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## Feminisms and activism: reflections on the politics of writing and the editorial process

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(image)

border-crossing<sup>1</sup>, AZ 04.05

**Feminisms and Activisms:  
Reflections on the politics of writing and the editorial process**

Alexandra Zavos, Johanna Motzkau, Jude Clark, Barbara Biglia

[Zavos A., **Motzkau J.F.**, Clark J., Biglia B., (2005) "Feminisms and Activisms: Reflections on the politics of writing and the editorial process" *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 4: 9- 24. [ISSN 1464-0538]

This article addresses the questions and dilemmas that each of us has brought to the project. It traces their modulation, refinement and manifestation as they became part of a shared creative dynamic and thus subject to our personal experience and reflection thereon. The initial idea was to produce one text with multiple voices, yet considering our theoretical diversity, the geographical distance between us and the short time at hand we realized this, for the moment, was a too ambitious project. Hence as a tribute to the diversity of our perspectives and reflecting the actual dilemma of seeking to 'speak in one powerful voice' while allowing heterogeneity, this article presents itself as a tentative pastiche of our four distinct yet overlapping and intersecting contributions.

To create a common basis for the writing process, we collected a pool of crucial questions that were then split up between us, following the idea that each of us will reflect upon the editing process by way of exploring her particular questions. This reflection obviously cannot capture either the complexity or the entirety of the experience of co-editing and producing the journal, it can only highlight some aspects of the contradictions, juxtapositions and intersections that emerged.

Alexandra sets the scene by outlining the intricacies of working across the multiple borders constituted by language, institutional backgrounds, gender, nationalities etc. and explores what it means to reflexively re-negotiate our own boundaries in this process. Picking up on the concrete ambiguity arising around the crossing of 'language borders', Johanna then discusses the paradoxes arising around the question of what qualifies as 'critical resistance' and how our experience of producing this journal could inform agendas of agency for social change. Jude inquires even further into the question of legitimacy and 'voice' and challenges our own position within a feminist agenda by exploring the complexities of working both within and against the power hierarchies, discourses and ideologies that framed our project. Finally Barbara concludes by interrogating the experiential and theoretical issues around dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> The colour version of this image can also be found in the Cdrom. The 'Klezmer Improvisation' which is included on the Cdrom, forms part of the article (it is played by the duo 'Double-Bind': J. Motzkau: s-saxophone & R.Dinges: double bass). For me (Johanna) this music and the joy of playing it in this particular situation comprises and expresses the intricacies and realities of numerous border crossings.

conceptions of feminism itself and points to the exciting prospect of a stronger link to an activist agenda.

**Working ‘across borders’: the journal as ‘boundary object’**  
**Alexandra Zavos**

“Boundary objects are thus a means of producing sufficient coherence to enable interaction without this being predicated on the erasure of heterogeneity; nor on the imposition of uniformity or transparency. Thus boundary objects offer a site or medium for the negotiation of identity and difference” (Burman, 2004: 370).

I would like to use this opportunity to reflect on the production of this journal – both as process and as object - in relation to notions of space, borders and boundaries linked to the construction and negotiation of a gendered and racialized politics of writing.

*On space(s) and boundaries*

The process of producing this journal is as much a physical and material one, as it is an intellectual and ideological one. In its physical and material aspects we need to write in the temporal and spatial dimensions around which our work was structured; dimensions that to some degree determined the relationships between us, as editors, and with the contributors. More often than not the spatial distance between us and the time restrictions, imposed an operational/task directed framework at the expense of an attention to the multiple and diverse relations and seemingly ‘personal’ issues that were emerging.

The journal/project was conceived as an attempt to push or disrupt the boundaries between academic and non-academic writing, between feminist and other kinds of engagements, between academic and activist practices, between scientific and artistic representation, and to do so across several territorial (national), linguistic, cultural and racial borders. However, as an object primarily located and circulating in institutional spaces, it is inescapably inscribed in and by the practices (demands, expectations, technologies, protocols) of academic writing and publishing that organize the discursive, temporal, relational limits (or borders) of its production. In other words, regardless of its breadth and diversity in content and the challenges it wishes to pose, this journal is produced as an institutional object and is determined by the relations and means of production that organize this space.

At the same time, ‘space’ in this journal figures metaphorically - reflected in linguistic expressions such as e.g. the ‘space’ of the journal, or ‘space’ for reflection and discussion - which does not preclude its being constructed through and embodying, in its concrete materialization, very ‘real’ social relations (Massey, 2005). The textual space of the journal is produced through, and as, a relational space. In this sense it articulates, in its specificity, a range of available – even if contested or marginalized - subject positions and relationships of power(lessness).

Understanding the process of the production of this journal as a space that articulates and juxtaposes different positions, we can look at the texts included as outlining

positions of identity (e.g. feminist, lesbian feminist, activist, feminist activist, black, black activist/feminist, critical researcher, youth worker, psychologist, critical psychologist, artist, musician); spatial positions (e.g. positions of closeness, or distance); positions of power (e.g. positions of authority, hegemonic positions, marginalized positions, liminal positions); relational positions (e.g. positions of similarity, difference, agreement, opposition). The space of this journal is also inscribed with its own historicity, it is in other words invested with its own – however multiple, or heterogeneous – identity captured under the title of ‘feminisms and activism’. And finally, with its own temporality, as evidenced not only through the closure of the different phases of its production, but also through the patterns of communication it engendered and followed.

In this respect, the journal itself can be seen as a boundary object (Burman, 2004), one circulating between physical and symbolic/textual/linguistic spaces, circulating between different discourses (academic, non-academic, theoretical, experiential, feminist, critical), different practices (academic, activist, educational), and different locations and performances and representations of identity.

One of the striking contradictions illuminated is that between academic and non-academic writing, whether drawing on discourses of ‘experience’ or ‘art’. As long as this juxtaposition remains unbridged and untheorized, it produces the effect of the ‘different’, in the sense of not-belonging, texts occupying a more or less tokenistic position in the overall, academically overdetermined, context. Johanna and Jude elaborate this point further in relation to the linguistic, racialized and gendered accessibility and visibility of texts. This can be seen as a function of the institutional space within which the journal is produced and intends to circulate, the reproduction of which we are also implicated in, however unwillingly.

### *On borders*

We need to register at least two levels of working ‘across borders’: on the one hand it refers to the collaboration amongst the editorial team, and between the editors and the contributors; on the other it refers to the texts themselves, both as separate, self-contained units and in their conjunction and co-articulation within the ‘space’ of the journal. In this sense, the texts speak for themselves, enter into dialogue within the framework of the journal, and, also, as a whole, represent a particular manifestation (or construction) of the diversity of feminist and activist engagement. As is evident from the diversity of articles included in this journal, both in topic/theme, as well as in academic and activist engagement, and in location/origin, the project articulates a high level of complexity and a wide breadth/scope.

Focusing on the first aspect, the ‘relational’ one, I would like to list a number of ‘borders’ we have had to work across in the process of producing this journal:

- physical borders: living in different parts of the country and/or in different countries limited the possibility of face to face meetings between us to very few and far removed; this we had to compensate for with ongoing email communication and a circumscription of the necessary debates amongst ourselves.
- cultural borders: coming from different backgrounds impacted not only on how we related but also on how we understood and engaged with the themes of this journal, we had to acknowledge between us the historical specificity (and differences) of the articulations of feminisms and activism and our experiences of them.

- language borders: the fact that not all of us were ‘native’ english speakers presented a necessity for continuous translation; at the same time it highlighted the conditions of privilege and accessibility which use of a dominant linguistic currency, namely that of the english language in international academic publications, determines.
- disciplinary borders: coming from different theoretical backgrounds presented the need to interrogate the intersections and points of connection between different discourses and traditions in order to establish a common (and multiple) overarching framework.
- positional or identity borders (including gender, class, race, political commitment): while these were least explored between us they most certainly shaped our individual positions, resistances and alliances, constructing a dynamic group field of constant negotiations of (mis)understandings and distance or closeness.

*Writing as gendered politics: Is feminism an identity?*

Writing from a feminist perspective and engagement is not relevant because I ‘am’ a ‘woman’ – although of course how I enter the space of writing, theorizing and activism is determined by the multiple ways in which gender is written into social relations – rather this commitment, which I take to be first and foremost a political one, is a strategic and ethical choice related to the politics of knowledge production. To put it more directly, I do not believe one can practice good theory, research or activism without embodying or performing a feminist approach; that is without an attention to all the issues around gender and power that feminist scholarship and praxis have brought to the foreground. Barbara further illuminates the articulation of feminism(s) and activism(s).

*Writing as racialized politics: Is it enough to remember whiteness?*

While it is common to equate concerns with racism and racialization with the exposure of discrimination exercised in institutional and personal contexts against ‘black’ people, I would like to draw attention to ‘race’ as a constitutive social relation for both ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’, much in the same way that ‘gender’ is constitutive for both ‘women’ and ‘men’. If I understand ‘race’ not as skin colour but also as a particular relationship to power, authority, and legitimization, then I would argue that ‘forgetting’ race needs to be inscribed within those very same practices that establish and reproduce racialized hierarchies and entitlements. In this sense skin colour as embodied privilege is important.

‘Whiteness’ does not only reference skin colour, but moreover – and for my argument here – it signifies a position of power that is constitutive of our subjectivities and the ways in which we author our personal histories around forgetting the multiple ways in which they are racially inscribed. As a ‘white’ author and editor I don’t have to worry about whether or not I have the right to speak, or the authority to represent myself, these are givens, I experience a condition of ‘natural’ entitlement. Forgetting ‘whiteness’ is thus another manifestation of racial discrimination. And ‘whiteness’ in its forgetfulness embodies the practice of power that renders certain bodies more visible and more accountable than others. In our case here, as Jude illustrates further, we might question how it is that concerns about institutional racialized discrimination, as practiced in the context of academic journal writing, became marginalized and/or the ‘natural’ responsibility of those editors variously identifying as ‘non-white’ (or ‘black’)?

This forgetfulness, however, is only experienced from within the context/location of 'whiteness', i.e. as Sara Ahmed (2004) points out: "*Whiteness is only invisible to those who inhabit it.* To those who don't, the power of whiteness is maintained *by being seen*; we see it everywhere, in the casualness of white bodies in spaces, crowded in parks, meetings, in white bodies that are displayed in films and advertisements, in white laws that talk about white experiences, in ideas of the family made up of clean white bodies. I see those bodies as white, not human" (ibid: 14). In this sense the forgetfulness of 'whiteness' cannot be posited as a general condition, and furthermore its recognition cannot serve to dissipate or absolve institutional(ized) racial discrimination, as it is individually and collectively practiced.

### *Editorial privileges*

Finally, I would like to end with a brief reference to the extraordinary power and responsibility the editorial position placed upon us. From deciding which contributors to invite, to deciding about the relevance or appropriateness of a submitted article, to extensively reviewing and commenting on the texts, to deciding and enforcing deadlines, to initiating (successfully or not) different processes of interrelating between contributions, to deciding on the published form of the journal, to ensuring the terms of its material production, our engagement has been pivotal. Thus, it is reflected in the final product, which is as much an illustration of the collection of texts and discourses as of our own efforts and inclinations, aesthetics, and negotiations.

### **Across borders, towards resistance...<sup>2</sup>**

What is critical? What is resistance? Dilemmas of self-positioning within agendas for social change

**Johanna Motzkau**

There is no such thing as 'resistance' or a 'critical stance', as neither of these has an abstract momentum of its own. They are meaningful only as manifestations of the concrete act of e.g. collecting and featuring marginalised and critical voices that expose and challenge the dominant structures of power and knowledge production, as is our intent in 'Feminisms and Activisms'. Yet paradoxically this 'act' in itself means to be drawn into those dominant discourses and to exercise power. So while negotiating and crossing the borders Alexandra has pointed out above, there were various instances when our self-evidently mutual direction of critique and resistance suddenly appeared utterly dispersed and the diversity we invited seemed to undermine the process. I would like to invert the question of resistance in order to explore one of those concrete instances where critique resisted us -where resistance itself became problematic to our very agenda, putting us at risk of silencing ourselves.

### *Resistant Language Borders – Politics of Expression:*

In order to create an internationally accessible space for sharing with a larger audience, perspectives on marginalised issues from different regions, journal contributions needed to be in English. Yet with English being the dominant linguistic currency, the lack of proficiency or confidence in using the English language is also

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Klezmer Improvisation' (included on the Cdrom) is part of this article, as for me this music and the joy of playing it in this particular situation comprises and expresses the intricacies and realities of numerous border crossings.

part of the reason why issues remain marginal. Thus for most of those we encouraged to contribute, writing in English was very challenging or formed part of an implicit struggle they routinely faced.<sup>3</sup> I understood it as a self-evident aspect of our intent to make ‘voices’ heard and empower contributors, to extend revisions beyond feedback on contents, and to share language skills by including suggestions concerning grammar, expressions or the reconstruction of whole paragraphs. Yet during the revision process this sparked an intense debate among us about the degree to which we should see ourselves entitled to interfere with the contributions. On the one hand there is the danger of an over zealous and patronising revision that coercively smoothens original expressions chosen by the authors and sanitises their subversive use of language in the name of correct grammar and standard English. Hereby we would implicitly acknowledge the legitimacy of the dominant language of academia and impose it on the contributors, instead of challenging it. On the other hand there is a fine line between a loose and subversive use of language and a text that fails to communicate its message because the more and less intended diversions from ‘standard English’ make it difficult or impossible to understand what is being said at all. Hereby we would equally fail the contributors and simply pass the ambiguity over to them as we provide a space for resistance without facilitating its use or sharing our privileged knowledge about the means of expression within this space.<sup>4</sup> Here two trajectories of resistance short-circuit: Our subversive aim to ‘give voices’ and to ‘feature diversity’ collides with the critical awareness of power-relations and hierarchies that manifests in our ambiguity and unease when exercising editorial power. And here we were at risk of silencing ourselves, of getting stuck in the politics of critical expression and the wish to steer clear from the dominant discourse but nonetheless challenge it.

Depicting this instance in such a static and abstract fashion makes it look more irresolvable than it was. But for me experiencing this unexpected void in our taken for granted critical agenda, exemplified in a condensed form that a critical position could never be a predefined static point of departure but only the effect of a very concrete and dynamic activity. To move beyond the dilemma we began to reflect upon questions of legitimacy, entitlement and power in very actual and personal terms. What is our position within the ‘dominant language discourse’?<sup>5</sup> How are our concrete personal commitments related to producing this journal at this point in time and in how far do they entitle us to assume and exercise editorial power? Answering these questions it became clear that issues of legitimacy and power repeat themselves infinitely into the micro levels of our activity and that we could not be outside the dominant discourses or above power. Yet, simultaneously we realised that critical momentum and legitimacy were gained at that very concrete level by a dynamic, constant move in and out of the dominant discourse, in and out of power positions. Taking responsibility of editorial power, exercising it consciously and temporally assuming authority to structure one concrete move and then passing it on, distributing

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<sup>3</sup> And this is certainly true for myself.

<sup>4</sup> This will additionally double the disadvantage of those who are not proficient in English, because they will be the ones who struggle most with reading texts that are formulated in a less ‘standard’ language.

<sup>5</sup> To stick with my language example: Only two of us are native English speakers. Yet again neither of these two have grown up in the UK or North America. What does that mean for the way they relate to (are positioned towards) the English language as a dominant linguistic currency? Does it make them ‘superior revisers’ or does it disqualify them as biased?

it again. As a similar dilemma persists within research itself, I would like to sketch out an instance from my own research to show how the thought outlined so far, could be developed even further to shed a new light on questions of research positions and impact for change.

*The dilemma of critical research positions and impact for change:*

For my current research I am interviewing legal and psychological professionals to explore the ways in which the British and the German legal system deal with child witnesses.<sup>6</sup> Looking at some accounts it is quite apparent how the discourses about who is seen as a reliable witness implicitly rely on problematic paradigms of developmental psychology and gendered stereotypes. The following excerpt from an interview with a crown prosecutor is an example for this. She talks about the recently implemented practice of video recording child witnesses' initial testimony to the police and how it helps her decision to prosecute or drop a case:

*"[...] I had ahm a video tape that I watched for a five year old, now that's young for here we don't normally prosecute on the evidence of a five year old [...] ahm and she was an absolute star [...] and she described it perfectly this and this was a child who could not have made it up you know her innocence shone through on the video absolute oh she was a doll absolute doll ahm [...] that's a really good example of I think how helpful having a video can be because it helps to ass' you to you know just assess what they are like you know you get you get some that're sort of look shifty but then [...] I think you've got to take into account that they might look shifty and uncomfortable because they are uncomfortable you know so ahm [...]"<sup>7</sup>*

I cannot go into detail here, but it is clear how the video instead of amplifying the girls's own voice, perpetuates her passivity: Not the girl's actual statement, but the degree to which she fits the criteria of a pretty little girl, naturally innocent, a doll, passive, in need of protection and with no mind of her own to fantasise, outweighs the fact that her young age would have disqualified her as a reliable witness. Here it worked in her favour, yet the practice shows that when unable to fit the 'doll-category', "looking shifty", or indeed having reached an age where girls as adolescents are by definition seen as prone to deceit and promiscuity, they hardly stand a chance of even getting to court.<sup>8</sup> These insights are not new, but certainly crucial, and I am indebted to those feminist critiques that prepared the grounds for this analysis,<sup>9</sup> yet sadly enough it is not at all unusual that this prosecutor draws on these discourses to guide her decisions. So in this particular situation I suddenly wondered what actually constituted my critical position. Tempted to introduce my critical reflection and to challenge her account, I realised that the likely antagonism I was going to summon might well cause my interview to terminate prematurely, but would hardly help to change her view or the practice in general. But what was the point in doing this interview if the critique could not be fed back to undermine this practice?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Here mostly in relation to cases of an alleged child sexual abuse.

<sup>7</sup> This is an excerpt of an uninterrupted account she gave during the interview. To amend it for this text, I have omitted a few lines, as indicated, but the overall character of the statement is not altered by the omissions.

<sup>8</sup> Here I can paraphrase a judge I interviewed who resignedly recommended: 'As a witness you shouldn't be female and between 13 and 17!'

<sup>9</sup> Among other important contributions: Burman (1994; 1998); Walkerdine (1987; 1993).

<sup>10</sup> A legitimate caveat is that I am in the 'wrong' discourse here. Should I not be talking to child witnesses instead to hear their views? I perfectly agree, and that is what I have done in earlier work.



Similar to our situation in the editorial team, I felt stuck between options of inefficient resistance and mere listening to collect data. This created an uncomfortable void within my assumed critical position and forced me to re-focus on the concrete situation. And here a hint at how to move beyond this dilemma could be found in the tiny void, the tension, the prosecutor herself creates by concluding with paradoxical plausibility that child witnesses also “...might look shifty and uncomfortable because they are uncomfortable...” and thereby implicitly disqualifying her earlier rationale. Interesting is not so much her self-contradiction, but the fact that this void in her account offers a glimpse at the multiple uncertainties that already perforate and undermine this concrete practice. As such this is one of many potential entry points that could be collected, theorised and used to introduce critique to practitioners on a pragmatic level and with reference to points in their practice that they experience as problematic themselves. And this could effectively undermine and challenge legal practice from inside while avoiding complicity with it.

With regard to legal practice this is certainly a tentative suggestion, but it exemplifies how the dynamic that emerged from our experience as journal editors repeats itself with regard to critical research positions: In order to not silence myself I had to move in and out of the legal discourse, subversively use the concrete voids within it and re-examine what constituted my actual critical position. Again it is apparent how critical momentum and thus agency for change is not guaranteed and legitimised by some predefined criticality, but generated via the immediate activity of relating to a concrete practice in a way that could make a specific critical stance bear upon it and incite change.

It is this understanding of ‘critique’ and ‘resistance’ that made the idea of juxtaposing, merging and intersecting feminisms and activism such an exciting prospect, and thus producing this journal could be seen as a concrete attempt of ‘doing’ critical theory while simultaneously theorising practice. This journal produces and exposes a multitude of those resistant, reflexive or indeed dubious voids that manifest at concrete instances of action, when people are drawing on, speaking up against, or struggling within dominant discourses, and as such this journal is an invitation to you to spot, make use of or even enlarge these voids, because they are passages for change.

**‘Talking the Talk & Walking the Walk’: Some Reflections On The Politics Of  
Knowledge Production  
Jude Clark**

This journal venture has brought to life in an ‘up close and personal’ way the intricacies of the politics of knowledge production. It has been mainly in retrospect that we have felt more able to interrogate the kinds of politics (workings of power) that constructed the *meaning* of the project and informed our editorial actions. Despite the value of a temporal critical distance, it needs to be noted that ‘looking back at what it all meant’ and ‘how it could have been done differently’ is a familiar and perhaps less unsettling recourse than doing so ‘in the moment’. Nevertheless, at

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Yet this also raised my awareness for the intricacies of transmitting their voices, speaking ‘for’ them and the difficulty of having an impact for change.

certain points we *were* pushed to engage more explicitly and critically with the institutional and discursive conditions that shaped the project, and the experience of the many women who participated in it. I'll call these junctures 'critical moments', instances that either vaguely or abruptly create a rupture, and trigger a shift in the way the process is/was thought about and understood. Subjectively experienced as a kind of discomfort, these 'disturbing' moments can tell us something about what is going on, making an aspect that was implicit more visible. As such, they carry great potential, particularly when explored as part of broader questions on how the subjective investments we make in our everyday practice can be traced/linked to networks of institutional power and the discourses and ideologies that inform them (Parker, 2005).

One example of this subjective investment was characterised in the moment(s) when we began to feel quite protective over the contributions we had each solicited, while at the same time feeling anxious once these had been requested, that they would be 'good enough'. This tension of recognising the value of a contribution yet being wary of its representation and articulation within a broader corpus of knowledge such as this journal issue, is an important illustration of the recursive relationship between the epistemological and the political. Historically, the establishment and protection of power, privilege and status has been integrally linked to the ways in which realities have been 'knowledged'. The academy has played a pivotal role in inscribing and prescribing a hierarchical system that differently and unequally values ways of 'knowing' and of representing that knowledge. These dominant inscriptions and prescriptions have meant that critique with distinctly different ideological underpinnings, intellectual genealogies, theoretical trajectories and political implications, has been systematically marginalized. Preoccupations with this 'good enough' notion is a powerful illustration of the ways in which we internalise, individualise, depoliticize, and often - in our representations - *perform* the regulatory systems of control that are so much a part of academia.

The diverse resources drawn on by the articles in this issue, and the different ways that they are positioned in interrogating the 'feminism/activism' theme necessitates that they, in a way, each be 'read' differently. This nexus of engagement, with writers all articulating different positions from their particular locations in and out of the academy, holds much promise. If we *emphasise* rather than evade the 'critical relationality' represented by the various articles, and the cognisant positionality of the authors, we can negotiate the "variety of identities, theoretical positions and textualities without falling prey to schisms and dualistic or binary thinking that dismisses one dynamic to privilege another" (Boyce Davies, 1994:57). Through this kind of reframing we avoid a superficial representation of both 'diversity' and 'ontological unity'. In this way, rather than *meaning* being merely asserted, it can be rewritten, (re)produced and re/deconstructed as a fundamentally relational activity.

Some 'critical moments' of this journal project showed the ways in which power is both regulatory and productive, working on many levels and in diverse ways, pinning down and opening up possibilities for forms of meaning-making and action, and impacting practices and social institutions that fall far outside academia (Weedon, 1987). As an editorial team we were pushed to question our own complicity and collusion with the very authoritative discourses and exclusionary tactics we sought to challenge. Signals to this (apart from our own almost imperceptible and unwitting

recourse to a specific ‘goal-oriented’ discourse of ‘aims’, ‘tasks’, ‘responsibilities’ and ‘deadlines’), included occasions where contributors sought clarification on the meaning of an “abstract”, or when there were requests for a more understandable version of our introductory email. These are totally reasonable and legitimate responses and provide critical commentary on how the dominant discursive resources we drew on powerfully precluded other meaningful ways of engaging with and articulating the project and our positionings within it. This is a central complexity we faced as an editorial group working both *within and against* the power hierarchies and discourses that framed our project. Of course this is a slippery slope to tread, and represents a central question that has long challenged feminist projects: In this process, how do we avoid ultimately reproducing that which we seek to transform?

The extent to which contributors felt able/ willing to enter a space of dialogue (as in the ‘interrelating notes’ process), or to ‘speak back’ (to the review process), and how this was manifested, is tied to many issues, not least of which are the implications of ‘speaking back’ in a language that is (literally!) not your own (the complexities of which are discussed by Johanna). We can understand any hesitance/ resistance to/ lack of engagement in a space such as this, when we see it as a forum, which, despite its invitation, is discursively constructed in a way where one might feel pushed to ‘know’ or to convey knowledge in ways that are unfamiliar or problematic, if not oppressive. Here there are resonances with bell hooks’ description of the implications of talking to those who can’t / won’t talk back (hooks, 1989). These dynamics are intricately connected to the many other dimensions on which power works, and has significant implications for identity politics. For example, an initial commitment from a sizeable number of Black women, submitting as individuals or collectives, by the end of the process was down to two individuals. Consequently this meant that the only representations from Black women were poetry and art. As valuable as these contributions are as representations of marginalised knowledge (on a few levels), in the broader constellation of the journal, how does this avoid being conveyed as some kind of essentialised epistemic homogenisation (as a racialised representation of how Black women ‘know’)? What broader politics prevent us from conceptualising *every* article as a particular artistic/ cultural production, ‘voicing’ a particular (racialised, gendered) location? This is just one example of the complex relationship between historical epistemological shifts and representational politics (which includes the process of ‘naming’). It raises the following question: What are the implications of involving marginalized women in what for the most part are mainstream forums without first interrogating those forums themselves?

The insistence that “subordinated groups be empowered to articulate their realities and become subjects rather than objects of knowledge-production processes”, has been one significant and is largely the outcome of the political impact of Black women within feminism (Mama, 1995:14). However, as argued by Burman (2000), the ushering into discourse of subordinated knowledges creates its own difficulties. “While the project of “giving voice” threatens to reproduce the very paternalistic relations it claims to dismantle, this by virtue of presuming the power to afford that “giving” of voice” (p. 54-55). This necessitates exploring what the “alternative ways are of conceptualizing and negotiating structural relationships, such as those organized around racialized, gendered, and professional identities” (Burman, 2000:50). This is not merely an intellectual exercise involving discourse, but integrally tied to that of formulating a cogent political programme of action. We need

to ask, as Butler (1995) does, what possibilities of mobilisation are generated on the basis of existing arrangements of discourse and power. How can we change that very matrix of power by which we are constituted to destabilize existing power regimes? This journal, and all that it 'represents' is a small, but significant step in response to some of these questions, and of course, the struggle continues...

### **Feminists and activists diffractions<sup>11</sup>.**

**Barbara Biglia**

#### *Thinking through Feminisms*

I find it quite easy to define myself as a feminist but when I have to explain to someone else what feminism could be I become confused. It is not that I don't have a clear idea of what I feel and mean by the concept, but because the term is nowadays used with a very large multiplicity of meanings, my choice between any one of them will be inevitably reductive. On the other hand, assuming a political compromise within feminism, by not being critical with some uses of the word, is clearly impossible. So how to fuse, engage and respect these two tensions simultaneously? The idea of inventing a new word is in some ways frustrating because it implies the renouncement of the powerful history of women's every day subversions.<sup>12</sup> But, on the other hand, some of the imaginaries evoked by the use of that concept are far removed from any possible meaning of feminism I can imagine and, in some cases, can reinforce heterosexist and/or patriarchal practices (like some essentialist feminisms did in the past).

But what are feminisms? Without giving a definition, I feel that feminisms are both an ontology of life and an articulated and polymorphic project of collective lives; in this sense it is also, and perhaps primarily, a politics. Then, considering that *Feminism is for everybody* (hooks, 2000), the critique of black/non-white<sup>13</sup> and lesbian feminists - during the so called 'second wave of feminism'<sup>14</sup>- around the discriminatory construction of women as a unified category (for an overview: Nicholson, 1997;

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Haraway (1997) for her fascinating definition of Diffractions.

<sup>12</sup> Moreover the alternative-antagonistic concept of 'postfeminism' also conjoins in itself two different and opposite realms. On the one hand it can be related to queer theory (To maintain the open link with activism we would like to remind you that soon there will be the VII queer activist meeting, which will take place in Barcelona. More information at:

<http://www.queeruption.org/barcelona/english/index.htm>) and the aim to deconstruct the dichotomized gender divisions (for an example of that use, see Preciado, 2003). On the other hand it tends to represent, with the complicity of the media, the negation of feminism, both by young women who assume contemporary stereotypical feminine constructions and sexist masculinised attitudes, and by liberal theorists who, starting from the negation of women's victimization, disqualify feminist analysis (Gamble, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Whenever I have to talk about this concept I struggle with the definition, on the one hand the word 'black' homogenizes all the people not included in the allegedly 'white normality' and, on the other hand, the expression 'non-white' is white-centric. Alternative expressions such as: 'those who are not white-identified' seem to me too complex. Significantly the problem also exists because I am included in the white category, if I was not, my use of the term could be interpreted as a claim... ...finally, I have no. solution to this dilemma, I do not want to be politically correct but I will be happy if someone has a good suggestion for me!! (Thanks Jude for highlighting this problem!!)

<sup>14</sup> This definition itself is incorrect and tends to render invisible the feminist practices and subversions that developed before the, so called, 'first wave' of feminism.

Tietjens Meyers,1997), has to be extended to the definition of feminist politics as well. In fact, feminist agendas and priorities still tend to hide the needs and the agency that is emerging in minoritised groups and geopolitical arenas<sup>15</sup> (Cooper, 1995). So even if we may be able to recognise the multiple, fragmented, cyborgs, nomads, borderline etc.. identities involved in ‘womanhoods’, the feminist political priority is still producing discourses that would like to be universal but represent just a particular version of reality. This implies, in my opinion, that one of the challenges of feminist politics nowadays is to find ways to fight for our legitimate situated claims (as example Biglia, 2005) without obscuring other feminist needs.

Although we tried to assume this complexity in the journal, with the presentation of very different collaborations, it is important to remember that they are just some of the possible points of view, the ones nearest to the editors. Nevertheless, we recognize these limitations and push for the enlargement of the interchange network that developed during this process, as a step in the direction of developing further the communications between feminisms (for another example: Zavos, Biglia, Hoofd, 2005). In this sense, we would like to remark that the editing process was extremely rich in collective self-reflections, with its inevitable stress and irritations, misunderstandings, etc... but in which the collective aspect was precisely one of the major aims.

As Erica Burman (2003) argued, the great importance given in recent years to introspection in feminism has produced (as a ‘secondary negative effect’) a reduction of the power of the collectivity. Sometimes we feminists, have spent too much time trying to redefine our differences instead of constructing alliances. So, according to her, if on the one hand postmodern feminism has provided a useful theoretical tool to question the depoliticization of psychology - a depoliticization effected trough the ‘cooption’ of the feminist claim ‘the personal-is-political’, on the other hand, through a displacement onto the self, it created new forms of pathologization, reducing the power of feminist political psychology. In order to answer the call for collective action it is important not to idealize community, as some feminisms have done, because it can become a way of homogenising or neglecting differences (Young, 1990). But to experiment with new forms of relation and articulation, as we tried to do, by empowering networks or, using Plant’s (1998) expression, ‘weaving collectively’.

### *... and Activisms*

Since the pioneering work of Le Bon and Freud, collective behavior has been seen as pathologic, childish, and uncontrollable, and Social Movements as the result of societal breakdown (Capdevila, 1999). Nowadays, this kind of interpretation has been mostly discarded, and, already in the ’70s, a new generation of theorists have reinterpreted collective action in a more positive way (Johnston, Laraña, Gusfield, 1994). Nevertheless, and without entering an in depth analysis of these theories in the

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<sup>15</sup> Obviously there is a lot of work done in support of and in solidarity with ‘third world’ feminism (for example by NGOs) but unfortunately, in most cases, it tends to take over the agency of the protagonists of the fight and re-colonises their politics. Nevertheless, there are also interesting experiences that help the dialogues between women from minoritised backgrounds recognising their agenda, for example PGA (2001).

limited space of this article, there was still a wish to *explain* and *understand* Social Movements and activism, so they tended to be objectified, reduced and homogenized. Some limitations particularly need to be highlighted, in that context, in order to outline the need for new approaches:

- From a social constructionist point of view it is not possible to understand the complexity and fluidity of social actions in different spaces and times without the recognition of the importance of **agency** as mobilizing factor (Reicher, 2004).
- Considering the NSMs (New Social Movement) as a cultural/identity project, as has been done by most theorists, is an exercise of power. Because, while the claim (for identity) may be considered an indulgence, by those persons who recognize themselves as possible, it is a necessity for all those who, on the other hand, experience themselves as unreal (because they do not fit in any of the existing identities) (Butler, 2001). In this sense, a claim to re-construct identity would be considered an a-political project only by those who are in privileged conditions. Moreover, defining the NSMs as a cultural project, implies reducing the notion of politics and activism to the formal arena and does not recognize, as argued by feminism, that **the personal is political** (Biglia, 2005).
- Most Social Movement theory is eurocentric (Gameson, 1992) but tries to assume a general value. The generalization of that partial view implies the loss of the differentiated and situated specificity of different realities. (Hetherington, 1997).
- Theories tend to be performative, creating new waves of ‘activist practices’ according to changes of paradigms in psychology, sociology or political theories, rather than attempting a situated analysis of realities. In this way, they obscure the ongoing work of activism (Plows, 2002) which then has to be genealogically recuperated (Roseneil, 2000).
- Last but not least, “traditional sociological models of movements players and their tactical interactions limit our understanding of movement as gendered. Adhering to these dominant constructions obscures the particular struggles and demands of women activists working for social change in the political arena.” (Taylor, 1998:674)

Considering all these points it is clearly important to shift our approach to activism from an analytical and interpretative position to a more open hearing option. For this reason, and according with the tensions expressed in *Activist Research* (Investigació, 2005), we offered the space of this monograph to feminist activists who, assuming their position as agents, have decided to recount different experiences of action, politics, life.

### *NETworking*

After this brief excursion into the impossibility of defining the key concepts of this monograph it is important to try to understand the meaning and aim of this project. In the first place, the work produced has been constituted as an embodiment of some of the interrelated meanings between feminisms and activism. In my opinion, knowing that theories and practices are not antinomies but could not exist independently, the interaction between the accounts collected, the practices and reflections behind the different themes, the network they imply, and the interconnections that grew through the attempt to engage in dialogues could represent, in itself, an activist practice. The Network(ing) was, therefore, simultaneously a space, a need, a process, a result, a limitation, a starting point, a political option and much more; it was also a cyborg

(Haraway, 1991) constituted both by humans, non-humans and machine technologies, resources and energy.

In this context, the virtual space has been first of all a useful platform to facilitate interchange, both between the editors and with/between the contributors. Specifically the list and the web space offered by the **riseup** radical tech group (<http://riseup.net>) and the open source technology they use were extremely important and powerful tools. Moreover, using the Internet for a feminist project was a challenge to subvert the technological heteropatriarcal domain; a cyberfeminist action in which bastard daughters rebel against their fathers (Haraway, 1991)<sup>16</sup>. In this sense “one of the most exiting aspects of the Internet is its potential for the creation of communities that cut across border and distance.” (King, Hyman, 1999: 13). Nevertheless, the difficulties of acessibility and governamental restrictions (Quina, Miller, 2000) limit the potentiality of cyberspace which remains more open to priviledged people and/or comunities<sup>17</sup>. This is one of the reasons why this processual network does not have to remain restricted to the virtual arena: it has to be spurious and contaminated, locating itself in all the places where it can be useful/enjoyable. In this sense we would like to transform the presentations of the printed version of this journal into spaces of debates and we hope this will allow, on the one hand, the proliferation of nodes and connexions between them and, on the other hand, the (re)utilization and transformation of the debates presented in the monograph and the production of more articulated collective knowledges.

This practice also respects the origin of the weaved network, which didn't rise up from nothing, but was (re)created based on the interconnection of different pre-existing networks. According to Plant (1998:45) “If anything does emerge from the complexity of current shifts, it is the realization that cultures cannot be shaped or determined by any single hand or determining factor, Even conceptions of change have changed. Revolution has been revolutionized.” In this sense probably one of the most important political aims of this work will manifest as it (de)generates in multiples and uncontrollable ramifications: it is in your hand!

### **Concluding ...for the moment ...**

One of the important ways this journal has impacted on us, is to help us realize both the potentialities and the limitations of collective feminist/activist projects. Moving on, we acknowledge the ways in which the multifaceted travails of facilitating the creation of this journal have also inspired our renewed commitment and energy.

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<sup>16</sup> Although I agree with Alexandra's suggestion that “the Internet too needs to be situated as medium/ process/ technology specific to academic journal publishing and academic work”. We have different understandings of the opportunity to use it, she is more pessimistic, thinking that, “because it is inscribed in the institutional space of the academy, I don't know if and how we can claim it as a ‘revolutionary’ [...] practice”, but I still believe that the medium itself is neither revolutionary, nor conservative but its use can be subversive.... ...an open discussion!!

<sup>17</sup> Moreover, unfortunately, most of the material in the web is in english.



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