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The Post Pandemic University, Possibilities, Practices and Pedagogies: And New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies—Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2020 Feminist Studies Association's (FSA) Annual Student Essay Competition

By Carli Rowell¹

The Feminist Studies Association UK & Ireland (FSA) is delighted to present this special issue of the Journal of International Women's Studies (JIWS) featuring the winning and shortlisted entries of the 2020 student essay competition. However, before I do so I find it imperative that time is accorded to reflecting upon the extra ordinary times that we all find ourselves amid – on year on.

The Post Pandemic University: Possibilities Practices, Pedagogies and Pitfalls

Around one year ago an invisible, unknown yet highly contagious virus made its way around the world - the world powerless in preventing its travel and transmission. Covid-19 rampant and pervasive travel and transmission was made possible by time space compression that is a defining feature of our modernised, globalised world. As a consequence, the covid-19 variant struck hard and fast and over the course of the last twelve months or so has changed the lives of those all around the globe in both mundane and extraordinary ways.

The effects of covid-19 have been far reaching, all-encompassing and devastating. Lives have been lost and many have been taken too soon, the global mood is one of mourning – but it is also one of hope. Last year I stated the need for feminism to be attentive to the unseen, ripple effects of COVID-19 and the way(s) in which it could and would impact upon the lives of women around the world. A year on and the picture is a clear one, the global pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and paved the way for the emergence of novel ones. Women's jobs are more vulnerable to the crisis of the pandemic; whilst they make up the minority of global employment, they account for the majority of job losses and are overrepresented in the industries that are expected to decline as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, women are overwhelmingly shouldering the burden of unpaid care and overwhelmingly represented within the paid formal care sector and are thus on the covid-19 frontline. Poverty and the pandemic are also compounding the experiences of the already precarious on both domestic and international levels. Within the UK the pandemic has driven hundreds of thousands (and rising) of individuals and families into poverty. Globally, the pandemic is having regressive effects upon decades of progress on global poverty, healthcare and education.

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Higher education, globally, as a result of the ongoing pandemic its landscape has transformed in ways previously inconceivable. Campus and boarders have shut, social distancing measures have been implemented and teaching that once occurred solely within lecture halls and seminar rooms have shifted online. Academics, students and university staff alike have worked from home conducting research and teaching from the parameters on their home offices, bedrooms and even bathrooms! Thus, the practices and pedagogies of the contemporary university educator have been subject to reconfiguration. Much of the narrative framing discussion regarding the impact of the pandemic upon higher education pedagogy has centred around notions of the rise of the online classroom and the Netflix of education alongside the education inequalities that the pandemic is serving to compound. But what positives can be identified from the current landscape of higher education? What possibilities can be taken into the post pandemic university?

Globally, universities are taking steps towards the digitalization of its operations. Research fieldwork is increasingly conducted online (albeit temporarily), and pedagogical decisions are increasingly drawing upon analytics as the ecosystem of the digitization of higher education plays out. There is the danger, that like much else, the pandemic is being drawn upon as a tool and justification to push through neoliberal reforms within the university that had been on the back burner for many years. There is also the possibility that, the pandemic will increase participants within higher education - through the increasing digitization of classrooms and campuses per se. But who for? To what effect? To what end?

Let's take, for example the phenomenon of 'working from home' or what we might also refer to as 'flexible working' ... Whilst there are myriad inequalities inherent within 'working from home' not least in relation to the kinds of jobs that can be conducted from home there are also gains. Feminism has long advocated for 'flexible working' however it is only amid the pandemic that we have witnessed such working arrangement(s) in practice. It is a direct effect of the pandemic that those with chronic illness, disabilities and caring responsible or an even perhaps, a complex mix of the aforementioned are able to draw upon 'flexible working arrangements' to complement / fit around their many commitments. A phenomenon that seldom occurred prior to the pandemic. Whilst it is true that as advocates of social justice, we need to be guarded against the increase in working from home especially given the potential for employers to advocate 'working from home' long after the pandemic in a move to cut overhead costs under the guise of flexible working there are also reasons to be optimistic. Home working has provided many with the opportunity to combine work with caring commitments or to better manage chronic illness and / or disability and it is these positives that the pandemic has brought about that we must fight to hold onto in its aftermath. So why then are we so cautious about the digitization of higher education?

There exists a stark intersection between education and the marketisation of education despite knowledge within the field being tentative at best. Within the UK the management and marketing of higher education through digital mechanisms is not novel. However, the argument that online higher education is a democratising phenomenon arguably is. Whilst on demand and demand driven education alongside the Netflix of education operates in line with student demand and is thus the perfect 'student as consumer' articulation there is nothing democratising about said practice, it is purely capitalist. By placing students as the choosers of their own education (more so than at present) renders higher education akin to an exercise in 'pick and mix' with students picking their education syllabus depending on what appeals to them at that point in time. This is dangerous as what students should be taught but don't know that they should be taught gets pushed out. Spaces to create and enact pedagogies of discomfort are consigned to the pre digitalisation of

higher education history and the transformative power of education radically reduced. We already know so much about the structural barriers precluding minority groups from the higher echelons of higher education, whether they be student or aspiring academics. We already know about the gender and ethnic bias in artificial intelligence and algorithms outside of the academy. So why then do we think higher education and its move to digitalisation will be spared such bias? Change as a result of the pandemic within higher education is inevitable, and whilst the pandemic has pushed universities online higher education typically has lagged behind other industries with regards to its digitalisation. Whilst it is true that moving the university online, or rather aspects and elements of the university online opens up many possibilities it also opens up the ground for new and existing educational inequalities. As feminists concerned with equality, we already know so much about the gender digital divide, without equality of access to technology and the internet women and girls around the world are precluded from participation in digital sphere and the same could be true of the digital university. Whilst it is true that the digitalisation of higher education and the post pandemic university could serve to 'open up' and make elements of a university education more 'accessible' there is also grave scope for the increasing digitalisation of higher education to both deepen existing educational inequalities and foster new ones. Examining the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in relation to the post pandemic university, the possibilities, practices, pedagogies and pitfalls.

The 2020 FSA Annual Student Essay Competition

I turn now to introduce the 2020 FSA Annual Student Essay Competition. Firstly, I offer a note on its timeline and contributors. The past year as proved to be a difficult and different backdrop for us all, it is against the backdrop of the pandemic that there has been increased commitments and uncertainty for everyone. Despite this, essays were submitted, internal and external FSA judges were recruited, the essays read in depth and detail and a shortlist drawn up and a winner selected. I would like to begin by sending thanks to all of those who submitted an essay regardless of whether it features in this issue. This year the task of drawing upon the shortlist was an exceptionally difficult process with many deserving and worthwhile essays being submitted. The judges found them a joy to read and a welcomed distraction from what was happening all around. Essays were submitted from both undergraduate and postgraduate students and as always at FSA we just wish we were able to publish more. Judges were faced with the difficult task of drawing up a shortlist and selecting the winner, this took much deliberation and therefore highlights the quality of all submissions. 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. Special extended thanks to the external judges who amid a pandemic, with all of the pressures and uncertainties devoted their time to engage with this year's competition. Many thanks to Dr Karen Throsby, University of Leeds and Dr Jessica Gagnon, University of Strathclyde for their considered and thoughtful feedback on the shortlisted essays.

The essays that make up this special issue of *JIWS* represent the strengths of the FSA: the work is interdisciplinary, challenging and passionately written, the articles that follow engage with the past, present and futures of feminism. The essays were written by scholars who were students at the time of writing, they therefore represent the latest debates in feminism highlight the new directions for feminist scholarship. To all those who submitted, FSA and *JIWS* sincerely thanks you.

The Essays

I am pleased to announce that the winner of the FSA Annual Student Essay Competition is Naoise Murphy for her paper entitled “*Queering history with Sarah Waters: Tipping the Velvet, lesbian erotic reading and the queer historical novel*”. Naoise is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies. Her research interests are in twentieth-century literature, queer theory and history, and Irish writing. The essay outlines how Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) illuminates the challenges involved in doing queer history. Within the essay, Naoise argues that Waters’ engagement with embodied reality represents an innovative intervention in queer historiography. The erotic is mobilised in this novel to collapse the distinction between alterity and continuity, admitting the affective dimensions of queer research. *Tipping the Velvet* addresses the tensions between some forms of lesbian feminist theory and queer theory, demonstrating the inextricability of queerly gendered subjectivities and lesbian erotics.

In Jovana Čvorić essay “*Intimate Partner Femicide in the Serbian Mainstream Media: Maintaining the Patriarchal Narrative through Online Newspaper Readers’ Comments*” a feminist standpoint is adopted. The essay explores how the maintenance of the patriarchal narrative about male violence against women (MVAW) in the Serbian media impacts the audience perceptions of intimate partner femicide (IPF). The study uses critical discourse analysis to explore online readers’ comments on articles relating to IPF published in four Serbian daily newspaper web portals in 2013 at a time when the highest number of IPFs was recorded.

“*Social Reproduction Theory: on regulating reproduction, understanding oppression and as a lens on forced sterilisation*” written by Lydia Glover considers Marxist feminism’s two main schools of thought – ‘dual systems theory’ and ‘social reproduction theory’. The paper brings these two theoretical perspectives into dialogue with a topic that is often neglected in feminist discussions of reproductive rights: forced sterilisation. The two material examples explored within the paper are the historical forced sterilisation of Black (cisgender) women in the USA and the current coercive sterilisation of transgender men and women in the USA. The essay argues that ultimately, although the Marxist ‘tool’ will inevitably need to be ‘sharpened and honed to fit new, emerging social realities’ (Bhattacharya, 2017a: 19), Marxism is just as important now to our understanding of the social as it ever was.

Cécile Huber’s essay “*Polymorph: Female Embodiment in Louise Bourgeois’s Sculptures*” brings together a feminist psychoanalytic materialist approach inspired by Rosi Braidotti with the work of the artist Louise Bourgeois. In doing so this essay highlights how sculpture in particular can show the polymorphy of female embodiment. It thereby moves beyond previous interpretations of Bourgeois, which mainly drew on Freud’s and Klein’s psychoanalytic theory. Focusing on three works by Bourgeois, *Torso/Self-Portrait* (1963–64), *Janus Fleuri* (1968), and *Maman* (1999). Huber, throughout the essay argues that these sculptures show amorph, ambiguous, and hybrid modes of embodiment. All three examples thus illustrate the lived polymorphy of the subject’s body.

In “*What does it mean to ‘decolonise’ gender studies? Theorising the decolonial capacities of gender performativity and intersectionality*” Julianne McShane argues for an understanding of Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality as decolonial methodologies, alternative epistemologies, and forms of political praxis within gender studies. McShane argues that gender performativity and intersectionality act as decolonial methodologies by revealing the respective erasures of constructedness and

situatedness within certain dysconscious, imperialist conceptions of ‘gender’ grounded in Whiteness, as well as how these erasures remain otherwise hidden and/or naturalised (to some).

“*Salvation as violence: anti-trafficking and the rehabilitation of rescued Filipino women into moral subjects*” by Sharmila Parmanand grapples with key themes such as sex work; trafficking; rehabilitation and victimhood within the context of the Philippines. The essay draws on extensive interviews with ten Filipino women who were placed in anti-trafficking shelters for rehabilitation, only four of whom identified as trafficking victim. The essay highlights the participants experience illustrating the way that rehabilitation programs have fallen short of their own goals of providing women access to resources and upholding their self-determination. Not least, the paper argues, because rehabilitation opportunities were conditional on exiting sex work and cooperation in the prosecution of perpetrators, regardless of women’s preferences. Furthermore, the paper also argues that the disciplinary practices and moral regulations to which women were subjected are part of an ideological project that constructs sex work as deviance and directs women towards low-paying, labour-intensive alternatives that conform to normative femininity.

Gender and the production of knowledge has long been deliberated and discussed. Alice Roberts Dunn’s essay further extends such discussion. In the essay “*How should an understanding of gender shape our approach to the production of knowledge?*” Dunn explores the question of what it means to take a feminist approach to the knowledge production process itself is of paramount importance. Drawing on postcolonial and intersectional thought and embedded in a discussion of the realities of the academic research process, this paper questions how an understanding of gender should shape such an approach. Ultimately, it argues the importance of moving beyond self-reflexivity alone and towards an understanding of research as a process of representation. Dunn draws on Spivak’s exploration of the concept of representation and Alcoff’s analysis of the problems of speaking for others, to show that the concept of representation offers an alternative path for the feminist production of knowledge. In doing so, the paper grapples with themes such as intersectionality, postcolonialism, production of knowledge, reflexivity, development and representation.

Finally, last but by no means least the special issue presents Jessica Beaumont’s “*Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s Fleabag(s): direct address and narrative control from stage to small screen*”. A special mention goes to Jessica for her work as it was written during her time as an undergraduate student reading BA English Literature. It is an exceptional achievement and at FSA and JIWS we were exceptionally excited to get a high quality, publishable undergraduate essay! Jessica’s essay explores the television comedy *Fleabag* (BBC 2016-2019) which was adapted from a theatrical monologue and owes its mode of direct address to this dramatic past. The original one-woman show, written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, was first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, and, like the BBC Three television adaptation that followed in 2016, follows the story of a sexually promiscuous young woman, known to the audience only as ‘Fleabag,’ struggling with the death of her closest friend. As Beaumont writes, the essay is concerned with the application of auteur theory becomes relevant to a discussion of the use of direct address, and particularly interesting in the context of the perceived difficulty in resolving auteur theory and feminist content. The essay is an example of excellent undergraduate work within the realm of feminist and women’s studies

Conclusion

I sincerely hope that you enjoy reading this year's competition essays, and I am sure you also congratulate the essayists on their wonderful success in this competition despite a challenging backdrop that accompanied their submission and editing process. I do hope that the following essays will inspire the next generation of students to submit their work for consideration for the next annual competition. For more information about the FSA and its initiatives, including the next round of our essay competition, please visit <https://the-fsa.co.uk/>.