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Journal of International Women's Studies

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Crossing Boundaries

By Sue Jackson

Introduction to this edition

It was with mixed feelings that I offered to host a conference in the summer of 2003 for the Women’s Studies Network (UK) Association. Whilst I have been committed to the Network for several years now, and have been involved as an Executive member and as Co-Chair, I took on the conference organisation at short notice and alone. I was not at all sure that I could pull it off! However, what I was clear about from the outset was the theme in which I was interested. My working title of Transcending Boundaries met with some resistance, with some colleagues on the Network Executive feeling that ‘transcending’ was somewhat ephemeral and that something more concrete was required from us – and indeed that we require from ourselves - in our work both within and without the academy. My view was (and remains, I think) that to cross boundaries still leaves them in place, and there are some boundaries I would rather transcend than cross. However, we eventually agreed a title of Crossing Boundaries and Conference calls for papers invited contributors to consider a range of boundaries, including:

♦ Crossing boundaries of teaching and research
♦ Crossing boundaries of the academy
♦ Crossing interdisciplinary boundaries
♦ Crossing boundaries of ‘race’ and ‘class’

Feminist scholarship can act both as a site for struggle and as an enabler for the discovery of the tools necessary to bring about transformative change and development. As part of such struggle, feminist practices consider and integrate theoretical and ideological positions, material realities, and the personal experiences of women. It relates these issues to conditions of power, oppression and privilege. In trying to lay the foundation stones for a world in which institutionalized practice does not subordinate women’s lives and experiences, new ways of seeing have to be conceptualized, and boundaries both crossed and transcended. Traditional disciplinary boundaries, for example, can be a barrier to intellectual thought, and the boundaries that appear tightly fixed around what counts as ‘conventional’ research can effectively shut out women’s lives, experiences and ways of knowing.

The articles in this special issue have been selected to give a good example of the range of discussion and issues that were raised across the themes of the Conference. The Conference also raised questions about women’s studies itself, and the place of the Women’s Studies Network. With the demise or disappearance of many women’s studies courses within the British Academy, several Conference delegates felt that by clinging onto the name of ‘women’s studies’, the network was excluding many feminist scholars who no longer – or never did – work within ‘women’s studies’ per se, although they are certainly very involved with and committed to feminist teaching and research.

Women’s Studies has always been a contested space, both within and without the academy, personally and politically. It has a huge diversity of approaches and struggles, and is not just inter- and multi-disciplinary, but is also trans-disciplinary. This can make the spaces occupied by women’s studies / gender studies / feminist
scholarship even more difficult and contested. In an apparently post-feminist era, feminist spaces are becoming increasingly difficult to claim, and feminists find themselves engaged with political, ideological and material struggles over which boundaries to build around ‘safe’ spaces, and which boundaries to try and cross or dismantle. Should we, for example, be trying to locate ourselves more firmly institutionally and, if we do so, is this ‘selling out’, setting boundaries and constraints for ourselves? Within this special issue of the Journal, contributors consider the boundaries we have crossed, the boundaries still to cross, the boundaries we wish to maintain and the boundaries we self-impose.

Within the academy, boundaries are often tightly drawn around disciplines and subject specialisms. Although research councils, universities and other authorities may appear to promote the value of interdisciplinary research, in practice there are barriers to engaging in such work, and in many areas increasingly narrow specialisation within accepted paradigms has become the norm. In their article, Marion Hersch and Gloria Moss argue that challenging accepted paradigms within the academy, or combining or using multiple paradigms, is seen as akin to heresy. They question whether this type of specialisation and mono-disciplinarity occurs anywhere other than in the academy and suggest that a broader interdisciplinary approach should be welcomed as more appropriate and productive.

The authors argue that those people who are able to accept being outsiders may find it easier to go against traditional disciplinary boundaries and paradigms, although self-acceptance as an outsider brings with it some areas of serious concern, and may indeed deny some of the pleasures felt by feminists at developing their academic profiles as insiders, an issue that is raised below and by Valerie Hey in her article. Marion Hersch and Gloria Moss also suggest that women, with their experience of multi-tasking, may be particularly suited to interdisciplinary work, and it is certainly the case that women appear to be more interested in undertaking interdisciplinary research than do men.

Indeed, for many women undertaking research the most exciting opportunities are those which enable boundaries to be crossed or even transcended: boundaries of interdisciplinary research; of a central focus on women’s lives and experiences; and boundaries of constructions of ‘academic. Yet as is argued in my article with Amanda Loumansky, for many women in the academy - including those at the start of their academic careers - the processes of the PhD viva examination means that such boundaries are difficult, sometimes impossible, to cross. In the UK, the viva is uniquely positioned in the academy as a private affair and within many institutions little is known about the interaction that occurs behind closed doors.

Whilst at undergraduate level women have made, and continue to make, critical inroads into the academy, entering universities in at least equal numbers to men and performing equally well with regard to classification of final degree, fewer women than men undertake research degrees and women are less likely to apply for research funding after they have a PhD. Less women than men opt for an academic career, either as researchers or as lecturers in the academy. We argue that whilst the gatekeepers who determine access through the closed doors of the secret world of the PhD viva continue in the main to be the white, middle-class men who dominate the academy, the male culture of the university (supported by some women) will continue dominant, and many women will find themselves powerless to make the challenges to bring about change.
And yet, as indicated above, Valerie Hey builds a case about the persistence of perverse pleasures of academic work, showing the ambiguities involved in the complex navigations that we all negotiate across the personal, private, public and professional aspects of identity. This is certainly part of what I was/am doing in organising the Conference and putting together this special issue of the journal. The Women’s Studies Network, journals such as this one, and the issues raised with regard to crossing boundaries are all centrally important to me as an academic feminist. However, I have to admit here (with the guilty and almost secret pleasure that Valerie Hey identifies) that my professional identity will also benefit through editing a special issue and through being a conference organiser.

Valerie Hey considers both intellectual pleasure and the pleasures of creating an academic identity, as well as the pleasures of female friendship in academic feminism. Like identifying as a women’s studies lecturer or researcher, feminist struggle within the academy has always been ambiguous. The insider / outsider relation (also raised in other articles here) says the author, is particularly vexed when demands on professional identity appear to erase the more political claims on our identity such as being a feminist.

Identity is a theme running through this special issue. Clare Beckett outlines ways in which heterosexuality is located as a boundary for lesbians and disabled women. Both coming out as a lesbian and identifying as a disabled woman, she argues, create boundaries located in heterosexual social assumptions that must be negotiated in order to gain entry to social value and respect. Heterosexuality operates as the sphere of the adult, or the normal, and to not be part of that sphere is to be seen as being powerless and dependent. As other authors in this special issue have also argued, creating a category not only marks boundaries, but also reflects the parameters of other categories. If heterosexuality is a border, says Clare Beckett, then there will be crossing points and frontier skirmishes. She concludes that the friendship networks between women is the strongest defence against border skirmishes. Recognition of exclusion that is based on social heterosexuality will enable safe passages through and beyond the boundaries for all women.

However, as Myria Vassiliadou shows, recognition is not always sought for, and friendships are not always viewed as desirable. Like Clare Beckett, she also raises the boundaries of patriarchal heterosexuality and ‘otherness’ in her article, showing how we at times create spaces for ourselves through the construction of ‘other’. Here she identifies how questions of identity are about sameness (you are the same as me and we belong) and difference (you are different from me and you do not belong). Myria Vassiliadou takes us across academic boundaries and moves us both outside of the academy and into Mediterranean Europe. She argues that work on the Mediterranean and Near East has largely ignored questions about women’s experiences and attitudes, including issues of marginalisation, discrimination, racism and ethnic-gender groups.

The author’s work with women in Cyprus takes us through the boundary of the ‘front door’ of the apparently private world of the home. Crossing the front door, she explains, is an act of particular importance in Cyprus, where the home represents structures of patriarchy, oppression and domination. Although the gatekeepers are men, some women have been allowed access to the key – but this is a key that allows them to enter through the door but not to exit again. Women who have been given the key to the front door have the power to exclude those women who do not, and one way in which women survive in the home is to adopt coping mechanisms of creating ‘others’ amongst women who are not able to enter. In her research, the author
concentrates on three groups of women who have become ‘other’ to the ones inside: prostitutes, lesbians and domestic workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

For domestic workers such as these, as well as for refugees and asylum seekers from across the world, border crossings are more than metaphor. Jennifer Langer describes borders of geography, of history, of culture and of memory that are crossed and negotiated, as well as the patriarchal systems that are transferred across borders. She considers the extent to which the formerly repressed voices of exiled and refugee women have adapted to Western diasporic space. She does so though an examination of the writing of exiled women, asking whether women writers consider exile to be a safe space in which to describe the horrific experiences of gender specific persecution or of being a victim of violence in conflict, or whether taboos restrict women’s voices. Is exile, she asks, providing a cathartic space to write openly?

The author concludes that it is only partially doing so, with exiled women writers struggling to maintain a hold to their roots, as well as trying to deploy the new spaces in which they find themselves. Borders and boundaries, says Jennifer Langer, are not just material barriers to be crossed – often in flight, sometimes in hope – but are fluid, shifting and changing. The literature that exiled women writers produce can be a meeting point between the exiled writer, and listeners / readers in and from the exiled lands, and within the new geographic and psychological spaces in which the women find themselves.

Of course, these new spaces are often not safe spaces for exiled women, who have to negotiate the interrelationships between the supposed boundaries of racism, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. In revisiting intersectionality, Ann Phoenix and Avtar Brah ask how issues of ‘otherness’ and political connectivity are to be addressed in the face of postmodern neo-imperialisms of the 21st century. Many of the ‘old’ questions about the category ‘woman’, they say, assume critical urgency once again, now bearing the weight of global circumstances. In order to understand colonialism and post-colonialism, they argue, the supposed boundaries of ‘race’, gender and class need to be deconstructed: they are not distinct and isolated realms of experience.

The authors take us firstly across the boundaries of time, to 19th century North America, and to Sojourner Truth’s passionate and accusatory question, ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ This is not, they argue, because the past necessarily provides answers for the present, but because critique and insight gained can help shed new light on current predicaments. They go on to argue that social class and its intersections with gender, ‘race’ and sexuality are simultaneously subjective, structural and about social positions and everyday practices. They conclude that considerations of intersectionality need to be both historically-rooted and forward looking in order to challenge the power games that are currently played out on the world stage. We should work within, though and across the boundaries of cultural differences, moving towards complex and dynamic understandings of intersectionality.

The articles here demonstrate a commitment to developing understandings of intersectionality and to finding ways to work within, between and across boundaries and yes – even at times transcend them. Women’s identities both within and without the academy become subsumed into apparently universal and normalised identities. We need to be able to not only recognise ourselves in the stories that are told, but also to value what we see, and to have our own stories valued institionally. In disputing the boundaries which can often make border crossings so difficult, there is a challenge
for us all in acknowledging and valuing women’s experiences, and in examining the production of meaning and claims for the universality of ideas or practices.

Within the academy, pedagogic conditions must be created which enable border crossings to be made, deconstructing and challenging dominant power relations. Power operates in complex ways, and power structures are reproduced whenever someone who ‘knows’ instructs someone who does not. However, women are not just passively located within power structures but are also active agents, differently positioned in relation both to men and to each other. Consideration needs to be given not just to the border crossings, but also to what prevents border crossings being made. This includes an understanding of who the gatekeepers are, what gives them the power to name themselves as gatekeepers, and ways in which boundaries are reinforced and borders closed to certain groups. In addition, we need to find diverse ways to transcend the boundaries and search for alternative routes. This is particularly true within the innovative practices of women's studies, but includes the alternative routes discovered in much of women's education and feminist scholarship and practice.

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Heresy and orthodoxy:  
Challenging established paradigms and disciplines

By Marion Hersch and Gloria Moss

Abstract
A brief survey of the literature on interdisciplinary work and a discussion of issues relating to orthodoxy and heresy are presented to introduce a questionnaire on current interdisciplinary practice and the effects of engaging in research of this kind. Preliminary results of the survey are presented and it is suggested that women may have a greater tendency than men to engage in interdisciplinary research. They may also encounter more obstacles in their research than men. A number of hypotheses, including the relationship of interdisciplinary work and heresy, are proposed and a plan of further work to investigate them put forward.

Key words: Interdisciplinarity, gender, heresy

1. Introduction: Interdisciplinary Research and gender
There is a large literature examining the nature and consequences of the pursuit of interdisciplinary research, and separately a literature examining the extent to which the field of women’s studies is situated within or without disciplines. Largely absent from the literature is an examination of the extent to which women’s research in general (i.e. not simply research lying in the field of women’s studies) is of an inter-disciplinary nature, and an examination of the consequences of any such engagement. There is also a body of literature on heresy and orthodoxy, but this rarely mentions interdisciplinary work. To fill these apparent gaps, this paper reports on the findings of two questionnaires completed by both male and female researchers engaged in inter-disciplinary research. It considers a variety of questions, including any evidence of a tendency for greater numbers of women than men to engage in research of this kind, the consequences of interdisciplinary work and its possible relationship to ‘heresy’.

The paper is organised as follows. Section two discusses heresy, orthodoxy and interdisciplinarity and Section three presents a brief survey of the literature on interdisciplinary work and its effects and the position of women’s studies vis-à-vis disciplinarity. The methodology of the two related surveys carried out by the authors on interdisciplinary work is discussed in Section four and preliminary results of the two surveys are given in Sections five and six respectively. Suggestions for good practice from both surveys are presented in Section seven and conclusions discussed in Section eight.

2. Heresy, Orthodoxy and Interdisciplinarity

2.1 Heresy: Similarity and Passion
The term heresy was first used in religion. Although the term, as such is rarely used in this context, the associated attitudes and treatment have since spread to science and research more generally. Heresy generally has two main features:

- Similarity or closeness: theories, philosophies or ideas are generally only considered heretical when they have a broad area of commonality with the mainstream or orthodoxy, but differ in either significant or trivial aspects. Thus sects of a given religion may be considered heretical, but different religions generally are not. It is this closeness that
probably gives rises to the feelings of betrayal and the intense feelings of bitterness that ‘heresy’ can generate.

- Fervour or passion: the concept of heresy generally only arises about theories, philosophies or ideas which are taken very seriously. One example is the dispute within the Church of England concerning the ordination of homosexual priests, a dispute which threatens to tear the church apart. Further examples include the debates over GM food, mobile telephones and the war in Iraq. The feelings that can be provoked by differences in opinions can be extreme. Kuhn (1962) considers that resistance (particularly amongst older and more experienced academics) can be ‘life-long’ and ‘indefinite’ and that responses can be ‘so emotional and erroneous’ that they are otherwise difficult to explain.

The problem Kuhn describes is not new and was, for instance, observed by Leo Tolstoy a century ago:

…..most men … can seldom accept even the simplest and most obvious truths if it can be such as would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have delighted in explaining to colleagues, which they have proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabric of their lives (Jeffreys, 1998).

Tolstoy was speaking in general terms whereas most of Kuhn’s discussion is focused on the natural sciences. However he does also refer to the social sciences and suggests that trying to reach a firm consensus in this field is ‘extraordinarily arduous’. Findings in the field of change management mirror Kuhn’s observations as to the emotional reactions an actual or threatened paradigm shift can provoke, and they also cast light on the sources of the problems. In terms of reactions, Pugh (1993) notes vividly that resistance may be manifested in ‘A series of outraged objections, some relevant … some irrelevant’. He also suggests caution and that rational discussion of the underlying issues may not receive an equally rational response.

Johnson (1988) suggests that one factor underlying these emotional reactions is a perceived diminution of power arising from the threat to the prevailing paradigm. He considers that the most powerful people in organisations derive this power at least in part from their association with ‘the constructs of power’, making it very difficult for members of the organisation to challenge or change aspects of the paradigm unless such changes are evolutionary. In addition challenges to the organisational paradigm are frequently perceived as ‘political’ and ‘cultural’, rather than matters lending themselves to intellectual debate. As a result, analytical challenging of the status quo may lead to a ‘political’ rather than an ‘intellectual’ response in the form of action to preserve the integrity of the existing paradigm and resistance to the adoption of the new one.

Another interesting aspect is the denial through appeals to a higher authority of the fact that such reactions are emotional rather than intellectual. Using emotive words, such as traitor and heretic, in discussing ‘threats’ to the established order, whether in religion, research or politics, is portrayed as a reasoned rather than an emotional reaction. This also indicates a fear of acknowledging and expressing strong emotion. Research by Baron-Cohen (2003) and others, indicates gender differences in the capacity to experience emotion. However it may be rather that there are gender differences in what causes strong emotion, with threats of loss of power more likely to lead to strong emotional reactions in men, whereas suffering by themselves or others produces similar types of emotion in women. If this is the case (which remains to be proven) it would indicate a tendency for men to have a more egocentric and women a more holistic perspective. It should also be noted that all these propositions are generalisations which if proven to hold will not be true of all individuals.
This also raises question of whether women are likely to be more tolerant of heresy i.e. differing viewpoints than men or whether there are gender differences in the types of beliefs and behaviour considered heretical.

Another factor that affects the opinions considered legitimate are commercial interests. The extent to which scientific research is now underpinned by external sponsorship is underlined by a 1996 study by Krimsky and Rothenberg (2001) at Tufts University, Boston. Of a group of 1000 scientists publishing in 14 major scientific and medical journals in 1992, one third had commercial sponsorship. Increasing pressures to obtain commercial or military funding may lead scientists and engineers in particular to carry out research in areas likely to attract funding or slant their research in directions of interest to potential funders. For instance acceptance of a Ministry of Defence grant by the Bristol University veterinary school after rejection of the original project by a research council led to a change in research aims. Rather than studying the effects of four airborne organisms on the health of farm animals in closed environments, the study changed to the effects of the single organism Klebsiella pneumoniae, which does not endanger animals, but causes possibly fatal pneumonia in humans (Evans, Butler and Gonçalves, 1991). Thus the control of a high percentage of research funding by the military (and industry) may have already led to a shift away from long term fundamental research to short term applied work with immediate applications, resulting in a de facto limitation of academic freedom. There is also the question of whether it is appropriate that the research agenda should be determined by the military and industry and whether they are likely to do so in the interests of society as a whole. The need to seek financial disclosure from authors was discussed in Nature in 1997 (Editorial, 1997) and this is now a condition of publication in the Lancet and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The concept of religious heresy is generally meaningless in modern secular society, though not in societies in which religion plays a dominant and often also oppressive role. Religious tolerance seems to often be in part a consequence of the fact that religion does not matter enough for concern about doctrinal differences. Thus raises a number of questions, including whether passion and tolerance are compatible and how tolerance can be achieved without a loss of passionate interest in and dedication to the subject. Another important question relates to the future of research. Will the increasing bureaucratisation and commercialisation of research lead to a reduction in concern about dissenting or heretical views or will the orthodoxy to be protected shift from established disciplinary expertise to bureaucratic procedures and commercial interests.

2.2 Heresy, Interdisciplinarity and Truth

There has been relatively little discussion of heresy and interdisciplinarity in the literature. For instance Gürsoy (1996) mentions it, but only in passing. Interdisciplinary research may challenge two different (but related) orthodoxies:

- The orthodoxy of disciplinarity according to which all research activities should be carried out within a particular discipline.
- The orthodoxy of the particular discipline which interdisciplinarity challenges by bringing in ideas from outside and mixing them (in new ways) with the orthodox disciplinary ideas.

At the same time interdisciplinary research may seem close enough to the original disciplines to appear heretical rather than a new discipline with which the original disciplines do not have to concern themselves.
The difference between orthodoxy and ‘heresy’ in a particular context is largely determined by the relative power of their proponents, rather than necessarily any specific differences in characteristics of the different ideologies, theories or philosophies. One of the ways of maintaining orthodoxy is through gatekeeping, in which access to resources and publication in respected journals is restricted to individuals who are considered to conform and who present ideas or projects within the canon. As a consequence, indigenous knowledge, for instance, of edible plants, is disappearing or even being suppressed, since it is not recognised as valid or authoritative (Ilkkaracan and Appleton, 1995). The mechanisms by which this occurs are different in different contexts and include the lack of transparency and gender and race discrimination in the peer reviewing process for academic journals and the deliberations of research councils and other funding bodies.

It has been suggested that change often happens at the margins. Interdisciplinarity occurs at the margins or boundaries between disciplines and therefore often brings change, whether in terms of giving rise to new disciplines, which then may become part of new orthodoxies, or in the generation of new ideas. This mixture of creative potential and being situated at the margins or boundaries may also be a cause of hostility and suspicion.

Orthodoxy is often distinguished by a particular concept of the Truth, which is considered to be unique and knowable or revealed to particular (male) experts or leaders, whether scientific or religious. Heresy is therefore presented as based on lies and distortions and consequently requires to be challenged and suppressed because it denies this one Truth. However more tolerant or broad based approaches recognise that our theories and ability to perceive the Truth are only partial and that there are many possible approaches to finding or determining the Truth. An interesting perspective on this is given by one of Brecht’s (1930) didactic plays in which a young comrade who tends to go his own way is told by four fellow activists: ‘Don’t separate yourself from us. You could be right and we could be wrong’. Their immediately preceding comment on ‘heresy’ is equally interesting: ‘Show us the way we should go and we will follow it with you, but don’t go the right way without us, as without us it is totally the wrong way.’ There are parallels with interdisciplinarity, which can be considered to undermine the disciplinary Truth. The unfortunately disablist story about the blind men and the elephant is relevant here. While it should be recognised that blind people are no more likely to have limited perceptions than sighted people, it does illustrate the problem of restriction of viewpoint. In disciplinary terms the approaches and perspectives of a number of different disciplines may be required to comprehend the whole picture.

Power, passion and Truth have all been mentioned. Sometimes passion for defending the Truth is the main driving force behind the fight against heresy, whereas in other cases the rhetoric refers overtly to defending the Truth, but the real issues are concerned with defending establishment power. However a genuine belief in a particular Truth can coexist with use of belief in this Truth to preserve the status quo.

Interdisciplinary work often involves boundary crossing, which can be understood in the following ways:

- Acting as a bridge between different disciplinary languages and cultures. This is a very important aspect of interdisciplinary work and the existence of ‘bridges’ between the different disciplines, whether in the form of individuals or particular project activities is often a prerequisite for success. However, without taking the metaphor too far, it should be noted that bridges get trodden on. This is a serious potential risk for individuals who have a bridge-building role.
- Crossing or moving outside the boundaries of disciplines or paradigms. As discussed in the literature (Kuhn, 1962), this can often also be a risky strategy.
- Crossing the boundaries of orthodoxy into ‘heresy’, as discussed above.
2.3 Scapegoats and Whistleblowers

Another concept drawn from religion and myth, which is unfortunately of relevance to interdisciplinary research, is that of the scapegoat. Scapegoating is only effective when there is an element of delusion, which allows guilt, suffering and responsibility to be transferred to its victims (Girard, 1987). Scapegoating must remain unconscious to allow persecutors to chose their victim for inadequate reasons or randomly (other than being in a vulnerable position). The scapegoat is chosen to bear responsibility for reasons totally independent of any actual guilt, but there is still a question as to whether the scapegoat’s objective innocence is important. The group of possible human victims is distinguished by being outside or on the fringes of society, ranging from the king who is isolated by being higher than everyone else, to the pharmakos (who was frequently both already condemned to death and considered very ugly, chosen to bear all the ills of the community and then burnt to death) who is lower. Individuals are more likely to become scapegoats if they are not well integrated into society and there are unlikely to be reprisals or vengeance for their deaths. Thus interdisciplinary researchers make ‘good’ scapegoats because their work occurs at the boundaries and can therefore easily be marginalized. They may also be less well integrated into the department both academically and socially than its other members.

Scapegoat myths generally have ‘happy endings’ with the collective murder or expulsion ending the problem by removing the ‘trouble maker’ who must therefore be guilty, or achieving some unexpected positive benefit which has little logical connection with the situation. Historical examples of scapegoating have generally had much less dramatic benefits. They have tended to unify the group or community against the alien ‘threat’ represented by the scapegoat, and thereby promote cohesion and group feeling. However this unification is based on exclusion (of the scapegoat) rather than inclusion. In addition to the suffering caused to the actual scapegoat, the scapegoating process legitimates discrimination and violence and the benefits are based on delusion or a lie. In both the mythic and historical contexts the collective violence against those who became the founding ancestors and tutelary divinities can also lead to the birth of a new cult, establishment of a totemic system or development of a new culture. Parallels probably exist here as well. Disciplining or expelling an interdisciplinary researcher may ‘tame’ their heretical ideas and enable their serious consideration and acceptance, as part of a new orthodoxy. Although scapegoating is only one of many mechanisms, it may be becoming increasingly important with the growth of a cult of blame in universities and many interdisciplinary researchers do suffer in their careers.

Another relevant parallel is to the treatment of whistleblowers who publicise wrongdoing in organizations (Hersh, 2002). Many surveys and other accounts indicate that whistleblowers experience retaliation, sometimes of a very severe kind. In a proposed four-stage model of retaliation (O’Day, 1972) the second and third stages are isolation and defamation of character, raising the idea of the whistleblower as heretic. The problem, as presented, is not in the organization, but in the whistleblower’s false views.

This then raises the question of how to investigate the relationship between heresy, boundary crossing and interdisciplinary work and there are a number of associated difficulties. In particular definitions of ‘heresy’ and orthodoxy are likely to vary and many researchers, particularly in more traditional disciplines, may be uncomfortable with the concepts. Researchers may also not wish to label themselves as either orthodox practitioners or heretics.

The first approach to investigation has been through the use of a questionnaire, including questions about whether researchers challenge the paradigms of their disciplines and whether they consider themselves as insiders or outsiders in their work and in their lives. While there is some relationship between being an outsider in work and life and frequently
challenging disciplinary boundaries, it does not follow that these researchers should all be considered ‘heretics’ and those who rarely go outside disciplinary boundaries and consider themselves insiders in both work and life should be considered orthodox. The use of indepth interviews, focus groups and power relationship diagrams may be helpful in investigating these issues further.

3. Interdisciplinary Research and gender: the literature

Research has been conducted on the nature of inter-disciplinary work and its consequences and separately from this the position of women’s studies vis-à-vis disciplinarity. A brief overview of this literature is presented in sections 3.1 and 3.2 respectively.

3.1 Interdisciplinary research

Interdisciplinary research involves the study of the scholarly and institutional relationships among various branches or fields of knowledge and the exploration of how those fields might be brought together (Salter and Hearn, 1996). A large literature exists looking at issues surrounding this kind of research. Dating from the 1950s (Qin, Lancaster and Allen, 1997) it offers definitions of interdisciplinary research (distinguishing it from multidisciplinary research) (Rossini and Porter, 1981; Salter and Hearn, 1996), profiles of those likely to engage in this research, in terms of age, status and gender (Birnbaum, 1981; Bruhn, 2000)–with one study reporting that over 90% of interdisciplinary researchers in the sciences were male, and without concern for tenure, either because they already have obtained it, or because they are not in tenure track positions (Birnbaum, 1981) - and the pitfalls and benefits of this kind of research (Birnbaum, 1982; Bruhn, 2000; Rossini and Porter, 1981; Wilson, 1996; Younglove-Webb et al., 1999). The problems highlighted by the literature can be separated into those focusing on input issues–problems of communication and teamwork – and those focusing on output issues–from ease of publication to overall impact on an interdisciplinary researcher’s career. Salter and Hearn (1996) highlight two key communication issues namely the ‘translation problem’ (arising from differences between disciplines in the way information is presented) and the ‘language problem’ (the same words are used in distinct ways in different disciplines).

Not only, according to the literature, is interdisciplinary research problematic, but it can be hazardous as well. The literature links this to the fact that interdisciplinary research can conflict with the traditional academic system of most universities (Robertson, 1988), as well as the fact that the system of rewards in academia may be geared to single discipline research rather than to interdisciplinary work (Nelson, 1980). Part of the problem may lie in the fact that interdisciplinary work may be refereed by scholars who lack expertise in some of the fields represented in the work and may as a consequence receive lower ratings as compared to single disciplinary work. According to Rossini and Porter (1981), interdisciplinary projects are rated less favourably than single discipline work and peer review is ‘fundamentally and ineluctably anti-innovation’, favouring well established research areas over nascent ones. Therefore it is not surprising to discover that interdisciplinary researchers can find that their careers suffer as a consequence of their involvement in interdisciplinary research (Bruhn, 2000). The literature tends to downplay the problems facing interdisciplinary researchers, one study speaking in heroic terms of interdisciplinarians as ‘hybrid scholars’, ‘border crossers’, less anxious in high stress situations than others or as scholars who refuse to let their creativity be politically controlled (Bird, 2001).

While the literature plays down the problems associated with interdisciplinary research, it deals eloquently with its benefits. These include: increased productivity (Younglove-Webb et al., 1999), gap bridging (Nelson, 1980), problem solving (Nelson,
One study goes so far as to suggest that new disciplines are ‘often created by researchers at the margins of their field’ (Editorial, 1997), typically those engaged in interdisciplinary research. Elsewhere, those scientists involved in work of this kind are described as ‘defy[ing] the crowds’ (Bruhn, 2000). Given that Wilson (Wilson, 1996) regards specialisation as, in part, a defensive strategy against overload, and given that, according to Birnbaum (1982) problems are becoming more complex, one can see how interdisciplinary work could bring associated benefits.

### 3.2 Women’s studies and disciplinarity

According to research conducted in the early 1980s (Allen and Kitch, 1998), more than 90% of interdisciplinary researchers in the sciences were male. Since the majority of researchers in the sciences are male, a more relevant question would be on the relative proportions of male and female workers in interdisciplinary and single disciplinary research. This question is equally relevant to interdisciplinary research outside the sciences. The closest seemingly relevant studies are focused on the field of women’s studies and their relationship to interdisciplinary research. According to Pryse (2000), women’s studies is situated within an interdisciplinary environment that is ill defined, yet promoting of cross-cultural insight. She discusses the institutional barriers and challenges such work presents to the ‘exclusionary logic’ of disciplinary structures.

This theme of the oppositional nature of disciplinary and interdisciplinary research is developed elsewhere. Bird (2001) describes disciplines as ‘particularistic’ and interdisciplinary work as ‘holistic’. Allen and Kitch (1998) define ‘disciplines’ as ‘domains of inquiry that share objects of study … governed by a general set of rules and categories’ and interdisciplinary as the ‘integration of disciplines’ to create a new epistemology that rebuilds the prevailing structures of knowledge. They define interdisciplinary scholarship to be of fundamental importance in recasting women’s studies investigations beyond conventional limits on to innovative terrain. Boxer (2000) takes a disciplinary approach back to the

> ‘powerful authoritative voices, largely male, that two centuries ago … began to corral all kinds of knowledge into the disciplinary forms that came over the last century to structure academies of higher learning’.

She contrasts this with feminist work that has ‘resisted some of the disciplinary rules’ and situates this in the context of Klein’s model, allowing for ‘normal’ boundary crossing at one end of the extreme, to ‘oppositional’ boundary crossing (which challenges the disciplinary order) at the other.

However there is no or little discussion in the literature of the following questions:

- Any differences in the ways in which women and men carry out interdisciplinary work
- Any gender-based differences in experiences of interdisciplinary work, including barriers, problems and consequences for career progression.
- The extent to which men and women carry out interdisciplinary work
- The interaction of other identity factors, such as race/ethnicity, age and class with gender in determining experiences and practices of interdisciplinary work.

In order to investigate the answers to some of these questions, a questionnaire was prepared and posted on two sites:
1. http://www.elec.gla.ac.uk/projects/Leonardo/leonardo/ques_interd.html and publicised on a number of mailing lists which include high proportions of researchers working in the areas of assistive technology and rehabilitation engineering. The questionnaire was also offered in alternative formats to make it accessible.


Although the authors recognise that women researchers are not a homogenous group and that other identity factors may also be significant, it was decided to focus initially purely on gender. The influence of other identity factors may form the subject of further work.

4. Methodological Issues

The results reported in this survey are based on two related questionnaires. Both questionnaires are divided into four sections. The first section requests information about the respondent’s gender, employment situation, level of seniority, concerns about job security, disciplinary background and similarity of this background to that of the department or section. This information will be used to investigate correlations between interdisciplinary research and other factors. The second section investigates involvement in interdisciplinary research, the nature of the interdisciplinarity in terms of an individual working across many disciplines and/or project groups involving people from different disciplines, the disciplines involved, the gender balance of interdisciplinary and other project groups and the benefits and disadvantages of an interdisciplinary approach. Section three investigates perceived benefits and problems associated with interdisciplinary research. Section four looks at suggestions for good practice.

The first questionnaire focuses specifically on researchers working in the areas of assistive technology and rehabilitation engineering, which is believed to be strongly interdisciplinary. It therefore includes questions on interdisciplinary research both in the area of assistive technology and in other areas. The second questionnaire has a stronger gender focus and is aimed at all researchers rather than those working specifically in the area of assistive technology. Thus it asks about interdisciplinary work in general rather than focusing on interdisciplinary work in assistive technology and other areas. It also contains questions on multi-tasking and identity as an insider or outsider. Analysis of the first questionnaire led to additional response options being offered to some of the questions.

Information about the questionnaires was sufficiently widely distributed to avoid bias from this source. However it is very difficult to avoid self-selection bias with this type of questionnaire. Although difficult to prove, it is considered likely that a higher proportion of the respondents are involved in or supportive of interdisciplinary research or consider it important to project success than in the total population. However it is considered unlikely that there was respondent bias in the areas of personal characteristics, approaches to carrying out interdisciplinary research or the barriers encountered. The likelihood of self-selection bias has been taken account of by the collection of a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data and the application of more qualitative rather than statistical techniques of analysis. This also helps identify specific factors and individual circumstances.

4.1 Results

To date 51 completed questionnaires have been received, 30 from the first survey and 21 from the second survey. Not all respondents answered all (applicable) questions. The results of the two questionnaires, other than suggestions for good practice, will be reported on separately and then compared and contrasted. The suggestions for good practice from the two questionnaires will be combined since there are no methodological reasons for not doing this.
However any differences in approaches to good practice between the two groups will be noted.

The relatively small number of responses received makes the use of descriptive rather than statistical analysis techniques appropriate. This approach fits well with the combination of qualitative and quantitative questions. For this reason percentages of respondents are quoted as rounded approximations, such as about two thirds or about 40%, rather than the exact percentages of respondents being used to avoid giving a false impression of statistical precision and accuracy of the results.

5. First questionnaire on Interdisciplinary research in assistive technology

5.1 The respondents

Three quarters of the respondents are male, and only one quarter female. Two thirds of respondents are experienced, nearly 60% have a permanent job and just under 40% are on a short term contract, with approximately the same percentages (though not always the same respondents) not worried and worried to some extent about job security and no respondents very worried. The respondents are split 60:40 between academia and ‘other’, with none from industry. The majority of respondents are at the ends of the spectrum with regards to seniority. Disciplinary backgrounds are very varied and include both respondents with apparently single disciplinary backgrounds, such as electronic engineering and others with backgrounds in several related disciplines, such as physics and electrical engineering. However respondents with fairly similar backgrounds may describe themselves very differently, with some respondents only stating the major discipline studied and others providing information on all disciplines, including those to which there has been very minor exposure. The majority have a disciplinary background in engineering or the natural sciences. The disciplinary background of just over 45% of the respondents is very similar to that of their institution and of another nearly 45% moderately similar.

5.2 The Research: Type of Interdisciplinarity and Gender Aspects

Nearly 80% of respondents are currently or had previously been involved in interdisciplinary work in assistive technology or rehabilitation engineering and 60% have been or are currently involved in interdisciplinary work in other areas, including two of the respondents not involved in interdisciplinary work in assistive technology. In nearly 70% of cases interdisciplinary work in assistive technology involves respondents both personally working in a number of disciplines and collaborating with others from different disciplines, with the remaining 30% collaborating with colleagues from different disciplines. In other areas than assistive technology just under half the cases of interdisciplinarity involve collaboration with other disciplines, nearly 30% of cases personal interdisciplinary and only just under a quarter of cases both personal interdisciplinarity and collaboration. Unlike in assistive technology, work in other areas includes cases of personal interdisciplinarity without collaboration. About 30% and nearly 60% of respondents respectively found the interdisciplinary approach an important and a very important component of success in both assistive technology and other projects (with the remainder considering it moderately important). Clearly the overwhelming majority of respondents consider an interdisciplinary approach to have been important or very important to the success of projects where it has been used.

The percentage of women was higher in interdisciplinary than other projects in nearly half and the same in just over a quarter of the nearly two thirds of cases where specific answers were given to the question of the ratios of women to men in both interdisciplinary and other projects. This indicates that a higher proportion of female than male researchers may be involved in interdisciplinary research.
5.3 Experiences of Interdisciplinary Research: Benefits, Problems and Communication Issues

Nearly 90% of respondents had enjoyed the challenge of interdisciplinary research with the other 10% enjoying it sometimes. Nearly 80% of respondents consider they do work which ‘sometimes’ challenges the established paradigms of their disciplines and 20% that they do work which ‘generally’ challenges these paradigms. Unfortunately a category of ‘often’ challenging the paradigms was not included.

Benefits of interdisciplinary research suggested by respondents include providing a critical mass of skills; facilitating effective cross fertilisation of ideas; allowing both technical aspects and social impacts to be considered; providing a broader approach and obtaining better quality results; facilitating the development of strategies to obtain meaningful solutions in complex situations; as well as personal benefits in terms of obtaining insight into other disciplines and perspectives. The perceived disadvantages could be considered the flip side of this and relate to problems in managing teams with different academic and work cultures, research priorities and objectives; difficulties resulting from people unwilling to see other perspectives or shift their position even slightly; and competing interests between the different disciplines.

Approximately 30%, 40% and a quarter of respondents respectively find it ‘very easy’, ‘easy’ and ‘moderately easy’ to communicate with colleagues in their own discipline, whereas there was an approximately equal split between finding it ‘easy’ and ‘moderately easy’ to communicate with colleagues using other paradigms, with only one respondent finding it very easy; and just under 30% and just under half of respondents finding it ‘easy’ and ‘moderately easy’ to communicate with colleagues from other disciplines. Only one and two respondents admitted to finding it hard to communicate with colleagues in the same discipline and using different paradigms, respectively, whereas three and two respondents find it ‘hard’ and ‘very hard’ respectively to communicate with colleagues from other disciplines. This may indicate a relationship between being able to solve the communication problems and successful interdisciplinary research. There also seems to be a definite trend of slightly decreasing ease of communication in going from one’s own discipline to different paradigms to different disciplines. Suggested strategies for communicating across disciplines and paradigms include both practical means, such as email, seminars, workshops and conferences and a philosophical approach. Several respondents suggested (in different words) the need for open mindedness and respect and creating an environment in which all views are listened to and valued.

Few respondents generally experienced obstacles to interdisciplinary work or were undermined by colleagues, but just over a third had sometimes experienced obstacles and just under a third sometimes felt undermined by colleagues. Just over half the respondents to this question (nearly 90% of all respondents) felt isolated either regularly or sometimes. Problems in publication (for reasons other than the quality of the work), such as the paradigms used or being outside the remit of journals were generally not an issue and only concerned 10% of respondents. However approximately a third of respondents consider there are barriers to interdisciplinary work in both assistive technology and other areas and approximately half are unsure, with less than a fifth considering there are no barriers. Barriers considered to exist include problems in obtaining funding, difficulties in people assimilating different opinions or interests, little interest in research in assistive technology and a lack of substantive involvement of disabled end-users, though this has improved recently.

6. Second questionnaire on Interdisciplinary research
6.1 The Respondents
A total of 21 responses were received to this questionnaire. The balance of the genders is different in this survey from the first one, with two-thirds of respondents, this time, being female, and one third male. Half of the respondents are experienced with a permanent position and 30% are on short-term contracts, with similar percentages having some and no worries about job security.

The vast majority (about 80%) of respondents are from academia with none from industry or government. The majority of respondents are at the ends of the spectrum with regards to seniority, with about a quarter at the senior end, and 30% at the more junior end. Of the four Faculties represented (Arts, Sciences, Social Sciences, Law), 45% of respondents are from the Arts, 25% from the Social Sciences, and 25% from the Sciences and Law. Disciplinary backgrounds are very varied and include both respondents with apparently single disciplinary backgrounds (such as history) and others with backgrounds in several related disciplines, such as language, culture, gender and media studies. The interdisciplinary research itself embraces numerous combinations of disciplines. Some span the sciences, arts and social sciences (10%), some span just two of these Faculties (65%) and some interdisciplinary is concentrated in one Faculty area (25%).

Thus there are a number of differences in the characteristics of the respondents to the two questionnaires. In particular the majority of respondents to the first questionnaire are male and from engineering and the sciences, whereas the majority of the respondents to the second questionnaire are female and from the arts and humanities. This raises issues as to whether any differences found in responses are either gender or subject based, though there may be some correlation between the two due to the preponderance of men in engineering and the sciences and the relatively large numbers of women in arts and humanities. In addition the overwhelming majority of respondents in the second survey come from universities or research institutes, whereas over 40% of respondents in the first survey came from other organisations.

One of the main reasons for involvement in interdisciplinary work reported by respondents is the inherent interdisciplinarity of certain areas or the requirement to consider them from an interdisciplinary perspective. Other reasons cited include the need to build bridges, whether for oneself or others and an interdisciplinary background from a joint honours degree.

Only just over and just under 20% of respondents consider themselves outsiders in their lives and work respectively. However respondents are divided more equally (11:10 and 4:3 in work and life respectively) between those who consider themselves insiders and those who either consider themselves outsiders or are unsure of their status. The combined figure indicates that a significant percentage of interdisciplinary researchers do not feel fully at home in the work environment, but comparative data on single disciplinary researchers would be required to more fully interpret this result.

There is a tendency to multi-tasking amongst respondents, with 80% involved in this at home and at work. Again a comparison with the practices of single disciplinary researchers would be useful to determine whether there is a link between multi-tasking and interdisciplinary work.

6.2 The Research: Type of Interdisciplinarity and Gender Aspects

The overwhelming majority of respondents are involved in interdisciplinary work which involves personal interdisciplinarity either on its own (nearly 40%) or in combination with working with colleagues from other disciplines (nearly 50%). Only about 15% of respondents’ interdisciplinary work solely involves collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines. This supports the finding of the first survey that personal interdisciplinary work, particularly in collaboration with colleagues, is an important component of interdisciplinary
research. However the role of purely personal interdisciplinary work was found to be much stronger and of purely collaborative interdisciplinary work much weaker than in the first survey.

In two thirds of the 40% of cases where specific answers were given to the question of the ratios of women to men in both interdisciplinary and other projects, a higher ratio of women to men was reported in interdisciplinary compared to other projects. In just under a third of cases equal numbers of women were reported to be working in interdisciplinary and other research. Although different project groups have different numbers of members, the higher proportion of women in interdisciplinary than other research groups in both surveys gives an indication that a higher percentage of female than male researchers are currently involved in interdisciplinary research.

6.3 Experiences of Interdisciplinary Research: Benefits, Problems and Communication Issues

Respondents to the second survey reported more problems, barriers to interdisciplinary work and greater communication difficulties than in the first survey – just under 70% of respondents speak of barriers to IDR work - but they universally enjoyed the challenges and with only two exceptions (who considered it important or moderately important) considered interdisciplinarity very important for the success of their research. This may be a case of the second group of respondents being more realistic about the problems and consequently working harder to overcome them and experiencing increased satisfaction and success. However there could also be other explanations.

With only one exception, respondents reported that their interdisciplinary work challenges established paradigms ‘generally’, ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’. Two thirds of respondents cite this as happening ‘generally’ or ‘often’. All but two of the respondents considered that the interdisciplinary nature of the research was critical to the research’s success, with slightly under half linking interdisciplinary with a new understanding of issues, and a fifth linking it with the formulation of new ideas. One respondent expressed the advantages as ‘seeing things as a web rather than a line’.

45% of respondents find it ‘moderately easy’ and another 45% easy or very easy to communicate with other researchers from the same or related disciplines. These percentages reduce to 40% for communication with researchers using different paradigms and the percentage of respondents finding communication hard or very hard doubles from a tenth to a fifth. In the case of communication with researchers from different disciplines there were slightly more respondents who reported finding this hard or very hard (about 40%) than moderately easy (35%) and the percentage of respondents finding this type of communication easy or very easy dropped to just over 15%. As with the first questionnaire, there is trend of increasing difficulty of communication in going from one’s own discipline to different paradigms to different disciplines, but much greater communication problems were experienced (or admitted to), particularly across disciplines.

Just under 70% of respondents consider that there are barriers to interdisciplinary work. Those cited include: research funding programmes being geared towards highly specific topic areas; human ignorance; tradition and careerism; fixed university structures; obstacles or obstruction from colleagues, problems with journals, and too many researchers unprepared to think ‘outside the box’. The problems experienced led one respondent to conclude that ‘the fundamental platform of academia is geared in many instances away from interdisciplinary work’. However another respondent considered that interdisciplinary work is now being stimulated. Over half of the respondents have experienced problems in publishing due to each of the following on at least one occasion: the nature of the topic, using paradigms which have not yet been accepted, paradigms which challenge disciplinary
orthodoxy and work being outside the remit of established journals. About 40% have experienced problems in each of these areas sometimes or frequently and another approximately 15-20% have experienced problems in each area on one occasion. This shows a significant difference from the first survey in which problems in publishing work (for reasons other than its quality) were experienced by a only small minority. Part of the difference is probably due to the different response options encouraging a higher response rate, but the remainder could be a consequence of the higher proportion of women in the second survey, the different mixture of subjects or specific factors associated with assistive technology research which do not hold for other types of research.

Isolation and obstacles or obstruction from colleagues are problems for the majority of respondents, with nearly 30% feeling isolated, another third sometimes feeling isolated and the same percentages experiencing obstacles and obstruction from colleagues generally or sometimes. Being undermined as a researcher is a problem for a significant minority of respondents, with nearly 30% undermined and nearly 15% sometimes undermined. The greater experience of problems in all these areas than in the first survey could be a consequence of the higher proportion of women in the second survey, the different mixture of subjects or specific factors associated with assistive technology research which do not hold for other types of research.

7. Suggestions for Good Practice

Suggestions for good practice include encouraging research projects on the theme of interdisciplinary work; all participants to be equal and valued stakeholders and project ‘owners’, regardless of their disciplines; ensuring all participants are aware of all objectives and progress in parts of the projects involving other disciplines, for instance by regular walkthrough sessions; having a good coordinator; well qualified partners who are open to interdisciplinary work and other perspectives; regular communication and project review; being open, listening and insisting that other participants do; involvement of disabled people; setting aside time to understand the perspectives of other disciplines; developing communication strategies to be understood by all participants and being sensitive to other people’s feeling. It should be noted that many of these suggestions are equally important for the success of single disciplinary research and that there are no significant differences in the types of suggestions made by the two groups of respondents.

8. Conclusions

Initial conclusions from this survey corroborate many of the findings of other surveys, for instance on the status of interdisciplinary researchers, the problems encountered and the benefits of interdisciplinarity, but seem to contradict others, such as the earlier indication that more male than female researchers are involved in interdisciplinary research: both questionnaires reported on here suggest the very opposite, or at least that a higher percentage of female than male researchers may be involved in interdisciplinary research. The second survey, unlike the first, had a majority of female respondents, and it is noteworthy that this second survey reported higher levels of problems and obstacles, as well as greater difficulties in communication particularly across disciplines than the first questionnaire. Other noteworthy indications from the two survey are the importance of the combination of personal interdisciplinarity and collaboration with colleagues across disciplines in carrying out interdisciplinary research. This goes against the reporting of collaboration with colleagues across the disciplines as the main approach to interdisciplinary work in much of the literature. Differences in the proportions of respondents exhibiting personal interdisciplinarity and collaborating across disciplines in the two surveys may be gender based.
Responses to the questions on challenging disciplinary boundaries, considering oneself an insider or outsider in work and life and experiencing isolation and obstruction from colleagues particularly in the second survey, give an indication of possible links between interdisciplinary work and heresy. However more in-depth investigation, for instance through focus groups and interviews would be required to draw firm conclusions. In some cases the differences in responses on these questions was solely to differences in the two questionnaires, with, for instance, the questions on being an insider or outsider only present on the second questionnaire. However there is also a possibility of gender differences, due to the greater percentages of men and women answering the first and second questionnaires respectively.

The relatively small numbers of respondents means that conclusions are only tentative. The authors hope to carry out further research, initially using the two existing surveys at http://www.elec.gla.ac.uk/projects/Leonardo/leonardo/ques_interd.html and http://www.iftr.org.uk, to investigate the following questions:

- Differences in the numbers of women and men involved in interdisciplinary research.
- Gender differences in experiences of interdisciplinary research, including the extent and types of problems, barriers and other difficulties as well as levels of satisfaction.
- Gender differences in approaches and methods used, including to overcoming problems.
- The balance between personal interdisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity through collaboration and a mixture of the two and any gender differences in this balance.
- The consequences of interdisciplinary work on career progression, access to grant funding and ability to publish and gender differences in these consequences.
- The influence of other identity factors on gender differences.
- Perceptions of interdisciplinary work or researchers as heresy or heretics either by themselves or others.
- The ways in which perceptions of and attitudes to heresy affect the conduct of interdisciplinary work and the experiences of interdisciplinary researchers.
- Gender differences in attitudes to heresy and the use of new paradigms, particularly if they challenge established orthodoxies.

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Out of the frying pan into the viva

By Amanda Loumansky and Sue Jackson

Abstract

Women today are making clear inroads into the academy and, at undergraduate level at least, are engaging in greater numbers than men. However, at postgraduate level the picture changes, especially at doctoral level, and fewer women than men undertake research degrees. However, little is known about women’s experiences of doctoral research, including the viva. The authors seek to address the lack of research about women’s experience of the PhD viva. The research carried out by the authors emphasises both the lack of power felt by women in the current examination process and the lack of consistency in practice across universities. The authors argue that if the viva is to be more than just a process which reinforces existing patterns of power, it cannot continue to be a ritual where only certain voices are allowed to be heard. They conclude by suggesting reforms that they believe would make the system fairer to all.

Key words: viva, powerlessness, quality assurance

Introduction

Women have made, and continue to make, critical inroads into the academy, and there is a lot that is known about our experiences and opportunities. We know, for example, that women are now entering university – at undergraduate level at least – in at least equal numbers to men (Whaley, 2000), and that we are performing equally well with regard to classification of final degree, although there are still differences in the subjects chosen for degree level study. Despite this apparent success, we also know that fewer women than men undertake research degrees and are less likely to apply for research funding after they have a PhD. Less women than men opt for an academic career, either as researchers or as lecturers in the academy.

Women (and men) have to find ways to negotiate and cross the boundaries between taught and research degrees; and between their PhD and post-doctoral research. However, there is currently very little knowledge about the PhD viva or its affect on women’s careers. There is some anecdotal evidence, but little else to tell us of the affect of a viva voce examination on the women who participate. There has been very little systematic research about what goes on in viva voce examinations and how people feel about them (Leonard, 2001: 249).

In the UK, the viva is uniquely positioned in the academy as a private affair and within many institutions little is known about the interaction that occurs behind closed doors. All too often, those who are powerless (and this might include both the examined and the examiners) become silenced in an academy that is steeped in patriarchal traditions and ways of knowing. There is little opportunity for our voices to be heard, when ‘speaking out’ leaves us open to accusations of just not being good enough.

In this article we shall examine the PhD viva as a defining boundary from pre- to post-doctoral engagement in and with the academy. Following an outline discussion of the examination and its assessment processes, we shall go on to discuss some of the results of our preliminary empirical research. We shall then show why
the viva is a feminist issue, and end by offering some strategies for crossing and for challenging the boundaries.

**The research**

The initial stage of this research was conducted by distributing questionnaires to women who had experienced, or were about to experience, a viva voce examination, as well as to supervisors and examiners. Of course, these are not entirely discrete groups, and some women who responded had completed their own viva voce, and were now or had also been supervisors and examiners. The questionnaire was initially distributed at a women’s studies conference in the summer of 2003, and was followed up with a series of qualitative questions on-line to email discussion groups for postgraduate and postdoctoral women.

In all seventeen questionnaires were returned together with a number of on-line responses. Whilst the number of questionnaires returned was not large this did not pose a problem for us as we always intended to carry out a fairly small pilot project initially. Later stages of the research will see greater distribution of questionnaires together with follow-up interviews. However the views of those who did take part confirmed our suspicions that this has been and continues to be a largely neglected area of research and further work needs to be done. In response to a question asking them to describe their ethnicity fourteen people answered white, two said Indian, and one person did not respond to this question. Six said that they were or had been supervisors and five said that they were or had been examiners. Five respondents answered questions from their positions both as (past or current) students and as (past or current) examiners and/or supervisors.

**Considering assessment and monitoring**

In UK universities, doctoral degrees are examined through the submission of a written thesis, which has to be ‘defended’ to examiners in a private viva voce examination. Although at undergraduate level, oral examinations have been abandoned as “too costly, unreliable and potential for sex, race and other stereotyping and discrimination” (David, 2003: 7) they still remain as the determining factor in the examination of PhD research. According to Diana Leonard (2001), this form of assessment was a familiar one in medieval universities, an academic world completely dominated by upper-class men of the ruling elite. Today the power structures may be less obvious, but the majority of senior academic posts are still held by men, including at professorial level, where they occupy around 90% of the posts. Supervisors and examiners of PhDs are more likely to be selected from senior rather than junior academic staff. More prestigiously, they are likely to be professors. Therefore it is highly likely that the supervision and assessment of research degrees will be determined at every stage of the process by senior men in the academy.

Choices of examiners are often determined via an ‘old boys’ network and are at times haphazard. When asked about institutional policy on the appointment of examiners one supervisor replied “it’s predominantly informal – and if I am honest – it’s a ‘mates’ thing managed by inside men doing trade with their male friends”. Of concern to those students awaiting their viva was the lack of information available to them about the examiners. One respondent was worried that the occasion would be used “to score off the student or to advance their [the examiners] own position.” This tendency was also mentioned by two of the examiners.
Becher et al (1994: 137) say the viva is not a lottery, nor is it overgenerous, but it is fair - but how do we know? There is little (and variable) guidance on criteria, or on what is meant by contribution to the field of knowledge (see Leonard, 2001: 240). Students who have developed their work around feminist epistemologies and methodologies, for example, might find an unsympathetic reception to their research. For students engaged in multi-disciplinary work, it might be difficult to find examiners with knowledge of both (or all) disciplinary bases. Should the examiners come from one subject or the other? How does the student ensure that the work is appreciated by both disciplines? One respondent stated that she was told by her examiner that he knew nothing of one of her subject areas, and therefore had not read a complete section. Another respondent told us

One of the examiners...said as he did not know (one of my subject areas) he would not comment on the largest part of my work...I thought this to be unfair as my subject, if unique at all, is unique only for this area...

The issues become particularly difficult to define for those engaged in cutting edge interdisciplinary work where it becomes more difficult to find ‘experts’ to determine that contribution.

Additionally, work which acknowledges the subject positioning of the author can find itself contested in an academy which locates itself in an apparently scientific objectivity and supposed neutrality (see Jackson, 2002a). There is an assumption that examiners will know what constitutes both good research and contribution to the field of knowledge but, as Foucault and others have shown, ‘knowledge’ is partial and determined by those who have the power to define the boundaries (see eg Foucault, 1972; Harding, 1987). Whilst the determination of ‘good research’ appears to be neutral or unbiased, it is clear that this is far from the case and can be biased against women. In particular, students can find themselves hindered if they focus on qualitative research, particularly favoured by women, and there is a “continual need for researchers to justify qualitative methods to the gatekeepers of the research” (Quinn, 2003: 10). For those engaged in interdisciplinary work or feminist research, the process might be particularly damaging.

Standards are ensured by having peer examiners who are assumed to know the thresholds, but there is little (if anything) to determine whether this is actually the case, and practically nothing is known about what goes on inside the private domain of the PhD viva voce examination. Whilst the Quality Assurance Agency responsible for Higher Education in the UK published a Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Programmes in 1999, it did not “deal with the ticklish issue of who is selected to be the examiners for a doctorate, nor how the viva itself should be conducted. It merely states that ‘research assessment processes should be clear and operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently’” (Leonard, 2001: 255). But, as we have shown above, there are real issues about who determines what is meant by clarity, equity, reliability or consistency.

When we asked our respondents to suggest two changes to current practice that would make the viva more transparent, six replied that the lack of official information added to the difficulties in this area. There was a consensus of opinion that institutions should provide more in-depth written guidelines both to regulate the exam process itself and to provide an explicit framework upon which candidates could base their expectations. Four examiners highlighted the lack of advance guidelines they received from institutions providing clear advice on how to respond to...
unsuccessful and/or problematic candidates. One examiner said that “More clarity would provide a fairer environment to all the parties involved in the process and would also make the experience a more constructive one.” A student suggested the need for

Some process, some transparency! Some clarity about the entire process of examining, about the role of the examiners … Some evaluation and quality assurance – it’s just so bizarre, I just don’t understand how most of the rest of the education system is quality assured to within an inch of its life, and there is just so little regulation of the PhD process, from beginning to end, obviously the viva is just the end result of a lot of other fuck ups along the way. And maybe even some standardisation, as clearly the examination process happens differently in different places…so if some places can get it right, why can’t they all…

Two supervisors recommended that the viva become a public occasion but both appreciated that this could be potentially more stressful for the candidate. High stress levels were also blamed by supervisors for hindering the type and level of discussion that took place and it was noted that it was often difficult to “get a critical discussion going” because of the candidate being so nervous. However one examiner also commented that she would welcome “examiners being more focused on students rather than their own status”, within a system which becomes embedded with “complex power relations and manipulative practices” (Nixon et al, 1998:283). Indeed, it has been claimed that the viva “both humiliates the examinee and diminishes the credibility of those who examine” (Burnham, 1994:30).

**HEFCE’s consultation exercise**

The Higher Education Funding Council for England are currently (2003) undertaking formal consultation with higher education institutions, in an exercise to consider “Improving standards in research degree programmes”. In setting the terms for the consultation, the Council states that:

Research degree graduates are key to developing the UK as an innovative knowledge economy. With the increasing sophistication of research and other activity in higher education, the public sector and industry, successful leadership demands the specialised knowledge and wider skills gained by research degree students in a wide variety of disciplines. As the UK continues to invest more heavily in research and development, towards a European Union target of 3 per cent of GDP by 2010, we may expect the demand for these skills to rise still further.

(http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03_23.htm).

The linking of research degrees with the knowledge economy and industry, and moves towards a skills based agenda, means there is already an assumption of a hierarchy of certain types of postgraduate research, with a clear prioritising of the benefits to industry. The document calls for support which will benefit the UK economy, and yet industry and the economy are highly gendered (and ‘classed’ and ‘raced’) and such an agenda is unlikely to benefit women research students – indeed it is more likely to maintain existing gender inequalities.
In addition, the recommendations are for each institution to continue to have a large degree of autonomy with regard to implementation of the guidelines. For example, although the document outlines threshold standards and good practice guidelines, it has little to say about assessment, proposing

light-touch assessment arrangements, whereby institutions maintain responsibility for implementing threshold standards in ways that suit individual university regulations or codes of practice.

The priority here, then, is to find a system that suits individual universities, not one that will necessarily work to the benefit of students. The consultation document does suggest that

systematic and transparent monitoring and assessment mechanisms … be in place to ensure the student’s progress is reviewed independently and the final examination is rigorous, fair and consistent.

However, it does not suggest any guidelines for good practice, let alone minimum threshold standards. It does discuss the viva voce examination, albeit briefly. Under its recommended guidelines for minimum threshold standards, the document call for the

final examination to be by a viva with an independent panel of at least two examiners who are demonstrably research active, at least one of whom is an external examiner.

Nevertheless, although there are calls for supervisors to receive appropriate training, there is currently no such recommendation with regard to examiners, and no recommended practices with regard to the viva itself. The recommended guidelines for a framework of good practice suggest that “each examiner (should) provide an independent report on the thesis before the viva”, and it is apparent from our research that this process is one that would benefit from clear criteria. One woman who responded to our questionnaire stated that there was a need for examiners to agree a clearer delineation of requirements well before the viva. She added that when examiners were appointed they should face “institutional scrutiny” to avoid supervisors choosing “pals who may be inappropriate.”

One of the questions that we asked examiners and supervisors was whether they were aware if institutions carried out any monitoring processes with regards to equality of opportunity. Those that answered the question were unaware of any formal monitoring process that took place, although one supervisor said that she questioned the process if there was not a gender balance of examiners for students that she put forward. However, she did not say with whom she questioned this (herself? the institution?), nor whether any changes arose from her questioning.

The document suggests that completion rates should be monitored, but does not indicate what such monitoring might involve. There is currently no requirement for a record to be kept of category of ‘pass’ (pass/pass with minor amendments/pass with major amendments), and no recommendation that this should be the case in the future. There is, then, nothing to show whether these categories vary by gender (or indeed by ‘race’ or other categories). We know that this can make a significant difference to our academic experiences, both as students and as lecturers (see eg
Jackson, 2004, forthcoming), yet currently there is little or no systematic research into the effects of gender, race or class within viva examinations.

It is worrying that a document entitled ‘Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes’ fails to make any mention of equality of opportunity. It is worrying, too, that in developing the guidelines for a framework of good practice consultants worked with the academic community and those who fund postgraduate study but did not include students - either past and current - in their research. In the light of the research that we have carried out these are glaring omissions which at best shows a misplaced complacency in the system that they oversee and at worst highlights a lack of will to address some of the issues that students face when they jump out of the frying pan and into the viva. Unlike any other examination, in a viva voce the examiner and examined meet in private, and the potential for abuse has been described as ‘awesome’ (see Noble, 1994: 69). We will go on to consider issues of abuse below.

**Behind closed doors**

On the whole it was clear that supervisors understood how fraught the viva was for many students and most of their recommendations for change to current practice that would make the viva more transparent were made in the light of how to make the occasion less stressful. For example four supervisors replied that if the examiners had already decided to recommend the award of a PhD this news should be shared at the beginning of the viva so that the candidate could be in a more relaxed frame of mind. It has to be acknowledged that whilst the benefits of adopting such an approach are obvious to the successful candidate one can only imagine what the impact would be for a candidate who does not receive such good news at the beginning of the viva.

Several respondents described feelings of powerlessness during the viva:

They launched into questions, and I think I just agreed with all their critiques. In retrospect I guess I wished I had stuck up for myself a bit more, argued back a bit, rather than just rolling over, and agreeing it was shit. Afterwards I talked to a number of people who were also told they had failed and who argued back, and managed to get their examiners to change their minds … So I kinda regret not trying that.

For others, powerlessness was linked to feelings of being abused. One academic, who was a mature student wrote:

I left the examination room feeling that I had been abused. The examiners were both so rude and aggressive. They kept interrupting me as I tried to answer questions and started the process by criticising my supervisor for keeping them waiting a couple of minutes. Neither examiner made any effort to discuss the contents of my research and I came away feeling that they hadn’t even read it properly. The viva turned out to be the start of a dreadful process. After waiting nearly three months for the written report, which was originally promised for the next day, I was stunned to read its contents. The examiners said that my research ‘did nothing to convey anything more than a nodding acquaintance with book titles rather than their contents.’ The report was nothing more than a rant – as I read through the three pages it was impossible to find one positive comment about a piece of work that was
78,000 words long. What had I done to deserve this? I had complained to the Academic Registrar about the length of time it was taking for the report to be written. Now I was being punished.

She spent months feeling paralysed by the comments made about her. Every time she began the task of making the alterations suggested by the examiners she would sit down and read the report. Her lack of confidence in her academic judgement slowly began to return after she burnt the report, a course of action suggested by her supervisor. She concluded her questionnaire by stating that

Anyone who believes that equality of opportunity exists in the viva system is deluding herself. When are women going to stand up for fair treatment in what is probably the ‘final frontier’ as far as academic study is concerned?

It is not just our respondents who have faced such issues. In response to a recent article about the viva examination, students stated:

“Clearly, the entire viva was some sort of power game, in which the external used his power to show me who was in charge...For the next three months, I did no research work of consequence, so deeply affected was I by this experience...an awful lot also depends on what side of the bed the external got out of, and whether or not you hit on one of the external's 'pet hates' ... No one accompanied me into the viva so no one was there to witness what went on in the room ... (Wakeford, 2002)

One of the problems is that lack of any policy regarding equal opportunities in viva examinations mean that it is difficult, if not impossible, to stand up for fair treatment. One of our respondents, who had to re-submit her thesis, told us:

… there are a few things (about the resubmission) that really pissed me off – that the viva took six months to set up: and that when I re-submitted they took eight months to re-read the thesis. That quite outraged me …

She continued:

I submitted in January and should have been examined by about March really, in lots of time for applying for jobs; and instead it took until mid-August; I was applying frantically for everything, and not quite getting anywhere, and it felt like having the PhD sorted can make a difference, given how competitive the application process is these days. So I was so angry, and getting depressed about the thought of having to spend another year working part-time … I couldn’t quite believe that they really were taking 8 months to examine the thing; and I did finally make official complaints, but of course ‘they’ (senior admin people) couldn’t really do very much, except encourage the external to do it asap, as its such a grace and favour system, there wasn’t anything they could really do …

From the responses we received, both examiners and students appeared uncertain of processes, and grounds for appeal were often limited. In most cases, appeals do not seem to be an option as they could appear to be grounded in a
challenge to the examiners’ knowledge and judgement – not admissible for an appeal. As one student states, “I was left in the position of failing but having nothing to appeal against” (Wakeford, 2002).

Supervisors who responded to our questionnaire lacked any knowledge of what, if any, options were open to them if they believed that a student had been treated unfairly during a viva. Although knowledge of procedures leading up to the examination process were high, there was little if any advice available to those supervisors and their students where there was a general feeling that things had gone badly wrong.

Further issues were raised in the responses about the examiners’ report:

The other major thing that pissed me off, apart from the time it took to be examined, was the examiners’ report. In the viva, having told me I had failed … I asked if I would get extensive notes on what they had to say, and they were very clear that I didn’t need to take notes, that the report would give a detailed account of our conversation, and what needed to be done …. The report, when it turned up after a month of waiting, was less than one page. There (were) … two paras of what was needed for a PhD, one consisting of about six bullet points, and the second, clearly written by the internal, on her specialism, detailing a whole range of things I could do, and some refs, on something that was really a small part of the thesis. And the bullet points were just useless … It was just so vague, when we had quite a precise, focused discussion in the viva, and I guess I was also slightly concerned that that could be an endless task, that they could turn around when I had re-written it, and say that I had not done enough … so I was really disappointed with that, well, not just disappointed, angry and frustrated, I felt that all I had to guide me were these six bullet points …

It is not unusual for there to be lack of clarity in what examiners are asking for with amendments, yet - as our research and that of others has shown - one bad report can have serious repercussions (see e.g. Leonard: 2001, 238-254).

Another respondent, too, described her feelings of anger, frustration and powerless-ness during her viva, when “one of the examiners turned rude and was quite angry for reasons I still don’t understand”. This student was subsequently told she could not continue at the institution, either for an MPhil or a PhD:

I found this strange as (my supervisor) had said … that my work was very good … To me this sounds very strange and unfair. I just cannot think of any reason, especially as she herself had said and they too kept saying that my work was good and that I was not a failure. I did not get an adequate explanation for their decision that I could not continue.

The respondent went on to describe how she eventually “left the place very discouraged and confused. It seemed to be some sort of personal animosity on the part of one of the examiners …”. This student is Indian and an older learner, and she is concerned that she has suffered double discrimination here. She tried to take this up with the university, but she has so far received no response “to my comments on the viva and the unfair manner in which I had been treated”.

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An academic, who described herself as white and from a working-class background, told us:

I found the whole experience of the viva extremely distressing and undermining: in fact nearly three years later I still think of it as a nightmare. I know I was there to defend my work, but I really felt under attack. One of the examiners in particular stated that the work had no proper theoretical base, and that the research was flawed. She criticised just about every aspect of the work that she could. I knew sitting there that I had failed miserably, and that there would be at least another year or more of work to do, assuming I would be able to resubmit. My world felt like it was falling apart.

The shock that she experienced on being told that she had in fact passed with minor amendments was immense. She felt little cause for celebration and has remained convinced that by some fluke the work was let through, but that it was undeserving of a PhD. This feeling has remained with her and has led to a great deal of insecurity about making any applications for research funding. Whilst this research has not explored the link between women’s experiences of their PhD and their subsequent feelings about submitting publications or research funding applications, there is likely to be a correlation. We do know that women are less likely than men to do PhDs, and that of those who do women are also less likely to apply for research funding (Wotjas, 1999).

Whilst many women are keen to transcend the boundaries of more traditional academic research, the gatekeepers of the academy ensure that the work of some women remains undervalued, with severe effects on their career opportunities and development (see Jackson, 2002b). Women suffer discrimination in an academy in which the odds are stacked up against us. Perhaps experiences like those of this academic might start to account for why. However, it is difficult to know this, as it is not an experience that she has shared with many people, afraid that if she does “real” researchers and academics will see her work as “less worthy”.

**Conclusions**

We have argued here that if the viva is to be more than just a process which reinforces existing patterns of power it cannot continue to be a ritual where only certain voices are allowed to be heard. Universities and funding bodies must engage much more actively with PhD students and listen to what they are saying. Although it was clear from the responses to our questionnaire that some universities do have regulations for the conduct of postgraduate examinations, and indeed some respondents even supplied copies of their own university’s documentation, there was a complete lack of any reference to policies of equality of opportunity within the viva. However, this silence does not mean that women are not being discriminated against in viva voce examinations and it does not mean that change is unnecessary. A lack of equal opportunity measures has done much to sustain patterns of domination in academic institutions and a clearly defined equal opportunities policy, carried out in practice, may help to end some of the worst practices. One important step forward could be an equal opportunity monitoring representative to be present at all examinations. We are in little doubt that the inclusion of clear criteria regarding equal opportunities would impede certain types of behaviour within the examination.
However, equal opportunities policies and practices alone are not enough. For many women undertaking PhD research, the most exciting opportunities are those which enable boundaries to be crossed or even transcended: boundaries of interdisciplinary research; of a central focus on women’s lives and experiences; and boundaries of constructions of ‘academic’ (see Jackson, 2004, forthcoming). Yet for many women in the academy, the processes of the PhD viva examination means that such boundaries are difficult – sometimes impossible – to cross. Whilst the gatekeepers who determine access through the closed doors of the secret world of the PhD viva continue in the main to be the white, middle-class men who dominate the academy, the male culture of the university (supported by some women) will continue dominant, and many women will find themselves powerless to make the challenges to bring about change. The current climate of lifelong learning in the academy suggests that students should take responsibility for their own learning. Such individualism enables advice to research students to continue to be that it is for them to face the horrors of the viva and try to deal with them (Murray, 2003). Such advice takes no heed of patterns of inequality, nor does it call institutions to account. And yet the academy is currently imbued within a culture of accountability and quality assurance. It seems inevitable that in the end the PhD viva voce examination will fall prey to this. However, ‘quality assurance’, without challenging the power structures inherent in definitions of ‘quality’, is not enough. Institutions and individuals are still able to deny that PhD ‘horror stories’ exist. As one senior academic recently stated:

I am not sure they exist in the way people want us to believe … This is always the argument of bureaucrats. They will point vaguely to alleged widespread abuse so they can get their hands on a problem and do a lot of vandalism (Bunting, 2003).

However, without adequate monitoring, the individual voices who are brave enough to speak out will always risk such accusations. We recognise the limits of our current research: it could be, for example, that people with more positive experiences of the viva chose not to respond to our questionnaires. However, the experiences of those who did respond are real, and it is our hope that some of the voices in this article will start to ‘vandalise’ the processes. Until institutions recognise the vandalism that is done to the lives of individuals through the viva voce examination, and acknowledge that their responsibilities extend far beyond current practices, the structural inequalities of the academy may continue to find a safe haven behind the closed doors of viva voce examinations.

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Perverse Pleasures – Identity Work and the paradoxes of greedy institutions

By Valerie Hey

Abstract

Women’s studies struggle for a location in the academy has always involved feelings of deep ambiguity. The outsider/insider relation is a peculiarly vexed one in times when the demands on professional identity appear to erase the more political claims on our identity such as being a feminist.

This paper considers aspects of these complex navigations across the personal, private, public and professional aspects of identity through the concept of pleasure. It explores the discrepancy as well as the interrelations between the moral climate of higher education and the more elusive, secret or at least unspoken nature of our persistent (over?) commitment to intellectual labour. I draw on key concepts such as ‘seduction’ and ‘repression’ (Bauman, 2001), in order to tease out the complicities secured by the rewards and the displacements won by our repression. What positions and identities do we stake out in the hyper-competitive world of higher education and is the feminist project sustainable in these crisis times?

Key words: Academy, feminism & pleasure

Introduction: Texts and Contexts

There is a considerable literature on audit and managerialism and minimal literature on pleasure and even less theorising what pleasure academics might still manage to squeeze in ‘wannabe’ universities. This paper is inspired by Jocey Quinn’s pioneering work ‘Taking pleasure in the university’ (Quinn, 2003) where she examines how universities have been marketed as sites for the pleasure-seeking hedonist’. Her own empirical work offers an alternative vocabulary of pleasure defined by some of her subjects through 2 different registers – of an appreciation of the university’s ‘homeliness’ and their subsequent delight at ‘fitting in’, and intellectual pleasures – an excitement of ‘thinking about things’ or ‘just learning stuff’. These are discourses notably absent from government policy documents (as Quinn, 2003 notes) and it has to be said from feminist work. They offer stimulus to further musings about the complexities and fragmentary nature of pleasure.

In this initial exploration I consider first intellectual pleasure; then briefly allude to some related aspects of the pleasures of creating an academic identity - dress, finding a voice and writing and teaching before moving onto alternative (banal or unexpected or tutored) pleasures; and end by alluding to the complex redemptive pleasures of female friendship in academic feminism.

I am interested in questions of commitments and desire because I am struck by an enigma in my own practice and one that is shared by other women I know. I am perplexed by the clash between the ‘corridor talk’ ‘shop talk’ critique of the impact of audit and managerialism and our manic productivity. As Sue Webb remarked recently, our commitments have been powerfully reworked so that we have become instrumental in our own exploitation. What is going on below the level of the obvious regulation and what surplus value is being extracted from our own (punitive) pleasure in what we do?
The Difficulties of Desiring Otherwise

One of the many hard lessons of feminist enquiry has been the recognition that current desires to ‘be otherwise’ are conceded to the lures of the present (Rowbotham, 1985). Moreover, our collective capacity to think about feminist-inspired futures has been seriously diminished in the context of ‘identity politics, postmodern critiques of enlightenment projects (Nicholson, 1990) and the consolidation of centrist and conservative political alliances in the US and UK. Jane Gallop notes;

‘We don’t seem very able to theorize about how we speak as feminists wanting social change, from within our positions in the academy’
(Gallop, 1992: 4)

Lynne Segal comments the ‘austere pleasures or torments of abstract thought’ are one thing and the ‘heated exchanges of collective confrontation and strategic coalition building’ another (Segal: 2000). Part of my motive here is to confront aspects of ‘our’ investments in academic work and identity (including my own) to begin teasing out these obscure pleasures and torments. My aim is to connect arguments about the conditions of production of academic labouring to its material base. For this identity to qualify as successful requires an internalised commitment to ‘wanting’. Hyper-productivity and visibility (output & impact being key words) required by external modes of regulation direct this desiring economy into ever more infantile and regressive modes – we want more – more, more, more - to be ‘world class’ to be ‘simply the best’.

My modest intent here is to take up what Lynne Segal implies, the search for a more subtle appreciation of what is at stake in developing a feminist capacity to conceptualise the future. We need stronger understandings for why we desire what we do – a politics of educational subjectivity (Walkerdine, 1987). This is not framed by notions of piety though it does have a moral context and content but, using the words of Joan Scott, Segal comments that feminism has ‘only contradictions on offer’ (Scott, 1996).

I suppose my recent interest in these questions of our presence is in examining the nature of our contradictory morality as outsiders within. This is partly because of my growing unease with writing about social justice whilst increasingly living the dissonance between what I/we say and what I/we (alas) do.

The particular paradox I want to open out is that of our contradictory investments in aspects of some present academic identity projects that are clearly not unequivocally pleasurable and desirable but they do seem to produce their own dividends. My initial premise is that there is more to our punitive work rate than can be explained as compliance with the escalating demands of higher education restructuring (Marginson, 1997; Morley, 2002). We seem to be over-complying, or at the least over-zealous. I think that there might be a complex rehabilitation going on –at least psychically –a sort of psychological adjustment. My frames of reference here are the fields of feminism, sociology and women’s studies as well as education – this gaze maps my own affiliations, professional, personal and political.

Theorising Academic Identity Work

My take on questions of identity power relations is taken from Foucault’s notion of capillary formations and power networks but is augmented by some attention to what Bauman (2001) calls the seductions and repressions of consumer
capitalism. A focus on the symbolic economy of desire enables us to understand how the installation of discursive arrangements and social practices are successfully secured because of their capacity to mobilise appealing identifications (Hall, 1996). We need to pay more analytic attention to those moments of fixing without falling back on the notion of deterministic structures.

One way to consider this is taking up Bauman’s notion that power now circulates largely as the capacity to stimulate desire (Bauman, 2001). His metaphor for contemporary subjects is that of the swarm –

‘Whomever may wish to keep the swarms on target should tend to the flowers in the meadow, not to the trajectory of a single bee…the management of humans is being replaced by the management of things…(quoting Goux), “to create value, all that is necessary is, by whatever means possible, to create a sufficient intensity of desire’

(Bauman, 2001:127-130)

My claim here is not that there ever was an altruistic golden age – altruism is after all another desire, but that the shaping of our desires has disarticulated positions from collegiality to hyper-individualism. This is not to suggest that the ‘old boys’ clubs were preferable either. Leonard (2000) argues that different formations of higher education – successively liberal, emancipatory or technical/rational commodity marketised – are nevertheless masculinist in some form or another. What has changed is the dominant configuration of masculinity.

But whilst academics, like all professional communities, have modes of inclusion and exclusion, prestige and honour systems are not new. What is different I think is the intensification in enticements and seductions spun in the spaces of the academy. These inducements work us over and come to form an indispensable resource of any identity work project.

The fact that feminist academics have so easily ‘rolled over’ and bought this package indicates a number of processes not least the pliant nature of our own socialisation that predisposes us to replicate its individualistic orientation. Our training in intellectual labour, most crucially its assessment in competitive examinations, validates the thesis – these ideas as ‘ours’ - emanating from single and singular minds. I have written before about ‘citation wars’ (Hey, 2001). We know what academic culture desires and to some extent we desire it too. Even our language is instructive – we learn the texts of our discipline, we do disciplined enquiry, we must be rigorous, and we offer our work as submissions – these discursive terms offer insight into the deeply ascetic, self-denying (yet) egoistical paths we follow as participants in what I take as a very peculiar practice. There is something vaguely medieval here, which of course there is, given the origin of the English university in monastic vocational devotion. I return to this theme of sacrifice later.

So my provocative question is ‘Why is the contemporary feminist intellectual identity that of a self-flagellating ascetic’? She/we are not unlike earlier complex identity projects such as female martyr saints such as the medieval figures of Catherine of Siena and Margaret of Cortona (Meiners, 1999).

Yet, my problematic does not deny the exploitations and pressures of academic work. It does nevertheless consider our own roles in buying into the particular economy of new times performativity and the rationales we offer about our commitments and performances.
Given these ambiguous circumstances then we need a subtle sort of attention to get at the feminist stakes in academic labour: here the utility of the vocabulary of the psycho-social, of pleasure and the emotions as a way to tease out commitments. Perhaps also this register could offer one possible way to explore our ‘absent presence’ and hence situate the riddle of some paradoxical consequences of our commitments. I think this level of analysis is extremely useful for generating (indispensable) concepts that link the ways in which the private and the public are intimately related - notions of ‘identity work’ which is stitched back to material relations can assist us here (Hey, 1997). What follows is a first attempt to do that.

**Guilty Pleasure (1) Heady Labour - Theory for its own sake**

A while back at a women’s studies conference Jacqueline Rose (I think?) gave a paper about the guilty pleasures of ‘difficult theory’. What I recall apart from the elegance of the paper was the frisson of recognition as if somehow ‘coming out an intellectual’ or a theoretician was in contradiction or at least in some tension with being a feminist/activist. Yet, because feminism has a historical legacy of an ethical discourse of social justice theory –theory as an elite practice – it is still likely to be seen as a minority, excluding and thus not quite decent activity, least of all in England. In this precise vein, another (male?) discussion about the pleasure of intellectual practice captured something of the illicit aspects of doing ‘non-useful’ work. The author is discussing Barthes famous account of ‘jouissance’:

I don’t know about you, but sometimes even I can achieve something like this kind of pleasure. In my case it works by reading some theory first. In the right circumstances (e.g. not having too much work to do, not having to think of summarising it all in a lecture), theory can have a pleasantly “heady” effect on me – I can see new possibilities. I can follow complex arguments; I can delight in the (usually French) pursuit of implications into quite new areas. Gaining some sort of shock of recognition while watching a Bond (the page is about filmic pleasure) and catching myself at, say, constituting the text from a reading formation, or enjoying an inter-textual moment, or glimpsing those serried ranks of paradigmatic meanings, or pursuing a floating signifier, can deliver a kind of intellectual pleasure. It is impossible to enjoy intellectual pleasure in England without feeling guilty immediately afterwards however, if this is orgasmic, it is also masturbatory? (sic) (http://www.arasite.org/jbpleas.htm) italics added

Many colleagues concurred and spoke of the ‘privilege’ of having space for thinking and for exploring ideas – that was what they really loved about their job. And this is also true of those few feminists who have written about this. Liz Stanley notes her ‘passion’ in knowledge and indicates that her own questions are about who are the ‘gatekeepers and the role of contested knowledge. Under the rubric – Other versions of My Life – we find:

Working class by birth, a lesbian by luck, and a Northerner by choice (for all its denizens know, Manchester is the centre of the known universe)…

What these, and various versions of ‘me’ as well, have in common is a litany of what the novelist Colette called – and extolled as – the earthly pleasures’. For me, the mind is a very earthly thing too, very much part of my bodily and grounded pleasures’ (http://ourworld.compuserve.com; homepages/lizstanley/)
This motif of the pleasurable is carried through; later she speaks about how she ‘read omnivorously’ and how she was involved in the ‘heady ferment of gay and women’s politics and sociological ideas’. The bodily metaphors convey the gustatory and gastronomic delights of feeding and being fed, and ‘heady’ is a perfect metaphor for the intoxicating thrills of politics/thinking or politicised thinking that drives so much of feminist scholarship and research. It is also encouraging (and thus pleasurable) to read this energetic celebration of critical sociological work largely because this unique voice does not take itself too seriously. It is quite hard to pull off the trick of ‘doing’ commitment as well as ‘doing’ reflexivity about pretentiousness. Her picture of herself dressed as a very convincing rabbit is paradigmatic of this double-position in this sense.

Following the theme of desire in head work, a recent paper by Sandra Acker and Michelle Webber (2003) on pleasure and danger in academic life noted the passionate endearments through which some respondents constructed their academic work and identity, ‘I love to teach; really love to teach’ (p3) – but they also commented that how or where people are ‘positioned’ is crucial in determining their level of satisfaction. So what this specific (partial) account indicates is the delight in creativity, in making new links, in comprehending – in getting to grips with difficulty as well as in simply celebrating being there as a politics of presence.

**Perverse Pleasure (1): Girls Are Us? Competitive Relations Between Women**

I have argued that conditions of the contemporary academy put the ethical practice of feminism in extreme contradiction with the contrasting ethical practice and moral regulation of audit and accountability. Feminist academics live between these spaces.

Given that any form of regulation is irksome (has constraints as well as opportunities), we could speculate that given the disposition of power/desire in the academy (definitely not on the side of the angels!) adherence to the well-intentioned, edicts of feminism (collective practice and collaboration) produces increasing levels of deviance that might then be recuperated as the pleasures (no doubt ambivalent) of being a ‘bad feminist’ but a ‘very good girl’. By this I mean the pleasure of compliance with (masculine formal) authority.

The Errancy by Jorie Graham (1997) tackles this tension of feminist certainties and compliance:

> Utopia: remember the sensation of direction we loved,  
> How it tunneled forwardly for us,  
> And us so feudal in its wake -  
> specking of diamond-dust as I think of it now,  
> that being carried forward by the notion of human  
> perfectibility-like a pasture imposed  
> on the rising vibrancy of endless diamond-dust  
> And how we would comply, someday.  
> How we were built to fit and comply-  
> As handwriting fits the form of its passion

Are there instances when we have run from the unappeasable demands of the matriarch –feminist BIG SISTER back to the patriarchal BIG BROTHER – because at least the men are in charge and we can get some rewards individually? I know this is
too crude but I am struggling to think through the ways that the forces of these practices drive through into the mundane realities of feminist-feminist relations.

In the context of an intensely competitive ethos, are we conceding too much to the professional ‘dividend’? If we think of how academic feminists are positioned (variously overworked, over casual, marginal as well as mainstreamed and ‘successful’), we might appreciate how the moral climate of individualism that incites (and rewards) the worst sorts of bad behaviour is shearing away at our own forms of fragile or incipient collectivism.

For my purposes, what I found intriguing and disturbing lately about the psychic economy of academic feminism in its least reflexive moments, is how continuous it is with the divisiveness that poisons girls’ friendships and sets the limits of female solidarity relations:

Girls have to make sense of themselves against other girls but they have to do so ‘not in conditions of their own choosing’. We can I think locate some of the features of girls’ relations here. We have seen that girls ‘longings’ for certain girls; for a sense of belonging to certain groups and argued that these affinities resonate as another politics of ‘desire’ played out in the in/ex/clusions of personal forms of feminine intimacies (cf. Steedman 1986:33) There is however, more to it than that. Not only were ‘places’ desired, they were loathed, not only wanted they were repudiated. Moreover, given that the ‘places’ were embodied by ‘other’ girls and all they represented - looks, clothes, manners, forms of sexual self display or ‘cleverness’ - we should not be too surprised to discover that the various economies of girls’ friendships carried both intense sources of personal affiliation as well as forms of social antagonism. (Hey 1997: 136)

My argument here was about the social divisions of class and ‘race’ and their ‘distinctive’ manifestations in ‘the aesthetics of taste’ – here expressed in evaluative judgments about sexuality, consumption and ‘intelligence’. Girls compared and contrasted and did their identity work invariably as evaluations of the self and the ‘other’.

At their worst, feminist conferences can resemble the schoolyard girl popularity contest i.e. who’s in? Who’s out? Who’s cool? Who’s off the pace? Who’s last year’s news? That is all so terribly 20th century!

The performative hierarchical orderings of conference going is palpable – you feel on display or alternatively invisible – neither I think is a comfortable position but being positioned as a ‘face’ is definitely better than ‘faceless’. These risks to identity can weigh on the nerves and are felt as physical symptoms – I never feel more agitated or excited or disappointed than at conferences. I seem to live them at a ridiculous level of anticipation a bit like a Cinderella waiting to go to that ball – these are pleasurable anticipations but they are also troubling and perverse.

Sometimes ‘backstage’ at conferences reminds me of fieldwork in the ‘girls’ locker room’. ‘Bitching’ can reach new heights of professional polish and we do indulge with relish! We can be that 5** psycho-witch from hell dissecting another woman’s paper/personality in the steamy stew of post-presentation deconstruction. What this indicates is that if we are honest about the murky world of our own professional jealousies and resentments, we can be and enjoy being competitive! This is hardly news, but I think the price we pay whether we dish or receive the dirt is a lot
higher personally and professionally than when we find ourselves in the struggles with misogyny.

The collisions between friendship, feminism, professional competition, self-interest and social justice rationales are currently unvoiced, which indicates the degree of unspeakable difficulty here. We need at least to acknowledge these strains.

**Perverse Pleasures (2) Difficult Desires – Status & Dressing to Impress?**

I have alluded to our ambiguous pleasure in competition and status. As women (and thus not dominant in universities) we have noted the ‘uncomfortable’ pleasures of recognition as well as unease around the distance created by the status given to those with ‘titles’ such as Dr or Professor.

I think for me ‘getting a chair’ was embarrassingly embodied – it took me a month to stop smiling! There was the enormous buzz of ‘making it’ and a powerful feeling of self-worth from the respect I (imagined, fantasised?) I received. And all this despite the role of the RAE ‘market’ in making spaces available for certain types of female academic. Yet, this could not completely override ‘feeling’ a success as pleasure. How do you celebrate something so individualistic in a feminist space? A bit tricky from my point of view. What is the protocol? Who holds the rules?

One thing I did do was go and buy some new clothes, which was decidedly pleasurable. I then consulted the literature to see if there was any work on ‘dressing like a professor’! Interestingly the same emphasis on difficulty was there in the one text I found, ‘Through the Wardrobe: Women’s Relationship with their Clothes’ (Guy et al, 2001) – this did not disappoint - lots of trauma and anxieties about how ‘to embody authority’ –some references to ‘floaty clothes’ and ‘the fun of dressing to impress’ –of refusing to ‘mouse dress’ but only one truly irreverent insistent comment - something more daring - ‘of going blonde’:

I couldn’t be a professor without doing something outrageous, so I rang my hairdresser…it was the first phone call I made, I finally feel…I’m established enough professionally that I can do what I’ve always wanted …it’s almost a statement of defiance, like you know, I’m going to be blonde and they have to take it seriously’ (Joyce in Guy et al, 2001 p114).

This account reveals both the power of the regulatory force of the masculine norm as well as the calculated exercise of female power to ameliorate it. Again it is understood how the binary marks of femininity and masculinity are mapped onto the body/mind distinction. But it also shows what happens to pleasure when you analyse it!

Work on identity and clothes, style and self-presentation have barely touched the surface. There is a great deal to be said about self, identity, disguise, display and the enigma of female forms of authority as embodied and enclothed. These relations are classed and racialised of course. But I will leave this agenda for another time. Suffice to say I think feminists have lots more to say about pleasure in clothes and presentations of self.

**Innocent and Banal Pleasures? (1): Resistant Collaborators**

In contrast to the confessional tortured tone of the previous section I turn briefly in this excavation of academic culture to look at some ‘old’ times practices of sisterhood.
Colleagues still speak about the pleasure of resisting the individualistic ethos of higher education by persisting in collaborative work, even though this was often only fleeting and against the warp of institutional arrangements. Encouragements at trans- or inter-disciplinarity can provide space for more capacious forms of dialogue and there is some burgeoning work here.

At more local levels of collaboration, a colleague remarked on the simple pleasure of receiving thanks from students for being supportive, which was treasured. Hard won collegiality is perhaps all the sweeter. More light-heartedly still, a friend responded to my enquiries about what at work gave her pleasure: ‘Opening an email and discovering you don’t have to do anything’ The same friend mentioned ‘going to the library and finding a book you want!’ And she also added the times of pleasure when people who she had mentored, supervised and otherwise supported recognised her contribution in thanks. This meant a sharing and thus an extension of personal individual delight. In a sense in the rush of the hot housing of higher education, it could be that these ‘banal’ pleasures of the everyday, are valuable precisely because they are often effaced by the pressures to produce. We no longer actually feel at times the need (nor do we make the time) to express conventional human courtesies that mitigate the pressures of work.

**Academics Anonymous or Pleasurable Futures?**

Yet, as we garner (or not) the vulgar ‘goodies’: of grants, the publication of prestigious papers, the tonic invite to keynote leading conferences, we also know that the pleasure of winning is very short lived, almost a redundancy since success is for ever postponed in the race for the next prize.

These are the circumstances rather like alcoholism. We need to have the next hit! Is there an addictive subculture developing that is the equivalent? I once heard at a gender and education conference a woman declare that she was a ‘recovering academic’. I know what she means. It is an obsessive activity.

Current conditions for our production are then extremely competitive. Our bread and butter practices are grant bidding, reviewing and refereeing. As we jostle for places on an ever-escalating elevator to climb higher we have to do more. Measures of where we are to be found set against any one performance indicator become endlessly applied (Hey, 2001, Shain & Ozga 1998). We are required to practice this gaze on our own and others’ performativity/productivity. This is both seductive (if you are higher than someone else) but regressive (if not). We shift around in different league tables. We advance three paces if we get a grant, go back ten if we fail to produce articles for 5* journals, make progress again if our citation index goes up and so on….

Should we form ‘academics anonymous’ for people (like us?) who suffer the same addictive compulsive personalities, being dependent on something that is not necessarily good for us? But perhaps this peculiar mix of compulsion and stigma – massive commitment and yet insignificant immediate social relevance⁹, marks out why those of us so positioned talk this kind of fanatical discourse of the fatally hooked minority. Could it be that academic feminism, having turned inwards with such spectacular success, is intent on administering its own guilt-induced self-mutilation as the price we have paid for buying into the pursuit of individual careers. Like sado-masochists, we have to exist in proximity to the administration of the punishment as the condition of extracting individual desires.

What can we say and do as feminist academics to handle the collision of a collective project with the need for earning our own incomes? How do we do as well
as build what Nancy Fraser called for as an alignment of the ‘politics of distribution’ and the ‘politics of recognition’ (Fraser 2000). Can we understand the markers that structure the unconscious as well as the very conscious motivated positional jostling of our own practices?

What about interrogating our epistemic communities – those smaller more localised entities that form around political and theoretically informed agendas? These groupings often have something of the identity of large mobile households created across the boundaries of friendship and professional interest. Like most households they can be amicable and warm as well as dysfunctional and punitive scapegoat clubs. Can we get some more pleasures in there, can we make it more pleasurable for newcomers?

Can we identify other ‘innocent’ pleasures or are these all eaten up by the desiring machine of professional identity projects fuelled by ambition and personal and positional gains? Do we still feel ‘heady’ pleasures or has it become ‘just a job’? Is feminist academic work accountable to professional ethics or has it just become accountable to managers? Does the old-fashioned idea of ‘making a difference’ survive the conditions of academic work?

There are some hopeful signs of new political - intellectual themes that are prospective and connect more to the progressive liberal humanist tradition that briefly flourished in the early 60’s –70’s (Leonard, 2000). There is some evidence of a growing civic desire to envision ‘things otherwise’ that encompasses a wider political plane than any one strand of social justice action.

It might be too premature (possibly another kind of infantilism) to announce a shift in the ‘structure of feeling’ but there are some positive trends of the revival of left-leaning dissent stoked locally by disappointment with New Labour; an interest in utopianism (BSA 2003) and the global movement struggling to challenge the logic of ‘compulsory capitalism’. Most notable of all was the building of a critical anti-war alliance that showed that it was possible to unite very discrepant constituencies on a common platform of principled opposition to US imperialism.

What this suggests is the possibility of refreshing our selves by making new sorts of network connections to reinvigorate our ability to ‘speak as feminists wanting social change’, if we are honest about what we ‘get out’ of the current settlement, even so far as recognising the perversity of our pleasures, we might be in a better position to stop martyring ourselves – as punishment for these inadmissible ‘guilty pleasures’ (in intellectual work; in competitive endeavours, in status, in winning, etc) and put our skills and capacities to ‘better’ public and civic use – it could also be redemptive, even as we know it will be another contradictory struggle.

References
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Fraser, Nancy (2000) “Radical Academia, Critical Theory and Transformative Politics: An Interview with Nancy Fraser” by Bice Maiguashca Imprints 4 (2) 197-212
Several friends and colleagues helped my deliberations here. They warmed up my imagination, reminding me of my own perverse pleasures in academia. I have to admit therefore to a certain opportunity sampling at the level of empirical data and literature. This is work in progress partly stimulated by curiosity about becoming an academic and recently a professor and the sorts of de-and reconstructions it has required. At points, it draws on ad hoc ‘conversation’ with other feminists in higher education about their pleasures in their work but the final shape is best seen as indicative work mapping some questions that I will take forward in more detailed and systematic ways at a later stage.

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3 A comment made at a paper at the Discourse, Power & resistance Conference University of Plymouth April 6th-8th 2003

4 I do not mean this literally more that social studies and the critical social disciplines seem redundant in most social formations but they matter massively to their practitioners and in an ideal world would possibly contribute to democratic renewal.

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Crossing the Border:  
Locating heterosexuality as a boundary for lesbian and disabled women  

By Clare Beckett

Abstract  
This article draws on my personal experience, and on the separate experiences of 'leaving heterosexuality' and of 'being disabled'. I have attempted to find common ground for action between these two groups by interrogating the experience of being sexual. I argue that heterosexuality functions as a social matrix, with exclusionary practices that operate in similar ways towards both groups. Mechanisms may be different, but the experience of exclusion is similar, and is based on similar practices. This article focuses on specific points in the exclusionary process, and illustrates similarities.

Key words: heterosexuality, disability, lesbian

Introduction  
This article has developed from the juxtaposition of two tasks. I was working on understanding the process that led women research partners in my doctoral research sample to make a 'coming out' declaration, and also trying to arrange a weekend away for myself and my woman lover who is a wheelchair user. I was seeing evidence in my research that leaving heterosexuality created need for a statement not necessarily linked to sexual acts, and I was ringing hotel after hotel, only to find that none were willing to provide two women with a disabled room with a double bed. (Actually, they rarely provided disabled rooms with double beds!). Both tasks required me to make sexuality visible, without linking that visibility to heterosexual social assumptions. In creating visibility, I was negotiating a hidden boundary that divided individual action from social recognition. So, this article interrogates heterosexuality as a social institution that masks, de-values and trivializes difference. That masking, de-valuing and trivializing creates a boundary that must be negotiated in order to gain entry to social value and respect. In this paper I explore the experience of negotiating that boundary.

I draw on the experience of women who identify themselves as disabled, and of women who identify themselves as lesbian. I also draw on my own experience of both locations. There are three reasons for locating disabled women and lesbians in relationship to heterosexuality. Firstly, both feminist political action and disability politics share identification that the 'personal is the political'. Personal border skirmishes illuminate and potentially change the nature of the border. Secondly, feminist voices can be hidden from the disability movement, and disabled women are sometimes missing from feminist thought and action. While I do not minimise differences and oppressions that stem from sexuality and disability, I think that commonality should also be stressed. Thirdly, I am situated with experience in both groups.

Jenny Morris writes that

The fact that dependence is a key part of the social construction of gender for women and of the social construction of disability means that women's
powerlessness is confirmed by disability. (Morris, 1993:89 original emphasis)

and, in so doing argues that disability becomes a 'double disadvantage'. My argument is slightly different. It seems to me that both disabled women and non-heterosexual women are disadvantaged by mechanisms of heterosexuality, as well as by mechanisms of gender. In this sense, heterosexuality becomes the sphere of the adult, or normal. Not to be part of that sphere is to be powerless and dependant. Entry to that sphere is through recognition of heterosexual social sexuality.

I am not attempting to conflate the experience of being lesbian with the experience of being disabled. I am trying to identify commonality in the experience of locating women's action. Beth Ferri and Noel Gregg (1998) begin their article by stating

Gender and Disability are both social constructs, understandable only within the contexts and relationships that give meaning to the terms' (Ferri and Gregg 1998:429)

Here, I am using common experience of heterosexuality to give meaning to the experience of lesbian and of disabled women. I recognise that all groupings, women, lesbian and disabled, also exist in location to institutional locators of class, or race, or age. For the purposes of this article, I interrogate only heterosexuality, lesbian, and disabled.

A Note On Terms Used

My understanding of disability has developed from the theoretical to the practical, as the partner of a mobility impaired woman. As feminists and political activists, my partner and I develop and teach awareness of the rights inherent in a social model of disability as presented definitively by Colin Barnes (1990). Jenny Morris (1991) among others has developed this argument in tune with personal politics, and Barbara Fawcett (2000) has interrogated links between feminist perspectives and disability. I do not associate disability with specific impairments. So, although I describe my partner as a wheelchair user or as having impaired mobility, it is inaccessible locations and lack of awareness that disable her rather than her embodied impairment. This standpoint can conflict with those feminist theorists that foreground issues of care. I do not intend to contribute directly to conversation between the disabled people's movement and the feminist movement about contested locations and uses of 'care'. I have not engaged in a rights 'dualism', where one perspective can be prioritized. I am looking for common experience in negotiating (hetero) sexuality.

Heterosexuality is also both an embodied experience and a specific social relationship. Like Gillian Dunne (2000), I do not think that heterosexual sex is any more, or less, natural or right than any other kind of sex. Nor do I think that heterosexual women individually ‘sleep with the enemy’. Dunne (2000) looks for examination of implicit assumptions about heterosexuality and lesbianism that work against interrogation of heterosexuality as a constructed category, and identifies the following elements of a ‘theoretical heterosexism’

that heterosexuality is natural/desirable, or that lesbians replicate heterosexual (male/female) practices, or that a too vocal critique of heterosexuality undermines the popularity of feminism (like the New Labour view that socialism loses votes). (Dunne: 2000:134)
Creating a category not only marks the boundaries of that category, but also reflects the parameters of other categories. Janet Halley (1993) explores this process as a way of exploring boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In her analysis, homosexuality not only constructs the border of heterosexuality, but also becomes the only exit from heterosexuality. In other words people are perceived to be, and are treated as, heterosexual unless they are differentiated by functions of heterosexuality or differentiate themselves. As early as 1984, Gayle Rubin described a 'wall' of expectation, based on social reward, between valued sexual interaction (heterosexual, married, reproductive) and sanctioned sexual interaction. While she described the wall as being made up of hegemonic social values and fears, I would like to use the concept of the wall as being heterosexuality itself. Drawing on my own research project, I argue that to be lesbian is also to be part of a constructed category, and identification is only partly centered around sexual activity. As one research response was phrased

At the time, I just thought I was sleeping with a woman. It was only later I realised I was lesbian now!

Harte (1994) traces the visibility and invisibility of 'lesbian' as a social category, separate from individual action, drawing analyses from social control and policing. Jan Lofstrom (1997) presents an overview of interrogation of connections between social processes and the creation of 'the homosexual'. His account does not necessarily reflect lesbian experience, but does place 'homosexual' and by inference 'lesbian' in relationship to social interpretation and social structure.

Border Crossings

If heterosexuality is a border, then there will be crossing points and frontier skirmishes. My argument is that for lesbians and for disabled women, these crossing points and skirmishes share aspects of meaning and purpose. Locating those points is a subjective process, dependant on individual location. Different women will identify different moments of conflict. I have highlighted three points of skirmish here, because they are points that are common to both research partners accounts and disabled women's accounts. Firstly, there is a point of entry. At some time, some tangible or intangible goods or services are sought from the public world. I reached such a point in arranging our weekend away, but they are not unusual. Secondly, I identify a 'maintenance' border, where locating as (un)problematic requires constant vigilance. Lastly, I look at the position of the outlaw in relation to the heterosexual boundary.

Entry

Perhaps a very obvious point is raised by this comment from a research partner-

- We're still the girls. I'm 40, she's 50, we've lived here twenty years and we've paid off our mortgage. But we're 'the girls'!

I mentioned this quotation to friend, who said with instant recognition 'Oh yes- we are, aren't we!' In one sense, this is unimportant. In another, it is a constant and unsubtle reminder of 'otherness', where sexuality is undeveloped or trivialized. What stops a
girl being a woman? Perhaps it is 'badges of office', like opposite gender sexual partners. And what are girls excluded from? Adult informal social relationships.

Research partners felt invisibility, and described it as a reason for making public acts of identification. 'Coming Out', claiming identification, is a process that requires constant attention. The following story is again from research partners-

I told my brother Sue was living with me. He asked where she slept, and I said in my bed, with me. I thought I'd done it! A few months later Sue left, and I was really miserable. He asked me why I was so down, and I told him she'd left. He said 'but why are you so upset?' He really hadn't realized that I MEANT slept in my bed with me! He thought I was being generous, and the house was crowded. (Name changed).

This is not the only story, or the only indication that avoiding heterosexuality requires constant action. What is clear from the accounts is that sex is described as different from identity in a way that is not paralleled for heterosexual people. For example-

At the time I did not consider that I was 'coming out' but rather naively that I was moving on to a new relationship. It is only more recently that I have realized the full consequences of living with another woman in terms of the reactions from other people.

It is hard to imagine a heterosexual relationship where the sex act would be seen as so independent from the relationship. Rather, expectations could be summed up by the instructions rumoured to have been given to Department of Social Security inspectors in pre-1986 Income Support Guidelines, to assume a sexual relationship and therefore a relationship of financial support between men and women but to assume no relationship of support between men and men or women and women whatever the circumstances.

There is also the pronoun minefield, familiar to lesbian women. A simple description of 'what I did at the weekend' is complicated if I cannot state openly that I did it with a female partner. If I make the partnership and the pronoun explicit, I have effectively 'come out'. A heterosexual woman is in exactly the same position, in that her discussion of 'him' situates her as heterosexual. The difference is that her action promotes little reaction, whereas mine can be seen as provocative.

For disabled women, this reminder of otherness, of not having gained entry to an adult, public world, also revolves around an assumption of sexlessness. The generic term disabled, used to describe both facilities (disabled toilet) and people, hides both gender and sexuality. Jenny Morris identifies implications of trivialized or made invisible sexuality in her list of assumptions made about disabled women:-

That we are naïve and lead sheltered lives
That we are asexual or at best sexually inadequate
That we cannot ovulate, menstruate, conceive or give birth, have orgasms,
That if we are not married or in a long term relationship it is because no-one wants us and not through our personal choice to remain single or live alone
That our only true scale of merit and success is to judge ourselves by the standard of their world
That we are sweet, deprived little souls who need to be compensated with
treats, presents and praise.
(Morris 1991:20 part).

Her observation of disability for women being equated with childhood is
also present in Patrick White's discussion of ways in which the discourse of, in his
case specifically, blindness becomes equated with heterosexuality.

The options available to lesbian women are limited by the social nature of
heterosexuality. They are to become invisible, or to lose credibility by raising their
profile. The options available to disabled women are limited by their lack of
access to sexual heterosexuality, which is in itself mediated by social
heterosexuality. The similarity in the skirmishes for lesbian and for disabled
women lies in the positioning of sex, not sexual identification. In both instances,
women are seen as a-sexual, or sexually immature. To counter this assumption is
to make a statement about sex. This is itself problematic. There is ample
theoretical and empirical evidence to indicate that claiming an explicitly sexual
identity can be a dangerous location for women. Beverley Skeggs (1997:ch.7)
links the theoretical and the empirical evidence by describing the choices of
working class women through the lens of 'shame'. In her analysis, she makes very
clear that being sexual is opposed to being respectable.

Maintaining One’s Self As (Un)problematic

This is the area that my partner and I refer to as 'fitting in'. We have lost
count of the number of times we have said 'Don't worry, we'll sort ourselves out'.
This phrase has been used to negotiate both physical entry and sexual entry. For
instance, it covers both the need to manage physical space where adaptations are
not suitable, and the requirement for our sexuality to be invisible where
heterosexual assumptions have been made.

Research partners also describe the need to make their sexuality visible at
different points, and that borders between visibility and invisibility are twisty and
uncertain. In each case, there is a complicated decision to be made. Is crossing the
border possible? is it worthwhile? is it necessary, in that this particular frontier
represents 'a bridge too far'? Or, did I mean to do it? It is possible to become
visibly non-heterosexual without intention, as the following account shows-

When we left the park we were so up and close! and then we got near
home and I suddenly realised I was walking down the street holding the
hand of a woman who wasn’t my mother or my sister- and everyone could
see! It kind of jumped out at me then.

Her action did not provoke an obvious reaction from passers by, although it
did clearly cue that woman to re-assess her public identity. The following woman
also felt ‘caught out’-

I worked for a debt collectors, and went to work in a skirt suit and heels.
I’d been lesbian for years, but no-one knew. I used to go to the gay club on
a Friday night. This night, a whole raft of them from work came in- and me
in my leathers! They just thought it was funny, but I had to go back to
work on Monday.

The follow up to that story indicates that the woman radically lost face in
her public life because of the recognition of her non-heterosexuality.
After that I couldn’t get the young kids to do anything I needed them to do. They weren’t nasty, they just kind of asked someone else. In the end I left.

Eve Sedgewick (1991) describes the need to identify oneself, to 'come out of the closet' continuously and in different situations, as fundamental to gay oppression. She presents the dualism between public knowledge and ignorance (of category) as specific to sexual identities and as delineating both experience within the category and the location of political action for the category.

Vibrantly resonant as the image of the closet is for many modern oppressions, it is indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions. Racism, for instance, is based on a stigma that is visible in all but exceptional cases. (Sedgewick 1991:75)

While her work is most clearly relevant to gay men, many women in my research study talked about 'coming out' as a continuous process. Any action that must be continuously repeated carries the possibility of inaction. At some point, and for some reason, any lesbian may choose to allow herself to be seen as heterosexual.

If visibility for lesbians can be a problematic, and evidence of borderlands, for disabled women it is a constant aspect of daily life. Consider the following story from a disabled research partner-

I love swimming- I can move around in the water fine. To go swimming, I must negotiate changing rooms, toilets, doorways- all with the chair, and all in the public arena. Finally, I will be hoisted out over the pool – a bit like a witch on a ducking stool!

The constant need to cross the boundary of disabling access and attitude means that disabled women are always in the position of negotiating visibility. It is almost impossible to enter a room unobtrusively in a wheelchair or with crutches, and impairment that does not effect movement also carries its share of visibility. What is visible is an impaired person, not a woman taking up equal space with other women. The border lies in the invisibility of disabled women as women, and as sexual.

Outlaws

It is important to recognise that the issue is not the need to be seen as sexual in order to negotiate sex on an individual level (although that helps). The issue is that respect, status, and recognition depend on recognition of heterosexuality.

Where women are both disabled and lesbian, the invisibility of non-heterosexual acts can be an advantage. My partner and I share a physical intimacy in public that is denied to most able bodied lesbian women. Hugs, kisses, even overtly sexual touch on breasts and other parts of the body are perceived by others as caring rather than sexual. However, even this contributes to the invisible barrier of heterosexual assumption. Since we are neither heterosexual nor both able bodied, our sexual expression holds no power. Where we do find hotels that offer double beds to disabled people, we catch ourselves retreating behind a smoke screen of misinformation around her care needs rather than our conjugal needs. Unless we act, I am given status as her carer, her sister, and even on occasion her mother! On the other hand, the male carer who gives her personal assistance, is given status as my husband or her brother. (He is neither). Allocations of status to the carer undermine her ability to be received as an agent of her own actions. No
allocation of status to a carer contributes to the invisibility of the numbers of women who prioritise care, and who become financially and socially marginalised as a result.

Invisibility of both lesbians and disabled women as active women cannot be ignored, however. Entry into lesbian space is often mediated by ability, as entry into disabled women's groups is often mediated by sexuality. In other words, the assumption that lesbians and disabled women are both different from the heterosexual majority and different from each other is deeply rooted.

What is on the other side of the boundary?

Heterosexuality in this role is undertheorised. Connections between heterosexuality and social privilege are often assumed or silent. One possible reason for this is that heterosexuality intersects privilege between men and women. It offers a different experience and implication dependent on the gender of the persona occupying the category. To argue, as many second wave feminists were forced to do, that heterosexual women are privileged through their connection with masculinity, but de-valued through their gender, can create a divided political action.

Ruth Frankenberg (1993) identifies three linked dimensions of 'whiteness'.

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint', a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (Frankenberg 1993:1)

These three dimensions are also useful as a way to consider the production and reproduction of heterosexuality. However, this dimension of privilege and ease, and the implication of category membership, is often not recognised by those women who are self or socially identified as heterosexual. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993) describe in some detail the difficulty of identifying women who would write from a heterosexual position. As a category, it appears to be largely 'unchosen'. In some ways, it can be seen to be a default category, where women who do not actively remove themselves are placed.

In this sense of hegemonic and discursive action, formal boundaries are perhaps less pervasive than informal ones. Formal sites are, to some extent, bounded by formal process. So, it is often possible to use state action to support crossing a heterosexual boundary in places that are subject to law or policy. It would be unusual to be refused access to work or access to social institutions purely on the grounds of lack of membership of a social heterosexuality. There is movement in current United Kingdom policy to make some protection against discrimination against lesbians in employment explicit in law. Where explicit law is not helpful there are often codes of practice and formal methods of complaint to support explicit boundary crossing.

The coffee morning, the neighbours, the women at the supermarket till, all take on a role of power in creating and recreating social norms. It is this area in which unquestioned exclusion from social heterosexuality flourishes. It is exactly this hidden quality of the exclusion that makes it both hard to recognise and hard to locate. It is this, in itself, that makes the boundary both all pervasive and invisible. It also means that border skirmishes are deeply divisive, and very
personal. The following research partner is both lesbian and disabled, and is talking about the process of joining her local residents association:

First they had meetings off the scheme, and I asked them not to because I couldn't get there. Then they had meetings at a local house. They used to go in cars, but they were all in couples and cars only have four seats, so there wasn't room for me. Then they stopped asking me to meetings because I never went. Then they went to Blackpool, but they didn't ask me because they were talking about it at a meeting I wasn't at- and anyway, they thought I wouldn't like it because I was on my own. Then something went wrong on the scheme, and all the husbands went to the pub to discuss it, and I never knew what happened. The husbands never come into my house, you see- I don't need little jobs doing.

Her position as excluded outsider is not formalized, and would probably not be recognised when verbalized in that way. She goes on to say-

They don't seem to know what to do with me if they don't have to help me or feel sorry for me.

**What action can we take?**

Sue Clegg (1996) argues that much of the work of the formal women's movement in the 1960s was foregrounded, grounded, and disseminated by the informal friendship networks that link women. It is this area that is the strongest defense against border skirmishes. Recognition of exclusion based on social heterosexuality re-doubles the work of women's studies and women's networks to build safe passages for all women.

How this is done will depend, to some extent, on the theoretical standpoint of the analysts. From an 'identity politics' standpoint, it is difficult to see how women who have actively left heterosexuality can find common ground with women who are disabled, who may or may not also want heterosexual relationships. (Here, I mean *common* action rather than supportive action for one or other group). It is only by taking the steps in this article, separating social heterosexuality from sex action, and by recognising the impact of heterosexuality on women, that commonality makes sense.

**References**


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Women’s Constructions of Women: On Entering the Front Door

By Myria Vassiliadou

Abstract

Despite the vast volume of scholarly work on Mediterranean and the Near East the region, issues of marginalisation, discrimination, racism, and ethnic-gender groups as well as the implications of these within the context of various wider forces and structures are only lately receiving any attention at all and this paper is part of an effort to explore and expose them. The aim of this paper is to explore this otherwise forgotten area through the example of Cypriot women and their interpretations of internal ‘Others’ in Cyprus. It is thus an attempt to analyze the discourses and images adopted by women in Cyprus surrounding ‘Otherhood’. Ultimately, the paper represents an effort to use ethnographic fieldwork and empirical data in order to explore and raise questions about women’s experiences and attitudes in Cyprus, since the androcentric cosmology common to Mediterranean societies has been largely ignored.

Key words: Constructions of Women, Otherhood, Cyprus

Why The Front Door? Introducing the ‘Structure’

The Mediterranean and the Near East have traditionally been the focus of much anthropological research and more recently the attention of social scientists, most notably economists, and political scientists. Despite the vast volume of scholarly work on the region, issues of marginalisation, discrimination, racism, and ethnic-gender groups as well as the implications of these within the context of various wider forces and structures are only lately receiving any attention at all. The following analysis is part of an effort to explore and expose them through the example of Cypriot women and their interpretations of internal ‘Others’ in Cyprus. It provides an analysis of the multiple discourses and images adopted by women in Cyprus surrounding ‘Otherness’ and raises questions which have been ignored to present day in part due to the ‘phallonaristic’ vision and the androcentric cosmology common to Mediterranean societies (Bourdieu, 2001, p6).

In order to discuss Cypriot women’s attitudes, beliefs, and opinions on issues of ‘Otherhood’, one has to enter their homes, into the so-called ‘private’ sphere. Entering ‘the Front Door’, as the title of this chapter states, is an act of particular importance in the case of Cyprus. The ‘house’, like the patriarchal, capitalist state, is a structure of oppression and domination. It is highly symbolic as the “house is a place of cleanliness and purity as opposed to the street which is dirty … The street is also a place of sexual impurity … (and) a euphemism for adultery, as when it is said that a woman deceives her husband ‘in the street’.” (Dubisch, 1983, p197-8). The concept of cleanliness within the home used to be very dominant in both urban and rural settings, although it is gradually shifting and reconstructing its previous symbolic significance in urban settings (partly due to women’s entry into the labor force). A clean woman (kathari yineka, implying a woman who keeps the house clean) and a clean house are important praises which indicate to sexual purity. They are socially implied as mutually constitutive,
interdependent symbolic terms, where one cannot exist without the other: a woman who is occupied with cleaning the house, is not occupied with ‘other things’, her mind is not ‘elsewhere’ (ο nous τις ενεπ αλλου). Rather, her interest lies within the home and the family. Women’s commitment to household chores and responsibilities is made explicitly obvious in a high standard of cleanliness and order, “often at the expense of convenience.” (Rushton, 1983, p59). A woman who neglects her house chores, in either a rural or an urban community will be, in the best case scenario, subject to gossip by both women and men as this demonstrates her lack of commitment to the family and the home. The state of a Cypriot woman’s house reflects her sexual morality, so both the woman and the man have a vested interest in the house being kept clean (Dubisch, 1986, p.200).

It has been argued that the house represents the center of the family in particular and the society in general. It represents sanctuary as opposed to the competitive and hostile outside world (Dubish, 1986, p199). Therefore, if the house is neglected, the ability to deal with this world is weakened this being the responsibility of women. The house and the street, similar to the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ are interrelated and work in conjunction with one another, reflecting the dominant discourses on sexuality and morality. One cannot be studied and analyzed separately from the other. Although urban middle class women might be argued to be less affected by these standards of moral critique, due to their more career-oriented, ‘public-space’ lives, they are certainly not excluded from the symbolic ideas and moral evaluations attached to the home, ‘proper’ behavior, and femininity; rather, different facades for the same power discourses are constructed in order for them to be included. As the paper aims to demonstrate below, prostitutes, homosexuals, and domestic workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines directly relate to, affect, and are affected by these symbolic capital and intentional representations.

Clearly, there are many ‘others’ in Cypriot society; I intentionally choose to concentrate on these three as first, they were the ones mostly referred to by the women in my research, second, have acquired relatively widespread public interest in recent years predominantly due to dominant European Union accession discourses, and third, they all relate to issues of sexuality and ‘morality’ –issues which necessitate entering the ‘front door’.

**Who is Behind the Front Door? Methods of Entering**

The paper is the result of an exploratory study. Using an inductive approach, the empirical findings rest on my study of urban, middle-class women through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation in three non-govermental groups which constituted of women. All the women, aged nineteen to forty-five, lived in both sides of the divided capital of Cyprus, Nicosia. More specifically, twenty-one of them were Greek Cypriot, two were Turkish Cypriot, one was Armenian, and one was a Maronite, thus reflecting (not proportionally) the major communities on the island. About half were involved in voluntary work or associations and groups that deal with ‘women’s and family issues’. The rest did not express a particular interest in women’s issues. My fieldwork and subsequent analysis are based on my intensive personal experience as a female participant in this line of activities, and my predicament as the ‘native’ feminist researcher. They thus represent a challenge in aiming to describe, analyze and explore
the data I have gathered as both an insider and an outsider at the same time. The biggest difficulty rises in trying to discuss the manifest and the latent, and in clarifying who, the women in my sample, speak for, as we share a lot of common social characteristics. I am pointing to a conscious recognition that this can and does affect my ‘findings’ in this study (Stanley and Wise, 1983, p228). If part of this study is argued by some to be a research of myself, then by acknowledging explicitly my ‘subject position,’ I also demonstrate a ‘strong objectivity.’ (Charles, 1996, p30). If, further, coming to conclusions is treated as a social process, it can be demonstrated that interpretation is a political and unstable process between the lives of the researchers and those of the researched. “Interpretation needs somehow to unite a passion for ‘truth’ with explicit rules of research method that can make some conclusions stronger than others.” (Holland and Ramazanoglou, 1994, p127).

As most studies concerning Cyprus tend to concentrate on rural communities and urbanization, people in cities, and especially women, have been totally neglected as ‘subjects for research’ (although the European Union accession efforts has led to a very recent, less than three-year-old interest in the subject of ‘women’ as an area of study and social engineering) (see Vassiliadou, 2001). However, the social anthropological fascination with ‘studying the natives’ has left little or no information on half of the population in Cyprus, especially the lives of middle-class women in urban settings. My initial question was whether the women mentioned above were regarded as somewhat ‘privileged’ by society in general (due to their class, education, financial situation, place of residency, and opportunities) and other women in particular, would also be less restricted by patriarchy (in terms of class, for example), and more likely to express ‘tolerant’ attitudes. However, no information existed on the lives, attitudes, and experiences of these women, and my aim became to find out who they were, what they thought, and eventually, what they did.

My current research indicates that these women find themselves caught between their attitudes and practices. Words are deeds, Wittgenstein argues, and attitudes can be argued to themselves represent practices; I will not concentrate on this debate in this paper, but rather, for the purpose of discussion, I will hereby use attitudes to indicate that this is what women think, and practices to problematically indicate what women ‘do’, that is, how they behave. The conflicts and contradictions they face are part of their everyday realities; however, women deal with these in different ways. Some experience them unproblematically, others find them to be sources of tension and struggle, and yet others accept them despite their convictions because they feel there is not much they can do about it. Nevertheless, all of these women adopt techniques and coping-mechanisms, which allow them to adjust to the demanding environment they live in. In the process of doing so, they tend to create ‘others’ amongst women whom they exclude from the in-groups they form. An exploration of stereotypes about internal ‘others’ (such as homosexuals, domestic workers, Eastern European prostitutes) will thus be offered. In my broader study, I also examine women’s attitudes towards Greek/Turkish Cypriot women (the major ethnic communities in Cyprus), but since this falls under a different area of analysis, and relates to nationalisms and ethnic identities, these ‘external’ others (women they do not ‘live’ with) will not be part of the focus in this paper (Vassiliadou, 2001).
It is important to point out here that although feminism is a general theory of the oppression of women by men, it is a highly contradictory one. Although contemporary feminists in different parts of the world strongly disagree on the uniformity of women’s oppression, feminism itself cannot exist without some element of universality (see Ramazanoglou, 1989, p22). Thus, questions of ‘Otherness’ have to be dealt with caution. It has been pointed out, for example, that there are risks associated with the ‘cultural relativism’ of feminists uncritically supporting practices for women in other societies that they would not support in their own. Risks are also associated with feminists’ efforts to deal with ‘Otherness’ and distancing themselves from women’s movements in various other parts of the world (Maynard, 1996, p19). I am not arguing in this paper that the experiences of urban-middle class women in Cyprus are more or less ‘serious’ than the experiences of the ‘other’ women they create. They are all part of patriarchal regimes and occupy different spaces within it, with less or more choices at a time. I am, nevertheless, arguing that their experiences, similarly to the experiences of numerous other women throughout the world, have been less heard and understood, and that in order for women’s oppression to be over, it needs to be voiced, understood, and explained in as many of its contexts as possible. I thus accept throughout the paper that gender is mutually constitutive to ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and age and the underestimation of their interaction in society is an incomplete process.

What was Behind the Door? Analyzing Cypriot Women’s Narratives

One of the ways in which women in my sample were able to create spaces for themselves was through the construction of ‘others’ amongst women whom they excluded from the in-groups they formed. The question then does not necessarily lie within who the ‘other’ becomes –the other can be anyone over whom women have power upon- but rather how these women acquire a sense of identity through the creation of this ‘other: who they ‘oppose to’, compare themselves to in order to create a sense of self or group identity. These women’s narratives will be used below to best illustrate this.

The Threat of the Dirty House

Since many urban middle-class women in Cyprus are in full-time, paid employment, their ‘double-shift’ can be relieved with the employment of domestic workers. Dilemmas are posed in these women’s lives since they need to work in order both to contribute to the household income (and to be ‘modern’ and ‘Western’), whereas at the same time the family needs to be looked after (by women) and the house to be kept clean. There is a rapidly growing tendency for families or couples to employ domestic workers from the Philippines and Sri Lanka to live in the house and either be responsible for housework, or look after their children and/or the elderly (on occasions, these women are also responsible for cleaning shops, restaurants, barns. Although employed for one or the other, most often than not, they do both). The employment of domestic workers lies in the necessity to preserve the patriarchal regime, unquestionably release pressure from the state’s lack of a sufficient welfare system which will support women’s employment, and ultimately encourage the further shift into the capitalist economy.7

One of my interviewees had been employing a woman from the Philippines for three years when she explained: “I don’t like it that she is around the house all the time but at the same time it is a big relief to be able to do what I like without having to worry
about leaving the kids with a baby-sitter or alone.”

In two other cases, the parents of interviewees employed Sri Lankan women who were ‘given’ to their daughters on a weekly basis to help them with domestic chores without additional payment, and often on top of their workload. The mother-in-law of an interviewee, Sappho, employed a woman from the Philippines who also cleaned the latter’s house twice week. This interviewee’s advice to her mother-in-law was not to let “Nina think that she can do whatever she pleases. If she mixes with all these other maids, she is going to start wanting more and asking for things. She should know her place. She is lucky to have this job, most women in her country become prostitutes to survive.” Sappho was referring to another worker, a friend of Nina’s who openly complained that she was made by her employer to work all day and on occasions not allowed to leave the house on Sundays as indicated in her contract.

It appears that a number of ‘privileged’ women have their needs “met through services provided by subordinate, servile, or enslaved women… Women’s successes in achieving educational and occupational parity with men have enabled a growing minority of successful women to buy cheap domestic services from more disadvantaged women.” (Ramaazanoglou, 1989, p107). Most women in my study accepted this situation with domestic assistants and their behavior toward those women supported it. Although most of them argued that women are oppressed by men in Cyprus and that they have to suffer because of it their practices were once more an indication of the contradictions these women encountered. Domestic assistants were not included in their definitions of the ‘women’ category. These domestic workers often have ‘bad’ reputation in their countries because they go abroad to work, they ‘leave’ their families and children, and are considered to be of dubious sexual morality and decency. They are thus being marginalized by being women; by being poor; because of their low-paid, low-prestige work; and by their employers -men and women, in complex, multi-leveled, direct, and indirect ways.

One fifth of my interviewees expressed their disapproval of the abuse of these women both on a social and a personal level. These women were involved in voluntary work, considered themselves feminists, and refused to employ these domestic workers. By refusing to employ them these women tried to show their contempt about the way domestic assistants are manipulated, but at the same time denied these women the opportunity to work for more money than they would be able to earn in their own countries. Evidence from my broader study supports that women who identify themselves with feminism (irrespective of their individual definitions of the term) in urban Cyprus are more aware of gender as well as class and ethnic divisions within their society than non-feminist or anti-feminist women are. In line with the current literature, awareness of one type of oppression increases awareness of other types of oppression. Some women’s consciousness and experience of actually ‘being the other’ seem to lead to their acceptance of members of groups in society who are themselves ‘others’.

The Threat to the Sexual Morality of the ‘House’ -Homosexuality

All the feminist women in the sample were further more tolerant of issues concerning homosexuality and sexual orientation and did not consider homosexuality as “negative behavior in any way”. The same could not be argued for the rest of the women in the study. Although they explained said that they accepted homosexuals, they did not
“particularly want to have anything to do with them. Let them do what they want to do, but I don’t have to be exposed to it.”11 These findings could be compared to the Cypriot Social Attitudes Survey. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the decriminalization of homosexuality; 41 percent said that homosexuality ought to be decriminalized whereas 59 percent disagreed. Women showed lower levels of tolerance towards ‘deviant behavior’: 66 percent of the women as opposed to 51 percent of the men disagreed with the decriminalization of homosexuality. If these numbers are compared with 1994, 71 percent of the people disagreed with the decriminalization, in 1995, the percentage was 61 percent, and by 1997, it was down to 59 percent. Such findings on attitudes concerning homosexuality contrast with findings in other countries like the United States. For example, American women were found to be more accepting of homosexuality and to have a greater tendency to regard the basis for sexual orientation as somewhat social rather than natural (Kane and Schippers, 1996, p663).

The rapid and sharp social changes taking place in Cyprus are clearly reflected in people’s attitudes. Recently, a ‘new’ dilemma arose within the ‘authorities’ and the state and consequently within society in general. After a gay man took the State to the European Court of Justice, the law concerning homosexuality was expected to change, since the Cypriot government has been trying to facilitate membership with the European Union. In a heated debate in which the media and eventually the people were involved the Cyprus Weekly (1997, p7) explained, that “The House of Representatives will decide after Easter what its stance will be on decriminalizing homosexuality. At the moment, Cyprus is failing to conform with a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights to make homosexuality legal.” Most of the House Members were in favor of accepting the ruling to decriminalize homosexuality but the Orthodox Church took a vocal, strongly opposing stance on the matter, considering homosexuality a sin. It is important here to point out that according to the law, homosexuality can only be ‘committed’ by men and involves penetrative, anal sex. Women’s homosexuality was not, and is not an issue. It is not illegal and thus does not need to be decriminalized. Lesbians were not there, they do not exist, and they do not matter.

Upon discussing female homosexuality, one interviewee, Phryne, argued that she was aware of “numerous examples, but they are not out in the open, for obvious reasons.”12 She gave an example concerning a woman who had been in a gay relationship for six years and was “a lesbian until she could not stand the pressure any longer and decided to get married.”13 She is currently married, has three children, and her husband knows nothing about her previous sexual activities. She explained that if he found out “he would kill her”. The reasons were not discussed or explained further by the interviewee; they are part of an accepted, unchallenged, dominant discourse. Another case involved a gay female couple that was in a monogamous relationship for almost a decade. They lived abroad for the whole period since they were terrified with the idea of returning to Cyprus. In fact, remaining abroad for all that time was a struggle they went through simply in order to be together. A lack of options pushed them into finally returning to Cyprus despite being unable to express their relationship in public. When one of them decided to ‘confess’ her sexual orientation to her family, she was treated with pity and she was regarded as ill. Similarly, Korinna argued that lesbian women were not to blame for their ‘condition.’ “It is not their fault really. We should not reject the poor people, but accept them. Feel for them. They are born that way.”14
Sixty five percent of women in my sample were accepting of homosexual behavior; the predominant majority identified themselves as feminists whereas the rest were indifferent. Further, women who claimed to be indifferent to feminist ideas were less tolerant, and the remaining three were very critical of gay people. One of these women considered herself an anti-feminist and the other two indifferent to feminism. Feminist opinions appear to be linked in the sample to higher levels of tolerance and greater understanding toward ‘others’. The consciousness, personal experience, and awareness of ‘otherness’ appear to be related to greater acceptance of social groups that could fall under similar categories of oppression and exclusion.

In general, deviation from heterosexual sex seems to “posit a threat to the view that sex is innate” (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, p227) and therefore homosexuality is treated with “exaggerated horror.” In Cyprus, as in Greece, homosexual behavior has been interpreted as involving an ‘active’, very masculine man, and a ‘passive,’ ‘feminine’ man. Cypriots widely accept that the passive member in a male homosexual relationship is the ‘real homosexual’, the poustis;15 the active partner is jokingly called kouloumbaras, and he can be more socially accepted as a man who had ‘normal’ sexual urges fulfilled with a member of the same sex. Many sexual activities jokingly described by soldiers (eighteen to twenty year old men) involve “X having been f … d by Y, because he is gay.”16 This contradictory attitude on male homosexuality is reflected in the study by Georgiou mentioned above, who found that “the Cypriot priests … believed that the passive homosexual was by far worse than the active one … and also reflects the societal attitudes of the majority of Cypriot males.” (Georgiou, 1992). One of my interviewees told me that her husband had such experiences with two men in the army and that he confessed it to her when they first met; she found it strange but acceptable because her husband was the active partner: “he is not exactly a poustis, right?”17 Sexist, essentialist discourses dominate in these interpretations, as traditional associations of sexual passivity and weakness are connected with gay men, who are ‘feminine in behavior’ (yenekotoi, poustidhes). By penetrating, and thus feminizing the homosexual man, the conceived ‘straight’ man acquires power. However, a commonly used term to “suggest the possibility of sexual attraction between women” (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, p229) does not exist. Further, “not only is there no female counterpart to the poustis, but there is no common term for a woman who would wish to take a ‘male role, either.” Female homosexuality, if expressed, is a deep secret that no one wishes to uncover. The association of women’s sexuality to fertility is so strong that a need for women to ‘express’ sexuality in ways that cannot result to procreation is beyond perception (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, p229).

The Threat of Sex outside the House – The Evil of Prostitution

The restrictive construction of female sexuality within the context of procreation described above is dominant only in the gender-role expectations for Cypriot women. Foreign women are considered different. They are simply there for Cypriot men to have sex with. They are considered ‘easy’ and as long as they are ‘lured’, they will give a man ‘what he wants.’ Their attraction to the Cypriot man, or their willingness to be involved in sexual intercourse is irrelevant. After 1974, this ‘foreign’ woman was generally the tourist woman from Western Europe, and especially Scandinavian countries. This ‘more
sexually liberated’ woman became ‘the official reason for the increase of divorce’ since she readily accepted the advances of the Cypriot man, who was in many cases, married. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cyprus has witnessed unexpected changes in the family structure. Thousands of Russian, Rumanian, and Ukrainian women came to Cyprus to work as ‘artistes’, although the official number limits them to 1500. The requirement has been that they become strippers/dancers in inner-city cabarets that have increased rapidly to reach a number close to a hundred. For an island of half a million inhabitants, the figure is relatively high. Numerous cases have been made public concerning the owners of these clubs who force the women to sleep with the customers for money, most of which are received by the club owners. Women between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five offer their ‘services’ to Cypriot men for prices varying from thirty to one hundred Cyprus pounds. ‘Massage parlors’ are advertised on an everyday basis in the press, only later to be discovered to operate as ‘homes’ for these affairs. Prostitution has reached uncontrollable rates and is linked to another ‘new phenomenon’ in Cyprus, that of organized crime. Currently, all fifteen agents bringing foreign artistes into Cyprus have a criminal record. Nevertheless, the issue of trafficking of women is never addressed publicly by the authorities and to present date, a systematic study on its extent has not been published.

At the House Crime Committee, which discussed the link between prostitution and organized crime, the then Interior Ministry Permanent Secretary said: “Prostitution will always be there whether it stems from cabarets, night-spots or pubs and we can't stop it. If we closed all the cabarets, would not artistes work in massage parlors, brothels or enter the island as tourists and work as prostitutes.” (Cyprus Weekly, 1998, p6). He also said, “the committee was considering limiting the number of foreign artistes at each cabaret. This would mean, however, that the remaining women would simply have to sleep with more men” (Cyprus Weekly, 1998, p6) and, closing the cabarets would force the problem underground. The reasons behind the “fact” that women would have to sleep with more men remains unchallenged. In fact, it is taken for granted and given as a reason for the perpetuation of the present, patriarchal status quo. The problem does not appear to be prostitution itself, or the exploitation (and/or trafficking) of the Eastern European women, but rather the links of prostitution with organized crime. Cyprus is a place where prostitution has been accepted as part of society and ‘ierothoules’ (sacred servants / legal prostitutes) have been serving the ‘common good’; organized crime has ‘got in the way’ of smoothly run, patriarchal affairs. The construction of the body ‘as a sexually defined reality and as the depository of sexually defining principles of vision and division’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p11) creates attitudes and experiences about the biological differences between men and women, but also amongst women themselves. Men have the sexual urges, some (‘good and mostly ugly’) women deny them, and some (‘bad and mostly beautiful’) women accept them.

Similar to northern Cyprus, in the non-occupied, southern Republic of Cyprus which is under study here, Russian and Rumanian women are seen as a source of disorder and danger, but they

“…Also have a more complex role in helping to define community boundaries at a time of change in gender roles and expectations … The two aspects of female sexuality symbolized by Russians and Rumanians–deviant and unambiguously
dangerous, as well as modern, attractive, and ambiguous- are present in
constructions of gender and sexuality that also apply to Cypriot women. Russian
and Rumanian women are an embodiment of the outsider within a role that is
illustrated by the way in which they are incorporated into ‘traditional’ structures
of authority and control.” (Scott, 1993, p400).

In the Republic of Cyprus, the symbolic and eventual problem is not much the
Eastern European women’s entry as workers in the tourist industry, but rather their entry
as ‘artistes’, available to dance and ‘fulfill the sexual wishes of men’ (sexualikes
epithimies ton antron), with money as their only demand. In many cases where Cypriot
couples separate after the man’s affair with an Eastern European woman, the immigration
authorities are called to ‘kick the woman out of the country’ so that the man can return
home. An immigration official explained that they were thus safeguarding the traditional
Cypriot family. The common story involves a middle-aged man who gets involved
with a cabaret dancer in her late teens or early twenties and then decides to leave his
family in order to live with her. When one of the women in my study was recently
subjected to the same experience, the first thing she was asked by her relatives was
whether she would like to see the woman out of the country. Her positive reply led to
Immigration officers deporting the woman a few months later. Further, when I escorted
a Russian student to the Immigration Authorities after she had been forced to have sex
with her Cypriot guardian, the immigration officer asked me (as I was translating) if the
woman had been a virgin before the ‘alleged rape.’ I asked whether that made any
difference to her case and he replied, “most of these common women are asking for it,
you see. They are poor and they come here to lure our men. We must make sure they are
decent, but they never are.”

Many women support the sentiments of the immigration officer and they openly
express hatred and disgust about the morality and behavior of Eastern European artistes.
Regarded as a direct threat to their marriages, and thus the ‘legitimation’ of their status in
society, Eastern European women are expected to leave the island and ‘leave us in
peace.’ Throughout the study, the women I interviewed and observed appeared to have
clearly defined perceptions about these ‘other’ women. Although most of them claimed
to acknowledge women’s oppression, they appeared inflexible and intolerant in their
attitudes and behavior toward ‘other women’, especially if these are prostitutes.

Middle-class Cypriot women’s gender awareness processes do not necessitate
their internalization and practice of discourses which are alternative to patriarchy:
“during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation,
tend themselves to become oppressors, or ‘sub-oppressors.” (Freire, 1970, 1993, p27).
Nevertheless, and as mentioned previously in the paper, the feminist women in my
sample illustrated that their awareness of gender oppression within their society increased
their awareness about other levels of oppression within the same social structure.

Upon Closing the Front Door – Who is Left Out? A Discussion on Women and other
‘Others’

Since a Cypriot woman’s sexuality is important in the way she is judged and
defined in her everyday life, (Lees, 1989, p19) being a ‘Kypraia’ (being a Cypriot
woman) carries certain sexual ‘prerequisites’, especially her conformity to “rules about
sexually appropriate behavior – otherwise she becomes excluded.” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983, p68). Compared to Western women, Cypriot women are considered as ‘naturally’ less attractive, less sophisticated, and less sexual. Confusion is created in these women’s lives since they are currently receiving contradictory messages on ‘proper’ behavior and appearance. One woman expressed her dilemma on how to deal with these antithetical images, saying that “men in Cyprus pretend that they like modern women, that they admire them, and they certainly desire them; but, the truth is, when it comes down to marriage, they care about how you dress, who you slept with in the past, why, where, do you smoke, do you drink, is your skirt too short? They compare us with European women. They want us to be like them, have sex with everyone, but when it comes to serious commitment, they cannot cope with us being anything like them. Whatever we choose to do is wrong.” This woman’s sentiments and observations point to the symbolic antagonism between the Occident and the Orient, the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, the ‘civilized’ and the ‘backward’, all within the context of the varying faces of patriarchal discourse.

When Eastern European prostitutes come to Cyprus, they pose a threat to Cypriot women’s identity. In the case of middle-class, urban women, they also represent a very antithetical challenge, as these prostitutes are both ‘Western’ looking, but lower class (‘they dress like horkatisses’- peasants, as one interviewee explained). The definition of membership within an ethnic group is directly related to the proper performance of accepted gender roles, and “both identity and institutional arrangements of ethnic groups incorporate gender roles and specify appropriate relations between sexes, such as, for example, who can marry them.” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983, p68) these relations are increasingly becoming confusing for Cypriot women, who are caught between resisting and adopting the socio-cultural changes in the symbolic definitions of ‘proper’ female behavior.

The historical aspects in which gender relationships manifest themselves, such as ethnicity/race (in this case darker-skinned Asian women and/or lighter-skinned, blond Eastern European women) and class (the interviewees being of ‘higher’ class than their ‘others’), are often neglected in feminist scholarly work and active and passive forms of resistance in which women have been implicated throughout the ages become marginalized. At the same time, the concept of patriarchy is assumed to be a generalized term for the oppression of women, whether or not combined with race. It starts from the premise that a particular form of male domination of women exists everywhere, and uses this as a basis to analyze specific relationships between men and women. The suggestion that Cypriot women feel the need to behave ‘modern’, like ‘Europeans’, which I quoted above, for example, assumes an improvement in the lives of women. Thus, women who do not behave like ‘Europeans’, such as women from Sri Lanka and the Philippines, are backward. Acting like a ‘Cypriot’, can be derogatory for these middle–class women; being a Cypriot is embarrassing, unless compared with something profoundly ‘worse’, such as being a Sri Lankan or a Filipino woman. When it comes to stereotypical acceptance of the perceived Western (see Eastern European here) ‘look’ it is clearly better (as these are “beautiful, long-legged bitches”) and worse (because “they are sluts by nature”) at the same time. Various levels of contradiction arise in these women’s lives, since they want to be European at the level of assumed attitudes, and often reject assumed monolithic, dominant ‘European’ practices.
Many issues are raised by this particular expression of patriarchal structure in Cyprus. Ethnic, class, and gender divisions are mutually constitutive and in this context create difficulties for all the parties concerned. Under patriarchy, wives, lovers, ‘proper’ women, prostitutes, wealthy and poor women of various colors, and their offspring, are the losers of the ‘regime’ that has no ‘clear’ winner. Men in Cyprus control this regime only to destroy their marital relationships and the lives of poverty stricken young European women (whom they manipulate and eventually leave in most cases), but also create the path for organized crime (again, committed by men and profited by men, but where the bearers of the cost are predominantly women) to flourish in the society where they live. By rejecting artistes, Cypriot women practice their agency and struggle to safeguard their marriages, whereas by choosing to work in cabarets in Cyprus, Eastern European women can escape poverty and unemployment in their countries. These women make choices and conscious decisions -based on the options available, themselves limited by masculinist structures of power- over how to deal with the war that men have declared against them (see French, 1992).

The sheer attempt of discussing patriarchal, phallocentric ideologies and social constructions can be argued to be a result of discourses which are themselves products of these ideologies of masculine domination. In the same line of thought, it can also be argued that when Cypriot women create ‘others’, whom they perceive as being dominant over (as in the case of the domestic workers or homosexuals), or dominated by (as in the case of prostitutes), they perpetuate an ideology of this historically and socially constructed masculine modes of thought.

However, having said that, one is not to assume that women’s agency is ‘lacking’, but rather that it is restricted but existing structures of masculinist power and structures of violence, symbolic or other. The process through which Cypriot women produce, and construct ‘others’, reflects what Bourdieu describes as the ‘long collective labor of socialization of the biological and biologicization of the social’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p3). These women biologize and hierarchically perpetuate one male and three main female, opposing sexualities: the male is always the sexualizing beast, the aggressive, uncontrollable sexual animal; the woman, on the other hand, can ‘choose’. She can first, accept the above and deny the existence of her sexuality, thus being the woman behind the front door; second, she can transfer that identity to the domestic worker and go out to reconstruct her sexualizing self into a ‘career’ self that is in ‘public’ life but not in the street; finally, she can choose the uncleanness of the street, thus serving the needs of the male and the needs created by the first choice. In the process of reproducing masculine domination, the woman acquires agency, thus perpetuating the ever-lasting ambiguity of gender identities and discourses within the context of that domination. Agency is in restricted by particular structures and thus in a sense becomes another form of being dominated upon.

In this paper, I used women’s narratives to explore how they create what Bourdieu named the ‘categories of understanding”--“or in Durkheim’s terms, the ‘forms of classification’ with which we construct the world (but which, as products of the world, are largely attuned to it, so that they remain unnoticed)” (Bourdieu, 2001, p3). Women (mostly non-feminist) often (re)construct and categories that are by and large part of the dominant (see masculine) discourse, thus perpetuating that very same discourse which
dominates them. By taking a feminist stance, some women aim to challenge this discourse and thus become less likely to reproduce it. The problem lies within the feminist debates which often operate within masculinist discourses as these represent a structural ambiguity whereby one challenges and at the same time reproduces essentialising, phallocentric notions of women’s experiences. By creating ‘Otherhood’, women in Cyprus become involved in an ambiguous, contradictory process through which they support and perpetuate non-feminist, hierarchical, capitalist, and patriarchal values and at the same time challenge these values by trying to express their agency within them.

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As the worst case could often result in domestic violence and sometimes divorce because the woman neglects her duties.

The idea of the street being dirty, wrong, immoral, can also be seen in the neglect and the disinterest of the people for the street. When I asked a woman why she put a lot of rubbish right outside her (spotless) house she said: “I don’t care. It is not in the house, it is in the street. And it’s not mine, is it?” For a related discussion, see also Vassos Argyrou, “Keep Cyprus Clean: Littering, Pollution, and Otherness’, Cultural Anthropology, 12(2), pp.159-178, 1997.

More than before, and more than women in the countryside, but not more than men.

For a detailed discussion on feminism in Cyprus, see Myria Vassiliadou, Narratives of Gender Consciousness: A Qualitative Approach of Feminist and Other Identities, International Society of Political Psychology, Twenty-Fourth Annual Scientific Meeting, Panel 7.3 The Construction of Gender Relations, Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, 15-18 July 2001.


According to the only NGO in Cyprus in support of the rights of migrants, the Immigrant Support Action Group (ISAG) set up in 1998, there are about 12000 domestic workers out of a total of around 35000 migrants with papers (many more come illegally), in a country of 700000 people. The position of domestic workers vis-à-vis their employers has further worsened after a decision of the Council of Ministers in December 2000 where the possibility of domestic workers changing their employer (which they had before) was abolished at the consent of the latter. Amongst other of the many serious problems they face are the physical and psychological violence they are often subjected to (there have been many cases of repeated sexual abuse and rape by different male members of the same family). Further, their contracts are not honored, their passports are often held by their employers, and they work on average fifteen hours a day without overtime payment.

Private Conversation with Author, Interview with Olympias

Present at a discussion with Sappho and her mother

Strong evidence by the Immigrant Support Action Group, demonstrates that domestic assistants from the Philippines and Sri Lanka are treated like second-class citizens, and on occasions like slaves, by both men and women who are ‘sirs’ and ‘madams’, hold their passports, and often deposit these women’s salaries in the bank so that they do not spend it.

Private Conversation with Author, Interview with Korinna

Private Conversation with Author, Interview with Phryne

Ibid.

Private Conversation with Author, Interview with Korinna
The *poustis* (passive homosexual) is “strongly denigrated as someone who fundamentally lacks full humanity, and his weakness exposes him to all sorts of evil dispositions … *Poustis* comes to be a synonym for liar or thief, a man without dignity, and it strongly contrasts with the characterization of the man who adopts the ‘male’ role and who may claim a ‘supermale’ reputation, much as he might if he consorted with a prostitute” (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991, pp227-8)

16 *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Sappho.

17 *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Jezebel


19 In June 2003, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Alvaro Gil Robles described the evidence on human trafficking in Cyprus as "striking", and gave as an example the number of women working as 'artistes' in cabarets. "Compared to the size and population of the island, I think you show a lot of interest in these matters," said Robles. He added that the matter needed closer attention. "In order to deal effectively with criminal circles that operate with human trafficking, legal measures need to be taken for the protection of victims and witnesses, and more concern shown for the victims."

20 The Ombudsman’s Office is currently in the process of carrying out its first investigation on the issue.

21 *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Immigration Officer

22 I am personally aware in detail of nine cases, and I have heard of similar cases very regularly, especially due to my involvement at the Centre for the Prevention and Handling of Domestic Abuse. Most interviewees in this study have also described several similar incidences.

23 *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Sappho, July 1997. My interviewee asked me not to get into details about her case, as 'everyone would understand who I am.’

24 *Private Conversation with Author*

25 *Private Conversation with Author*, Interview with Thecla.

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Crossing Borders:
The extent to which the voices of exiled and refugee women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space

By Jennifer Langer

Abstract
In this article I will consider the extent to which the voices of exiled and refugee women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space. I will examine whether women writers consider exile to be a safe place in which to describe the horrific experiences of gender specific persecution and of being a victim of violence in conflict or whether taboos restrict the women’s voice. Is exile providing a cathartic space to write openly? Do the exiled writers as reflected in their literary work, relate to their British physical space and interact with British people and society? What is the situation in exile in the case where women functioned as strong collective groupings in their countries and created and developed their own oral literature through these collective groupings?

Key words: Refugee women, literature, exile

Introduction
For some women, border crossings are more than metaphor. This article will consider the extent to which formerly repressed voices of exiled and refugee women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space. I will examine whether women writers consider exile to be a safe place in which to describe the horrific experiences of gender specific persecution and of being a victim of violence in conflict or whether taboos restrict the woman’s voice. Is exile providing a cathartic space to write openly? Do the exiled writers as reflected in their literary work, relate to their British physical space and interact with British people and society? The issues raised here stem from my work in researching and editing my book Crossing the Border: Voices of Refugee and Exiled Women Writers (Langer, 2002) and from my work as director of ‘Exiled Writers’ Ink!’ Crossing the Border is a collection of literature by women refugee and exiled writers from Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Bosnia, Turkey and Kosova. Does exile represent rebirth for exiled women writers?

Mahnaz Afkhami in ‘Women in Exile’ makes the point that:

Along with the loss of their culture and home comes the loss of the traditional patriarchal structures that limited their lives in their own land. Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the woman. The pain of breaking out of a cultural cocoon brings with it the possibility of an expanded universe and a freer, more independent self’ (Afkhami, 1994, p.45)

However, I think this is quite idealistic and is certainly a long process. One wonders how this can be reconciled with the feelings of isolation and absence of roots articulated by so many of the women writers who have also articulated feelings of conflict between their traditionally accepted role of the disempowerment of the female voice and the freedom to express themselves in the West. In exile, there is to a
certain extent a reproduction of social relations for women writers in terms of gender and power. At regular gatherings of exiled writers in London, for example, some of the women writers told me they were concerned about reading their work because of the men present from their communities and the strong honour and shame ethic. Social taboos are still very strong leading to a process of self-censorship by women and censorship by the family. It seems that traditional gender power structures within cultures are maintained, so women remain within the social, cultural and religious codes to maintain the given boundaries. In addition, women often feel frustrated, isolated and terrified in an alien culture without comfort from their immediate family with their experiences in exile often being marginalized because they are generally inarticulate in the public domain, reflecting the history, culture and traditions of the female voice and its disempowerment in the male dominated society. Women writers are still fearful of *Crossing the Border*. Many of the writers have proclaimed with emotion: Our voice is not heard, our voice is silenced, we haven’t got a voice.

A Somali poet, Anab Sheikh Abdi, told me that she dreamed of one day returning to the fertile Juba River Valley and meanwhile found it hard to function in Britain. Feelings of disjointedness, of feeling neither here nor there, are expressed in a range of work. However, the angst of exile is for some a powerful contributory factor which inspires them to write. A Bosnian poet, Amna Dumpor, told me that her anguish on fleeing Bosnia and becoming a refugee, had caused her to write prolifically, to pour out her emotions ‘like a volcano erupting.’ Aydin Mehmet Ali through her work with Turkish speaking women found that many wrote to keep sane. She states in *Breaking the Silence of the Soul* (2001) ‘they write to remember, to reshape, to redefine, to make sense of their past.’ (Mehmet Ali, 2001, p.33)

**Exile as a safe space?**

Is exile a safe space in which to describe horrific experiences of being a victim of violence in conflict? Generally the silence of the women is this area is significant. There are clear gender differences here in terms of the silence of the women compared to work by male exiled writers. Whereas the male writers in my first book, *The Bend in the Road* (1998), describe the detail of torture and suffering, the women avoid this kind of detail as the experiences may be too painful or unacceptable to articulate such as gender specific persecution including rape. A Kosovan writer, Valbona Ismaili Luta has said ‘Where we come from, it is better to die than to be raped.’ Denial may also be a way of dealing with atrocities to terrible to confront. Haifa Zangana, the Iraqi writer, is unusual in that she writes almost openly about her time in prison where she was ill treated by males. She has stated a reason for writing:

> Is it my charm for curing the leprosy that permeated my body on the day it was touched by whatever I hate; my charm for warding off forgiveness that comes with passing of time, for repelling widespread failing memory, repelling the return to a country where they still practice insulting rituals, repelling the conscious emptying of memory or its rage, repelling oblivion, oblivion, oblivion? (Zangana, 1991, back cover)

Generally, women who write about gender specific persecution, usually do so once they are in exile and even then, would not generally write in detail about the atrocity because of the community in exile’s link with the home country and the honour and shame ethos. Therefore, Asiye Guzel is highly unusual in terms of her
book, focusing on her experience of being tortured and gang-raped by the security police in Istanbul, being published in Turkey, her country of origin. (Guzel, 1999 English translation, 2003). A journalist and activist whose best-selling book was one of the first detailed accounts of state-based violence to emerge, she says ‘It had a big response, especially from women, because rape and sexual harassment are very widespread there and women would keep their experiences hidden.’ She also states that however enlightened some women may be, because Turkey is feudal, women inevitably take on the feudal view in terms of adopting a different perspective to women who have been raped. (Guardian, 18.11.03). A fictitious character may be deployed as in the case of the novelette ‘Une Femme en Exil’ by the Congolese writer, Amba Bongo (2000), in which she describes her prison cell and the nakedness enforced on the main character Anna by the male perpetrators.

The soldiers forced her to remain naked for several days with the guards frequently making derogatory remarks about her body. The periods of enforced nakedness were for her, the worst of all tortures. It was prolonged violation, the deepest violation of her person and over a long period, she felt stripped down to the depths of her soul (Bongo, 2002, p. 72)

The victimisation of women by men is also described by Shahrnush Parsipur in her short story ‘The Executions’: Shahrnush Parsipur was imprisoned four times by the Iranian government for her writing. She has been exiled from Iran, where all her works are banned, and now lives in the United States as a political refugee.

On the last day of her life, Shahin had told her friend that she thought she was going to be executed. She knew this because the interrogator had fondled her breasts and that was a sure sign of doom. There was a rumour that virgins condemned to die were married to the Revolutionary Guards before their execution. According to tradition, if a virgin girl is buried, she will take a man with her. (Parsipur, 1981)

Few writers have written about the mass rape in Bosnia, although there were tens of thousands of rape victims with rape being used as a war strategy to terrorise and eliminate a population. However, one writer, Dr Vahida Demirovic, in her book Visages from the Wasteland (1998), has directly described this. Her purpose was to record the inhuman behaviour and to hope that the book would be a warning to humanity. She states that it was unbearable for her to write although she herself was not a victim.

Memory

It may be many years before female refugee writers externalise the events of persecution. Perhaps it is more difficult for women writers because of the honour and shame ethos prevalent in most of the communities. To deal with the trauma takes a considerable period and in consequence the experiences are probably mediated because of the passing of time and so the reconstruction of events and feelings takes place through memory. Self-censorship of memory takes place through a sifting and purifying process. Dina Wardi, an Israeli psychotherapist and academic, has identified two types of memory in relation to persecution – common memory where the victim remembers the details of names, dates etc and deep memory which equates to traumatic sensations from which it is impossible to escape (Change of Address:
The deep memory remains disconnected from the conscious self and may not necessarily be transmitted by words and in addition, words such as ‘hunger’ and ‘cold’ may have different resonances for the persecuted victim. Only many years after the experience of being occupied by the Russians did Afghan writer, Farooka Gauhari describe the search for her missing husband in her book Searching for Saleem (1996) and there will no doubt be a time-lapse before the experience of victimisation under the Taliban is addressed openly. Many refugee writers of today reconstruct their origins through memory. For the exiled writer, memory is retrieved from the past and reconstituted in the present as a means of survival in the new space. If it is preserved intact, it can become life itself. The literature on loss and memories is sad and moving and is a site of mourning. The memory of loss is the writer’s history and a deep longing and an awareness of loss pervades much of the work. Refugee writers remember places, images, experiences, objects and people. Amna Dumpor (2002), a Bosnian poet, writes about leaving behind a person she loved, Farhija Hodzic (2002), also a Bosnian poet, describes the ear-rings she always wears that have been in her family for generations and symbolise the link with her lost family. Rouhi Shafii (1997), from Iran, describes childhood memories, of her beautiful family house and sleeping on the roof in the hot south. Women relatives rather than male are evoked in the male-female polarised societies from which the writers originate – a grandmother, a mother, an aunt are described and some of the texts explore relationships, conflicts and bonds between women. In women’s writing, they often evoke the private and/or internal life—childhood memories of sleeping on the roof in the hot south or the interior life of the hamam. Events and feelings relating to a group’s collective memory are also evoked. For example Choman Hardi from Kurdistan, dedicates her poem ‘The Penelopes of my Homeland’ (Hardi, 2002, p.222) to the widows of Anfal, Southern Kurdistan, 1988. (Special operations of genocide against the Kurds of northern Iraq included the razing of thousands of frontier villages and the internal deportation and disappearance of large numbers of Kurdish men). Many women, who were, in reality, widows perpetually waited in vain for the return of their husbands. In the poem, the analogy of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, is used, with Penelope waiting for the return of her husband from the Siege of Troy and from his long wanderings.

Years and years of silent labour
The Penelopes of my homeland
Wove their own and their children’s shrouds
Without a sign of Odysseus returning

Patriarchal systems transferred?

When I first embarked on this work, I had certain expectation about the themes that would be pre-occupying refugee women writers, namely the experience of having been persecuted in a war situation and of displacement. However, given that the power structures, oppression and conflict connect in quite a frightening way in so many of the countries, I should not have been as shocked and horrified as I was, to find that so many of the writers were focusing on being victims of the patriarchal society, within the family, society and state. In a story within a story by Aydin Mehmet Ali (2002), a young Turkish mother who has been in London just a short time, is raped by her father-in-law. However, this fact is never revealed to the Turkish speaking audience of women in the story but only to the British reader as it is deemed too shocking and painful within the community. A number of the women writers in
particular deploy literature polemically and didactically to expose the iniquities of their patriarchal societies and the connections with state policy. Samia Dahnaan (2002), originally from Algeria, in her short story ‘The Journey’ describes the victimisation of herself and a friend in Algeria by male ‘fundamentalists’ who finally shoot her friend because she refuses to cover her hair. Nazand Begikhani (2002), from Kurdistan, has written a poem ‘Man the Sinful God’ in which she describes the ingrained attitudes of men towards women:

Oh Man!
You are for me
Father
Brother
Lover
Son
But I am for you only shame

The similarity of experience is surprising and shocking and the anger expressed by the women writers is palpable. So much of the literature illustrates the depths of the women's pain and despair. This is therefore politicised literature, which tries to change the status quo and would certainly be banned or censored in many of the writers’ countries and put the writer’s life at risk in the home country. I sense a fear by the writers because of the enormous pressure on them to conform to the norms of society; to deviate from these norms is to place themselves in danger. In spite of this, many of the women writers are very courageous in that they are writing about being victims in the patriarchal society within the family, society and state, inextricably linked with state policy and religion.

However, many women writers in exile continue to have difficulty in writing openly partly because of fear of retribution in exile. The fear is caused by the repercussions their writing could have on their families still living in their countries and by spies in the UK. This manifests itself in caution when writing about politics and the deployment of allegory in the use of a pen-name. One writer is known to me only as Sheherazade. She told me that in order to retrieve her short stories from her country, whilst a refugee in the UK, she had bribed her sister, who still lived in her country, with presents. Her sister had then embedded the writer’s stories in letters – a process that had taken three years. An Algerian writer, who had spoken out at a UK conference addressing the Algerian situation, had since received mysterious phone calls and death threats. A young Iranian poet, Ziba Karbassi, who was an advocate of women’s rights through her poetry and had written a powerful poem entitled ‘Death by Stoning’ was receiving police protection. The courage of the writers is admirable with some at risk for speaking out, even in exile.

Contradictions

However, there are contradictions. Censorship is one of the serious threats to the freedom of the writer and in many cases, in order for a writer to remain in his or her country, there was a compulsion to operate a system of self-censorship or to veil one’s ideas in allegory and imagery. The power of the pen was respected and often the only means of opposition and therefore extremely dangerous for the writer. In Iran, poetry was known as the ‘symbolic language of political dissidence’. Many writers in exile continue to have difficulty in writing openly partly because of this. Nahid

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Husseini, an exiled Iranian journalist, told me that she believes that it is difficult for Iranian writers to write openly and directly in exile given that they have long been accustomed to censorship and that the style of writing openly is not customary in Iranian culture. Also in Iranian culture there is a concept called ‘sharm’ which applies to women. According to Rouhi Shafii in *Scent of Saffron* (1997), it involves both an internal state and an external behaviour. It accompanies feelings of embarrassment, shyness or self-restraint and a women’s public self-erasure. At a conference about Arab women held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, an opinion was expressed that all Arab women had a second layer of complexity and that in a non-democratic society various devices such as deviousness, madness and exorcism (‘zar’) were deployed by women to gain their freedom. It seems that in the literature these devices do not appear to be transferred to exile. One Iranian writer has described the issue of having to adjust to freedom given that in Iran there was the tension of having lived democratically inside the home but having to adopt different covert behaviour outside the home because of the secret police. Similarly in the case of Iraqi writers in exile, Haifa Zangana told me that in exile it was difficult for them to liberate themselves from ideological slavery so that writers in exile were struggling with political independence and found it hard to express themselves freely. It was once explained to me by Fawzie Kerim, an Iraqi writer, that in his opinion, no Iraqi writer was a free thinker and they were all instilled with ideological beliefs e.g. nationalism, communism or Islam although a large number of writers were allied to the Communist party. Inside Iraq, writers had three choices – to openly follow the accepted ideology, to choose silence or to continue writing through allegory and mystification of history. Valbona Luta, a Kosovan writer, has explained that because of the censorship operated by the Serbs, she still finds it difficult to write openly after years of self-censorship.

**Relationship to British exilic space**

Do the exiled writers as reflected in their literary work through the characters, relate to their exilic British physical space and interact with British people and society? What is striking in the literature is that there is very little sense of the place and space the refugee women currently inhabit and there is hardly any work in which the characters interact with British people. Where settings are British, usually London settings, the writer deploys characters that are outsiders. Rouhi Sharifian (2002) in her story ‘The Traveller’ expresses the pain of not belonging and of dual identities through her image of a transvestite who is shunned by other passengers on a coach journey to Nottingham. Dursaliye Bedir, a Turkish writer, interestingly observes an identifiable minority through curious yet sympathetic eyes – Orthodox Jewish women in Stamford Hill, London. Through their novels and short stories two Iraqi writers in exile in London, Haifa Zangana and Samira Al-Mana, describe the perspective of characters in exile with British spaces re-interpreted in terms of the ethos and culture of the exile community. In her novel translated from the Arabic, *Only in London*, Hanan al-Shaykh (2001) makes telling observations about dispossession, both physical and linguistic.

**Traditional female oral traditions in exile**

What is the situation in exile in the case where women functioned as strong collective groupings in their countries and created and developed their own oral literature through these collective groupings? I will explore this through Somali
Women’s voices. In exile, Somali women have to function as individuals whereas they are accustomed to being part of a group – the tribe being the passport to identity. This is a crucial issue as the groupings cannot be properly reproduced in exile and in addition, women’s poetry was traditionally sung in women’s groups.

The oral heritage was of great importance and poets in traditional Somali society were highly esteemed and their poetry was an unusually powerful medium of communication between people. Somalia’s poetic tradition is closely associated with its history and national identity. Margaret Laurence, writing in 1952 while living in Somalia, stated that there was a good deal of women’s poetry in Somali literature i.e. poetry written by women for women. Women also passed on a huge store of folktales, sayings and chants as well as the songs associated with everyday tasks.

Traditionally in Somalia and in Somali culture, there were and are accepted female structures of poetry called 'buraanbur' to be performed in the female space. It would not be acceptable for a woman poet to use the male forms or to perform in the male or mixed space. Now a more flexible verse/song form is being used. There were three types of women’s poetry. Women's work poetry was segregated and covered personal issues such as family, home and husband or gender issues such as the sex of a baby. It was passed down through the generations and had no authorship. Women sang these songs while they were working in small groups. However, they were not usually seen and this work poetry was not taken seriously by the community as performing poetry was considered the function of the man. Ritual and religious poetry was also segregated with older women chanting or singing the poetry to younger women in late pregnancy or where the family, children and childbearing were concerned. Sometimes they prayed to Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. A third type of poetry was classical poetry by women. However, this was not presented in a public forum because of the constraints and barriers in society for women. It has now become better known because of radio broadcasting.

Now because of the experience of exile in urban centres as opposed to the traditional pastoral society, different versions are being performed. However, there are grave concerns by the older generation that traditional Somali poetry is dying out. Nevertheless, poetry and song performed at events such as weddings are crucial in unifying clans and are a symbol of memories of being one people. Even today, the spoken word remains supreme with cassettes of old and new poems taped, copied and recopied by Somalis living in their own country or abroad.

Recently, Exiled Writers Ink! (www.exiledwriters.co.uk) created a performance piece ‘Breaking the Silence’ collaboratively with a Somali women’s group, Horn of Africa Women’s Association, which incorporated a range of genres - narrative, poetry and traditional and new songs. The performers represented the generations from grandmothers to granddaughters with the older women being the repositories of the traditional songs. Generally the verses are sung by one woman with the group singing the choruses. One of the traditional songs is:

If I don’t make ready his tea
He will kill me –
Just joking!
If I don’t make ready his tea
He will not talk to me
Even in my sleep.
Let me make it
Because he is acting like a king
And if I don’t make it ready
He will kill me!’

New group songs have been created which express the pain of exile and the strong axial links with Somalia:

My land, my land
My land is dead now.
One day will it be alive?
One day it will be alive.

My land.
It seems like a dark night.
It seems very dark.
It seems that the sun set.

The songs must surely play an important part in maintaining the identity and morale of the Somali women in exile with the women reproducing the familiar formats collectively.

Conclusions

It appears from the work of exiled women writers that women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space to a limited extent. Writers have complex feelings about their interaction with the indigenous society and the extent of the adaptation to the new diasporic space is affected by a large range of factors, which are to some extent deeply internalised. The length of time the women writers are in exile affects their perspective in that the writer may feel her identity is evolving and changing from feeling wholly alienated from the mainstream culture to absorbing mainstream influences and being involved in a process of dialogue. Simone Weil said that ‘to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul’ and in my opinion, through the act of writing, exiled women are confirming their roots as well as battling to explore and deploy the new space in which they find themselves. Exiled women writers are engaging in the creative process in the borders between the self and the other, thus producing literature with novel and different insights and perspectives so that the border becomes wavy and fluid. As a result, existing borders are questioned and shift. Crossing Borders is a meeting point of the exiled writer and the new reader/listener in the exiled land.

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Ain’t I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality

By Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix

Abstract

In the context of the second Gulf War and US and the British occupation of Iraq, many ‘old’ debates about the category ‘woman’ have assumed a new critical urgency. This paper revisits debates on intersectionality in order to show that they can shed new light on how we might approach some current issues. It first discusses the 19th century contestations among feminists involved in anti-slavery struggles and campaigns for women’s suffrage. The second part of the paper uses autobiography and empirical studies to demonstrate that social class (and its intersections with gender and ‘race’ or sexuality) are simultaneously subjective, structural and about social positioning and everyday practices. It argues that studying these intersections allows a more complex and dynamic understanding than a focus on social class alone. The conclusion to the paper considers the potential contributions to intersectional analysis of theoretical and political approaches such as those associated with post-structuralism, postcolonial feminist analysis, and diaspora studies.

Key words: diaspora space; intersectionality; racialisation

Introduction

At the time of the 1991 war against Iraq, feminist critiques of the then familiar discourse of ‘global sisterhood’ were a commonplace. As American and British bombs fell over Iraq once again in March 2003, many of the ‘old’ questions that we have debated about the category ‘woman’ assume critical urgency once again, albeit they now bear the weight of global circumstances of the early twenty first century.

This paper aims briefly to discuss some ‘old’ issues that continue to be central to making feminist agenda currently relevant. In order to do so, it revisits debates on ‘intersectionality’ that helped to take forward feminisms in previous decades. The first part of the paper discusses some long-standing internal conversations among different strands of feminisms which have already furnished important insights into contemporary problems. By revisiting these historical developments, we do not wish to suggest that the past unproblematically provides an answer to the present. On the contrary, we would wish to learn from and build upon these insights through critique so that they can shed new light on current predicaments. Hence, when we start with the 19th century debates, it is not because there is a direct correspondence between slavery and 21st century forms of governmentality, but rather to indicate that some issues that emerged then can help illuminate and elucidate our current entanglements with similar problematics.

The second part of the paper comments on intersections as they have been analysed in some autobiographical and empirical research based texts. We argue that the need for understanding complexities posed by intersections of different axis of differentiation is as pressing today as it has always been. In the final section we briefly examine the contribution of recent theoretical developments to the analysis of ‘intersectionality’ which could potentially nurture fruitful new feminist agendas.
Ain’t I a Woman? Sojourner’s ‘Truth’

One critical thematic of feminism that is perennially relevant is the important question of what it means to be a woman under different historical circumstances. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, this concern was the subject of major debate as the concept of ‘global sisterhood’ was critiqued for its failure to fully take on board the power relations that divided us (Haraway, 1991, Davis 1981, Feminist Review, 1984, Talpade- Mohanty 1988). A century earlier, contestations among feminists involved in anti-slavery struggles and campaigns for women’s suffrage also foregrounded similar conflicts. Their memory still resonates with us because the interrelationships between racism, gender, sexuality, and social class were at the heart of these contestations. Indeed, we begin this paper with the 19th century political locution ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ precisely because - by fundamentally challenging all ahistoric or essentialist notions of ‘woman’- it neatly captures all the main elements of the debate on ‘intersectionality’. We regard the concept of ‘intersectionality’ as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.

It is worth bearing in mind that the phrase, ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ was first introduced into North American and British feminist lexicon by an enslaved woman Sojourner Truth (the name she took, instead of her original name Isabella, when she became a travelling preacher). It predates by a century some of our more recent feminist texts on the subject such as Denise Riley’s (2003/1988) ‘Am I that name?’ or Judith Butler’s ‘Gender Trouble’ (Butler, 1990). It is as well to remember in this regard, that the first women’s antislavery society was formed in 1832 by black women in Salem, Massachusetts in the USA. Yet, black women were conspicuous by their absence at the Seneca Falls Anti-Slavery Convention of 1848 where the mainly middle class white delegates debated the motion for women's suffrage. Several questions arise when we reflect on black women’s absence at the Convention. What, for instance, are the implications of an event which occludes the black female subject from the political imaginary of a feminism designed to campaign for the abolition of slavery? What consequences did such disavowals have for the constitution of gendered forms of ‘whiteness’ as the normative subject of western imagination? How did events like these mark black and white women’s relational sense of themselves? Importantly, what happens when the subaltern subject – black woman in this case – repudiate such silencing gestures?

We know from the biographies of black women such as Sojourner Truth that many of them spoke loud and clear. They would not be caged by the violence of slavery even as they were violently marked by it. Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, very well demonstrates the historical power of a political subject who challenges imperatives of subordination and thereby creates new visions. This power (which, according to Foucault, simultaneously disciplines and creates new subjects) and its consequences are much bigger than the gains or losses of an individual life who articulates a particular political subject position. Sojourner Truth was born into enslavement (to a wealthy Dutch slave-owner living in New York). She campaigned for both the abolition of slavery and for equal rights for women. Since she was illiterate throughout her life, no formal record of the speech exists and, indeed, two different versions of it are in existence (Gates and McKay, 1997. The first was published in The Anti-Slavery Bugle, Salem, Ohio, in
June 21, 1851. However, it is the more dramatic account, recounted in 1863 by the abolitionist and president of the Convention, Frances Gage, which is in common circulation. What is clear is that the words of Sojourner Truth had an enormous impact at the Convention and that the challenge they express foreshadowed campaigns by black feminists more than a century later:

"Well, children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter, I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North -- all talking about rights--the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm. I have plowed (sic), I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much, and eat as much as any man--when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman? ..."

This cutting edge speech (in all senses of the term) deconstructs every single major truth-claim about gender in a patriarchal slave social formation. More generally, the discourse offers a devastating critique of socio-political, economic and cultural processes of ‘othering’ whilst drawing attention to the simultaneous importance of subjectivity--of subjective pain and violence that the inflictors do not often wish to hear about or acknowledge. Simultaneously, the discourse foregrounds the importance of spirituality to this form of political activism when existential grief touches ground with its unconscious and finds affirmation through a belief in the figure of a Jesus who listens. Political identity here is never taken as a given but is performed through rhetoric and narration. Sojourner Truth’s identity claims are thus relational, constructed in relation to white women and all men and clearly demonstrate that what we call ‘identities’ are not objects but processes constituted in and through power relations.

It is in this sense of critique, practice and inspiration that this discourse holds crucial lessons for us today. Part lament, but defiant, articulating razor sharp politics but with the sensibility of a poet, the discourse performs the analytic moves of a ‘decolonised mind’, to use Wa Thiongo’s (1986) critical insight. It refuses all final closures. We are all in dire need of decolonised open minds today. Furthermore, Sojourner Truth powerfully challenges essentialist thinking that a particular category of woman is essentially this or essentially that (e.g. that women are necessarily weaker than men or that enslaved black women were not real women). This point holds critical importance today when the allure of new Orientalisms and their concomitant desire to ‘unveil’ Muslim women has proved to be attractive even to some feminists in a ‘post September 11’ world.

There are millions of women today who remain marginalized, treated as a ‘problem’, or construed as the focal point of a moral panic – women suffering poverty, disease, lack of water, proper sanitation; women who themselves or their households are scattered across the globe as economic migrants, undocumented workers, as refugees and asylum seekers; women whose bodies and sexualities are commodified, fetishised, criminalized, racialised, disciplined and regulated through a myriad of representational regimes and social practices. So many of us, indeed,
perhaps, all of us one way or another, continue to be ‘hailed’ as subjects within Sojourner Truth’s diasporic imagination with its massive potential for un-doing the hegemonic moves of social orders confronting us today. She enacts dispersal and dissemination both in terms of being members of a historical diaspora but equally, in the sense of disarticulating, rupturing and de-centring the precariously sutured complacency and self-importance of certain feminisms.

Late Modern Decentrings

Since Sojourner Truth many feminists have consistently argued for the importance of examining ‘intersectionality’. A key feature of feminist analysis of ‘intersectionality’ is that they are concerned with ‘decentring’ of the ‘normative subject’ of feminism. Such decentring activities scaled new heights when fuelled by political energies generated by the social movements of the second half of the last century--anti-colonial movements for independence, Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, the Peace movement, student protests and the Workers' movements, the Women's Movement or the Gay and Lesbian Movement. Whichever set of hegemonic moves became the focus of contestation in a specific debate--whether it was the plight of subordinated sexualities, class injustices, or other subaltern realities--the concept of a self-referencing, unified subject of modernity now became the subject of overt and explicit political critique. Political projects such as that of the Combahee River Collective, the black lesbian feminist organisation from Boston, pointed, as early as 1977, to the futility of privileging a single dimension of experience as if it constituted the whole of life. Instead, they spoke of being "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression" and advocated "the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (ibid: 272).

The concept of 'simultaneously interlocking oppressions' that were local at the same time as they were global was one of the earliest and most productive formulations of the subsequent theorisation of a “decentred subject” (see, e.g. hooks, 1981). As Norma Alacorn, in her analysis of the book 'The Bridge Called My Back' – a North American collection of political writings by women of colour -- later suggested, the theoretical subject of 'Bridge' is a figure of multiplicity, representing consciousness as a "site of multiple voicings" seen "not as necessarily originating with the subject but as discourses that traverse consciousness and which the subject must struggle with constantly". This figure is the bearer of modes of subjectivity that are deeply marked by "psychic and material violence" and it demands a thorough "reconfiguration of feminist theory" (Alacorn in Anzaldua 1990: 359-365).

In Britain, we were making similar claims when women of African, Caribbean, and South Asian background came to be figured as 'black' through political coalitions, challenging the essentialist connotations of racism (Grewal et al., 1988, Brah 1996, Mirza 1997). This particular project of Black British feminism was forged through the work of local women’s organisations around issues such as wages and conditions of work, immigration law, fascist violence, reproductive rights, and domestic violence. By 1978, local groups had combined to form a national body called the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD). This network held annual conferences, published a newsletter, and served as an active conduit for information, intellectual conversations and political mobilisation. The ensuing dialogue entailed sustained analysis of racism, class, and gender with much debate as to the best means of confronting their outcomes whilst remaining alive to cultural specificities:
Our group organises on the basis of Afro-Asian unity, and although that principle is maintained, we don’t deal with it by avoiding the problems this might present, but by having on-going discussions……..Obviously, we have to take into account our cultural differences, and that has affected the way we are able to organise (OWAAD cited in Mirza 1997:43)

This careful attention to working within, through and across cultural differences is a highly significant heritage of this feminism and it is one that can be used as a resource for working with the question of cultural difference in the present moment when, for example, differences between Muslim and non-Muslim women are constructed as posing insurmountable cultural differences. Internal conflicts within OWAAD, as amongst white women’s groups, especially around homophobia, proved salutary so that, even as British ‘black feminism’ assumed a distinctive political identity separate from ‘white feminism’, engaging the latter in critical theoretical and political debate, it was not immune to the contradictions of its own internal heterogeneity. These internal conflicts within and between different feminisms prefigured later theories of ‘difference’

Gender, Race, Class and Sexuality

During the 1980s, there was much controversy about the best way to theorise the relationship between the above dimensions. The main differences in feminist approaches tended to be understood broadly in terms of socialist, liberal and radical feminisms, with the question of racism forming a point of conflict across all three. We do not wish to rehearse that debate here. Instead, this section discusses the importance of an intersectional approach by first addressing the contributions made by feminist work on gender and class, followed by an exploration of the gains made when the focus shifted to encompass other dimensions. We are aware that social class remains a contested category with its meaning varying with different theoretical and political perspectives. Our focus is somewhat different. We are primarily concerned with the ways in which class and its intersections are narrated in some autobiographical and empirical studies.

In the introduction to a now classic book Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing-Up in the Fifties, Liz Heron (1985) discusses how the provision of free orange juice gave working class children the sense that they had a right to exist. The implication of this – that social class produces entitlement/lack of entitlement to exist and that social policy decisions affect this - is vividly demonstrated in this example. In the same book, Valerie Walkerdine (who has consistently discussed social class over the last 20 years), describes walking with a middle class friend on a seaside pier and seeing a working class family adding brown sauce to their chips. When her friend asks, ‘how could they do that?’ Walkerdine is immediately interpellated as working class, drawn into recognising the ‘othering’ of her working class background in this class inflected discourse on culinary habits. In later work Walkerdine also discusses middle class tendencies to view working classes as ‘animals in a zoo’ (with Helen Lucey, 1989) and with Helen Lucey and June Melody (2002) she considers the ways in which social class is lived in everyday practices and the emotional investments and issues it produces. Some of the middle class young women, for example, were subjected to expectations that meant that they could never perform sufficiently well to please their parents.
While the intersection of ‘race’ with social class is not analysed in Walkerdine’s example, it is a silent presence in that it is white, working class practices that are subject, in the 1985 example, to the fascinated scopophilic gaze. In a similar way, Beverley Skeggs’ (1997) work on young, white, working class women in North-West England showed their struggle for respectability and their often painful awareness of being judged more severely than middle class women. In these examples, social class (and its intersections with gender) are simultaneously subjective, structural, about social positioning and everyday practices. If we consider the intersections of ‘race’ and gender with social class, however, the picture becomes even more complex and dynamic.

“‘Race matters’ writes the African American philosopher Cornel West (1993). Actually, class, gender and race matter, and they matter because they structure interactions, opportunities, consciousness, ideology and the forms of resistance that characterize American life… They matter in shaping the social location of different groups in contemporary society.’ (Andersen, 1996: ix)

Anne McClintock (1995) uses an intersectional analysis to argue that to understand colonialism and postcolonialism, one must first recognize that ‘race’, gender and class are not distinct and isolated realms of experience. Instead, they come into existence in and through contradictory and conflictual relations to each other. In keeping with Catherine Hall’s (1992, 2002) argument, McClintock shows that the Victorians connected ‘race’, class, and gender in ways that promoted imperialism abroad and class distinction in Britain.

‘Imperialism… is not something that happened elsewhere -- a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity. The invention of race in the urban metropoles. . . became central not only to the self-definition of the middle class but also to the policing of the "dangerous classes": the working class, the Irish, Jews, prostitutes, feminists, gays and lesbians, criminals, the militant crowd and so on. At the same time, the cult of domesticity was not simply a trivial and fleeting irrelevance, belonging properly in the private, "natural" realm of the family. Rather, I argue that the cult of domesticity was a crucial, if concealed, dimension of male as well as female identities -- shifting and unstable as these were.’ (McClintock, 1995: 5)

At the level of everyday practices and subjectivity, Gail Lewis (1985) demonstrates how ‘race’ and gender intersected with the working class positioning of her parents so that their shifting power relations were only understandable as locally situated, albeit with global underpinnings. Her mother (a white woman) was responsible for dealing with public officials because of her parents’ experiences of racism in relation to her father (a black man). In these instances, mother’s ‘whiteness’ (Frankenberg, 1993), becomes a signifier of superiority over her black husband. On the other hand, since both parents – marked by patriarchal conventions of the time surrounding heteronormativity -- believed that men ought to deal with the outside world, this had implications for their relationship at home, where her father prevailed. Lewis (2000) develops her analysis of the intersections of ‘race’, gender and class in studying the diverse everyday practices of black women social workers in relation to black and white clients and colleagues and white line managers. She demonstrates that the
intersection of ‘race’, gender and class is subjectively lived, that it is part of social structure and involves differential (and sometimes discriminatory) treatment (see also Dill, 1993).

Other autobiographical pieces of work also demonstrate these intersections. For example, bell hooks (1994) writes of how she quickly learned that working class black people around Yale University greeted her on the street, while middle class ones ignored her. Using her own experience as a white, Jewish, middle class woman, Paula Rothenberg (2000) examines the intersections of ‘race’, gender and social class. She argues that people generally do not see the ways in which they are privileged, and so well-intentioned, middle class, white liberals often strive to maintain privilege for their children, while denying that they are doing so. Yet, the dynamics of power and privilege shape the key experiences of their lives. From a different class position, Nancie Caraway (1991) argues that a simplistically racialised notion of privilege is highly unsatisfactory for analysing the experiences of working class white women living in poverty.

Over the last twenty years, the manner in which class is discussed in political, popular and academic discourse has radically changed to the point that, as Sayer (2002) notes, some sociologists have found it embarrassing to talk to research participants about class. This tendency is also evident in government circles as when the discourse on child poverty comes to substitute analysis of wider inequalities of class. While the current government does not wish to use the language of class inequality, it has pledged itself to eradicate child poverty within twenty years. However, it is important to ask whether a commitment to eradicating poverty in children can ever be fully achieved without the eradication of poverty among their parents. For example, a study by Middleton et al. (1997) found that one per cent of children do not have a bed and mattress to themselves, five per cent live in damp housing and do not have access to fresh fruit each day or new shoes that fit. More than ten per cent of children over the age of 10 share a bedroom with a sibling of the opposite sex. Yet, counter-intuitively, over half the children who were defined as ‘not poor’ had parents who were defined as ‘poor’. Their parents reported that they sometimes went without clothes, shoes and entertainment in order to make sure that their children are provided for. One in twenty mothers reported that they sometimes go without food in order to provide for their children. Lone mothers were particularly likely to report this. In Britain and the USA, recent studies by Ehrenreich (2002) and Toynbee (2003) provide another timely reminder of how grinding, poorly-paid, working class jobs continue to differentiate women’s experiences.

From their analyses of data from 118 British Local Education Authorities, Gillborn and Mirza (2000) found that social class makes the biggest difference to educational attainment, followed by ‘race’ and then by gender – although they recognised that class outcomes are always intertwined with gender and ‘race’. The processes by which social class continues to operate (for the middle as well as the working classes) require more attention if processes of social inclusion and exclusion are to be taken seriously. As Diane Reay (1998) points out in relation to education, this is not because different social classes view the importance of education differently – middle class position is commonly seen by both sections as central to social mobility and success. However, middle class mothers can draw upon more success-related cultural capital than their working class peers – e.g. they are better positioned to provide their
children with ‘compensatory education’ (help with school work, for example) and having the status (and confidence) to confront teachers when they feel their children are not being pushed hard enough or taught well enough.

Similarly, The Social Class and Widening Participation in HE Project, based at the then University of North London (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Archer et al., 2001), found that class has an enormous impact on participation in higher education. However, ‘working class’ people do not constitute a unitary, homogeneous category, and participation in higher education varies between different working class groups. Participation is lowest amongst those from unskilled occupational backgrounds and for inner-city working class groups. These class factors articulate with ‘race’ and ethnicity to produce complex patterns of participation in higher education (CVCP, 1998; Modood, 1993).

Recognition of the importance of intersectionality has impelled new ways of thinking about complexity and multiplicity in power relations as well as emotional investments (e.g. Arrighi, 2001; Kenny, 2000; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). In particular, recognition that ‘race’, social class and sexuality differentiated women’s experiences has disrupted notions of a homogeneous category ‘woman’ with its attendant assumptions of universality that served to maintain the status quo in relation to ‘race’, social class and sexuality, while challenging gendered assumptions. As such, intersectionality fits with the disruption of modernist thinking produced by postcolonial and poststructuralist theoretical ideas.

**Postcoloniality, Poststructuralism, Diaspora and Difference**

Feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980 were informed by conceptual repertoires drawn largely from ‘modernist’ theoretical and philosophical traditions of European Enlightenment such as liberalism and Marxism. The ‘postmodernist’ critique of these perspectives, including their claims to universal applicability, had precursors, within anticolonial, antiracist, and feminist critical practice. Postmodern theoretical approaches found sporadic expression in Anglophone feminist works from the late 1970s. But, during the 1990s they became a significant influence, in particular their poststructuralist variant. The work of scholars who found poststructuralist insights productive traversed theoretical ground that ranged from discourse theory, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and postcolonial criticism. Contrary to analysis where process may be reified and understood as personified in some essential way in the bodies of individuals, different feminisms could now be viewed as representing historically contingent relationships, contesting fields of discourses, and sites of multiple subject positions. The concept of ‘agency’ was substantially reconfigured, especially through poststructuralist appropriations of psychoanalysis. New theories of subjectivity attempted to take account of psychic and emotional life without recourse to the idea of an inner/outer divide. Whilst all this intellectual flux led to a reassessment of the notion of experiential ‘authenticity’, highlighting the limitations of ‘identity politics’, the debate also demonstrated that experience itself could not become a redundant category. Indeed, it remains crucial in analysis as a ‘signifying practice’ at the heart of the way we make sense of the world symbolically and narratively.

Overall, critical but productive conversations with poststructuralism have resulted in new theories for refashioning the analysis of ‘difference’ (Butler, 1990; Grewal and
Kaplan 1994; Weedon 1996; Spivak, 1999). One distinctive strand of this work is concerned with the potential of combining strengths of modern theory with postmodern insights. This approach has taken several forms. Some developments, especially in the field of literary criticism have led to ‘postcolonial’ studies with their particular emphasis upon the insight that both the ‘metropolis’ and the ‘colony’ were deeply altered by the colonial process and that these articulating histories have a mutually constitutive role in the present. Postcolonial feminist studies foreground processes underlying colonial and postcolonial discourses of gender. Frequently, such work uses poststructuralist frameworks, especially Foucauldian discourse analysis or Derridean deconstruction. Some scholars have attempted to combine poststructuralist approaches with neo-Marxist or psychoanalytic theories. Others have transformed ‘border theory’ (Anzaldua 1987; Young, 1994, Lewis 1996; Alexander and Mohanty-Talpade 1997; Gedalof, 1999; Mani, 1999; Lewis, 2000). A related development is associated with valorisation of the term diaspora. The concept of diaspora is increasingly used in analysing the mobility of peoples, commodities, capital and cultures in the context of globalisation and transnationalism. The concept is designed to analyse configurations of power – both productive and coercive – in ‘local’ and ‘global’ encounters in specific spaces and historical moments. In her work (Brah 1996, 2002) addresses the concept of ‘diaspora’ alongside that of Gloria Anzaldua’s theorisation of ‘border’ and the widely debated feminist concept of ‘politics of home’. The intersection of these three terms is understood through the concept of ‘diaspora space’ which covers the entanglements of genealogies of dispersal with those of ‘staying put’. The term ‘homing desire’ is used to think through the question of home and belonging; and, both power and time are viewed as multidimensional processes. Importantly, the concept of ‘diaspora space’ embraces the intersection of ‘difference’ in its variable forms, placing emphasis upon emotional and psychic dynamics as much as socio-economic, political and cultural differences. Difference is thus conceptualised as social relation; experience; subjectivity; and, identity. Home and belonging is also a theme of emerging literature on ‘mixed-race’ identities which interrogates the concept of ‘race’ as an essentialist discourse with racist effects (Tizard and Phoenix 2002/1993, Zack 1993; Ifekwunig 1999; Dalmage, 2000). Accordingly, the idea that you are mixed-race if you have black and white parents is problematised. Instead the analytical focus is upon varying and variable subjectivities, identities, and the specific meanings attached to ‘differences’.

Raising new and pressing questions
In 2003, the second war against Iraq has brought into relief many continuing feminist concerns such as the growing militarization of the world, the critical role of the military industrial complex as a technology of imperial governance, the feminisation of global labour markets and migration flows, the reconstitution of differentially racialised forms of sexuality as a constitutive part of developing regimes of ‘globalisation’, and the deepening inequalities of power and wealth across different regions of the world. A historically-rooted and forward looking consideration of intersectionality raises many pressing questions. For example: What are the implications for feminisms of the latest forms of postmodern imperialisms that stalk the globe? What kinds of subjects, subjectivities, and political identities are produced by this juncture when the fantasy of the veiled Muslim woman “in need of rescue”, the rhetoric of the ‘terrorist’, and the ubiquitous discourse of democracy becomes an alibi for constructing new global hegemonies? How do we challenge simplistic binaries which posit secularism and fundamentalism as mutually exclusive polar
opposites? What is the impact of these new modes of governmentality on the lives of differentially exploited, racialised, ethnicised, sexualised, and religionised humans living in different parts of the world? What do these lived experiences say to us – living as we do in this space called the west -- about our own positionalities, responsibilities, politics, and ethics? We have tried to indicate that feminist dialogues and dialogic imaginations provide powerful tools for challenging the power games currently played out on the world stage.

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