short discussion of some of themes and commonalities, which unexpectedly arose from such a diverse collection of papers.

The Essays

Cate Barron

Tussles Over Gendered Spaces and Assertions of Female Presence in Anne Le Marquand Hartigan's Play *The Secret Game*

Cate Barron's essay is a close reading of a single, unpublished play – *The Secret Game* - written by English-born, Irish Catholic writer and artist, Ann Le Marquand Hartigan. The essay was extracted from her Ph.D. research on Hartigan's work, and focuses on the complex gendered and spatial power struggles between an accidental female hostage (Chris) and a gunman (Noel), who was taking overnight refuge in a barn (where the play is primarily set). The only other character present in the play is the hostage's aunt (the owner of the barn), who is on stage throughout the play, in a pool of light that represents the farmhouse, where the aunt is oblivious to events in the barn. The interaction between Chris and Noel is contextualised within the often-violent politics of Northern Ireland, and within gendered power struggles for public and political space, both linguistically and in relation to the female body. Through a close reading of the text, Barron argues that Hartigan offers statements of female resistance to the 'spatial disinheritance of women' by focusing on the 'secret games' of language, of indoctrination through childhood games and of power struggles, which highlight the fragility of women's rights to bodily autonomy and linguistic and social space. The play, Barron argues, counters these 'games' through the sustained physical presence of the women on stage, through the inescapable presence of the menstruating female body and through an appeal to 'female-respecting values', re-centring women as resistant to 'normative male behaviour and actions'.

Michaela Fay

Refracting Mothertongues: Considering Mobility Through Language

Michaela Fay's winning essay draws on an ethnographic case study of the International Women's University 'Technology and Culture' 2000 (*ifu*) – a 100 day long gathering of almost 1000 feminist scholars drawn from across the globe. The goal of *ifu* was to engage in a multicultural dialogue, and to 'facilitate transnational exchange and networking amongst the next generations of internationally mobile and versatile feminist scholars, professionals and artists.' Conducted entirely in English, *ifu* required not only transnational mobility, but also linguistic competence. Drawing on ethnographic data from *ifu*, Fay explores the relationship between language and mobility by focusing on three very different, but overlapping case studies. The first of these, Turkish-born Ayla, retains a strong emotional attachment to her mother tongue, using Turkish to express emotion, and continuing to dream in Turkish (as well as cook Turkish food and follow Turkish news) in spite of describing herself as an 'international drifter'. The second case study is Adele – a Russian immigrant to Israel. Fay describes Adele's efforts to disconnect herself from Russia, linguistically and culturally – a form of discursive work that is related by Fay to Adele's coming out as a lesbian at the time of her emigration, and the rejection of Russian hyper-femininity that this required. Importantly, however, Fay also highlights Adele's recourse to what she describes as a 'very "Russian" repertoire', indicating her status as simultaneously both outside and within. The final case study differs slightly from the first two, focusing on a mailing list discussion between members of the '*ifu* diaspora', once the event was over. Fay's discussion focuses on a description of a physical encounter between two German participants, who, dislocated from the English-speaking *ifu* context spoke German together for the first time – a disconcerting experience which rendered their shared mother tongue a 'strange language'. The ethnographic data which Fay draws upon to construct the three vignettes forms the basis for a theoretical reconsideration of the relationship between language and mobility, reconfiguring that relationship not in static or mono-linear terms, but as dynamic and unpredictable. In doing so, she offers a persuasive challenge to the idea that it is mobility that influences the relationship with language, arguing instead that language also shapes mobility – a theorisation that speaks to the growing internationalisation and mobility of academic feminism.

Roxanne Grimmer

'By heaven and hell': Re-evaluating representations of women and the angel/whore dichotomy in Renaissance revenge tragedy

Roxanne Grimmer's essay explores the treatment of female characters in Renaissance revenge tragedy through an examination of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Grimmer takes as her subject the angel/whore dichotomy with which women in early modern culture were commonly identified. She understands both plays as occasions for revealing and subverting this gendered dichotomy. Kyd and Shakespeare are shown by Grimmer to have levelled the gender differentiated representation of women and men: as male heroes are portrayed as multi-faceted and even in their murderous personas are always more than either righteous or immoral, so are female characters. Although male characters' ability to express the range of human emotions was culturally unproblematic, unlike women's, men who

support the early modern angel/whore binary do not escape the playwrights' censure. Unperceptive male characters are not those who gain the audience's sympathy. But Kyd and Shakespeare's work is not utopian. If they allow their heroines greater scope and colour, these women's future misfortunes show up the difficulty of existing on the boundaries of female stereotypes, and Kyd and Shakespeare's demonstration of this suggests criticism of their culture's attitudes to women. Gertrude, Ophelia and Bel-Imperia die, their deaths suggesting the impossibility of living in an unregulated space; this space of 'nothing' and 'nowhere' does not, perhaps cannot, exist.

Grimmett's essay raises important questions about how far transgression really is transgressive – the question asked by Elizabeth Wilson in her 1993 essay 'Is transgression transgressive?' If transgression is confined to the play, can it spill out beyond the stage? As Wilson wonders, does transgression of gendered norms depend upon its opposite, the retention of such norms? And does that serve to reinforce the binary as much as it seeks to challenge it? Can transgression form the basis for a complete feminist politics?

Penny Halliday

What sort of mental health problems are experienced by women in contemporary British society? What do different feminist perspectives offer as alleviation?

The social construction of women's mental health in contemporary Britain is the subject of Penny Halliday's essay. Halliday employs the sociological distinction between medical and social models of mental health and illness, explored memorably by Thomas Szasz, who pointed out that madness is a social construct and a way of defining behaviour that is perceived as unacceptable. She draws on work of feminists including Phyllis Chesler, Elaine Showalter and Jane Ussher and incorporates reflections from literary material. Halliday produces a gendered analysis of women's mental ill health. The gender of those labelled mentally ill guides how their experiences of mental distress are interpreted: women are much more likely than men to be diagnosed with mental health problems and to be admitted to psychiatric institutions. Furthermore, the gender of those who do this labelling – generally men – has a bearing on the labels produced, and Halliday traces some of the history of diagnoses back to common assumptions about femininity in the Victorian era. But Halliday is not (or not simply) a poststructuralist, and she is concerned that material inequalities women face are often the prompts for mental ill health. Social construction of mental health involves not only construction through language; social processes and structures surrounding women's lives are equally influential. Halliday provides a radical feminist analysis concerned with the patriarchal control of women that occurs in the process of designating a woman mentally ill: women are seen as ill, she says, because femininity itself is pathologised, and this pathologisation is a way in which men may exercise control over women. Halliday simultaneously keeps a focus on key factors responsible for women's mental health problems, notably sexual abuse, violence and poverty, showing that constructions arise out of material conditions and are not simply linguistic. Halliday recognises that other social structures, including ethnicity, class and sexuality, cut across and complicate women's gendered experiences. Women who are unemployed, engaged in low-paid, low-value work, bringing up children alone or living in poor housing conditions are particularly vulnerable to mental health

problems. So too are black and minority ethnic women, married women, lesbians and disabled women.

So can solutions be provided to this situation? Halliday recommends a strategy that combines liberal, socialist and radical feminist approaches and commends recent government work in this area. Education is needed to improve the public perception of mental health distress, she argues, while the government must work to equalise women's pay and offer women living in poverty greater welfare provision. Women's needs should also be tackled on an individual level, and Halliday offers the example of a Norfolk project where women with mental health problems are not only listened to but are also given ownership of the service and helped to grow in skills and confidence.

Eliza Sellen

Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott: Rapping on the Frontiers of Female Identity

Unusual among the essays, Eliza Sellen's paper draws on popular culture, offering a detailed analysis of the music, lyrics and videos of rap musician, Missy Elliott. Sellen argues that Missy Elliott 'subverts and revises cultural signifiers', focusing on issues of female embodiment, sexuality, blackness and power to illustrate and develop the textual analysis of two music videos – *One Minute Man* and *She's a Bitch*. Using the theoretical frameworks of science fiction and technology to explore the visual landscapes of the videos, and drawing on the work of Christine Battersby, Sellen argues that Elliott's work constitutes a creative articulation of female identity as fluid, re-constructed and always provisional. The argument is explored via the endless reconfigurations of Elliott's own identity in the music videos. Through vivid description of sections of the videos, Sellen shows how Elliott represents herself variously as sexual, but always challenging the normative passivity of female sexuality; as embracing blackness (through the use of 'blackface') as a means of insisting upon the 'gaze' in her own terms; as martial, powerful and combative; and as a cyborg, moving constantly within and outside of the bounded body. The paper concludes with Elliott's most recent incarnation, following noticeable weight loss and a shift towards soft colours and more realistic and overtly politicised videos – an identity which Sellen describes, using Battersby's term, as an 'arrestation of flow', but which she speculates will be yet again reconfigured over time. This lack of containment is, for Sellen, a necessary and desirable feature of Elliott and her work, rendering the musician an 'enigma' defined by endless 'moments of identity', rather than established or enduring configurations. As the title of the paper suggests, this places Elliott at 'the frontiers of female identity', occupying a boundary location replete with both risk and possibility. Importantly, it is in this fluidity that Sellen locates Elliott's politics, highlighting the disruptive and challenging nature of her playful and provisional appropriations of cultural symbols of embodied masculinity and femininity, blackness, sexuality, power and technology.

Rachael Wright

The silencing of women: The abortion laws and religion

Rachael Wright examines the impact of Roman Catholicism on the legal and ethical frameworks surrounding the abortion debate in Ireland and, most importantly, on women's ability to articulate their claims to personhood and choice. It is a sad irony that though debates about abortion have concentrated on when personhood can be said to

begin, it is women (whose personhood is not supposedly not questioned) who are denied their rights to full citizenship when their desire to make their own choices are withheld.

One impetus for the current debates around abortion in Ireland is Roman Catholic teaching about women, sin and sexuality – teaching that has arisen from Christian tradition and a selective interpretation of the Bible, Wright points out. Women are blamed for the ‘fall from Eden’ and as ‘sites of temptation and sin’ their bodies have been viewed as needing control through chastity, marriage and motherhood. To decide not to give birth is to transgress. These ideas have percolated through Irish culture through the churches nearly 90% of the population regularly attend and through Roman Catholic influence on the education and medical systems. Moreover, anti-abortion activists have seized upon theology in order to advance their cause, arguing that the life God gives at conception must be guarded and protected, and have influenced the passage of anti-abortion legislation based upon this theology. Even when liberalisation occurs to these abortion laws, such as the Eighth Amendment, Article 40,3,3 of the Constitution of Ireland, which acknowledges that both the woman and the foetus possess rights, in this situation of competing rights it is the woman who loses out since her right to choose is overruled by the law’s duty to decide whether to permit that choice. Wright uses two examples, the Grogan case and the X case, to illustrate recent developments in Irish abortion law, paying particular attention to the interplay of religion and issues of personhood and rights.

Wright is concerned about the impact these laws have upon women who have had abortions. Laws impact upon individual women, and decisions they make about their own pregnancies and abortions cannot be detached from the social context of Roman Catholic Ireland. Seen as ‘social pariahs’ if they ‘go public’ about these experiences, women are conditioned into silence – a silence, Wright believes, that denies their citizenship and personhood.

Language, constraint and resistance

These six essays were submitted independent of any linking theme and should be read in their own individual contexts. Yet if one theme could be said to provide some sort of connection between them, it is language. In different ways, all six writers touch or concentrate on how language operates to constrain or (less often) enable women’s freedom.

Grimmett writes of the influence of the early modern angel/whore dichotomy and the difficulties it created for women seeking definition outside its parameters. Women’s speech and actions were constrained according to this Renaissance binary such that, as Maureen Quilligan (211) puts it: ‘The triple injunction to be “Chaste, Silent, and Obedient” is the fundamental tenet for the social control of the female’. Quilligan’s assertion that ‘sexual order is ensured by policing language’ applies beyond the scope of the early modern stage, as the six essay writers demonstrate. For Barron, the gunman in Hartigan’s play symbolises male control of public space and language, and much of the play involves him ‘chasing the female out of the social space of language.’ His linguistic bullying of the female characters is so ‘normal’ that it requires feminist analysis to question and problematise it.

Wright is troubled by the Roman Catholic church’s role in manipulating legal and theological language to deny women choices and, consequently and implicitly, to deny

them citizenship. It is difficult for women to articulate their own experiences, for if they do so they are heard as transgressors of a more influential patriarchal discourse. Halliday also concentrates on women who are constrained by patriarchal discourses, this time in the case of mental health, where labelling according to the medical model of mental health and illness prevents analysis and critique of the gendered social inequalities that prompt women's mental distress. While in Wright's example pregnant women must act to abort or continue their pregnancies under the social conditions produced by restrictive legal and theological discourse, in Halliday's case women cannot experience their mental health problems without being implicated in an oppressive medical language.

Fay's essay is most directly concerned with language. She uses vignettes from the *ifu* gathering to explore how reflections about language serve to create the mobile social; in so doing she takes debates about the relationship between language and the social an important step further than most. *Ifu* was a women's gathering, and her empirical examples hint at the many degrees of freedom and constraint experienced and linguistically enacted by *ifu*'s women participants.

If one takes a Foucauldian approach to language, it is also important to recognise possibilities of resistance to dominant discourses. The authors of these essays do this to varying degrees, attentive to the fact that differing social contexts make resistance more or less possible. Perhaps the impact of an identifiable feminist movement has encouraged women's resistance.

Grimmett writes of a period before such a named movement, but nevertheless shows how female characters were offered (albeit by male playwrights) the temporary space of the playhouse through which, through language, they might demonstrate ambivalence towards and subversion of stereotypes of femininity. For Halliday, as one hopes for the Irish women Wright focuses on, there are small possibilities of resistance: feminist analyses have entered state discourse about mental health, and projects with feminist ethos are contributing to women's empowerment.

For Sellen, Missy Elliott exploded onto the rap music scene in the late 1990s to assert an empowered Jamaican female identity in the face of an industry where men's representations of women dominate. Her lyrics express the voice of working-class urban American women and Elliott uses them to construct a powerful sexual subjectivity. How far women can use the language of men who have defined them problematically is a question Sellen raises: what does it mean when a woman calls herself or another woman 'bitch'? Sellen responds that this 'disrupts the masculine grasp on language', concurring with Irigaray (76) that 'to play with mimesis is...for women, to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.'

In a reading that has much in common with the French feminist literary critical tradition of *l'écriture féminine* Barron shows how the female body becomes the prime site of women's resistance in Hartigan's *The Secret Game*. Unafraid, like Missy Elliott, of asserting female bodiliness, Hartigan has the female body become speaker, speech act and subject. The gunman's verbal abuse when faced with the bodily realities of menstruation and abortion demonstrates wider conflicts that occur when women resist dominant male definitions of femininity.

These essays too, in constituting themselves in resistance to dominant interpretations (or ignorance) of their topics in mainstream academic subject areas, continue the goals of academic feminism. Questioning phallogentric knowledge and

language, all six writers contribute to the sustained challenge to the academy offered by feminist and women's studies scholars inhabiting ever-changing times and spaces.

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