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New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies
Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2017 Feminist and Women's Studies
Association's Annual Student Essay Competition

By Laura Clancy¹ and Sarah Burton²

Looking to the Future: Hope and Optimism in Feminist and Women's Studies Scholarship

The Feminist and Women's Studies Association UK and Ireland (FWSA) is delighted to present this special issue of *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS) featuring the winning and shortlisted entries to our annual student essay competition. This year marks 30 years since the inception of the FWSA, as an association, in 1987. We are now an international network of scholars with members' interests ranging across diverse topics in the arts, humanities, social and health sciences. Our anniversary is complimented by the warmth of our enduring relationship with JIWS, which has been publishing the winning and shortlisted essays from our essay competition for 13 years. Our sincere thanks go to Dr. Diana Fox, the managing editor of the journal, for her sterling support and ongoing collegiality. Celebrating the FWSA's commitment to encouraging and supporting students and early career researchers with a likeminded partner is testament to the strong spaces of intellectual sustenance and engagement which feminist and gender oriented scholars have created in the contemporary academy. In addition to the student essay competition, the FWSA also runs an annual small grants competition to fund postgraduate research events, the Ailsa McKay Travel Grant to support students and early career researchers in attending conferences, and the annual book prize which rewards exceptional feminist publications. The vitality of our commitment to these issues was evidenced in the hugely successful 2017 FWSA conference, hosted by the University of Strathclyde. The theme, 'Making space for feminism in the neoliberal academy', saw a range of scholars come together to discuss feminist collegiality and care in an increasingly precarious university environment. This coming together of feminist solidarities and the generosity they supply – evidenced intellectually in this special issue – is significant cause for hope and optimism within an increasingly neoliberalised academy.

The 2017 essay competition saw a record number of entries from undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK and Ireland, and reveals the lively and dynamic landscape of new feminist scholarship. We offer sincere thanks to everyone who submitted an entry and gave us

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such a stimulating and thought-provoking judging process. Further, we extend particular appreciation to our external judges, Professor Valerie Sanders and Dr. Vikki Turbine, who commented so constructively and valuably on a particularly cogent set of longlisted essays.

Making Space for Feminism: Epistemologies, Affect, and the Politics of Knowledge

Showcased in the winning and shortlisted essays we see an exceptionally broad range of feminist scholarship from multiple disciplines, standpoints, and perspectives. What is especially noteworthy – and what binds the scholarship in this special issue – are the ways in which all of this year’s contributions, to various extents, engage with our 2017 Biennial Conference theme. Each author, in myriad and persuasive ways, theorises on how we can “make space” for women from various sociopolitical and sociocultural backgrounds in both society and feminist epistemology. Crucially, they also follow an urgent core of existing feminist scholarship which examines the precarity of space afforded to feminism and gender studies in the contemporary academy (Burton 2018; Ahmed 2017; Meagher 2012; Hemmings 2011). In doing so, these authors offer us further analyses regarding the necessity of feminist scholarship and its pertinent place in a rich disimbrication of notions of value, authority, and legitimacy in the increasingly neoliberalised and managed intellectual space of the university (Thwaites and Pressland 2017; Billig 2013; Gill 2009). Drawing on a range of conceptual and intellectual resources - from zines and films as materials of mediation that feminists can use to articulate themselves, feminist postcolonial theory, queer crip praxis, and trauma recovery literature to considerations of domesticity and the making of home(ly) spaces - all of the essays demonstrate concern with providing the tools and language through which women and other marginalised identities can lay claim to space and visibility. The scholarship we feature here both frames intersectionality as a central concern, and uses it as theoretical navigation – thus challenging feminist approaches which close down opportunity for *all* women to present their experiential knowledge of a gendered social world.

We begin the special issue with an exemplary study of space-making and community. Olivia Wright’s winning essay, ‘Freedom in her Mind’: Women’s Prison Zines and Feminist Writing in the 1970s’, explores how women in prison create connections of community and solidarity through zine production. Wright compellingly shows that this shared political activity enables the incarcerated women to achieve collectivity and community in an environment which is primarily about “isolation, barriers, restriction, pain and corruption”. Zine-making, she argues, gives women the opportunity to reclaim the prison space as agentively productive, forge bonds with fellow prisoners and - most importantly - gives the women the scope and ability to shout back to power. Situating her argument in a history of zine-making as protest, collective autobiography and resistance, Wright illustrates how their shared status as “woman” supercedes their shared status as “prisoner”. As such, the women are able to maintain hold of, and explore anew, other facets of their identity outside of their pathologisation as “criminal”. Zine-making as a creative outlet is thus figured as a form of therapeutic (feminist) praxis and self-care for women frequently stigmatised by society.

Farhana Rahman’s essay, ‘The Merits and Limits of a Gendered Epistemology: Muslim Women and the Politics of Knowledge Production’ returns us to broader questions regarding the space of and for feminist knowledges. It is a timely intervention which brings together critical debates around the decolonising of knowledge and addressing Islamophobia with a re-assessment of feminist standpoint theory. Rahman suggests that by foregrounding gender as a primary

category of analysis, feminist epistemology risks a monolithic and essentialist understanding that marginalises other intersectional frameworks. Using postcolonial theory, the essay draws particular attention to the ways in which religion – specifically Islam – might impact upon ways of being and experiencing the category of “woman”. Rahman draws out the paradoxes and ambivalences of a gendered epistemology – suggesting both that it opens space for a more complex understanding of how Islamic knowledge is employed and understood, but also foregrounding its limitations as a western-centric perspective. Only by moving religion from the margins to the centre of analytic focus, suggests Rahman, can we undertake a more nuanced engagement with epistemologies.

This conceptual landscape is advanced in our third essay, ‘Reconceptualising Foreign Policy as Gendered, Sexualised and Racialised: Towards a Postcolonial Feminist Foreign Policy (Analysis)’, by Columba Achilleos-Sarll. Within this the author articulates the ways in which foreign policy analysis marginalises postcolonial and feminist theory. Through this identification, Achilleos-Sarll makes an original contribution to the scholarship by demonstrating how gender, sexuality, and “race” are always already imbricated in institutionalised government practice. In doing so, she foregrounds the ways in which foreign policy is inherently gendered, sexualised, and racialised. The essay aims to bring foreign policy and feminist postcolonial theory together in search of an ontological and epistemological approach which is attentive to, and critical of, this relationship. Achilleos-Sarll weaves a complex argument which mobilises postcolonial feminist work on “intersectionality” and “geographical segregations” to achieve this.

Lakshmi Quigley moves this examination forward in her essay, ‘Bengali art house cinema, women’s subjectivity, and history: Satyajit Ray’s use of ‘silence’ in *Charulata* (1964) and *Devi* (1960)’. Here, Quigley critically engages with how female subjectivity is—or is not—represented in film, and how the medium of film may offer new ways of understanding histories and historiographies. Taking the theme of “silence”, Quigley argues that the constructions of gender in Ray’s films reflect normative notions of femininity as they took shape in nineteenth-century Bengal – that is, how they were influenced by the nationalist sentiment of educated, upper-class, Bengali men. Ray’s use of silence, argues Quigley, means the films challenge the limits of written history and portray women’s subjectivities as defying the confines of language. In this way, film has the potential to overcome essentialised versions of womanhood in “official” history and instead provides the space to voice alternative historiographies which are more attentive to marginalised perspectives.

Gudrun Getz builds on these themes in ‘Honour and Dignity: Trauma Recovery and International Law in the Issue of Comfort Women of South Korea’. Using Judith Herman’s work on the three stages of trauma recovery, Getz addresses the systemic violent oppressions of women and the gender-blindness of transitional justice processes in South Korea. Bringing together discourses in legal frameworks, government bodies and NGOs with feminist psychoanalytic critical theory, Getz argues that issues of violence against so-called “comfort women” have not been attended to because of a critical failure to engage with the requirements of the trauma recovery process. In so doing, Getz brings the private space into the public sphere by arguing that this analysis speaks to the healing of the horrors experienced by comfort women *and* by Korea as a nation traumatised by a violent history.

Robyn Long’s essay, ‘Sexual subjectivities within neoliberalism: can queer and crip engagements offer an alternative praxis’, returns us to the sticky relationship between neoliberalism and the politics of knowledge. Long offers a critique to the framework of neoliberalism by seeking alternatives in queer and crip subjectivities and theories. Using Michel

Foucault's concept of "governmentality", Long argues that neoliberalism marginalises "bad bodies" that do not fit the ideal, compulsory mould of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. Undertaking a "feminist queer crip ethos" more attentive to politics of difference can, according to Long, destabilise social power relations and offer new ways of conceptualising the body as non-linear, fluid and multiple. In so doing, the transgressive potential of "bad bodies" means they become sites of resistance against neoliberal hegemony and its connected heteronormative, ableist assumptions.

The final essay, by Stephanie Butler, brings the special issue to a close through pertinent reflections on space-making. 'English Women at Home During WWII: Anderson Shelters as Domestic Spaces' makes sensitive use of women's letters to explore how domesticity in the alternative home spaces of air raid shelters was enacted and represented in World War II. The amount of time spent in the air raid shelters made it necessary to adapt these temporary spaces to make them spaces of comfort and homeliness; Butler draws our attention to the hidden labour of these women and suggests that the centrality of women to these projects of customisation and maintenance means they can be considered as an extension of the "domestic". While being mindful not to overstate the extent to which air raid shelters were considered positive spaces, Butler speaks to the wealth of scholarship which has addressed increased visibility of women in society during wartime, but extends this argument to include the important contribution of those women who prepared comfortable living spaces. Within this, Butler argues that the practical and affective actions of these women – revealed in their correspondence – is usefully read as a form of resilience. Butler's identification here returns us to the urgent questions of survival, stoicism, and space-making and -claiming which suffuse contemporary feminist conversations and writings.

Celebrating and Claiming Space for Feminist Perspectives

The essays featured in this special issue of *JIWS*, with their concern for detailed, vivid intersectional approaches and theorising, demonstrate the strength of current scholarship in feminism and gender studies in UK universities. In particular, they evidence the textured and subtle ways in which feminist standpoints, perspectives, and epistemology are being mobilised towards greater comprehension of social, cultural, and literary worlds. The ways in which they draw on rich histories of feminist scholarship and demonstrate their ongoing relevance to contemporary issues reminds us of the work already done in claiming space for feminist scholarship; while the ambivalences and hesitations they direct our attention toward speak to the precariousness of this space and the ways in which it is continually contested, reclaimed, and reformed. These essays are touchstones in this reclamation of territory. We hope you find the same intellectual engagement and solace in this year's winning and shortlisted entries as we do, and join us in congratulating the entrants on their success in this competition and their important early interventions in feminist scholarship. We would like to extend encouragement to all students inspired by their success and welcome you to submit your own work for consideration for next year's competition. For more information about the FWSA and its initiatives, including the 2018 student essay competition, please visit www.fwsablog.org.uk.

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