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NEW WRITINGS IN WOMEN'S STUDIES: SELECTED ESSAYS FROM THE FIRST WOMEN'S STUDIES NETWORK (U.K.) ASSOCIATION ESSAY CONTEST

Introduction

Dr. Louise Livesey & Dr Karen Throsby

The aim of this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS) is to showcase the winning and shortlisted entries for the 1st Annual Essay Competition, run by the Women's Studies Network (UK) Association (WSN) in 2002. The WSN aims to promote women's studies, feminist research and teaching both nationally and internationally, and the publication of the essays in JIWS constitutes a valuable opportunity, through its international readership, to develop new and productive points of connection between those working in this field. The remit of the competition was deliberately inclusive, inviting undergraduates and postgraduates to submit previously unpublished work "that carries on the Women's Studies traditions of innovation, interdisciplinarity and feminist challenges to mainstream academic conventions". Entries were invited from feminist scholars of any academic discipline, as well as from those working within journalism, feminist activism or conducting independent feminist research. The aim of the competition was "to encourage and celebrate a new generation of feminist scholars", and as we hope this special edition illustrates, the winning and shortlisted entries offer substantial assurance to those who are witnessing the institutional decline of Women's Studies in the UK that feminist scholarship is alive and well, and as exciting and diverse as ever. We also hope that this special issue will counter more generally the view that younger women are no longer identifying politically as feminists, conversely showing, if anything, a sustained feminism amongst young scholars. The standard of the competition entries was very high, and we are very grateful to the external readers and to the members of WSN executive committee who contributed to the difficult task of selecting the winners. Our congratulations go to Angela King, who won the undergraduate competition, and Esperanza Miyake, who won in the postgraduate category.

In light of the status of these essays as shortlisted and winning competition entries, we decided that, with the exception of the standardising of the texts in terms of format, the essays would be published as they were submitted, and the authors were not invited to make any substantive changes, as might be the case, for example, in the usual process of article submission to a journal. The reason for this is that all of the essays included here were highly graded pieces of writing from undergraduate and postgraduate courses, either as extracts of longer papers, or submitted in their original form. As such, they represent genuine examples of the high quality of work being conducted under the broad rubric of women's studies / feminist scholarship, and therefore, they are not only valuable examples to current students of what it is possible to achieve, but they also serve as a timely reminder to those who may choose to question the legitimacy of Women's Studies as a legitimate field of scholarship.

In the first part of this introduction, we introduce briefly the six shortlisted and winning essays. Both the introductions to the essays, and the essays themselves, are organised alphabetically by the authors' surnames in order to avoid a hierarchical ordering of the competition categories. In the second section, we have attempted to draw out some of the common themes which we identified as emerging from the essays.

The Essays

The first essay is by Caroline Baker. The paper is an abridgement of her undergraduate Literature Studies dissertation and is entitled *An Exploration of Quaker Women's Writing Between 1650 and 1700*. For Baker, these women can be thought of as being among the first feminists, arguing in the letter accompanying her entry that a focus on their "collective voice" illustrates "the importance of *herstory* as well as *history*". Her analysis of the writings offers a valuable and intriguing insight not only into the extraordinary lives of these women, but also into the dynamic reframing and negotiation of gender categories which is implicit in both their work and their writing. The Quaker women in the paper can be seen as a form of 'other' in the society of the time, and Baker highlights their pivotal, if hidden, role in our past.

The second essay is Sherry Chopra's insightful and challenging answer to the question: *In spite of challenges by "black" and "third world" women, do mainstream feminist theories still reflect the concerns of white women?* This paper was originally submitted as part of the course work for an MSc in Gender and Development, and in it, Chopra challenges an additive approach to black and third world feminisms which maintain intact the central categories of mainstream western feminist analysis. Focusing on two theoretical responses within mainstream feminism to the critiques of black and third world feminists – the politics of location, and the destabilising of whiteness – Chopra, a self-identified third world feminist, draws persuasively on a broad panoply of black and third world feminist voices to argue for the fundamental "transformation of analytical categories, and shifts in agendas and power hierarchies."

The third essay is by Angela King - the winner of the undergraduate category. Her essay - *The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body* – started life as her Critical Theory undergraduate dissertation, and constitutes a carefully executed critique of Foucault's failure to "explore how or why power operates to invest, train and produce bodies that are *gendered*". Through the ironic appropriation of sub-headings from Foucault – a gesture which she describes as "part parody, part *homage*" – King renders clear her dual goals in the paper of both critiquing the conspicuous absence of the gendered body from Foucault's work and of mobilising the concept of disciplinary power as a means of conceptualising gender as a form of social control. King, through this piece, exercises an important reclamation of Foucault's work for feminist theorists, highlighting that appropriating theory does not necessarily mean wholesale subscription to the omissions of a theorist's work along with its strengths.

Julie Mellor's paper, *An Illimitable Field: a Practice-Based Investigation Into the Writing Process*, came out of her work for her PhD in contemporary women's fiction – a project which combines the writing of a novel – *Cork Dolls* – with an examination of the writing process of herself and other women writers using Jungian and feminist archetypal theory. The paper itself reflects both aspects of her work, and is divided between an extract from the opening chapter of the novel and an analysis of the "conscious and unconscious decisions" which the writing process involves. The writing process, she argues, is part of the process of individuation, through which "the unconscious can be integrated into consciousness, resulting in greater self-knowledge" – a process which she describes as being of particular pertinence to women, "whose knowledge of themselves tends to be influenced by patriarchal definitions of the feminine". Mellor's critical look at women's creative writing offers a valuable showcase of the power of both fiction and its analysis.

Esperanza Miyake won the postgraduate prize with her essay, *My, is that Cyborg a little bit Queer?* In her accompanying letter, she described this not only as the first piece of writing she had submitted following her transfer into Women's Studies, but also that it was "the very first time I was truly happy and inspired with what I had explored" – a sense of inspiration that is plainly evident in the text itself. The essay picks up and runs imaginatively with Donna

Haraway's "cyborg manifesto", offering a creative queering of cyberspace that raises challenging questions about sexuality, power, embodiment and identities. In particular, Miyake explores the overlapping transgressive discourses of Cyborg theory and Queer theory and challenges us to conceive differently of relationships between the two, and with our own identifications. She presents challenges to the futures of both Cyborg and Queer theories, where concepts divorced from reality may become a new form of embodied reality.

The final essay in the issue is by Lee Ronald, entitled, *Reading as an Act of Queer Love – the Role of Intimacy in the Readerly Contract*. This paper is part of a dissertation written for an MA in Gender Studies – a thesis which Ronald describes in her accompanying letter as having "its roots in the tension and conflict between queer theory and feminist theory," arguing for "reading queer" as a form of resistive reading that is able to destabilise fixed identity. Drawing on the work of Eve Sedgwick and Luce Irigaray as a means of exploring "revised models of intimacy", Ronald aims to "reimagine the readerly encounter" in ways which transform not only our relationship to particular texts, but also to the wider social arena beyond the academy.

Before moving on to look at some of the shared themes among the essays, we also want to mention one final essay, by Kimberly Chrisman Campbell, which was shortlisted, but which we were unable to include here. The essay - *The Face of Fashion: Milliners, Marchandes de Modes, and Modistes in Visual Culture* - was part of Chrisman Campbell's PhD in French and the History of Art, focusing on the role of women in the eighteenth century fashion industry. The essay explored the changing portrayal of female professional fashion workers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but sadly for us (but very positively for her), the essay had already been published elsewhere by the time we began work on this special issue (Chrisman Campbell 2002).

Themes

As we are sure is already quite apparent, the essays that made it into the shortlist have come out of a wide range of inter/disciplinary backgrounds, and cover a diverse spectrum of issues of feminist interest. As editors, then, we were faced with an intriguing challenge in terms of compiling the essays and writing an introduction to them, since the primary shared characteristic of these papers (aside from their quality) was their collective affirmation, through their individual diversity, of the sheer breadth and depth of new feminist scholarship. In terms of writing an introduction, then, this poses an interesting task. However, it is also clear from reading the essays that it is possible to draw out connecting themes between and across them that point to some of the primary preoccupations of contemporary feminist scholarship. In particular, we chose to highlight three key themes: (1) reflexivity; (2) exclusion / inclusion and the negotiation of boundaries; and (3) reading and writing as political practices. In focusing on these broadly drawn themes, we are not suggesting that these are the only points from which to approach these papers, either collectively or individually, but rather, are offering just one way among many of reading them.

Reflexivity - that is, the location of the self within the text as a means of recognising your own situatedness in relation to it - is a research principle and practice which is prominent in feminist scholarship (e.g.: England 1994). Reflexivity offers an opportunity to acknowledge the constrained nature of any given research or analysis, even if the individual's very situatedness makes it impossible to render those constraints explicit. In the context of feminism, this demonstration of self-awareness, for example through the inclusion of personal experience or other autobiographical detail, offers a means of addressing some of the complex ethical issues which feminist research raises about speaking for others, and managing the power relations

between researcher and researched (e.g.: Oakely 1981; Alcoff 1995; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996).

In an incisively reflexive footnote at the beginning of her essay, Chopra offers a careful definition of her own usage of the term “black” and “third world”, as a means of both clarifying her own usage of the terms, and of simultaneously problematising that usage. In describing herself as “third world”, Chopra recognises that her own middle class upbringing in Toronto, and having been born in New Delhi, produce a particular set of interests which will inevitably differ from those of other black and third world women – a writing strategy which embodies her own rejection of the generalising misrepresentations that she is critiquing in her paper. Importantly, however, Chopra resists an unproblematic acceptance of the value of personal experience in feminist writing, citing the risk of “autobiographical narcissism” – the exercise of “white women interrogating their ‘identities’ while refusing to alter racist power structures which have allotted positions of privilege”.

Miyake offers a different form of reflexivity in the short narration of her experience of (re)watching *Blade Runner* – the experience which provides the context for the paper as a whole, setting out precisely where she is writing from in that moment. In a third example, Julie Mellor’s essay is literally an exercise in reflexivity, as she explores the process of her own fiction writing in thoughtful detail. If we are to understand the posing of challenges to mainstream academic conventions as one of the traditional characteristics of Women’s Studies, then the reflexive writing of the self that is evident in these papers can be understood as contributing positively to the process of finding new ways of writing / speaking.

The second theme, and one that finds multiple forms of expression in the essays, is that of inclusion and exclusion and the negotiation of boundaries. In her essay, Ronald focuses on the reader / text encounter, and its openness to being “queered”. In positing an intimacy between reader and text, rather than an opposition, Ronald argues that it becomes possible to challenge “our traditional framework for thinking” not only about the specific reader / text relationship, but also in terms of “the boundaries that limit and formulate practices of intimacy [...]”. Baker’s essay also takes up the issue of boundary construction between inclusion and exclusion, this time in the context of the writing of Quaker women. The women can be seen to be writing in a context of resistance and radicalism, experiencing imprisonment and emotional and physical hardship as a result. Their writing illustrates the complex discursive work which the women performed in managing gender, at times identifying overtly as women, and at others laying claim to a prophetic identity which transcended gender. These claims, according to Baker, shift according to specific social contexts and historical moments as a means of managing different forms of belonging, which in turn facilitated their religious work of preaching and writing.

King, on the other hand, focuses on the disciplining of the female body as a strategy for locating the self within the normative boundaries of femininity, offering a numbing catalogue of bodily practices, including surgical interventions, a comprehensive array of body-shaping / distorting clothing and underwear, and skin-care practices such as “plucking, shaving, waxing, buffing and electrolysis” to illustrate her critique and appropriation of Foucault. Key to King’s argument is not that the boundaries of femininity simply *are*, but that they are produced and maintained through the *work* of fashion and beauty practices. This, in turn, suggests that for all that they are deeply entrenched, those boundaries are not immutable and embody spaces for resistance and reformulation – a claim which Ronald’s project of rewriting the reader / text relationship enacts, and which is similarly explicit in Miyake’s queering of the cyborg.

And finally, in thinking about inclusion / exclusion and the negotiation of boundaries, Chopra’s essay challenges the drawing of the boundaries of feminism itself. She challenges additive strategies which aim to “include” those who have previously been excluded – black and

third world feminists, in this case – arguing that this simply reproduces existing power relations and re-establishes the production of “racial, ethnic or regional identities or interests as fixed and homogenous [...]”. She argues persuasively for a reconceptualising within mainstream feminism of black and third world women, moving away from generalisations of victimhood and the fetishization of issues such as veiling, purdah, arranged marriages, and sati, for example, and instead, moving towards understanding those women in terms of their own agency and subjecthood.

The final theme that emerges from the essays is the interrogation of reading and writing – activities that can be seen as central to feminist scholarship, although this is certainly not to suggest that these are the only modes through which feminism finds its expression. Mellor’s essay stands out here as focusing explicitly on the creative writing process, and the placing of the analysis of that process alongside the fictional work itself offers an unusual opportunity to see that process at work. This points back to the role of reflexivity in feminist writing as a means of both explicating the final product, giving us greater understanding of the characters, and complicating it, by highlighting the complex ways in which those characters inter-relate. Baker’s essay also places the act of writing at the centre of her essay, with the production of the written text constituting a radical (albeit always constrained) act on the part of the Quaker women whose writings she studied.

So, from writing, to reading – the nature of which Ronald observes remains highly contested. Through her discussion of what it means to be a queer reader, Ronald creates spaces for thinking more broadly not only about what constitutes “reading”, but also what constitutes the “reader”, inciting a return to questions of the ideological frameworks within which our readerly experiences are structured. This incitement extends conceptualisations of reflexive practice to include not only our role in the production of written texts, but also as consumers of them.

It is oddly, but gratifyingly, circular that one of the key emergent themes in an essay writing competition should be reading and writing, although clearly that is not the only lens through which this collection of papers can be read. Nevertheless, it seems to us a very positive thing that up and coming feminist scholarship is able to look closely at its own practices and processes whilst retaining its focus across a range of inter/disciplines on the broader social concerns and inequalities with which feminism is traditionally associated.

Conclusion

As we discussed at the beginning of this introduction, the essay competition aims to both encourage and celebrate a new generation of feminist scholars, and it is on this note that we would like to conclude. A recent article in *The Guardian*¹ argued that “feminism” has become an outmoded concept – a stance which has been embraced by high profile writers such as Natasha Walter (1998), who argues for the separation of the personal (for example, issues of dress, bodily appearance, sexuality etc.) from the political as the route to “the new feminism”. In direct contradiction to this, however, the essays in this special issue illustrate precisely the importance of politicising the personal as central to a feminist politics that is alive, well and far from outmoded.

We would like to offer our thanks to all those who submitted entries to the competition, and our congratulations to all those whose essays were shortlisted, and particularly to the two competition winners, Esperanza Miyake and Angela King. We hope that this special issue will

¹ www.guardian.co.uk (2 July, 2003)

act as a source of encouragement to up and coming feminist scholars, as well as a celebration of the achievements of those work is published here.

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