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Crossing Boundaries

By Sue Jackson¹

Introduction to this edition

It was with mixed feelings that I offered to host a conference in the summer of 2003 for the *Women's Studies Network (UK) Association*. Whilst I have been committed to the Network for several years now, and have been involved as an Executive member and as Co-Chair, I took on the conference organisation at short notice and alone. I was not at all sure that I could pull it off! However, what I was clear about from the outset was the theme in which I was interested. My working title of *Transcending Boundaries* met with some resistance, with some colleagues on the Network Executive feeling that 'transcending' was somewhat ephemeral and that something more concrete was required from us – and indeed that we require from ourselves - in our work both within and without the academy. My view was (and remains, I think) that to cross boundaries still leaves them in place, and there are some boundaries I would rather transcend than cross. However, we eventually agreed a title of *Crossing Boundaries* and Conference calls for papers invited contributors to consider a range of boundaries, including:

- ◆ Crossing boundaries of teaching and research
- ◆ Crossing boundaries of the academy
- ◆ Crossing interdisciplinary boundaries
- ◆ Crossing boundaries of 'race' and 'class'

Feminist scholarship can act both as a site for struggle and as an enabler for the discovery of the tools necessary to bring about transformative change and development. As part of such struggle, feminist practices consider and integrate theoretical and ideological positions, material realities, and the personal experiences of women. It relates these issues to conditions of power, oppression and privilege. In trying to lay the foundation stones for a world in which institutionalized practice does not subordinate women's lives and experiences, new ways of seeing have to be conceptualized, and boundaries both crossed and transcended. Traditional disciplinary boundaries, for example, can be a barrier to intellectual thought, and the boundaries that appear tightly fixed around what counts as 'conventional' research can effectively shut out women's lives, experiences and ways of knowing.

The articles in this special issue have been selected to give a good example of the range of discussion and issues that were raised across the themes of the Conference. The Conference also raised questions about women's studies itself, and the place of the *Women's Studies Network*. With the demise or disappearance of many women's studies courses within the British Academy, several Conference delegates felt that by clinging onto the name of 'women's studies', the network was excluding many feminist scholars who no longer – or never did – work within 'women's studies' per se, although they are certainly very involved with and committed to feminist teaching and research.

Women's Studies has always been a contested space, both within and without the academy, personally and politically. It has a huge diversity of approaches and struggles, and is not just inter- and multi-disciplinary, but is also trans-disciplinary. This can make the spaces occupied by women's studies / gender studies / feminist

scholarship even more difficult and contested. In an apparently post-feminist era, feminist spaces are becoming increasingly difficult to claim, and feminists find ourselves engaged with political, ideological and material struggles over which boundaries to build around 'safe' spaces, and which boundaries to try and cross or dismantle. Should we, for example, be trying to locate ourselves more firmly institutionally and, if we do so, is this 'selling out', setting boundaries and constraints for ourselves? Within this special issue of the Journal, contributors consider the boundaries we have crossed, the boundaries still to cross, the boundaries we wish to maintain and the boundaries we self-impose.

Within the academy, boundaries are often tightly drawn around disciplines and subject specialisms. Although research councils, universities and other authorities may appear to promote the value of interdisciplinary research, in practice there are barriers to engaging in such work, and in many areas increasingly narrow specialisation within accepted paradigms has become the norm. In their article, Marion Hersch and Gloria Moss argue that challenging accepted paradigms within the academy, or combining or using multiple paradigms, is seen as akin to heresy. They question whether this type of specialisation and mono-disciplinarity occurs anywhere other than in the academy and suggest that a broader interdisciplinary approach should be welcomed as more appropriate and productive.

The authors argue that those people who are able to accept being outsiders may find it easier to go against traditional disciplinary boundaries and paradigms, although self-acceptance as an outsider brings with it some areas of serious concern, and may indeed deny some of the pleasures felt by feminists at developing their academic profiles as insiders, an issue that is raised below and by Valerie Hey in her article. Marion Hersch and Gloria Moss also suggest that women, with their experience of multi-tasking, may be particularly suited to interdisciplinary work, and it is certainly the case that women appear to be more interested in undertaking interdisciplinary research than do men.

Indeed, for many women undertaking research the most exciting opportunities are those which enable boundaries to be crossed or even transcended: boundaries of interdisciplinary research; of a central focus on women's lives and experiences; and boundaries of constructions of 'academic. Yet as is argued in my article with Amanda Loumansky, for many women in the academy - including those at the start of their academic careers - the processes of the PhD viva examination means that such boundaries are difficult, sometimes impossible, to cross. In the UK, the viva is uniquely positioned in the academy as a private affair and within many institutions little is known about the interaction that occurs behind closed doors.

Whilst at undergraduate level women have made, and continue to make, critical inroads into the academy, entering universities in at least equal numbers to men and performing equally well with regard to classification of final degree, fewer women than men undertake research degrees and women are less likely to apply for research funding after they have a PhD. Less women than men opt for an academic career, either as researchers or as lecturers in the academy. We argue that whilst the gatekeepers who determine access through the closed doors of the secret world of the PhD viva continue in the main to be the white, middle-class men who dominate the academy, the male culture of the university (supported by some women) will continue dominant, and many women will find themselves powerless to make the challenges to bring about change.

And yet, as indicated above, Valerie Hey builds a case about the persistence of perverse pleasures of academic work, showing the ambiguities involved in the complex navigations that we all negotiate across the personal, private, public and professional aspects of identity. This is certainly part of what I was/am doing in organising the Conference and putting together this special issue of the journal. The Women's Studies Network, journals such as this one, and the issues raised with regard to crossing boundaries are all centrally important to me as an academic feminist. However, I have to admit here (with the guilty and almost secret pleasure that Valerie Hey identifies) that my professional identity will also benefit through editing a special issue and through being a conference organiser.

Valerie Hey considers both intellectual pleasure and the pleasures of creating an academic identity, as well as the pleasures of female friendship in academic feminism. Like identifying as a women's studies lecturer or researcher, feminist struggle within the academy has always been ambiguous. The insider / outsider relation (also raised in other articles here) says the author, is particularly vexed when demands on professional identity appear to erase the more political claims on our identity such as being a feminist.

Identity is a theme running through this special issue. Clare Beckett outlines ways in which heterosexuality is located as a boundary for lesbians and disabled women. Both coming out as a lesbian and identifying as a disabled woman, she argues, create boundaries located in heterosexual social assumptions that must be negotiated in order to gain entry to social value and respect. Heterosexuality operates as the sphere of the adult, or the normal, and to not be part of that sphere is to be seen as being powerless and dependent. As other authors in this special issue have also argued, creating a category not only marks boundaries, but also reflects the parameters of other categories. If heterosexuality is a border, says Clare Beckett, then there will be crossing points and frontier skirmishes. She concludes that the friendship networks between women is the strongest defence against border skirmishes. Recognition of exclusion that is based on social heterosexuality will enable safe passages through and beyond the boundaries for all women.

However, as Myria Vassiliadou shows, recognition is not always sought for, and friendships are not always viewed as desirable. Like Clare Beckett, she also raises the boundaries of patriarchal heterosexuality and 'otherness' in her article, showing how we at times create spaces for ourselves through the construction of 'other'. Here she identifies how questions of identity are about sameness (you are the same as me and we belong) and difference (you are different from me and you do not belong). Myria Vassiliadou takes us across academic boundaries and moves us both outside of the academy and into Mediterranean Europe. She argues that work on the Mediterranean and Near East has largely ignored questions about women's experiences and attitudes, including issues of marginalisation, discrimination, racism and ethnic-gender groups.

The author's work with women in Cyprus takes us through the boundary of the 'front door' of the apparently private world of the home. Crossing the front door, she explains, is an act of particular importance in Cyprus, where the home represents structures of patriarchy, oppression and domination. Although the gatekeepers are men, some women have been allowed access to the key – but this is a key that allows them to enter through the door but not to exit again. Women who have been given the key to the front door have the power to exclude those women who do not, and one way in which women survive in the home is to adopt coping mechanisms of creating 'others' amongst women who are not able to enter. In her research, the author

concentrates on three groups of women who have become 'other' to the ones inside: prostitutes, lesbians and domestic workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

For domestic workers such as these, as well as for refugees and asylum seekers from across the world, border crossings are more than metaphor. Jennifer Langer describes borders of geography, of history, of culture and of memory that are crossed and negotiated, as well as the patriarchal systems that are transferred across borders. She considers the extent to which the formerly repressed voices of exiled and refugee women have adapted to Western diasporic space. She does so through an examination of the writing of exiled women, asking whether women writers consider exile to be a safe space in which to describe the horrific experiences of gender specific persecution or of being a victim of violence in conflict, or whether taboos restrict women's voices. Is exile, she asks, providing a cathartic space to write openly?

The author concludes that it is only partially doing so, with exiled women writers struggling to maintain a hold to their roots, as well as trying to deploy the new spaces in which they find themselves. Borders and boundaries, says Jennifer Langer, are not just material barriers to be crossed – often in flight, sometimes in hope – but are fluid, shifting and changing. The literature that exiled women writers produce can be a meeting point between the exiled writer, and listeners / readers in and from the exiled lands, and within the new geographic and psychological spaces in which the women find themselves.

Of course, these new spaces are often not safe spaces for exiled women, who have to negotiate the interrelationships between the supposed boundaries of racism, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. In revisiting intersectionality, Ann Phoenix and Avtar Brah ask how issues of 'otherness' and political connectivity are to be addressed in the face of postmodern neo-imperialisms of the 21st century. Many of the 'old' questions about the category 'woman', they say, assume critical urgency once again, now bearing the weight of global circumstances. In order to understand colonialism and post-colonialism, they argue, the supposed boundaries of 'race', gender and class need to be deconstructed: they are not distinct and isolated realms of experience.

The authors take us firstly across the boundaries of time, to 19th century North America, and to Sojourner Truth's passionate and accusatory question, 'Ain't I a woman?'. This is not, they argue, because the past necessarily provides answers for the present, but because critique and insight gained can help shed new light on current predicaments. They go on to argue that social class and its intersections with gender, 'race' and sexuality are simultaneously subjective, structural and about social positions and everyday practices. They conclude that considerations of intersectionality need to be both historically-rooted and forward looking in order to challenge the power games that are currently played out on the world stage. We should work within, though and across the boundaries of cultural differences, moving towards complex and dynamic understandings of intersectionality.

The articles here demonstrate a commitment to developing understandings of intersectionality and to finding ways to work within, between and across boundaries and yes – even at times transcend them. Women's identities both within and without the academy become subsumed into apparently universal and normalised identities. We need to be able to not only recognise ourselves in the stories that are told, but also to value what we see, and to have our own stories valued institutionally. In disputing the boundaries which can often make border crossings so difficult, there is a challenge

for us all in acknowledging and valuing women's experiences, and in examining the production of meaning and claims for the universality of ideas or practices.

Within the academy, pedagogic conditions must be created which enable border crossings to be made, deconstructing and challenging dominant power relations. Power operates in complex ways, and power structures are reproduced whenever someone who 'knows' instructs someone who does not. However, women are not just passively located within power structures but are also active agents, differently positioned in relation both to men and to each other. Consideration needs to be given not just to the border crossings, but also to what prevents border crossings being made. This includes an understanding of who the gatekeepers are, what gives them the power to name themselves as gatekeepers, and ways in which boundaries are reinforced and borders closed to certain groups. In addition, we need to find diverse ways to transcend the boundaries and search for alternative routes. This is particularly true within the innovative practices of women's studies, but includes the alternative routes discovered in much of women's education and feminist scholarship and practice.

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