

Editorial

Connecting women in the age of difference: Re-thinking gender in twenty-first century Aotearoa New Zealand

This special issue of the *Women's Studies Journal* is an exploration of the theme of difference and diversity among women in Aotearoa New Zealand in the twenty-first century. As a construct within feminist literature, 'difference' has, for over three decades, irrevocably altered the landscape of feminist politics – in both its scholarship and its praxis. Fundamental to the theories of difference that have emerged since the 1980s is the idea that women's lived realities differ vastly depending on, amongst other variables, their sexual orientation, racial and ethnic background, religious beliefs, age and income status. This seemingly simple reality has had profound ramifications. The recognition of difference is credited with having imploded ideas of solidarity within the feminist movement as well as that of women's identity, oppression and emancipation within feminist scholarship. However, all references to differences have not necessarily been divisive; the concept has refined feminist analyses, with a greater emphasis on the intersectional contexts that define women's experiences, as well as their disadvantages.

If difference began as a statement of divergence in the 1980s and 1990s within the feminist movement, in the twenty-first century the implications of difference are not limited to feminist politics or feminist writing. Women as diverse (and consequently, incommensurable) communities of identities and interests are continually played out in mainstream society, whether it is the media, politics and policy, education, or employment. Meanwhile, the reality of difference is seen in the diverse social and economic experiences of women's lives. While the notion of difference obviates the tendency to construct perceptions of winners and losers, uneven patterns of social marginalisation persist. Alongside – and despite – these patterns, women continue to generate remarkable accomplishments. Consequently, the normativity of difference provides, in the twenty-first century, a complex landscape in which new feminist politics are to be charted and inscribed.

In some respects, an issue devoted to 'difference among women' in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly in 2011, seems at odds with recent women's organised responses to politicised events in the country: the 'slutwalks' organised in major cities in June this year to protest the culture of blaming the victim when women are raped; the furore at much publicised comments of Employers Federation and Association chief Alisdair Thompson, seemingly justifying women's lower wages because they menstruate; and the ongoing legal and media battles fought over abortion rights. These instances perhaps support the argument that there remain core 'women's issues' that are shared, despite the many differences among women in terms of our respective social locations. Yet, in the same year, there are stories of Muslim women in burqa being barred from boarding public buses because of their face coverings, and of a Northland couple being the target of repeated hate attacks because they are lesbians. And while our institutions cry foul at the lower representation of women in boardrooms, the stories of women fast slipping into poverty are being obscured. These stories are a sobering reminder that, lurking beneath our sameness, we are also different and, specifically for that reason, we

need to confront, understand and connect with each other despite our differences.

The rest of this editorial undertakes an overview: first, of the core concepts underpinning our issue; second, of the profile of diversity in New Zealand; and finally, of the papers that make up this issue.

Overview of concepts

Difference, diversity, and intersectionality are terms that are often used interchangeably. While they all acknowledge women's varied social contexts that manifest as particular life experiences, there are some particularities – both continuities and contradictions – in the way these terms are theorised by various authors. Difference feminism tends to be focused on the male/female gender divide and the ways in which women may be positioned more positively within this binary. In contrast, diversity feminism complicates the concept of women by considering race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other categories of social identity (Dietz, 2003). More recently, the theory and methodology of intersectionality has offered a conceptualisation of women and men as simultaneously positioned along multiple axes of difference which, rather than being separate and distinct, intersect and interlock in ways that serve to intensify or multiply the lived experience of oppression and marginalisation among structurally disadvantaged groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Intersectionality also contests the more common 'additive' approach to diversity that emerged during the 1980s, which sought to recognise the 'problems' of racism, classism, heterosexism and able-bodiedism by conceptualising them as additional layers of oppression built on top of the (implicitly assumed) fundamental basis of sexist oppression. From an intersectional perspective, the question becomes that of how to

grasp theoretically, and explore empirically, the points of overlap and intersection between various constellations of difference without employing gender as a privileged master category, but also without losing sight of the structuration of gender relations. (Lutz et al., 2011, pp. 69-70)

These three terms and the shifts in foci they represent parallel what Nancy Fraser, in her 1997 book, *Justice interruptus*, considers as the evolution of three key phases in twentieth-century feminist debates (she was referring to the U.S. context but this has wider applicability) that explicate an evolving understanding of 'difference'. In the first phase, which roughly covered the period of the 1960s to the 1980s, she argues that the focus was on 'gender differences' wherein feminist debates centred around whether women were equal to or distinctly different from men, with argument for and against both positions. Fraser's second phase, which she suggests started in the 1980s, shifted the locus of feminist debate from gender differences to 'differences among women'. Largely promoted initially by lesbian feminists and feminists of colour, this phase focused on history, normative representations, and social marginalisation to depict a nuanced set of women's experiences that were only remotely connected with heteronormative and Eurocentric women's life courses. The binary of the previous phase, i.e., equality versus difference, was substituted by analytical frameworks that drew attention to 'multiple jeopardy, multiple affiliation, and multiple identity' (Fraser, 1997, p. 179). The third phase of feminist debate, starting in the 1990s, has seen a move to theorise not just gender but a range of politicised differences akin to it, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, class and so on. Feminism has, in contemporary discourse, become less about women *per se* and more about social justice generally, across an array of variables that differentially marginalise particular groups of women and also some men, in specific contexts. The articles in this collection offer an eclectic melange of ideas drawing on all three concepts of difference, diversity and intersectionality, but also extending them into newer terrains that specifically point to the character of social and individual transitions in Aotearoa New Zealand.

New Zealand's diverse profile

Demographically, economically, and socially, diversity is fast becoming the hallmark of Aotearoa New Zealand society. Unlike any other period in its history, late twentieth/early twenty-first century New Zealand is confronted with a rapidly changing profile of age and ethnic identification that has significant implications for its social, cultural, and political makeup, including issues that specifically affect women. Here, we look at select statistics highlighting New Zealand's diversity in age, ethnicity and family structures.

Age has become a key variable of lived difference among women. The proportion of women over 65 is increasing and in 2006 represented 13.2 per cent of the female population¹. It is expected that nearly one in four women in New Zealand will be aged 65 or over in 2031². Older women are more likely to be living alone, largely because of their longevity. According to 2001 Census figures, women aged 65+ are also greatly dependent on the New Zealand Superannuation³. While the 65+ age group is increasing, the proportion of young people is decreasing in the wake of lower birth rates for several decades. Aotearoa New Zealand is therefore trending towards a population profile that is not just aging, but also feminised, with large numbers of older women who are more likely to be financially dependent on the state.

In terms of ethnicity, New Zealand is poised to become a multi-ethnic society with the growth of its non-Pākehā population groups within the next two decades. It is projected that between 2006 and 2026, New Zealand's Asian population will nearly double (from 9.7 to 16.0 per cent), its Māori population will increase from 14.9 percent to 16.6 per cent, and its Pacific populations from 7.2 to 9.8 per cent⁴. There are also specific macro-level patterns associated with the ethnicity of women. The average birth rate in 2007 was 2.17 per woman, but this was higher among Māori women at about 2.94 children per woman⁵. The average life expectancy for women was 82.2 years in 2005-2007, higher than the male figure of 78.8, but this differed across ethnicities with Māori women having a shorter life expectancy of 75.1, while male Māori life expectancy is even lower, at 70.4 years⁶. Pākehā women, on average, earn more than women in any other ethnic group and, indeed, earn more than many Māori and Pacific Island men (average hourly wages are \$18.12 for Pākehā women, and \$15.15 and \$14.75 for Māori and Pacific women respectively). The profile of violence (domestic and sexual violence) also differs across ethnic groups – with the rates being highest for Māori in both categories⁷.

The Ministry of Social Development's *Social Report* (2010) also gives us a profile of our differences in sexual orientation, able-bodiedness and household composition. Two-parent families are still the norm in New Zealand, although there has been a substantial rise in the number of one-parent families. The rise of 'mother only' households is responsible for the bulk of the increase in sole parent families. The proportion of 'mother only' families in 1976 was 8.8 per cent; in 2006 it was 23.5 per cent⁸. While there is a gap in the availability of reliable information on actual numbers of gay, lesbian and transgendered people, there is some available information about same-sex couples who live together. The 2006 Census recorded just over 12,300 adults living with a partner of the same sex, making up 0.7 per cent of all adults living in couples, a marginal increase since the 2001 Census⁹. The 2006 Census also provides disability statistics. As recorded in that Census, about 17 per cent of the population experiences some form of disability, with similar rates for males and females¹⁰.

These numbers are only part of the picture of difference and diversity. Many of these statistics, on further scrutiny, represent 'double', 'triple', or more accurately perhaps, 'multiple' jeopardies – women of colour who are disabled; young single mothers from minority groups; older women who are lesbian. But most importantly, these statistics in no way tell us about the lived experiences of these differences. The stories of achievement and celebration, marginalisation and isolation behind these numbers come to us from individual narratives and anecdotal

accounts. From these stories, we gauge how society responds to differences and, hopefully, how we may react to the institutional responses that either fail to recognise, or actively discriminate against, these differences. It is these evidentiary stories that are developed into the analyses offered in the papers in this issue.

Overview of the papers

In keeping with the theme, the present issue is deliberately eclectic in format. This special issue brings together diverse genres of writing, including scholarly articles, personal reflections, creative writing and reviews, each developing a distinct dimension of the thematic subject. Politics, literature, academic knowledges, poetry, workplaces and careers, among others, are put through a critical lens, demonstrating through their analyses the nature of the normative in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the experience of the outlier.

Immediately following the Editorial, we present a poem by Renee Liang on her Chinese identity, setting the tone for the theme of this issue. This creative piece is followed by several scholarly articles, including a work-in-progress research report and a graduate student paper. These academic articles are summarised below. We also include in this Special Issue some personal *Reflections* by a former Labour Party list candidate, Anjum Rahman, addressing the challenges of being ‘different’ in New Zealand’s mainstream political system. Two book reviews follow; one by Nadia Gush and the other by Leen Al-Hadban, both on topical subjects relating to diversity in New Zealand. Finally, we present Arezou Zalipour’s review of a recent example of Asian New Zealand cinema – Roseanne Liang’s critically acclaimed film, *My wedding and other secrets*. Our Special Issue is thus neatly bookended by the creative efforts of the extraordinarily talented Liang sisters who, in many respects, embody many of the complexities and contradictions of living with ‘difference’ in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

Naomi Simmonds, an emerging scholar, provides the first academic article, which offers a comprehensive analysis of mana wahine as a knowledge foundation that has implications for a range of fields, including theory, art, and practice. Mana wahine, as Simmonds notes, is a space of intersection of ‘being Māori’, and ‘being woman’ – it is a ‘complex and tricky’ space, an ‘in-betweenness’ that allows for exploring Māori identity from a position of power, rather than through the reactive acts of ‘talking back’. Despite its unique location, Simmonds argues that mana wahine is interwoven intimately with the wider Māori social and political fabric of mana tane, mana whānau, mana whenua and mana atua, while also having points of commonality with Pākehā feminism. Mana wahine, as she adroitly convinces us, is a valid alternative to foster knowledges of difference.

This issue contains two articles analysing contemporary Māori fiction, each exploring the complex, if at times vexed, world of difference. Both contributions are written by members of a collective of emerging German scholars based at Justus-Liebig University in Germany. In the first piece, Lisa Bach, Katharina Luh and Ulrike Schult take a comparative approach, using two of Ngahua Te Awekotuku’s short story collections – *Tahuri* written in the late twentieth century, and *Ruahine* in the early twenty-first – to explore a complex range of femininities in these stories. They specifically focus on an analysis of feminine representations in four motifs: the multiplicity of hetero- and homosexualities, family and kinship, female strength, and spatial surroundings. In looking at these motifs, the authors move the analysis of similarities and differences from the perspective of the ‘male gaze’ to that of ‘woman sight’. Together these papers argue that multiple – and conflicting – identities are resolved, not in the mainstream or the periphery, but rather, in the interstices, the bridging and ‘in-between’ spaces and representations where fluidity is the norm. It is here that difference thrives.

In the second of the literary analysis articles Svenja Bingel, Vera Krutz, Katharina Luh and Anneki Mütze adapt Witi Ihimera's *The uncle's story*, taking three minor female characters from the original story to explore the complexities of reconciling sexual identities and Māori identities. The authors use an intersectional or what they call an 'intercategorical' analysis, where the relationship *and* reciprocity among multiple identities of an individual are explored in specific social contexts. The article reflects on the tension between heterosexuality, homosexuality and being Māori, and the diverse ways in which the characters seek to resolve these tensions. Time is integral to this analysis; whereas in the past, homosexuality and Māori-ness were irreconcilable, the story, set in contemporary times, shows the unique ways in which selected characters negotiate these tensions and their resolutions. Thus, Roimata, the 'Māori lesbian' and Michael, the 'Māori homosexual' set out to have a family and build a 'new gay tribe', whereas Amiria marries and settles into an American life, permitting her to redefine her Māori and heterosexual identities within the framework of a global and cosmopolitan world.

From here, our special issue turns to an exploration of the unexpected epistemological and ontological similarities between certain influential strands of feminism and mythopoetic men's movements. Helen Gremillion's paper suggests that both movements are underpinned by similar binary and essentialist gender constructs, and hence tend to affirm universalising assumptions about the nature and primacy of gender identity. The author compellingly argues for the need to critically interrogate these taken-for-granted gender constructs in order to more effectively challenge and contest dominant heteronormative ideologies. Drawing on Derrida's concept of *différance*, she explores possibilities for representing gender in non-binary terms, arguing in favour of politicised, poly-vocal, and liminal gender constructs. This paper thus addresses important theoretical and practical questions relating to notions of equality, difference, relationality, and intersectionality in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand.

The following paper by Rachel Simon-Kumar reflects on some of the ways in which 'gender' as a politicised category of identity and disadvantage appears to be losing visibility and credibility in the contemporary policy arena. Partly as a result of the necessary acknowledgement of women's heterogeneity that this very Special Issue seeks to highlight and affirm, the socio-political category 'woman' has become ruptured, porous, and as a result, is rendered increasingly vulnerable to erasure. Yet simultaneously, 'ethnicity' appears to be growing in prominence and legitimacy as a marker of identity deserving of both recognition and the benefits of economic redistribution. Simon-Kumar offers a partial explanation for this seemingly contradictory phenomenon and contends that, unlike gender, 'ethnicity' has been successfully reframed as an economically significant and potentially valuable marker of identity in a wider geopolitical context where successive New Zealand governments have actively sought to forge closer economic ties with Asia. On that basis, Simon-Kumar suggests that traditional social justice arguments for policy remedies to address women's disadvantage are unlikely to achieve much headway in the current neoliberal political context. Rather, more effective traction might be gained by strategically reframing such arguments in terms of the clear economic inefficiencies that arise from gender inequality. Such an approach, Simon-Kumar contends, might be successfully reconciled with a postmodern theoretical conceptualisation of 'woman' as multiple and diverse through recourse to Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism'.

In a research note provided by Judith Pringle and Lynne Giddings, we are given an extensive – and very personal – introduction to their intended research project on the effects of the continuing prevalence of heterosexual norms in the workplace. They hope to use the herstories of lesbian academics to explore heteronormativity in academe, with a view to demonstrating its effects on lesbian women's lives and careers. Acker's (2006) notion of 'inequality regime' provides the framework by which they propose to deconstruct the heteronormative practices that

characterise the workplace. Pringle and Giddings intend to apply an ethnographic approach in the project and begin the process by presenting extracts from their own herstories. These serve as a starting point, a documented record of relived memories (variously joyous, traumatic, political, triumphant and cathartic), and as a demonstration of what potential participants in the research might expect to explore and contribute. Ultimately, this paper is a call for lesbian colleagues to reflect on their different experiences in the workplace and to offer those memories as a means of challenging heteronormativity in the academy.

In contrast to heteronormativity and the different experiences of lesbians in academia identified by Pringle and Giddings, age is the variable by which difference is addressed in our final academic paper from Barbara Myers. Myers explores the experiences of older women who have undertaken a period of autonomous travel and work in another country, a phenomenon referred to as self-initiated expatriation (SIE). She draws on data gathered for her Ph.D. research to examine an activity that has previously been considered the domain of a younger generation. The increased life expectancy and career spans of the current generation of older people have enabled SIE at later ages, and the experiences of the older generation differ significantly from those of previous, younger generations. In seeking to fill a void in the existing scholarship, this research finds that older New Zealand women engaging in SIE ‘simultaneously disrupt and challenge the traditional expectations of older women and the male norm of a continuous career’. Initial analysis of the data suggests that SIE may be viewed as a significant life transition, incorporating ‘refocus, renewal and rejuvenation’. A process of ‘reirement’ is posited as the new ‘retirement’ and suggests an ‘emergent strand of life development and career theory’. Our final scholarly contribution thereby accentuates the importance of research and scholarship which keeps abreast of the kinds of demographic changes which engender experiences and life courses that are significantly different to those of previous generations.

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Notes

1 Statistics New Zealand (2007). *New Zealand’s 65+ population: A statistical volume*. Wellington, New Zealand, source Table 1.05, p.12.

2 Ministry of Women’s Affairs (2008). *Briefing to the Minister of Women’s Affairs, 2008*. Wellington, New Zealand, p.13.

3 Statistics New Zealand (2005). *Focusing on Women, 2005*. Wellington, New Zealand, p.94.

4 Ministry of Women’s Affairs (2008). *Briefing to the Minister of Women’s Affairs, 2008*, p.13.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ministry of Social Development (2010). *The Social Report, 2010*, <http://www.socialreport.msd.govt.nz/people/gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-people.html>

9 Ibid.

10 Ministry of Social Development (2010). *The Social Report, 2010*, <http://www.socialreport.msd.govt.nz/people/nzgers-experiencing-disability.html>

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