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Introduction: New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies

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Special Issue Vol. 14 Issue 4 New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies: Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2012 Feminist and Women's Studies Association's Annual Student Essay Competition

Introduction

By Katy Pilcher¹ and Katya Salmi²

In this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS), the Feminist and Women's Studies Association UK & Ireland (FWSA) is delighted to present the winning and the shortlisted entries of its annual student essay competition. There was such a strong collection of insightful and thought-provoking essays submitted to the competition this year that we have chosen eight essays (instead of the usual six), for publication. This is certainly promising for feminist scholarship and the cross-disciplinary boundaries of the entries this year suggests a wide engagement with feminist, gender and women's studies across undergraduate and postgraduate courses within the UK and Ireland today. To all those who submitted entries, and to Dr Ayona Datta who acted as our external judge (and who we are very pleased to now welcome as the FWSA co-chair), we extend our sincere thanks.

It was in 2004 that JIWS first published a special issue showcasing the winning and shortlisted entries from the FWSA's first student essay competition, and we are delighted that this collaboration has continued. In these increasingly high-pressured and uncertain times within academia, it is vital that the next generation of feminist scholars are able to have a platform for their work. JIWS not only provides this platform for students to write within the journal, but through its openly accessible online format, enables those without institutional affiliations to also access the latest feminist scholarship, as well as facilitating an international readership.

The FWSA was founded in 1987 as a network of scholars with research interests in feminist and women's studies. Today we are a national association with over 300 members across the UK and Ireland, incorporating a diverse body of scholars/activists, whose scholarship range from the social sciences to the arts and the humanities. The FWSA's principal mission is to promote feminist research and teaching, whilst providing support for productive collaborations among both scholars and students. To this end, we run an annual small grants competition which funds collaborative postgraduate research events. This year's winners of the initiative, Anna McFarlane and Laura Paterson, will be holding an event which seeks to tap into the purported 'resurgence' in student feminism in recent years through promoting discussion around the use of feminism in academic theses³. Our biennial conference this year was also a successful means through which students, activists, early career researchers, and more senior academics could engage in debates around the meanings of feminism today, which was facilitated through the

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³ <http://smashingthepatriarchy.blogspot.co.uk/p/about.html>

engaging and important theme of feminist ‘protest’. Our annual book prize further rewards ingenuity and scholarship in the fields of feminism, gender and women’s studies and the award this year went to Dr Jane Monckton-Smith for her book entitled ‘Murder, Gender and the Media: Narratives of Dangerous Love’. This year has also seen the development of our blog,⁴ which hosts book reviews, commentaries and event reviews related to issues concerning feminism, gender and women’s studies. It is through these initiatives that we seek to promote and enhance feminist scholarship, and we hope that through this issue of JIWS we can inspire and provoke debate around some of the pertinent issues concerning feminism today.

The Essays

The key theme uniting the essays this year, we feel is the complexities of people’s engagement with heteronormative and hegemonic discourses relating to gender norms, bodies, and sexualities. Engaging with a range of material, whether through works of fiction or first-hand accounts, through examining artwork and media productions, or through the analyses of rights and codifications of gender issues, these essays tackle feminist issues that continue to resonate today. The essays all also speak to both the discreet and overt ways in which resistance to hegemonic patriarchal and heteronormative discourses can take form, emphasising unique approaches of negotiating and renegotiating agency and self-identity within this hegemony. Many of the essays engage with Butlerian ideas and queer theorising around gender, critical feminist thought, and are grounded in intersectional analyses.

We are pleased to announce that the 2012 winning entry is “No Place like Home: Re-writing “Home” and Re-locating Lesbianism in Emma Donoghue’s *Stir-Fry* and *Hood*” by Emma Young. Emma Young offers an insightful reading of Donoghue’s *Stir-Fry* and *Hood*, in relation to notions of home and lesbianism. Taking an interdisciplinary framework for analysing these two works, Young utilises theories rooted in feminist, gender and sexuality studies, combined with literary criticism. This allows Young to provide a thoughtful analysis of the way in which Donoghue challenges heteronormative and patriarchal notions of “the home” by allowing a redefinition of the home space where lesbian relationships and lesbianism become normalized. In a first instance, Young examines the symbolism behind closets, doors and kitchens, elements of the home that have traditionally solidified the patriarchal and heteronormative aspects of home life as well as the invisibility of homosexuality, to show how they are reclaimed by Donoghue’s characters to redefine the home. In a second part, Young highlights how objects within the home also contribute to this redefinition, examines how notions of belonging and feelings of being at ‘home’ are also challenged in the process of reclaiming one’s intimate space in a third part.

Enhancing theorising around lived experiences of gender relations, of space--as something which is not fixed but is full of ‘internal conflicts’ (Massey, 1994:55), and relations of intimacy and kinship, Katherine Natanel’s essay ‘Living in the Garden of Perhaps: Ordinary Life as an Obstacle to Political Change in Israel’, specifically addresses ‘how gender intersects with geopolitical location’ in the social worlds of Jewish Israeli women and men living in West Jerusalem and its suburbs. Through her attentive account of the sensory aspects of her research encounters, through which we are provided with an insight into Natanel’s ethnographic imagination, the spaces and experiences she is discussing, as well as the research participants’ narratives, are very much brought ‘to life’ for the reader. This richness is further enhanced

⁴ <http://fwsablog.org.uk/>

through Natanel's critical theoretical engagement with the tensions around subverting (and sometimes simultaneously reproducing) gender, 'race' and class norms, through her account of the complex 'everyday' negotiations of women and men living in a context of political violence.

Meremu Chikwendu's essay "*Circular Consciousness* in the lived experience of intersectionality: Queer/LGBT Nigerian Diasporic Women in the USA" explores the fluidity through which identities and self-identities can be negotiated and renegotiated through the process of "circular consciousness" which allows for the expression of multiple identities according to different contexts. The study focuses on women whose multi-dimensional consciousnesses is in flux as they navigate all of their identities (immigrant, queer/LGBT, women, black, African). What applies in one context does not apply in the other. Through the concept of circular consciousness, Chikwendu provides an intriguing approach for conceptualising the lived experience of intersectionality that avoids tiered or hierarchical methods.

In Melanie Anne Stewart's essay 'Sensational Kin: Family, Normativity and Women's Weekly Magazines,' she presents an analysis of 'women's weeklies' in the UK, contextualising this within debates in the current social-political climate centring around the family, welfare and the 2011 'riots.' Through her engagement with feminist, queer and cultural theories, Stewart presents an analysis of the 'affective linguistic devices' used within the narratives of the 'women's weeklies', to posit commonalities between women, and she highlights women's complex engagements with (hetero)normative discourses relating to the 'good' and 'family' life, and with reproduction. Stewart develops the argument that these magazine articles 'illustrate the changing form of the family' in contemporary Britain, 'while simultaneously failing to acknowledge it'.

Rebecca Trevalyan takes an innovative approach exploring the impact that Simone de Beauvoir's 'Second Sex' had on visual arts. Trevalyan roots her analysis in Beauvoirian feminist existentialism to examine the impact her work has had on the art of French women artists. Interweaving philosophy and theories of art, this essay begins by exploring artwork created by French women that centre on the themes of identity and otherness. Following from that, the essay turns to depictions of women's bodies through a discussion on the dual existence of women who experience their bodies in a raw, "carnal" manner, yet also as the object of the "male gaze." This essay then lays out the existential performativity evident in the artwork of some of these French women artists, who listened to de Beauvoir's call to action and used their own bodies in their work.

In the next essay "Doctors and Sheikhs: "Truths" in Virginity Discourse in Jordanian Media", Ebtihal Mahadeen shifts towards a discourse analysis of Jordanian media coverage of virginity. Engaging with the production, the text and the consumer, Mahadeen demonstrates how both medical and religious discourses are utilised in discussions on virginity to reaffirm societal traditions and norms surrounding women's virginity. By examining the treatment of the hymen question and hymen reconstruction surgeries in Jordanian media, as well as examining reactions and responses by readers in article comments, this essay highlights the power that media continues to have on framing and shaping debates relating to women's sexuality. While some media texts do offer "sites of resistance" and challenge the status quo, Mahadeen argues that the dominant media surrounding the issue only serve to cement hegemonic discourses on virginity and sexuality.

Kathryn McNeilly's essay, 'Framing Wrongs and Performing Rights in Northern Ireland: Towards a Butlerian Approach to Life in Abortion Strategising', seeks to reconceptualise

feminist debates around abortion from their current binary dualism, drawing upon Butler's work on 'life' to reimagine a renewed approach for feminist strategising relating to pro-choice discourses. Situating her arguments within a Northern Ireland context 'where restrictive access to abortion stands as an anomaly in UK law', she presents a critical analysis of both the 'health' and 'rights' framing within pro-choice discourses, and proposes an insightful means of shifting beyond the 'binarised paralysis' of the current abortion debate.

James West's essay 'Rethinking Representations of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: A Case Study of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission', examines forced marriage as a category of abuse within the Liberian Civil War, considering what is taken to 'count' as sexual and/or 'gender-based' violence, and who is considered, or left excluded, from discussions within official reports on the conflict. Employing a Foucauldian framework of power, his essay seeks to 'critique the binary gender categories which dominate rights-based discourses in development', and instead to seek alternative ways of understanding the abusive experiences of 'individual and group survivors' that these binary distinctions obscure.

Concluding Thoughts

We hope you enjoy reading this year's competition winning and short-listed entries and join us in congratulating the entrants on their success in this competition. We also hope that the publication of these essays will facilitate future feminist scholarship, and that students will be inspired to submit their own work for consideration for next year's competition. In celebrating the 10th anniversary of the FWSA essay competition, we are proud to present the theme for the 2013 competition, '*New Directions in Feminist Studies – Emotions, Activisms, Intersectionality*' and a special publisher's prize.

For more information about the FWSA and its initiatives, including the next round of our essay competition, please visit www.fwsa.org.uk

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