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Feminist Comforts and Considerations amidst a Global Pandemic: New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies—Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2019 Feminist Studies Association's (FSA) Annual Student Essay Competition

By Carli Rowell¹

Rather than reflecting exclusively on the content and scope of the essays that make up this issue the title instead reflects the time at which this special issue comes to publication. Before I turn my attention to this year's special issue, I find it essential that I take a moment to pause, reflect, and consider the current landscape in which I am writing. It is after all, a once in a generation experience, or so I am told. At present we are faced with global uncertainty and instability by way of a global pandemic. Consequently, much of what we (or rather I) understood and perhaps took for granted to be the norm of social life, has been, in this current moment called into question and put on pause albeit momentarily. I have long been mindful of the privileges that I, a white, working-class, educated woman in the global north has been afforded by way of geopolitics or otherwise. However, at certain moments in my life such privileges are pulled once again to the forefront, and I am left to both confront, experience and navigate my privilege as discomfort more acutely— COVID-19 is one such moment. As I sit comfortably at my desk, I cannot help but contrast my own experience of COVID-19 to those elsewhere. With regards to the UK, my mind wonders to consider my working-class peers who have long been employed within the food retail sector currently working for low pay, on zero-hour contracts and risking their own health in order to feed the nation. Or those I know working tirelessly, often in isolation, supporting both new and existing victims of domestic violence during the difficult period of social distancing and lockdown. Elsewhere I have found my thinking turning to consider such questions such as “How do you socially distance when you live in a township in Johannesburg?” or “Where do you go for healthcare if you a poor ‘untouchable’ Dalit in India?”

These questions take on a new meaning for feminism, gender and women's studies when we bear in mind that globally women account for the majority of those working in the low pay service and care sectors. Across the global north they are most likely found stacking our shelves, scanning our shopping and providing care and health assistance to the venerable and elderly. Elsewhere in the global south, women are by and large responsible for scouring food for household consumption and as such they are consequently at increased risk as they source food from shops and markets thereby not only coming into contact with a greater number of people but also finding themselves spending more time outside of the family home and so increasing their possible and probable exposure to the virus. Across Asia and the Pacific, the majority of women work within

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the informal economy in agriculture, as domestic workers or as vendors on the street with seldom any access to social protection. The unseen, ripple effects of COVID-19 has disordered access to critical sexual and reproductive health services and created barriers to organisations that respond to gender-based violence around the world. Many of the issues that the global COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating, feminism and women's studies have long cast light upon and long fought for. Around the world, women from all walks of life will be faced with the impact of the crisis of COVID-19 as multiple and intersecting dimensions of violence, exclusion and discrimination permeate their everyday life throughout the pandemic. The most marginalised communities are hit the hardest across both the global north and global south. Academia and academics have a role to play both in the moment as COVID-19 plays out in real time and once it has passed. Gender underpins every facet of the global COVID-19 pandemic and moving forward it is both the duty and responsibly of the academic community to shed light on the gendered ways in which the pandemic is impacting the lives of women however mundane or extraordinary, responsibility that those working in the intersections of feminism, gender and women's studies I am sure will fulfil.

At FSA we recently took on a name change, from the Feminist and Women's Studies Association to Feminist Studies Association. This change was proposed for a number of important reasons. Firstly, at such a challenging and important time for feminist practice more broadly, we wished to make the Association more inclusive to all those who identify as feminist. Making the name change will ensure the various demographics of our current and future membership are represented by the association. Second, regarding those members in universities in particular, in keeping with the history of the Association, we want to ensure the Association is open to all those who identify as feminist within the academy. That includes those who do not teach or identify with 'women's studies' as a discipline as such, but rather might undertake feminist practice in their broader approach to teaching, research, supporting colleagues, or personal lives. The name change will strive to ensure the association remains representative of these individuals. Third, the association is keen to expand its membership beyond the academy. Bringing together feminist scholars and activists is important to ensure effective feminist mobilisation, particularly at the current moment, as reflected in the themes of our 30th Anniversary event. By removing 'women's studies', we hope to de-institutionalise the association and better represent those outside of the university, while ensuring we remain committed to being an academic association, as listed in our constitution. The association changed its name from Women's Studies Network to Feminist and Women's Studies Association in around 2005/6, in order to speak clearly to debates at the time about the importance of representing all genders. Now, 14 years later and at the association's 30th anniversary, we wish to undertake similar work to address the debates about feminism happening in the public sphere more broadly.

In turning now to introduce this special issue I wish to acknowledge that whilst a pandemic seemingly comes from nowhere, spreads rapidly, invisibly and effortlessly academic publishing is all but these things. Academic publishing moves much slower, occurs over time, and only bears fruit through the labour, commitment and creativity of many. It is thus, in this vein that I want to thank those who have been working hard behind the scene to make this special issue happen. Firstly, thank you to all of those individuals who submitted entries – this year was an exceptionally hard process, even at the longlisting stage the panel we faced with difficult decisions regarding which essays would make the shortlist thus a testament to the quality and timeliness of submissions. The essays were intellectually captivating, creatively well written and thought-provoking. It was a delight reading through so many essays that grappled with gender and women's studies and

feminism from across the thematic spectrum and from both undergraduate and postgraduate students – my only regret is that we could have published more. It is in this vein that The Feminist Studies Association UK and Ireland (FSA) is delighted to present this special issue of *Journal of International Women's Studies (JIWS)* highlighting the winning and shortlisted entries to our annual student essay competition. My sincerest thanks go out to all of those who kindly submitted their entries. Special extended thanks to the fabulous external judges who gave up their time and intellectual headspace to engage with this year's competition. Many thanks to Dr Barbara Read, Department of Education, University of Glasgow UK and Dr Emily Nicholls, Department of Sociology, University of Portsmouth UK for their kinds, constructive and thoughtful feedback on the shortlisted essays.

The FSA Student Essay Competition is a longstanding one; in 2004 JIWS originally published a special issue featuring the winning and shortlisted entries from the competition and they continue to publish the shortlisted essays each year. In this vein FSA is delighted to work each year with JIWS to provide a platform showcasing the work and fresh novel thinking of emerging feminist scholars; with special thanks to Dr Diana Fox for her ongoing commitment to and enthusiasm for the competition. The timeline in which this year's student essay competition occurred was somewhat of a difficult one, with sector wide university strikes occurring in November 2019 and again in February and March 2020 and now of course the corona crisis. This special issue comes amidst a somewhat bleak and challenging landscape both in relation to the national landscape of higher education in the UK and Ireland (and indeed elsewhere). Through publishing a shortlist of entries, we at FSA and JIWS hope to bring light, comfort and escape in an increasingly challenging environment whilst also providing the students with support by way of a published essay. JIWS' open access, online format is vital in ensuring that those without institutional affiliations are able to access the feminist scholarship not only the shortlisted essays of the student essay competition shortlisted but feminist research per se, at a time when knowledge production is increasingly the preserve and product of the global north its open access provides a platform for international readership.

The FSA was founded in 1987 as a network of scholars with research interests in feminism and women's studies. Today we are a national association with members across the UK and Ireland, incorporating a diverse body of scholars/activists, whose work ranges from the social sciences to the arts and the humanities. The FSA's principal mission is to promote feminist research and teaching, whilst providing support for productive collaborations among scholars, students, non-HE organisations and community partners. Last year, in 2019 FSA launched its Mentoring Scheme aims to foster a strong feminist community that encourages supportive and collegial relationships between members of the Association. The scheme is for FSA members who have passed their PhDs and are early- or mid-career scholars. They will be paired with a more experienced mentor who is able to pass on advice or share experiences. At FSA we are soon to be re-launching our annual Book Prize to be sponsored by Emerald. Moving forward FSA will continue to support feminist scholarship, the established and the novel. It is hoped that this issue will provide comfort, escape, and provocation around a number of issues running through the contemporary veins of feminism and women's studies.

The Essays

We are pleased to announce that the 2019 winning entry is "Unending and uncertain: thinking through a phenomenological consideration of self-harm towards a feminist understanding

of embodied agency” by Veronica Heney. Heney offers an insightful perspective of self-harm, embodiment and agency. Adopting a phenomenological framework for analysing and understanding of self-harm in order arrive at a feminist understanding of embodied as an embodied, relational, and repeated act. In doing so Heney moves the discussion and debate surrounding the well-drawn upon concept of agency away from the longstanding feminist focus of sexuality to that of self-harm, an area that as Heney notes is omitted at large from feminist thinking. In doing so the essay considers the importance and benefit of breaking free from and evading binary frameworks where possession or absence of agency are placed in discrete opposition.

In Phoebe Chetwynd's ‘Postfeminist Hegemony in a Precarious World: Lessons in Neoliberal Survival from RuPaul’s Drag Race’ the ideological cost of the mainstream success of the popular reality television show RuPaul’s Drag Race is critically considered. Chetwynd draws upon Rosalind Gill’s work on postfeminism to argue that the format of RuPaul’s Drag Race required both contestants (and viewers) to uncritically conform to a postfeminist ideal whereby normative femininity is valorise thereby reaffirming the prevailing gender binary. Throughout the essay the relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism is troubled and interrogated, Chetwynd argues that whilst neoliberalism conditions postfeminism neoliberalism is in some ways dependent on postfeminism in order to ensure its own survival. Throughout Chetwynd continuously and convincingly highlights the importance of approaching what she refers to as “superficially subversive cultural objects” amidst an era where progressive and regressive politics are entangled and entwined.

Amy Finlay-Jeffrey's ‘Liminal Space and Minority Communities in Kate O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (1936)’ draws upon anthropological ideas pertaining to liminal space so as to explore the ways in which the twentieth century Irish author Kate O’Brien’s construction of queer communities in novel *Mary Lavelle* (1936) can be understood as liminal spaces that exist in opposition to governing heteronormative ideologies. In doing so Finlay-Jeffrey argues that Ireland is constructed as a closeted space in *Mary Lavelle*, and as such, upon departing Ireland O’Brien’s lesbian characters are afforded the possibility of experiencing and experimenting with different facades of their gender identity and sexuality. Thus, entering into what Finally-Jeffrey defines to be a space of queer liminality. Throughout the essay Finlay-Jeffreys provides an overview of popular Irish novelist and playwright Kate O’Brien’s third novel, *Mary Lavelle* which was banned in Ireland on 29th December 1936 by the *Censorship of Publications Act* of 1929.

Zara Ismail's work ‘The Communal Violence Bill: Women’s Bodies as Repositories of Communal Honour’ explored themes such as coloniality, gender, human rights, sexual violence in India. Specifically, Ismail seeks to ask the question as to why, after 15 years, as proposed by the United Progressive Alliance government of India the first Communal Violence Bill (CVB) is yet to be passed. Ismail both draws upon and adds to a rich body of work by Indian feminists, the women’s movement in addition to interdisciplinary scholarship on the topic of sexual and communal violence. The contributions of Ismail are twofold; firstly, Ismail approaches such topic through the lens of coloniality both of gender and human rights. Secondly, Ismail draw on Siddharth Narrain’s identification of a false dichotomy between ‘act’ and ‘identity’ and applied it to the incident of rape whereby distinctions are made between ‘men who rape’ and ‘men who are rapists’. In doing so Ismail re-iterates the asymmetrical value the Indian establishment places on men and women, favoring the former at the expense of the latter. Ismail begins this essay with a discussion of discussion of coloniality, introduces the CVB and progresses to discuss ‘sexual impunity’ with reference to communal violence in Gujarat exploring the role of women’s bodies as repositories of communal honor whilst also highlighting structural underpinnings. Finally, the

essay concludes with Ismail arguing for the need to decolonize both gender and human rights in India. This she argues would form part of a wider project of social justice by demanding structural change alongside the acknowledgement of both institutional and individual complicity.

In Amy Masson's essay 'A Critique of Anti-Carceral Feminism' she analyses carceral logics in the context of the 'unholy alliance' of neoliberal and neoconservative hegemony thereby arguing that carceral politics are in fact produced by a fusion of neoliberal and neoconservative ideas. Amy's discussion primarily focuses upon literature deriving from the USA and to a latter extent draws upon empirical examples from the UK. Amy begins the essay by setting out the landscape of carceral and anti-carceral positions for the reader. She then moves present an exploration of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, as conceptualised by Wendy Brown whilst also discussing the role of the state in anti-carceral approaches. The latter body of the essay provides a focused consideration of community in anti-carceral conceptions of justice. She concludes the essay by asserting that anti-carceral thinkers incorrectly locate carceral feminists as in coalition with neoliberals alone, when they also share much in common with neoconservatives.

The work of Katja May engages with one of the decades defining moments in political history and the women's rights movement and doing so grapples with issues of textile crafts, feminist solidarity, activism, and the Women's March on Washington. The essay entitled 'The Pussyhat Project: Texturing the Struggle for Feminist Solidarity' moves beyond branding the Pussyhat Project as either good or bad but instead recognises the myriad and nuanced ways in which the Pussyhat Project has been received whilst at the same time recognising the complex, messy and entangled nature in her successful effort to complicate dominant narratives and concepts of feminist solidarity, protest and craft. Throughout the essay May seeks to cast light upon the unevenness of the feminist struggle for liberation and affective solidarity whilst at the same time recognising the way in which such complex texture can become a means to position people closer in feminist practice and solidarity at a time when queer and transwomen, women of colour and women from the global south have long been silenced. This texture, as May notes is material, social as well as affective. May argues that whilst those who marched, knitted, or both did so from their own individual and collective experiences of disconnect and discomfort there need not to be a universal underpinning to such experiences for there to be a universal and collective commitment for collective action.

In 'Masculine Failure and Male Violence in Noah Hawley's *Fargo*' Jess Weisser argues that within the first season of Noah Hawley's *Fargo* male violence and weaponry is expressive of non-normative, queer masculinities, which has the effect of challenging the so-called 'integrity' of masculine identity. Firstly, Weisser establishes the critical framework and does so by parting ways with existing scholarly response to *Fargo* by grappling with masculinity and male desire from a Queer Studies perspective. Weisser then progresses to consider those men who negotiate masculinity through phallic weaponry which she argues queerly transgresses bodily boundaries. Weisser draws this essay to a conclusion by arguing that the most brutal violence from Season One of *Fargo* derives from specifically queered, othered masculinities.

Concluding Remarks

We at FSA hope that this year's special issue will bring you much enjoyment as you read through this year's competition winning and short-listed essays at a time of global uncertainty. I am sure you will join us at FSA in sending our sincerest thanks to those essays that feature and wish the emerging feminist scholars congratulations and every success. I hope that from reading

this year's collection of articles that you become inspired to submit your own work to the next FSA student essay competition.