introduction

95 | worlds turned upside down

Ann Genovese

In 1996, *Feminist Review* published a collection of papers by Australian and New Zealand feminists in a special edition, 'Feminism in the Antipodes: The World Upside Down'. The collection, edited by historian Ann Curthoys with sociologist Jeanne Martin and political scientist (as she was then) Helen Irving, was quietly confident about the place of feminism in the Australian collective political and cultural psyche, despite its self-perceived role as a necessary agitator. Feminism, as represented in the collection of papers in the edition, was viewed as a particular form of praxis that may have been marginal, but was undoubtedly implicated in debates about Australian society at the end of the twentieth century. Australia at this time was publicly grappling with the destructive aftermath of decolonisation, the hope for a final decentring of metropolitan power in 'the antipodes', and the need to recognise the lived dimensions of the politics of difference, which dominated all *fin de siècle* Western democracies, especially as they related to sexed and raced identities. There was a sense conveyed however, that Australian feminism could afford to continue to play a role, as it had done so publicly in the 1970s and 1980s, in refiguring the complexities of the present for its own future, as well as that of the nation (Curthoys, 1996).

That said, the essays also included some signs of disorientation and strain. Cultural theorist Margaret Henderson would describe such signs as part of the realisation in the 1990s by feminists and others from the broad Left that the material conditions which had enabled a sustained period susceptible to liberation politics were fracturing (Henderson, 2006). My own piece in 1996 tried to reflect on what was happening to feminism's public validity, played out in a seemingly generational spat about what feminism should or could represent (Genovese, 1996). Those tensions, unleashed by key texts by 1970s 'icons' Helen Garner and Anne Summers, are seen and diagnosed much more clearly now. They are interpreted as both signification of and causation for the idea of feminist loss or failure as the ideal conditions that had fostered its liberation phase dissipated. These texts also signified in Australia a space in which many individual women took stock of their own, often ambivalent, positions on feminism, as Zora Simic notes in her essay here. But it was Marian Sawer in 1996 who fired the early warning shots about how the public identity of Australian feminism, once eloquent in its commitment to

emancipatory projects, was losing traction. She presciently saw the writing on the wall as regards the much vaunted and ground breaking relationship in Australia between feminism and the state that allowed policy to be made that was cautiously supportive of gendered equity and fairness in the 1970s, and the 1980s. Sawyer wrote that the public nature of that relationship, imbricated in ethics of care in a welfare state/social liberal model, 'help fuel resentment on the part of those rendered insecure by rapid social change', and she suggested strongly that the 'neo-liberal "upsurge" and its case against distribution based on difference grounds (which were always historically grounded on material need also) was therefore not going to auger well for feminist projects' (Sawyer, 1996: 131–132). By the time *Feminist Review* issue 52 came out in March 1996 we had a new conservative Liberal Government, led by Prime Minister John Howard. Howard's politics were premised on an overt ideological commitment to policy making and cultural reshaping that were dependent on downgrading collectively generated state assistance, and that were also committed to neo-conservative values that mistrusted and resented, as Sawyer had predicted, the emancipatory projects that feminism and multiculturalism in particular had come to represent.

Australian feminism since we last collectively checked in has therefore had a turbulent time. (This is attested to also in recent individual papers in *Feminist Review* by Ruth Phillips (2008) and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (2008)). The 1996 edition may have been a view of feminist praxis from the other side of the globe, but 'the world upside down' is a different kind of narrative in 2008. It is a story about presumptions and certainties *turned* upside down, all over the post-1989 globe; it is a story about a struggle for feminist self-identification and reckoning, about public value and discursive commitments, in a vastly changed paradigmatic order. These stories are not of course unique to Australia: that is the point of the project of new forms of regulation required by globalisation and the ways in which nation states deal with those challenges in light of their own democratic identities, as Angela McRobbie has made clear in relation to life in the UK under Blair, for one example (McRobbie, 2000). But as Wendy Brown has noted, the move toward the global does not signify the end of the nation as a site of analysis. It becomes more important, as the particular myths, stories, and experiences that have shaped the particular become increasingly significant for communities to understand on a specific level as they change, or disappear (Brown, 2006).

In 1996, the point of an antipodean edition of this journal was to share what was not at the time easy to share: stories of the local, with an international audience. Despite important exchange of personnel and ideas between Australia and the US and UK, the practice and idea of Australian feminism was distinctive and separate, a consequence perhaps of the oft-cited uniqueness of the relation between feminism and the state in Australia (as described for example by Hester Eisenstein in her book *Inside Agitators* in 1996). But as Ann Curthoys noted in her editorial this separateness was, more prosaically, a consequence of the tyranny

of distance from the Northern Hemisphere. Mundanely, the seductive traffic of ideas translated through the world web wide was but in its infancy. (Ann Curthoys sent me the file of her Editorial, written in November 1995, in order for me to think about writing this one, and it is salutary to note her cover letter to London contact Helen Crowley. It had very detailed instructions about sending things by fax, and waiting for hard copies of photos and manuscript to arrive by air mail.) In 1996, Curthoys was surely accurate in her reflection that most of the time Australian feminists wrote for Australian audiences, and that we were 'surprised and ridiculously pleased if anyone else takes notice'. The point of an Australian collection of essays now, more than a decade on, is different. It is to try and make sense of our local experience in a transnational way. This is aided of course by the technological revolution we have experienced over the past decade – most forms of research and scholarship are now able to transcend their national audiences and interests, in ways not realised in 1996.

What we want to share in this edition is therefore broader than we imagined in the collective offering in 1996, but in other ways it is markedly narrower. We want to try and make sense of what has happened to feminism, in the symbolically marked period between 1996 when Howard was elected, to November 2007, the moment of Howard's End. We want to ask if, and how, feminism has been turned upside down in that period: as a practice, a discipline, and a politics. We do not assume that the relationship of feminism with the state and in the public consciousness and in personal experience has been transformed since the election of the Rudd Labor Government. But we do think the Howard years provide a historically demarcated frame, a period of intense change to political ordering in and of the nation that has transnational resonance, that is important to reflect upon and analyse through specifically feminist lenses. Unabashedly, this is an Australian rather than a New Zealand collection, the experience of feminism under Howard being qualitatively distinct from that under Helen Clark.

We have also chosen to limit our reflections to a specific representative site: the academy. In late 2007, Maree Parry, Zora Simic and I put together a symposium that asked if feminism, in the contemporary moment in Australia, was 'Mainstreamed or Muzzled?'. That question was provoked initially by concern over the precarious status of Gender Studies at the University of Melbourne, where Maree is the last woman standing in terms of the academic programme. The university is one of the oldest institutions in the country, but is undergoing a period of massive transformation toward a US style system (of graduate professional degrees and broad liberal Arts undergraduate curriculum), which has left interdisciplinary, small programmes like Gender Studies vulnerable to a very real threat of extinction. But the 'mainstream or muzzled?' provocation was also a way of posing questions about the broader historical sweep, the impact of the neo-liberal moment on the state and markets, and the state of emancipatory political projects that has resulted. The call for papers identified the experience

of feminism within the academy as a way of representing that wider exploration, of offering some clues or indicators about feminist epistemologies, and public perceptions, in a climate of *ressentiment*. We wanted to ask some specific questions, rather than try and demonstrate the range of interests that concern us. The papers we offer here are representative of our discussions that day, and provide multivalent and also diverse insights. This is not a surprise: they are the work of feminist scholars situated in very different places in relation to the questions the symposium posed, both in terms of their discipline, and their public position in the academy, and outside.

Barbara Baird's contribution, for example, offers another dimension to the short history of Women's and Gender Studies in Australia than that suggested by the experience at Melbourne, and that develops throughout these papers *in toto*. Baird is currently the head of a small, but thriving, Women's Studies Department, at Flinders University in South Australia. Flinders is a very different place to Melbourne, and has been at the forefront of pushing scholarship around gender and race for a long time. Baird's piece gives an insightful overview of the often fluctuating fortunes of not just feminism, but feminists, in the Academy, as they deal with the *real politik* of shrinking tertiary sector funding. Yet Baird feels guardedly optimistic. She notes importantly that the 'emotional labour' feminist academics must put in to feeling secure and belonging to institutions in order to offer necessary and critical work, is getting harder. But at the same time, she is not persuaded that feminism has been mainstreamed or muzzled, and she reminds us how essential feminism and Gender Studies remain, to colleagues and to students, in the range of questions they need to ask about the society in which they live.

Zora Simic also offers insights into how such contemporary discourse, including a very different take on post-feminism, operate in the public domain. Simic, with Monica Dux, has recently published a book in Australia called *The Great Feminist Denial* (2008), the aim of which is to try and make sense of how feminism has been made into a 'straw woman' over the last decade or so in national public debate. The book has had, unsurprisingly, mixed responses in the press, and Simic begins her essay here by describing her reaction to being labelled a 'doorbitch of feminism', a gatekeeper as an academic, in one such review. This concept that academic feminism is the bearer of the flame and in fact capable or desirous of keeping people 'out of feminism' is something Simic thought worth exploring. She develops a concept of 'feminist competency' which she tests and explores through interviews conducted for the book. Her conclusions are varied, and ambivalent: but it is clear that academic feminism understood as an object of public discourse is something we need to understand better, to make continued claims for relevancy, both inside and out.

Mary Spongberg also makes claims for relevancy, but she is appealing directly to the readership of *FR*, and similar journals. Mary is editor of *Australian Feminist Studies*. This has been ranked the nation's premier feminist publication, but the

policy process that lies behind journal ranking, and its ideological undercurrents, are closely scrutinised in Spongberg's essay. She notes that the recent history of the state's incursions into how the university sector is funded has had real and often detrimental effects on the possibilities that feminists have to research and then publish. She makes it very clear that the fortunes of feminist scholarship are tied to political dictates that often remain out of the control of feminist academics themselves. That said, the nature of Spongberg's analysis enables her to offer important and strategic insights into how we make this work: by drawing on the internal strengths of feminist scholarship of all stripes, which by definition meet the contemporary demands for interdisciplinarity, social relevance and transnational significance. In making her case, Spongberg exhorts us to continue to engage in good feminist citizenship: a large part of which is predicated on intellectual, and personal, engagement and conversation, across boundaries and borders.

It is important that Margaret Thornton is included in this edition. Thornton has been at the forefront of challenging legal culture, practice and jurisprudence through feminist thinking for over 30 years and her recent work has been about the corporatisation of the academy, and the impacts of neo-liberal ideology on its culture and practice. Her broad argument is that feminist scholarship has been particularly at risk through this process. Thornton's work is cited, often, when making arguments about how and why feminism still needs to voice its intellectual and political muscle in melancholic times. Her open space piece here draws on these themes through the precise site of the legal academy, which because of its own epistemological – and correlatively professional – barriers to women and feminism, is a site *par excellence* for examining empirically feminism's shrinking presence.

I asked Ann Curthoys, as editor of the last 'Antipodean' collection, to offer a Postscript to this one. Curthoys was not present on the day of the 'Mainstream and Muzzled' symposium. In fact, as she describes here, her political energies and intellectual commitments have predominately been focused not on feminism, but elsewhere over the past 10 years: on questions of race and colonisation. It is important to note that most contributors here, and at the conference, have also engaged in these questions in their work. The attention on feminist issues and scholarship in the Australian academy, as Curthoys shows, has been split, or diffused, for reasons distinct from, but related to, the move of the markets to the Right. (Although I suspect there is an important connection here: that we may be moving toward a better understanding of how feminism sits in relation to the specifics of the Australian state by seeing the experience of indigenous Australians as central rather than exceptional to our stories of minority politics and rights claims.) That said, Curthoys' forays into feminist thinking and writing since 1996 have been on the themes of this collection: the nature of feminist scholarship, its relationship to the state through institutions and its ongoing

need to offer critical insight and political energy into the many, many issues that women in Australia, and elsewhere, must continue to face.

The collection then, unsurprisingly, offers no answer as to the question the symposium posed: Australian feminism in the academy remains ambivalently positioned, yet capable of framing, identifying and pursuing with great energy and commitment questions that demand our attention.

author biography

Ann Genovese is a legal historian who teaches at the Melbourne Law School. She works on the history and theory of the relationship between Australian law, the state and political culture. Her major projects, more specifically, have focused on: History, law and indigenous peoples; History of feminist legal activism; and histories of the administrative state. Through these projects Genovese has expertise in a range of jurisdictions and areas of law: evidence, family law, legal theory, administrative law, criminal law and native title. Her most recent representative publications include *Rights and Redemption: Law, History, Indigenous Peoples* (UNSW Press, 2008), co-authored with Ann Curthoys and Alexander Reilly; and 'Poisons and antidotes: Historicising feminism and equality in an age of rights competition' (2008) 27 *Dialogue* 10–22.

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