Editorial:

The World Upside Down: Feminisms in the Antipodes

It has been a great pleasure to act as a guest editor of this special issue of *Feminist Review*. When invited late in 1994 by the London-based collective to do so, I felt both the honour and the difficulty of the task. This would be an issue by Australian feminists, speaking to an international feminist audience. While the traditional isolation of Australian feminism is rapidly breaking down, it is still true that most of the time we write for an Australian audience, and are surprised and ridiculously pleased if anyone else takes notice. And so the task was one of thinking about what we might contribute to a broader international feminist debate, how we might reflect on our own local experiences, conflicts and debates in a way that may be of interest to others.

I invited two of my colleagues at the University of Technology, Sydney (which I left for another institution in another city only a month or so later) to form a collective with me to edit the issue – Jeannie Martin, a sociologist with a special interest in questions of migration, ethnicity and multicultural policy, and Helen Irving, a political scientist interested in the formation of the Australian constitution who has contributed to current debate over whether or not Australia should sever its ties with the British monarchy and establish itself as a republic.

The three of us set about thinking about whom to invite to contribute to the issue. We chose a mixture of established and newer writers, thus avoiding any generational or single-cohort view of the issues facing Australian and Pacific feminisms today. We especially wanted to give space to the increasing numbers of young women whose work is transforming the way feminist analysis is conducted and debated. Naturally, we mainly invited people one of us knew, as intellectual colleagues, political activists, doctoral candidates, and as friends. Yet the group of contributors represented here does not form a collective in the usual sense – most have not met one another, few know all three editors, and one, Ien Ang, I communicated with entirely by email; we have never met, or even spoken on the phone. The contributors are, as is befitting in an Australian/Pacific issue, very geographically dispersed – from

Perth to Auckland (over 5,000 kilometres from one another, roughly the distance from London to Montreal, Accra, or Tashkent), and places roughly in between, from Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra. One, Larissa Behrendt, is from Sydney but is now a doctoral candidate in Law at Harvard; another, Camille Guy, now a feature writer on the *New Zealand Herald*, I met when she and I joined the inaugural Glebe Women's Liberation Group in Sydney in 1970.

What was so noticeable was how most of those we approached agreed to contribute, and, unusually in my experience, all but one of those actually did so. We Australian and New Zealand feminists, it seems, very strongly desire to communicate with a broader audience. Coming from relatively small societies, compared with those of the USA and Britain (Australia has a population of around 17 million and New Zealand 3.5 million), feminists in this part of the world have considerable access to the mass media here – newspapers, radio and television – but fairly little to international journals. Those who have been most closely associated with feminist psychoanalytic theory, such as Elizabeth Grosz, or feminist cultural studies, such as Meaghan Morris, have already communicated with a wider audience very effectively, so much so that British feminists such as Michèle Barrett have referred to their work as 'Australian feminism'. These people are indeed important in international and Australian feminist debate, yet 'Australian feminism' has, for us, a much broader purview, is much more diverse than this characterization would suggest.

In putting the issue together, we were working with three interrelated themes – feminism and questions of race and ethnicity, feminism and sexuality, and feminist political theory and analysis, especially in relation to the Australian nation and state. All three have provided a focus for Australian and Pacific feminist debate and action, and all three have, as they have elsewhere, thrown up questions and concerns that are not at all easy to deal with.

Between the signing up of our contributors and the writing of this editorial, a number of events occurred of major significance to Australian feminism. One was the publication of Helen Garner's book, *The First Stone* (1995), discussed here by both Camille Guy and Ann Genovese, which, as an evocation of a particular sexual harassment case at Ormond College at the University of Melbourne, aroused heated, very heated, debate. Garner, a well-known Australian feminist writer, spoke against the young women who had made the complaint, and construed the accused man, the Master of the College, largely as the innocent victim of a punitive feminism gone wrong. Public debate raged for months in newspaper letter columns, conference sessions and feminist journals. The issues the case and the book

raise, of sexuality, institutional power and supposed generational differences within feminism, remain vexed. The three editors take radically opposed positions in the debate.

Another, even more complicated, event was the award in 1995 of major literary prizes to a novel by Helen Demidenko, a young Australian woman of Ukrainian descent. *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1994) was set in Ukraine in the 1930s and Treblinka during the Second World War, and deals with participation in the Holocaust as viewed from the Ukrainian side. The novel features a young woman whose father, uncle and aunt tell their stories of their own actions in the Holocaust. *The Hand That Signed the Paper* was condemned by some as anti-Semitic, as suggesting that the enforced famine in Ukraine in the 1930s, when some five million people died, was seen by the novel as justifying or explaining Ukrainian alliance with Nazism, an interpretation hotly disputed by others. Then it was revealed that Helen Demidenko was not of Ukrainian descent as she claimed, but was rather Helen Darville, the daughter of English immigrants. So what some readers had seen as a novel by a Ukrainian Australian, based at least to some degree on the stories she had heard within her own family, was something else, a work of research and imagination. Finally, various plagiarism charges emerged. The controversy revealed not only how differently can one work appear to different readers, but also how unstable are the categories of 'migrant writing' and 'identity', and how unresolved within an immigrant society like Australia are the tensions remaining from the Nazi period and the Second World War, how problematic multiculturalism is, driven by the anguish and pain of bitter memory.

And then there were the French nuclear tests in the Pacific, which led to so much popular outrage that even the Keating Labor Government was surprised, and all parties felt bound to express similar levels of hostility and opposition. Greenpeace emerged as a major player in the opposition to the tests, and we invited one of their members, Jodie Brownlee, to compile a photo-essay on women's campaigns, in Australia, Tahiti and places closer to the test site, against nuclear testing in the Pacific. I am not sure how to explain why the opposition was so extensive, when testing in earlier decades had outraged only the Left and the peace movement; the current opposition is even more widespread than the anti-nuclear campaigns of the early 1980s, which led to many mass rallies, of 80,000 and more. Some saw the hostility as anti-French racism, yet it seems to me to arise more from a feeling that the days of metropolitan powers testing their weapons in the Pacific, or anywhere in our vicinity, are long gone. Yet even this feeling that the Pacific is 'ours' and not 'theirs' has given rise to some soul searching, as Australians have become aware of a French response that white Australians have no more claim to call the Pacific 'home' than do the French themselves

(the *Sydney Morning Herald* printed many letters from France, solicited through a French newspaper). While the argument may be motivated by a desire to disregard opposition to French testing in the Pacific on whatever grounds are available, the point remains that, as the processes of decolonization continue on and on, white Australians are seen internationally to have little legitimate claim, undermined by the violence of origins.

Our contributors illuminate many of these issues, in different ways. Feminisms in Australia have been continually affected by the critiques and perspectives from elsewhere, as Australia continues to be a site for migration, from most parts of the world, and for many diasporic communities. Both Tikka Wilson, from the USA, and Ien Ang, from Indonesia and Holland, ask questions that confront white British-Australian feminism, thereby refiguring local feminist debate, while Adele Murdolo, whose parents were part of the major southern European migration to Australia of the 1950s and 1960s, points out how complex a history of Australian feminism must be in such a culturally diverse society.

Tikka Wilson reflects on her experiences in association with a feminist-run women's refuge in a small country town, and especially the conflicts there between white feminists and Koori (Aboriginal) women. As an African American she was seen as belonging to neither side in these disputes, or perhaps to both sides, and this insider-outsider position affords her particular insights. Ien Ang, in an earlier essay in *Transitions: New Australian Feminism* (1995), pointed out how the multicultural desires of British-Australian feminists, with their rhetoric of inclusion, express the confidence and power of those who have the opportunity and ability to include, who are not themselves outside.¹ Here she develops these ideas, suggesting that nowadays in Australia 'racially and ethnically marked people are no longer othered today through simple mechanisms of rejection and exclusion, but through an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process of *inclusion by virtue of othering*'. Already well known in media and cultural studies for her book on *Dallas*,² Ien Ang is becoming an increasingly powerful voice in Australian intellectual life, and feminist debate in particular.

Writing in quite a different mode, Kathy Robinson explores the ways in which 'Asia' becomes a site in the European Australian imaginary where the 'tensions and traumas of our own rapidly changing world' are played out. Her focus is the representations of the idea of Asia in debates about marriage and sexual relations between men and women; she draws interesting connections between the quite different images of, on the one hand, the 'mail order bride', a subjugated Filipina married to an Australian

man, and on the other the well-known case in which a Malaysian ‘prince’ was reported to have kidnapped his two children from their Australian mother, his former wife, during a custody visit.

Also powerful are the interventions of women such as Larissa Behrendt, who writes about her own educational experiences as a Koori woman, and the experiences of her family before her, especially her grandmother. She explains how learning the life story of her grandmother changed her life, especially her enforced removal from her family: ‘The inhumanity and senselessness is something that fuels me on to make sure that Koories never have to endure such breaches of Human Rights again.’ Larissa Behrendt’s account of her family history and educational experiences provided the conference on Women in Higher Education in Sydney in April 1995 with its most telling moment. At the end of her speech, reproduced here, was one of the most sustained rounds of applause I have ever heard at a feminist conference. We are particularly pleased also to feature on our cover a work by Tracey Moffatt, an exciting photographer and filmmaker known for her films *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Night Cries*, and whose work around themes of sexuality, gender and power continues to confront and provoke.

Perhaps it is debates over ‘the state’, and especially its troubled relation to ‘nation’, that have preoccupied feminists in Australia the longest. Many have noticed the particular successes Australian feminism has had in achieving at least some of the changes it wanted through the agency of the state – either feminist influences in the state bureaucracies, or legislation affecting such things as employment, mother and child support, women’s health and education, and so on. Carol Johnson looks at the balance sheet in feminist terms for Australia’s Labor governments since the election of the Hawke government in 1983. She notes Australian Labor’s electoral successes, and its largely ‘right wing inclusivist vision’, dissolving conflict while celebrating diversity. Marian Sawer notes more generally how different notions of the state have associated with them quite different gendered metaphors, from the masculine minimal law-and-order state to the feminine welfare state. Much of the power of attacks on social liberalism over the last two decades derive from their depiction of it as emasculating, as undermining ‘independence, self-reliance and competitiveness’.

It is, indeed, the welfare aspects of the state which Australian feminists have best learned how to press and address. Most Australian feminists have floundered when confronted with the issue not of how to extract from governments and state bureaucracies policies congruent with feminist demands, but rather something more difficult, a reconsideration of the basic arrangements governing the constitution of the state itself. What are feminists, we have asked ourselves, to think about the increasing public

support for a republic? What is at stake here? Helen Irving probes these issues, outlining a history of the debate, and concluding, that the republic is indeed a feminist issue.

If questions of the state, nation, race and ethnicity continue to preoccupy Australian and other feminist debate, as indicated here, so too do debates over sexuality. Rapid changes in the sexual cultures of both Australia and New Zealand mean that feminist contributions to debates on sexuality, so important since the early 1970s, are facing entirely new challenges. Where feminism has traditionally seen itself as ineffably marginal and profoundly oppositional, it now finds itself regarded, especially by young women, as the mainstream, the powerful, the controlling, the 'politically correct'. Ann Genovese considers and contrasts two moments in feminist considerations of sexuality, the first the visit of American author Mary Daly to Sydney in August 1981, the second the 1995 debate over sexual harassment, noting just how much feminist debates have changed in this relatively short period. Camille Guy describes in considerable detail some key episodes in New Zealand feminist discussion of sexual issues, developing a critique of the 'prescriptive radical feminist hegemony that prevailed in New Zealand throughout the late 1970s and 1980s' and expressing serious misgivings about false allegations of child sexual abuse, and especially the climate in which sexual abuse allegations are considered.

In these feminist debates, questions of sexuality lead so often to the issue of violence against women. Margaret Jolly examines in detail the debates in Vanuatu over violence against women, and discusses the relationship that emerges there, and elsewhere, between feminist and human rights discourse. Her chapter elegantly expresses the concerns of the volume as a whole, which we might characterize as the specifically *feminist* version of the general contemporary problem of the relationship between the local and the global, between the dilemmas that separate us, and those we share.

As always, there are people to thank – Helen Crowley for being a patient and yet gently prodding contact in London, Jeannie Martin and Helen Irving for their efficiency and bright ideas as co-editors, and Sylvia Deutsch in the History Department at ANU for her work in communicating with the contributors. But most of all the contributors, and the lively and diverse feminist culture which sustains them and me.

Ann Curthoys
Canberra, November 1995

Note

Ann Curthoys is Professor of History at the Australian National University, Canberra. Her fields of interest include Australian feminist history, Aboriginal history, and the history of journalism.

References

- 1 CAINE, Barbara and PRINGLE, Rosemary (1995) editors, *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- 2 ANG, Ien (1985) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London and New York: Routledge.

From left to right: Jeannie Martin, Ann Curthoys, Helen Irving.