

New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies
**Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2016 Feminist and Women's
Studies Association's Annual Student Essay Competition**
Introduction

By Laura Clancy and Charlotte Mathieson

In this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS), the Feminist and Women's Studies Association UK and Ireland (FWSA) is delighted to present the winning and shortlisted entries of our annual student essay competition. JIWS first published this annual special issue featuring student essays in 2004, and we are delighted this collaboration has continued. JIWS's ongoing commitment to this competition demonstrates their support and encouragement of students and early career researchers; a practice which underpins the FWSA's values of promoting and enabling all stages of feminist research. The opportunity this special issue gives to students is incomparable. We were extremely pleased to hear about the positive experiences of the 2015 competition winners: Eliza Garwood has found her publication 'enhanced her application for PhD study', Eva Burke found it boosted her confidence and led to further publications, and Emily Nicholls found the experience of dealing with peer review comments extremely useful practice for her subsequent career (Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK & Ireland), 2016). We would like to thank the journal for continuing to advance interdisciplinary, cross-cultural perspectives on feminist study. Our thanks especially to Dr. Diana Fox, the managing editor of the journal, for her passion in supporting this venture and her continued commitment to advancing new scholarship.

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 huge range of feminist scholarship across disciplinary boundaries. Committed to encouraging feminist research and teaching, the FWSA runs a number of annual competitions which facilitate high quality scholarship from researchers at all levels. The annual small grants competition funds collaborative postgraduate research events, the annual book prize rewards exceptional feminist publications, and the Ailsa McKay travel grant enables students and early career researchers to attend. In addition, our biennial conference hosts contributions from a range of feminist scholars. The 2017 conference, "Making space for feminism in the neoliberal academy", to be held at the University of Strathclyde in September, continues the theme of facilitating feminist research, and addresses in particular the threats to feminist practice in the globalised and marketised contemporary university.

In this year's essay competition, we have enjoyed an array of entries from undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK and Ireland, and the multi-disciplinary focus of these contributions demonstrates a widespread engagement with feminist, gender and women's studies. We extend our sincere thanks to everyone who submitted entries to this year's competition; it has certainly been invigorating to see so much high quality upcoming feminist scholarship. To our external judges, Professor Karen Boyle and Dr. Sally Hines, we also give our thanks.

The Essays

This year's winning and shortlisted essays demonstrate a real engagement with both feminist practice and gendered experiences and representations of being across cultural and historical contexts. Many of this year's essays speak in particular to a disavowal of a white, British feminism, and instead embrace international contexts across historical epochs. Cultural phenomena ranging from paintings, magazines, novels and policy documents are scrutinized in invigorating feminist analyses, which challenge common notions of female sexuality and domesticity. Other essays demonstrate concern with particular feminist methodologies or practices, considering the role of reflexivity and identity in contemporary feminist research to invigorate methodological frameworks. Together, the essays showcase a range of feminist scholarship from a wealth of perspectives and disciplines, while all retaining intersectionality as a central consideration and concern.

Our first winning essay is Jana Cattien's "Feminist Epistemology and the Question of Difference Reconfigured: What can Wittgenstein tell us about "women"?", which offers an original enquiry into the question, "what is woman?" Cattien undertakes a brilliant critique of feminist standpoint theory, mobilizing the experiences of mixed-race women to query feminist standpoint theory's tendency to either essentialize all women "under one roof" and ignore intersectional differences, or "dissect" women into particular facets of their identity. Beautifully combining theoretical insights with personal anecdotes, Cattien outlines how Wittgenstein's "family resemblance concept" can help us to understand how identity boundaries are fluid, multiple, and linked together in a variety of complex ways which require more strategic and astute approaches to conceptualizing difference. Cattien contends that, if treated as a historically specific concept, the category of "woman" can continue to be used as part of a successful feminist agenda.

Joint winner with Cattien is Eleanor Dobson's "Sleeping Beauties: Mummies and the Fairy Tale Genre at the *Fin de Siècle*". Dobson cogently weaves together a range of sources to compare the relationship between representations of female mummies and the fairytale genre at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing out tropes such as desirability, objectification and marriage, Dobson explores mummy figures as analogous to fairytale heroines such as Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, making a compelling case for the similarities between the two. These parallels are imploded, however, when the mummy disintegrates before she can be trapped within the confines of the marriage which often concludes fairytale narratives. Dobson uniquely suggests this can be read through the lens of British imperialism, and the colonial presence of the British in Egypt, whereby the mummy can be read as simultaneously resisting both the control of marriage and the control of British rule. This historical context threads together Dobson's range of materials and data to narrate a story of gender, power and literature.

Representations of women are also the theme of Isabella Luta's "Nymphs and Nymphomania: Mythological medicine and classical nudity in nineteenth-century Britain", which investigates the epistemological development of the terms "nymph" and "Nymphomania". Luta provides a fascinating description of both terms' appearances in historical medical discourse, to determine how the classical figure of the nymph is implicated in/by accounts of Nymphomania. While the erasure of women's sexuality from medical discourse limits the extent to which these documents prove useful, Luta turns instead to nude paintings as a way of accessing sexual representations. Exploring depictions of the classic nymph, Luta suggests these texts were key to shaping understanding of Nymphomania in nineteenth century Britain, as well as being revealing of the specific social concerns around nude female paintings, prostitution and pornography. For Luta, the inconsistency of representations of the nymph figure demonstrates the confusion and ambiguity around female sexuality in Victorian Britain, as well as the complex and disordered etymology of Nymphomania as a medical phenomenon.

The socio-cultural significance of representations of women becomes more strongly developed in "Mothers, Morality and Abortion: The Politics of Reproduction in the Formation of the German Nation", in which Yvonne Frankfurth provides a fascinating historical account of the role of women in the construction of East and West German nationhood. Combining policy documents with popular culture materials, Frankfurth describes how representations of motherhood and reproduction became central to nation-building projects, which aimed to create distinctions between the two states. Representations of the "moral" West German mother who prioritised domestic responsibilities and raising children were directly contrasted with the "immoral" East German mother who had free access to contraception, abortion and childcare. Frankfurth goes on to describe how these two worlds collided upon the unification of East and West Germany in 1990, and how both states undertook

discursive and representational battles to reify their distinct ideologies. Crucially, the rhetoric of these cultural and political battles often relied on symbolic violence towards the women whose bodies were the target of these campaigns, as well as entirely overlooking their autonomy and independence, and the problems inherent in “building” a nation around structuring and determining access to women’s bodies.

“Post/Feminist Impulses: Global Capitalism and Class Politics in Annie Wang’s *The People’s Republic of Desire* (2006)” also takes an international focus. Kelly Tse undertakes a feminist reading of Annie Wang’s chick lit novel *The People’s Republic of Desire* (2006) in terms of its orientation to global capitalism and neoliberalism. In an elucidating analysis, Tse evaluates Wang’s claim that the novel is a critique of globalized consumption in post-socialist China, positing instead that it chimes with a Western postfeminist ethos which promotes mass consumption and traditional forms of female sexuality. Tse demonstrates how, while the novel does offer commentary on Chinese globalization, on the whole it only recapitulates neoliberal logic. Moreover, it is continually dismissive of class politics in post-socialist China, and offers only superficial commentary on growing inequality and economic disparity. In the end, the protagonist’s rejection of China and aspiration to move to America means the novel pivots upon a desire for Westernized versions of the global, thereby embracing the neoliberal and postfeminist ideology it seeks to expel.

In the final essay of this issue, Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani’s essay ““Speaking back” to the self: A call for “voice notes” as reflexive practice for feminist ethnographers” returns to the theme of the self and identity with which the issue begins. Mazanderani makes an important intervention into the literature on feminist methodology through a centering of the self of the researcher. Taking feminist debates about reflexivity in the research process as a starting point, Mazanderani makes a case for the use of audio recordings, or “voice notes”, during the fieldwork process. Mobilizing fascinating excerpts from her ethnographic research with young people in South Africa, Mazanderani explores how voice notes helped her to discern her own expectations and biases towards her research participants in ways which avoided the self-censorship typically inherent in written articulations. In a unique analysis, Mazanderani combines post-structuralist and feminist politics with linguistic concerns about the stability of language and meaning to present voice notes as a viable and effective tool for feminist ethnographers.

Mazanderani’s work offers a valuable opportunity for all feminist researchers to reflect upon their subject position in relation to their research practices, a concern which is complemented by the framework of analyses in the other essays, which encourage us to broaden the perspectives and contexts in which our work is undertaken. The essays’ broad range of historical periodization, local and global standpoints, and multidisciplinary theorizations demonstrate a promising future for feminist studies. And indicate the exciting new directions in which the field is developing.

Conclusion

We hope you enjoy reading this year’s 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. For more information about the FWSA and its initiatives, including the next round of our essay competition, please visit www.fwsablog.org.uk.

References

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