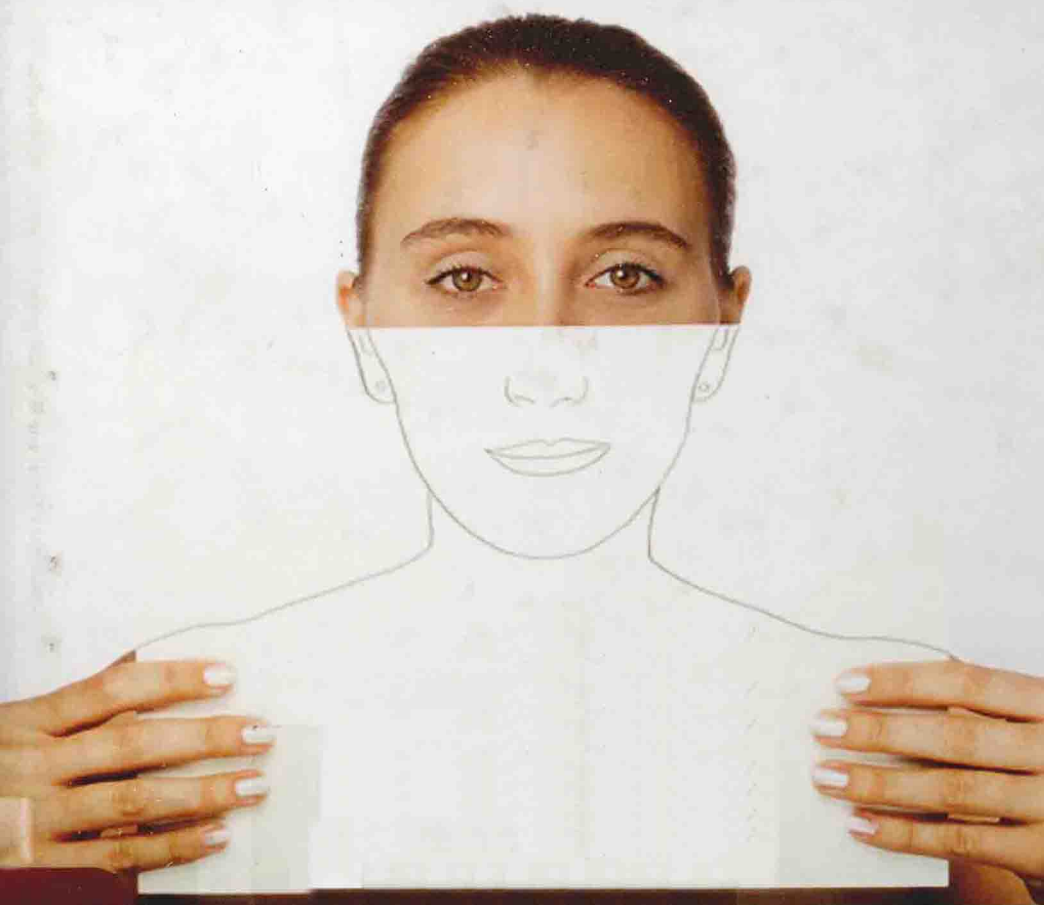


NEW FEMININITIES

POSTFEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM
AND SUBJECTIVITY



Edited by ROSALIND GILL
and CHRISTINA SCHARFF



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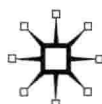
Rosalind Gill

and

Christina Scharff



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New Femininities

Also by Rosalind Gill

THE GENDER-TECHNOLOGY RELATION (*with Keith Grint*)

TECHNOBOHEMIANS OR THE NEW CYBERTARIAT

GENDER AND THE MEDIA

SECRECY AND SILENCE IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS (*with Róisín Ryan-Flood*)

Also by Christina Scharff

REPUDIATING FEMINISM (*forthcoming*)

For Angela McRobbie

Acknowledgements

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The chapters presented here are all original pieces of work, prepared specifically for this volume. We would like to express our appreciation to all the contributors for what we believe is a collection of outstandingly interesting and challenging essays that struggle to 'think' and understand the contours of gender, sexuality, race, class and neoliberalism in this contradictory moment. Without exception, the contributors have been a delight to work with, and have made the process of editing far easier than it might have been. We would also like to thank Alice Gavin and Chloe Preece for all their assistance with editing and preparing the manuscript and Christabel Scaife, Catherine Mitchell and their team at Palgrave for all their support. Our thanks also go to Joanne Kalogeras for her insightful comments on the introduction to this volume. We would also like to express our huge gratitude to Ana Sofia Elias for all her hard work on the Index, and to the team at Newgen for everything they did 'behind the scenes'.

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Finally, both of us would like to express our admiration, affection and respect for Angela McRobbie who is, in our view, the leading figure working in this field, and a feminist intellectual whose scholarship has consistently taught us, challenged us and inspired us. In recognition of her enormous contribution to feminist cultural studies we would like to dedicate this book to Angela McRobbie.

Preface

It gives me enormous pleasure to provide some words as a preface to this volume, and I regret that questions of space make it impossible for me to offer a response to every single chapter in this collection. The contents advance our understanding of current developments and permutations in the conditions of (mostly young) womanhood, the production of gendered subjectivities, and the various requirements to perform a kind of sexuality which will be compliant with the changing needs of a global economy. The authors all recognize and engage with the changes which have come to characterize the distinctive modalities of power that comprise flows and luminosities and formations of attention which attend to young women in contemporary sociality. Most vivid here is the expectation of 'equality'. Where there is no question of this being fulfilled in socio-economic terms, or even of it becoming a lively subject for discussion, nevertheless it is promulgated as a prevailing cultural norm, as though to say in capital letters 'Girls and Women Are Now Equal'. This provides a new horizon of power against which all sociological analyses must now proceed. Some might see this as an intensification of power through tropes of imaginary freedom, others as the gender logic of neoliberal governmentality. Certainly this equality norm has become a notional feature of social, political and corporate institutions through the last twenty years. Yet this has proved intractable, refusing to yield itself for analysis until recently. Maybe the reason for this was a 'double entanglement', a seemingly progressive push-forward factor which has seen gay and lesbian partnerships recognized and legitimated, and girls and young women being provided with new avenues and opportunities for achievement in education and employment and with sexual freedoms in leisure. At the same time, indeed as part of this same package, modes of patriarchal retrenchment have been digging in, as these conditions of freedom are tied to conditions of social conservatism, consumerism and hostility to feminism in any of its old or newer forms.

Perhaps I should say at this point that I owe all of my own writing on these topics from about 2003 onwards, to the slim volume by Judith Butler titled *Antigone's Claim* where she lays out the terrain of exactly this kind of scenario (Butler, 2000). Indeed I appropriated her re-reading of Antigone to reflect on how sexuality, family and kinship were being reconfigured to incorporate some of the strengths and achievements of feminism (Antigone's courage and strength). But in doing so such values were also, at the same time being discredited and repudiated, being literally entombed in a darkened cave with the effect that a whole range of sentiments, desires and attachments were to be forgotten about, abandoned. Desires that could not be fitted into

the family unit were considered irregular and increasingly unthinkable. This included, for example, political desires for feminist collectivity, for communality, for non-familial forms of kinship, for shared childcare, for a politicized non-monogamy, all of which no longer have a place in the polity, giving rise to a sense of loss and to a haunting melancholia.

One way in which this mode of neoliberal governmentality has more recently been discussed by Butler, by Joan Scott and others, is through the idea of instrumentality, where feminist ideals are hijacked by governments and agencies of the state in order to pursue a completely different agenda which often entails the denigration of other cultures where it is argued women are degraded or their human rights are violated (Butler, 2004; Scott, 2007). And consistent with this instrumentalization is a celebratory rhetoric in regard to the high levels of sexual visibility and the seeming enjoyment factor accruing to women in Western capitalism, as the fruits of secular modernity and the benevolent state, as though to say to those of us living in the West, that we should remind ourselves of 'how lucky we are'. Joan Scott has recently dissected the way in which such instrumentalization by government of 'women's rights' is currently played out in France through the 'politics of the veil' and her argument can be extended to the banning of the burkha. Here we see something similar, if more aggressive, to what I argued in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (McRobbie, 2009). The UK government during the Blair years offered itself as the preferred agency for delivering women's rights, such that self-organized feminism might wither away. In France we see the Sarkozy government in effect become champion of women's freedoms directly at the expense of migrant communities, already marginalized and suffering from poverty and from being targets for endemic racism. In the current volume this development is vividly described in the essay by Sadie Wearing in her discussion of the film *Vers le Sud*. The 'liberated' older woman who enjoys sexual encounters with a young man in Haiti emerges in the film as a blame-free neocolonizer inattentive to the consequences of her pursuit of sexual satisfaction. Likewise in Carolyn Pedwell's chapter there is a detailed analysis of some dangers which are attached to a desire by feminists to bring together debates about the veil with those about hyper-sexualization of young women through the rise of what has been called 'porno-chic'. Pedwell argues that these versions of intersectionality nevertheless confirm underlying essentialisms; Sheila Jeffreys, for example, takes the 'oppressive nature of 'non-Western' practices for granted and proposes a universalist feminism which would see women as both 'bareheaded and barefaced' (I myself recall my own fury as a young woman at the anti-make-up and anti-fashion stance of the radical feminists of the early 1980s; indeed such a stance encouraged myself and others to go to further extremes of flaunting the love of fashion, make-up, etc.) And Pedwell also argues that Duits and van Zoonen, in bringing the veil and the thong or G-string together, through a cross-cultural analogy with reference to sexual

regulation, are themselves also creating an axis of intelligibility which has its own limits and constraints. It feeds into a sense of this is how girls nowadays are to be understood, either as veil-wearing or thong-wearing. Pedwell is suggesting that unwittingly perhaps they are consolidating a trope in contemporary discourse, feeding into the moral panic and into a conventional manner of thinking which needs to be reconsidered.

Sexuality is of course a major theme throughout this volume; this entails, for example, our attention being critically drawn to the eroticization of the pregnant mother's body, and, in Róisín Ryan-Flood's article, to the realms of pain and injury which emerge at the social interface of the experiences of lesbian couples who are embarking on the process of becoming pregnant. As Ryan-Flood poignantly notes, this 'remains to some degree an "underground" activity'. The trajectories of openness and of new possibilities in reproductive technology are foreclosed or circumscribed by the sheer discrepancy between the commercialized and celebratory discourses which are now targeted at the newly pregnant woman and her male partner and the realms of subterfuge activity and, at the very least shameful discomfort, on the part of lesbians who want to have their own children. And so what prevails across the boundaries of lesbian, queer and heterosexual is the intensification of disciplinary practices as part of a new moral economy of reproduction where an absence of feminism within public policy discourse results in the privatization of interests according to sexual preferences. For 'well behaved' heterosexual couples who have almost 'left it too late' to have children, there are government agencies supporting their needs for fertility treatment, in sharp contrast to the few specialist agencies who are even aware of the needs of gays and lesbians in this regard and for whom the words 'reproductive rights' barely exist.

Across the chapters in this volume we see the subtle ways in which heterosexuality becomes more assertive, more expansive and ebullient than ever. Many of the chapters convey the mechanisms through which this occurs, even when, as in the many popular television shows which address the issues of love, sex and desire, there is an incorporation of gay and lesbian people. Laura Harvey and Ros Gill show how popular TV programmes like *The Sex Inspectors* endorse a notion of female performance which corresponds with the practices and rhetoric of pornography, and this theme reappears in many of the other chapters where the focus is on pre-teen and teenage girls, so much so that it becomes in effect the dominant vocabulary for popular sexual discourse, something which the abundant provision of pornography through the internet has made more possible than would have been the case prior to the growth of the new media. It is fitting then that I should conclude this preface with a more concentrated look at the way in which sexuality is reconfigured within the realms of the 'new femininities'. One thing that is overwhelmingly apparent is the way in which the internet and new media along with popular culture have created a space of sexuality which borrows

its vocabulary from the world of pornography and the sex industry. This then informs the everyday sex talk of teenagers, and studies referred to in this volume report the widespread practices of girls' own self-description as 'sluts'. Many of these girls talk dirty among themselves and with boys across the social networking sites in a way that would be unthinkable ten or fifteen years ago. The prevalence of explicit talk about oral sex, for example, or of girls posting pictures of their breasts onto websites (not just the more usual bikini shots) seems to me to point to the need for more in-depth analysis of what this all means culturally. The authors here make an impressive start on this task; there is a recognition of class, age and ethnic differences and how they play out in these sexualized friendships; there is also recognition of the pervasive use of irony and humour as in one girl calling her best friend her 'whore'. There is also lurking somewhere in the background a feminist-influenced destigmatization of sex work. This active taking up of pornography as a mainstream part of everyday life must have the effect of depathologizing the sex work which is entailed in its production, since so many people could hardly be active consumers whilst simultaneously condemning those who create it or bring it to their computer screens. At the very least this reduces the scope for old-fashioned hypocrisy. There is a strand of popular feminism which unites young women's investment in this kind of porn-scene as a buttress against the reappearance of the old sexual double standard. And as is shown with great clarity in the chapter by Feona Attwood the genre of 'altporn' provides sexually explicit material (e.g. Furry Girl who does not remove her body hair) some of which takes its benchmarks from queer activist and sex positive groups and sub-cultures.

I am totally in agreement with Jessica Ringrose that a feminist pedagogy dealing with these topics and brought directly into the classrooms for teenage girls and boys is an urgent requirement, that they might be exposed to the range of debates and the different arguments made by second-wave feminists and now also by their contemporary counterparts. This would give girls better ammunition with which to deal with some of their doubts and misgivings, with their uncertainties about how to engage with this pornographic popular culture which is perhaps in the first instances appealing precisely because it is 'bad' or 'shocking' especially to parents and teachers. And finally I welcome the chapter by Jin Haritaworn on the racialized slur of prostitution which sticks onto the bodies of second-generation, mixed race Thai-English and Thai-German women. Haritaworn's account of the Mail.Order.Brides/M.O.B.s, a group of Filipina-American artists who challenge the dominant imaginary which places such women as 'maids', 'brides' or 'prostitutes', draws attention to the ability of art to function as critique in a context where more conventional organizational structures for political resistance have become exhausted.

Angela McRobbie

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