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Theorizing Politics, Politicizing Theory

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Front cover image

Raili Haslam (Unpublished)

Photograph by Clement Cooper. Courtesy Autograph ABP.

See p. iv for further details.

Editorial Statement

It has been more than twenty years since *Cultural Studies* began publishing – ‘more’ because we should remember its origins as the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, the work of a devoted collective. In those decades, across the globe, there have been profound economic, political, social and cultural changes. As new struggles and projects have become more central in transforming the world, they have been met by increasingly energized practices of resistance and by ever-extended lines of communication and dissent. Cultural studies should be at the center of current debates about the changing world.

How these changes are realized, lived and represented vary in significant ways around the globe, but the days when one could study any local or even national context isolated from its material geographical integuments are long past. And so are the days when cultural studies could remain centered in its Anglophone and narrowly academic perspectives, traditions, examples and disciplinary histories.

At certain times and places, cultural studies has focused on popular culture, or media, or audiences, or the relations of production, textuality and consumption. In response to particular contexts, it has interrogated the ideologies of explicitly nominated cultural practices, or the production of identities and subjectivities. But, as Raymond Williams warned, cultural studies must never allow itself to rest comfortably with any single definition, or indeed, object. We believe that cultural studies has to remake itself – its questions, theories, methods, analyses and politics – as its context changes, and as it seeks to produce the best knowledge it can of that context and its possibilities.

Accordingly, as we look toward the next volumes of *Cultural Studies*, we want to reassert our understanding of cultural studies as: (1) the study of the effects of discourses as a necessary dimension of all human contexts, articulating relations among discourses, everyday life, social structures and apparatuses of power, with the explicit purpose of defining the possibilities for invention and intervention; (2) a project committed to retaining, as Stuart Hall put it, ‘the concrete empirical reference as a privileged and undissolved “moment” within a theoretical analysis’ without thereby making the study ‘empiricist.’ (*Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2003); and (3) an expansive conversation about how such study effectively contributes to understanding, living in, and transforming the related but enormously varied – cultural, social, economic and political – conditions of contemporary life.

Over the past fifty years, cultural studies has been successful, both inside and outside the academy, in sometimes unexpected ways. Many of the insights,

arguments and analytics of cultural studies have become the strategies for new forms of political and political-economic struggle and even domination. At the same time, some of the most significant changes and struggles in the contemporary world involve the fields of knowledge and education. Schools and universities have become primary sites of economic and political struggle, and the some of the most basic assumptions about what constitutes “knowledge” and education have been challenged from all sides of the political spectrum. These changes have to be taken seriously and incorporated into our understanding of cultural studies.

From its very beginnings in Australia, this journal has attempted to lead and shape the field of cultural studies. It will continue to do so, even more self-consciously, as intellectuals both inside and outside the academy, all over the world, attempt to understand ‘what’s going on.’ We want to recommit *Cultural Studies* to fostering a conversation about the changing and competing discursive and material conditions, struggles and possibilities of the contemporary world, in all their complexity and diversity. This conversation must include people speaking from and about the many different geographical, historical, disciplinary and institutional sitings of cultural studies. Consequently, the journal is open to the academic and the non-academic, the representational and the non-representational, the traditional and the experimental. Our only constraint is that we end up knowing more than we did before!

Lawrence Grossberg
Della Pollock



About the Cover

As our editorial suggests, we want to include artists, cultural workers and activists in the conversation of cultural studies. To that end, we have decided to give the cover of the journal over to supporting and publicizing the work of contemporary young artists, with the generous support of both Mark Sealy of Autograph APB (http://www.autograph-abp.co.uk/autograph_content.html) and Taylor & Francis. The next six issues will feature photographs by Clement Cooper.

Clement Cooper was born in 1965. He is a self trained photographer who lives in the northwest of England. He approaches photography as a cohesive whole that encompasses everything from producing the image to its final printing and display. In recent years recorded interviews and ambient sound play a crucial role in the final presentation to the general public. He lectures extensively and works in close collaboration with his subjects, taking considerable time to develop relationships. His projects *Presence*, *Deep – People of Mixed Race*, and *Primary* have all received international acclaim. He has for the last few years been working on a major UK-wide project which involves working with a variety of different Muslim communities. The first part of this project, *Sisters* was published in 2004. In late 2005 he began travelling throughout the UK working specifically with groups of Muslim men.



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The face, triumphant as an iconic representation of allure, becomes an ornament of public spaces, a document, which chronicles the fashionable contours of the face, a monument of postmodernity, which celebrates the permanence and instability of imagery and speaks to fact and fiction, and last not least, confirms the image-sign as real.



FIGURE 1 Berlin/Germany.



FIGURE 2 Klagenfurt/Austria.

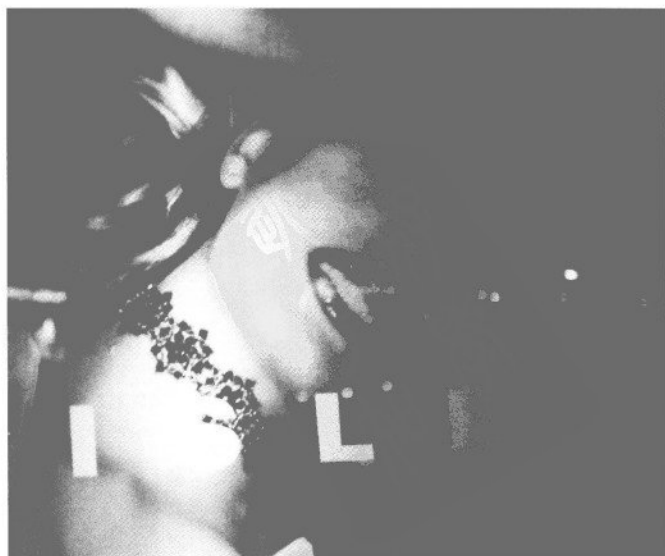


FIGURE 3 Banja Luka/Bosnia.



FIGURE 4 Klagenfurt/Austria.



FIGURE 5 Ljubljana/Slovenia.

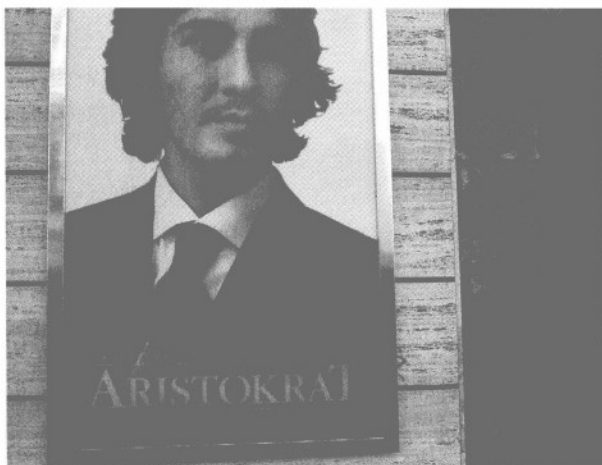


FIGURE 6 Klagenfurt/Austria.



FIGURE 7 Klagenfurt/Austria.

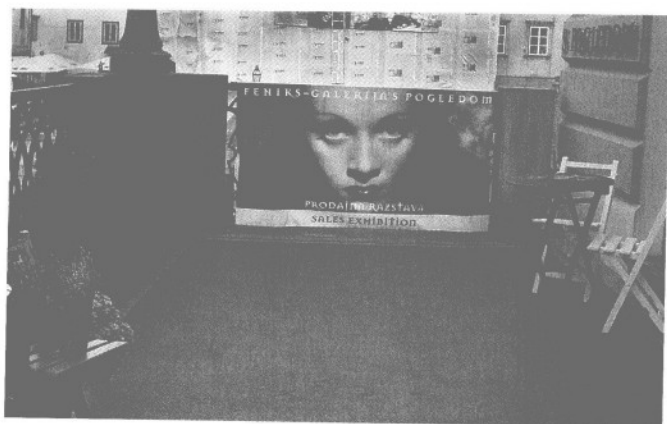


FIGURE 8 Ljubljana/Slovenia.



FIGURE 9 Klagenfurt/Austria.



FIGURE 10 Ljubljana/Slovenia.



INFO-WAR AND THE POLITICS OF FEMINIST CURIOSITY

Exploring new frameworks for feminist intercultural studies

*The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001 and the subsequent declaration of the 'war on terror' by US and European powers, placed a particular burden upon feminists in those countries to call attention to the centrality of gender discourse in the current geo-political era. This essay recognises the urgency of exploring the 'war on global terror' from a feminist perspective, and applying pedagogical expertise to encourage wide-ranging, informed debate within the academic classroom. Identifying the feminist questions at the heart of contemporary discourse on freedom and civilization can become a valuable way to develop a critique of imperialism from many different locations. Two themes are pursued: the language of difference, and the implications of speaking about women and gender in different situations; and the challenges of postmodern warfare, which demand a close critique of information sources. The international enterprise to reconstruct civil society in Afghanistan offers urgent opportunities to test the feasibility of transnational feminist work, in theory and practice. Finally, the essay considers the importance of bringing different kinds of contemporary texts into the classroom. The best-selling *The Bookseller of Kabul* is examined as a useful subject of critique. Bringing a feminist perspective on whiteness can also be helpful in analysing representations of orientalist, racist texts. Finally, feminist analyses of militarism provide a valuable way to connect patterns of power 'at home' with the way that war is represented to the public.*

Keywords feminism; pedagogy; imperialism; gender; war; racism

This work was originally motivated by a deceptively simple question that has challenged countless Euro-American feminists for over a century: how do we (those same feminists) show solidarity with women in countries under colonial occupation by our own governments, without either aligning ourselves with the civilizing mission or tarnishing local struggles for women's rights as a

suspect foreign import? This question was most forcefully posed in October 2001, when a world still shocked by the devastation of the World Trade Center witnessed the first military engagement in what was then called the 'War on Terror'. From the very start, the invasion of Afghanistan, ostensibly carried out to punish the Taliban for harbouring the perpetrators of this attack, was inextricably linked to a program of liberating women from Islamic fundamentalism in the name of 'Enduring Freedom'. In March 2006, on the third anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, the UK Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that the war to defeat 'global terrorism', regardless of where, geographically, it is being fought, is essentially a 'clash for civilization...the age-old battle between progress and reaction' (Blair 2006). Identifying this historic feminist question at the heart of contemporary discourse on freedom and civilization can become a valuable way to develop a critique of imperialism from many different locations. This essay will focus on the space of the classroom, acknowledging that the added question of how to teach women's studies in war-time offers new opportunities for ethical, anti-racist pedagogy.

I begin with a cursory trawl of the US Government website which quickly brings to light the following manifesto from the Office of International Women's Issues. It hardly needs saying that the very presence of this site is a testament to the success of feminists from a previous era in bringing about institutional awareness of gender at the highest level.

The United States is deeply committed to addressing issues that are important to American women and women throughout the world. Promoting women's political and economic participation is an important element of US foreign policy. Global respect for women is a Bush Administration foreign policy priority. The United States is in the forefront of advancing women's causes around the world, helping them become full participants in their societies through various initiatives and programs that help increase women's political participation and economic opportunities and support women and girls' access to education and health care.

Reading this paragraph with a jaded feminist eye, it is hard not to dismiss the rhetoric of 'global respect' with a howl of derision. This is not the increasingly universal language of human rights, nor the discourse of CEDAW (the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by 172 countries, not including the USA). The commitment veers between 'causes', a strangely nineteenth century notion, and 'participation', a loaded term currently used by proponents of gender mainstreaming. There are 'issues' and 'programs' to be addressed and initiated, though healthcare and education are sensibly, if uncontroversially, at the top of the reforming agenda. But while it is easy to analyse the cautious terminology of this administrative

window-dressing, it is also hard not to read the sentiments as an opportunistic justification of the use of force to advance US economic and political interests. In short, this policy statement echoes the rhetoric that accompanied the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, when the visibility of the Taliban's brutal repression of women briefly took center stage.

Throughout the Christian-majority world the subject of Islam often generates fear among audiences whose only knowledge of the subject is derived from hostile and stereotyped media representation. Well before the geopolitical climate shifted in 2001, factors such as the rise of Political Islam impacted on home-grown variants of racism to produce new levels of intolerance towards Muslim settler communities, and a readiness to see the entire Middle East as a hotbed of terrorism. This phenomenon is expressed in different but related ways in each country, but there is inevitably one unifying theme: the question of incompatible cultures fixed in 'tradition' on one side, and 'modernity' on the other. At the heart of this insidious 'culture talk' there is a consistent emphasis on questions of sexuality and women's rights (Mamdani 2000). This essay recognises the urgency of exploring this explosive subject from a feminist perspective, and applying pedagogical expertise to encourage wide-ranging, informed debate within the academic classroom.

Feminist scholarship over the past two decades has demonstrated that the struggle to improve women's lives has played a strategic role in the history of colonial missions to civilize people marked as heathen or unchristian. In part this can be traced to one of Euro-American feminism's founding arguments: that the quality, character or level of a civilization can be measured by the way it treats its women – a view shared, incidentally, by the influential Islamic fundamentalist theorist Sayyid Qutb (Euben 1999, p. 64). Today the case for new forms of imperialist aggression can be made more readily if the evil posed by the enemy is linked to their oppression of women. The so-called 'clash of civilizations' summons up a fundamental incompatibility between Christianity and Islam, secularism and religion. It pits western modern freedoms against oriental cultural traditions represented by veiled women and honour killings, relying on a notion of Islam as a timeless, homogenous religion impervious to change but in desperate need of modernisation. At the same time, indigenous women's movements in many countries, regardless of the contexts and conditions in which they develop, are often tainted by association with a Western imperialist legacy and neo-colonising agenda.

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001 and the subsequent declaration of the 'war on terror' by US and European powers, placed a particular burden upon feminists in those countries to call attention to the centrality of gender discourse in the current geopolitical era (Eisenstein 2004, Hawthorne & Winter 2002). This essay is connected to this new wave of theoretical and analytical work, but at the same time it specifically addresses how feminist questions about security,

anti-Islamic racism, terror, national identity, and militarism might be addressed on a local scale.

There is currently a crisis for feminists in the US (and in Britain too) who have been struggling with the problem of how to deliver a women's studies curriculum that is relevant to a new generation of students and infused with political energies that gave rise to it in first place. Collaborations like *Women's Studies on Its Own* edited by Robyn Wiegman (2002) have provided a welcome reassessment of the institutionalization of feminist scholarship in the US academy. Contributors from universities all over the country write about teaching, curricula, pedagogy, and the politics of transforming the educational experiences not just of students but also of faculty hired to teach in this area. The urgency of this project is captured by Minoo Moallem in her essay "Women of Color in the US": Pedagogical Reflections on the Politics of "the Name". She begins with the observation that 'Turning the experience of teaching in a classroom in Women's Studies into a textual site of critical and analytical investigation is a crucial task' (p. 368). Her contribution is useful here because it raises the question of how to approach feminist theories of difference from a historical perspective while also producing new forms of knowledge and insight.

The central theme of her piece is that the title of this course, which she has taught in several different places, sets up expectations among students that are antithetical to the exploration of new ways of thinking that the course is designed to offer. Her critique of the phrase 'women of color' echoes what is now a familiar complaint that the convergence of the terms 'black women' and 'Third World women' leaves important contradictions intact – not least of which is the fact that its vagueness – like the expression 'global feminism' – has allowed it to be turned into one more US export that carries the seeds of western cultural imperialism. Moallem writes: 'Even as the term "women of color" has emerged institutionally to critique women within the United States, the stretching of the term to include a global oppositional category of women of color became problematic in the context of the 1990s and the elaboration of postcolonial theory and transnational feminist theories. A fissure appeared, quite predictably, between the US category of "Women of Color" and the category "Third World" which constitutes in geopolitical terms subjects who are at the same time placed and displaced, resulting in serious contradictions and tensions' (p. 373).

An earlier version of this critique was made just over ten years ago by Marnia Lazreg in her book *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (1994). In her introductory essay 'Decolonizing Feminism' she explores some of the difficulties she has encountered writing about women not just from countries designated as Third World, but 'about women from a culture with a history of distortion' (pp. 7–8). Scornful of the mindset that groups Algerian women under headings such as Arab women, Muslim women, or Middle