
Volume 17

Issue 2 *New Writings in Feminist Studies:
Winning and Shortlisted Entries from the 2015
FWSA Student Essay Competition*

Article 1

February 2016

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Recommended Citation

Mathieson, Charlotte and Olowookere, Kehinde (2016). Introduction: New Writings in Feminist Studies. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(2), 1-4.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss2/1>

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New Writings in Feminist Studies: Winning and Shortlisted Entries from the 2015 FWSA Student Essay Competition

By Charlotte Mathieson¹ and Kehinde Olowookere²

The Feminist and Women's Studies Association UK & Ireland (FWSA) is delighted to present this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS) featuring the winning and shortlisted entries of the 2015 student essay competition. Since *JIWS* first published a special FWSA issue in 2004, the competition has continued to go from strength to strength. Following a highly successful 10th anniversary in 2014, this year represented one of our best yet with a high number of strong calibre entries across the disciplines. We are delighted that this collaboration with *JIWS* continues, and our sincere thanks go to Dr Diana Fox, managing editor at *JIWS*, for her on-going support of scholarship from a new generation of feminist scholars.

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 200 members across the UK and Ireland, incorporating a diverse body of scholars and activists whose scholarship spans 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, in addition to the student essay competition, we run an annual small grants competition which funds collaborative postgraduate research events, an annual book prize which rewards ingenuity and scholarship in the fields of feminism, gender and women's studies, and the Ailsa McKay Travel Grant to support PhD students in attending a conference. Our biennial international conference, most recently held at the University of Leeds in September 2015 on the topic of "Everyday Encounters with Violence: Critical feminist perspectives", provides a forum to discuss research, pedagogy, activism and policy, as well as providing networking and professional development opportunities for feminists. Our social media presence has also grown in recent years, through our twitter account and blog which hosts book reviews, commentaries and event reviews related to issues concerning feminism, gender and women's studies.

The essays presented in this special issue of *JIWS* represent the strengths of the FWSA: challenging, interdisciplinary work that is engaged with both the histories and futures of feminism. Written by scholars who were all students at the time of writing, they bring us the very latest in feminist debates while posing exciting new directions for feminist scholarship. To all those who submitted essays this year, and to the external judges, Dr Lindsey Moore and Professor Nickie Charles, we express our sincere thanks.

¹ Dr. Charlotte Mathieson is a Teaching Fellow in the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics at Newcastle University. She has been on the FWSA executive committee as Essay Competition officer since 2014. Her research focuses on themes of mobility, space and gender in Victorian literature, and her publications include *Mobility in the Victorian Novel: Placing the Nation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

² Kehinde Olowookere is a research student in the School of Management and Languages at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. She holds an MSc in International Human Resource Management from Sheffield Hallam University. Her current research investigates the management and experiences of Mental Health Conditions within the workplace, with particular focus on how difference is constructed within normative organizational contexts. Her research interests include the management of diversity in the workplace and identity construction at work.

The essays

We are delighted to present the winning entry this year from Eliza Garwood, “Reproducing the homonormative family: Neoliberalism, Queer Theory and same-sex reproductive law”. Focusing on The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, Garwood examines the often overlooked interconnectivity of same-sex reproductive law and neoliberalism. Although the Act has been celebrated as an important legislative move for same-sex couples, Garwood argues that the Act reaffirms the hierarchy of non-heterosexual identities through its privileging of marriage and the two parent model which allows only those who adhere to the hetero/homonormative ideal to legitimately access reproductive services. In addition, Garwood reasons that current same-sex reproductive laws are homonormative, as they depend on neoliberal discourses of the “good” family, promoting marriage, monogamy, and personal responsibility, allowing only those who fulfil normative ideals to access reproductive rights.

In order to affirm this, the essay draws on Queer work which highlights the interconnections between the economy, Queer Theory and heteronormativity. The essay utilises Foucault’s concepts of governmentality and biopower to examine the way that power functions through techniques of surveillance, internalisation and regulation to construct neoliberal and familial discourses as “common sense”. Garwood’s emphasis is on how this rights discourse assimilates certain LGBT identities into heteronormativity, producing the homonormative subject. Garwood’s work contributes to a growing body of work exploring the connections between cultural and economic value, and highlights the intersecting nature of Queer Theory and Political Economy.

The theme of state politics and policies also arises in Shruti Iyer’s “Taking a Break from the State: Indian Feminists in the Legal Reform Process”. Iyer examines critiques of “governance feminism” and analyses their exportability to the Indian context, focusing on the Indian feminist engagement with the Justice Verma Committee (JVC), the legal reform process undertaken in India in the aftermath of the Delhi anti-rape demonstrations of late 2012 to early 2013. She conducts a thorough review of critiques of governance feminism, and suggests that arguments from the West are limited in their applicability to the Indian context. Iyer achieves this by providing a coherent account of “governance feminism”, and by outlining the law reform process undertaken in India in the aftermath of the protests against sexual violence in 2012-13. The essay then contextualises the Indian feminist movement in its distinct history as a postcolonial movement, and situates the protests of 2012-13 in a wider feminist campaign against sexual violence, highlighting the particular ways in which the critiques of governance feminism apply, or fail to apply, to the Indian feminist movement. Iyer subsequently proposes that while the governance feminist critique advocates taking a break from feminism to account for other justice projects, in the context of the Indian feminist movement, feminists may be better off taking a break from the state.

The implicit theme of violence in Iyer’s political analysis is a topic directly addressed in Kate Every’s “‘Growing scar tissue around the memory of that day’: Sites of Gendered Violence and Suffering in Contemporary South African Literature”. Every examines the aesthetic of violence in two South African novels, J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Margie Orford’s *Like Clockwork*. In the context of a “crisis of crime” in South Africa – a result of the outworking of tensions from the perceived inadequacies of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission – these contemporary novels use the growing popularity of crime fiction to make sense of a violent reality. Through her analysis, Every shows how crime fiction has been a constitutive narrative in the “new” South Africa from the immediately post-Apartheid era work of Coetzee, to the recent

work of Orford. She highlights how the victim-survivors of the narratives in both novels negotiate the social realities of gendered violence in contemporary South Africa, and give at least a glimmer of hope in an enduringly dangerous climate. She subsequently concludes that while “texts cannot change the social realities of violence, what they do offer is strategies for managing it, at least in literature”.

Eva Burke’s work “Exploring the shifting dynamics of female victimhood and vocalicity in Poe and Pirkis” takes a similar generic focus in its engagement with detective fiction. Focusing on the detective fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and the lesser-studied work of Catherine Louisa Pirkis, *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective*, Burke brings new gendered perspectives to the idea of detection. While Poe is much credited with creating the figure of the male detective, for whom the paradigms of detection rest on a gendered dichotomy between the active, logical masculinity and passive femininity, Pirkis’s seminal collection introduces a female investigator whose appropriation of the detective role challenges these paradigms. Burke argues that despite the temporal distance between the major characters, Poe’s Dupin and Pirkis’s Brooke, both texts are significant in terms of the degree to which they establish or reinscribe the gendered parameters of canonical detective fiction, and may be credited with helping to irrevocably shape the prototype of the popular literary detective in the nineteenth century and beyond. In essence, Burke posits that Pirkis’s work has provided a forerunner character for better-known female detectives in works such as Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple, Patricia Wentworth’s Maud Silver, and more recently, Nancy Drew.

Literary studies represented a strong focus of this year’s competition. This is continued in the work of Emily Tait in an essay titled “‘Seething Underneath’: Objectification in Iris Murdoch’s Early Fiction”. Tait takes Murdoch’s early corpus, including *A Severed Head*, *Under the Net*, and *The Italian Girl*, and examines how the seeming objectification of women in these works is subverted by complex characterisation. Using a theoretical framework which draws together Jean Paul Sartre’s analysis of “the look” and Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “determining male gaze”, Tait first considers evidences of immobilization in Murdoch’s work, and then re-examines criticism of Murdoch’s female characters as “puppets”. She contends that Murdoch does not objectify female characters, but instead draws attention to their active passivity and resistance to petrification. The male gaze, she suggests, is here re-appropriated by female characters and utilized as a tool of female empowerment rather than objectification.

Susan Hennessy also takes up a re-reading of female characters in her essay titled “Happy Days Sinking into Immanence: Samuel Beckett and *The Second Sex*”. Hennessy argues that when it comes to discussions of phenomenological existentialism and its proponents, the works of Simone de Beauvoir often seem to be eschewed, or assimilated into those of the “more famous” Jean-Paul Sartre. She notes that revisiting *The Second Sex* affords new perspectives on Beckett’s construction of female characters and, in turn, a new existentialist reading of parts of his *oeuvre*. Focusing on Beckett’s *Happy Days*, Hennessy shows how the character of Winnie is used to highlight the limitations on the female body, here physically and figuratively constricted by a cultural script that renders her captive in her femininity. In doing so, Winnie provides an apt exploration of Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”.

The performativity of gender is the theme of the final essay, Emily Nicholls’s “‘What on earth is she drinking?’ Doing Femininity through Drink Choice on the Girls’ Night Out”. Nicholls explores how in a supposed “post-feminist” society of gender equality, engagement with contemporary spaces such as the Night Time Economy (NTE) may offer young women positive

opportunities to redefine femininities through leisure activities and alcohol consumption. The essay highlights that alcohol consumption remains gendered, and women continue to be expected to buy into normative femininity through their beverage choice on a specific mode of engagement with the NTE - the “girl’s night out”. Drawing on the findings of a PhD study on young women in the North-East of England, Nicholls examines how normalised activities – such as the consumption of more “girly” drinks – constrain women’s scope to enact gendered identities within a highly gendered and (hetero)sexualised contemporary leisure space. Her work contributes to analyses of the Night Time Economy, and highlights the strong gendered inferences related to this concept.

We hope that you enjoy reading this year’s competition essays, and join us in congratulating the essayists on their success in this competition and on their stimulating work. We hope that these essays will go on to inspire students to submit their own work for consideration for next year’s competition. For more information about the FWSA and its initiatives, including the next round of our essay competition, please visit <http://www.fwsablog.org.uk/>.