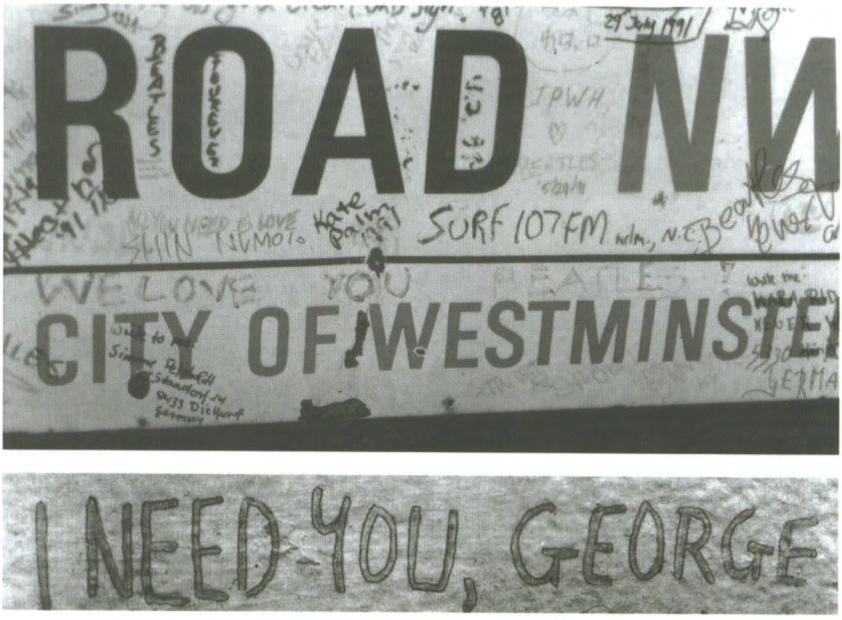
Women's Studies Journal

2001 17 : 1



2001

Women's Studies Journal

Volume 17, Number 1
2001

The Women's Studies Association of New Zealand
with University of Otago Press

The *Women's Studies Journal* is published twice yearly by the New Zealand Women's Studies Association Inc. with the University of Otago Press

All contributions and content enquiries:

Women's Studies Journal
Stefanie Rixecker
Environmental Management and Design Division
Lincoln University
PO Box 84
Lincoln
email: rixeckes@lincoln.ac.nz

All subscription and advertising enquiries:

Women's Studies Journal
University of Otago Press
P.O. Box 56
Dunedin

ISBN 1 877276 24 3
ISSN 0112 4099
Printed by Otago University Print, Dunedin

Contents

Editorial

Feminist visual culture is an interdisciplinary field where differences between analyses have been vigorously debated and generously accommodated. The good news continues to be the vibrant diversity in feminist media and cultural studies and feminist-influenced art and film in a period when certain prestigious universities, in the USA for instance, are dropping feminist writers in favour of teaching 'The Greats', i.e. pale males. For many feminists in and beyond academia, the broad area is considered important because it 'feels' instinctively useful to have plenty of structuralist analyses and empirical studies that critique so-called 'negative images' of women: the exclusion of women artists, narratives reinforcing women's vulnerability or second class citizenship/artistry, and so on. The potential of such work to produce readily intelligible counter-discourses and new images of ourselves, which can be used in various public arenas to support policy, legal and image changes, and thus empower women, is invaluable. Authors in this issue note that such 'ammunition' is used in New Zealand by public figures. The two writers who begin and end this special issue on Visual Culture, Karen Stevenson and Marian Evans, exemplify this important work (see below).

If you don't know the feminist visual culture field then this is a good place to start, and, if you do, it offers a range of New Zealand research, often hard to come by. But, arguably, it has been the meta-theoretical debates among feminists about *types* of explanations, and the mixture of philosophical and analytic work produced to support those various arguments, that have done the most, in the longer term, not just to inform feminist studies but to make all of our lives easier. In these multiple senses New Zealand feminist visual cultural studies at this time could be said to be in energetic good heart, and yet perhaps faltering. Let me explain.

It is well known that from the mid-1970s feminist theorists in wealthy countries began observing that the 'sexual revolution' was hardly proving to be of great advantage to women, carrying, as it did, serious chemical, relationship, sexual agency, workaday and self-esteem fishhooks. It was then, and still is, easy to feel like a guinea pig. In an

environment where it wasn't cool to be *seen* to enjoy fucking men or to have male lifetime partners, with some notable exceptions (Shere Hite, Leeds Radical Feminists, Cartledge and Ryan, the Barnard Conference), the volume of writing and art about heterosexual relations was tiny, relative to explorations of other aspects of women's lives. I haven't traced the latest research but, between the 1990s and the present, I sense that this trend has been reversing somewhat, with a greater volume of writing issuing mainly from young feminists, about sex and heterosex, in particular. This special issue illustrates the trend. The call was for visual culture, and four of six articles that arrived were centrally about heterosex in and as popular culture, and how young women intersect with it.

The energies of younger feminists in exploring issues that arise around the so-called 'new sexualities' (meaning women's putative 'freedom' to be safe and autonomous sexual agents, and how men and women are dealing with that) are welcome. There is undoubtedly room for research on how women make sense of film, television, popular music, magazines and so on because they are major sources of information and models. In a time where consciousness-raising groups are passé, focus-group research, for instance, gives small groups of women a chance to hear and discuss what others have gone through, in sessions made safe by feminist facilitators, and then provides the opportunity for others to read what is said. Focus-group research is reported here by Sheryl Hann, Tiina Vares and Karen Due Theilade. Likewise, transdisciplinary critical cultural studies (represented by Tara Brabazon's article on graffiti and women's exclusion from popular culture) encourages us to think *simultaneously* and in complex ways about the broader, the local and our individual pictures and processes. The potential is immense for this analytic work to foreground internal and social contradictions, solutions and performances – the 'gaps and slashes' in binary identity performances and structuralist theory, as discussed by postmodern theorists. The writers here, and many of the women they spoke with, were aware of the contradictions in the 'new sexualities'. Some of the stories emerging are alarming enough to justify expeditious research funding. (Leila Harré, Liz Gordon, Marion Hobbs, Philida Bunkle, Helen Clark et al., please note.)

However, I am concerned that, at the moment, so few feminists in this country seem to be taking up questions of pure theory. How do we explain these trends and reactions?

Listening to university classes discussing *Sex in the City* and *Ally McBeal,* I am aware of the influence of popular discourses in any environment where feminist scholarship has not been valorised and mainstreamed, and where *is* that happening? At the moment, many prevalent stories and issues could be said to cluster around two poles familiar to academics as 'postfeminism' and 'postcolonialism', and, in each case, their popular rather than their academic variants. In parallel fashion, one striking aspect of much of the current work for me was the apparent demise of the idea of 'postfeminism' as cutting-edge feminist theory. The term appears to have become contaminated by popular wrangles around the vilification of feminism and the rejection of the 'post-' idea out of a painful awareness that there is so much yet to be won for women. Maybe academic postfeminisms are also considered 'too hard' or insufficiently 'applied'. Instead of understanding postfeminist theories as serious, playful, innovative and lusty experiments with new ways of conceptualising and communicating, as well as of transforming real-life circumstances around multiple and fluid subject positionalities and pleasures, many writers prefer the safer ground of structuralist theories and gendered discourse. Yet, to me, postfeminist frameworks inform what several of the pieces in this issue were investigating. There is a crying need, for example, for research on issues around sexual consent. How can this be productively and convincingly achieved without exploring the situated complexities of meanings, desires and dangers by venturing *beyond gender*, that is to say, beyond gender *and* all those other modernist identities that are collapsed back onto 'gendered bodies', such as binary sex, sexuality, citizenship and ethnicity? There are many useful ideas and phrases strewn throughout the work of this journal which I hope will resonate in future feminist visual cultural analysis: have-hold discourse, manipulation as power, imagining ourselves otherwise, critical unease, hardbody heroines, liminality …

A second and related issue is the lack of Maori women's voices in this special issue. I know that, for many Maori women at this time, 'feminism' and 'postcolonialism' are dirty words. While I have some sense of why that might be, I don't buy the argument that the reasons given for their disparagement are to be entirely laid at the feet of Pakeha feminists. Private and public grievances, and actions deriving from the dishonouring of the Treaty, are uppermost in the minds and energies of many Maori women. However, in these reactionary times,

it is crucially important that women of every affiliation continue to form and reform shifting coalitions around practical and intellectual challenges, coalitions that cross all those borders which we compulsively seem to set up, but which are better understood as infinitely flexible and permeable. At least, this is what both post-colonial and postmodern theories suggest. As do 'queer' theories.

Speaking of which ... The issue contains Marian Evans' elegant retrospective on lesbian feminist art, which represents the voices of artists too seldom heard, and is organised around the themes of land and love. Karen Stevenson goes beyond conventional wisdoms to argue that the attribution of 'taonga' renders irrelevant white conventions that divide 'art' from 'craft' along gendered lines to disadvantage and discredit female creativity and visions. She suggests that Pacific women's art is not to be dismissed as 'craft' or diminished as 'women's' but it is to be viewed as a vibrant and significant movement in New Zealand art history.

LYNNE STAR

Lynne Star is grateful for the assistance of Alison Hagen with formatting.

Pacific Women: Challenging the boundaries of tradition

KAREN STEVENSON

The art of Pacific women – bark cloth, mats, jewellery, costume/clothing, and tivaevae – traditionally, has, at best, been designated 'craft'. Today, however, this label is not only challenged by the art/craft debate, it is both denounced and expanded upon by contemporary Pacific women artists. Women of the Pacific have always been the purveyors of cultural values and have also been the makers of economic wealth. Their arts, seen as taonga, or 'valued items', were essential to the socio-economic and political arenas of their lives. These taonga, however, were not afforded equitable value and recognition when introduced to the Western world. Their importance as 'gift', let alone their cultural significance, was overlooked, as they were merely labelled 'artificial curiosities'.

Within these very basic facts, essential issues of cultural, political, and artistic significance are found. These are intertwined with histories of colonisation and migration, which have impacted on the myths and realities of the Pacific. Scholarship about women's traditional art forms is scant, as the explorers and most of the early anthropologists were men, whose interactions (outside the sexual realm) focused upon the chiefs. Typically, they did not think women's work was important, or, to give them the benefit of the doubt, did not have access to women's knowledge. Only in the last 20 years have women's roles within a traditional context been discussed.[1] The residual effects of this early scholarship, coupled with gender bias and ethnocentrism, are seen clearly in the ongoing art/craft debate which remains a key issue in artistic discourse today.

In 1983, Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk suggested that the artwork of the men and women of the Pacific followed the strict gender divisions often prescribed within their societies. Since then, however, Teilhet-Fisk and a number of others[2] have re-examined this literature to find that women and the art which they produced were essential items within the social, cultural, and economic spheres of Pacific societies. Particularly related to the hierarchical systems of daily and religious life, bark cloth, mats, and sennit literally created 'the ties that bind.'[3]

Due to the cultural value of these objects, they remain integral to Pacific life today, wherever one finds it. As a result, those who have migrated to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States have maintained the knowledge and links to these traditional art forms as they reinforce cultural values in a new environment. This essay will look at these traditions, as well as the contemporary art practices which reference them. In so doing, it will become evident that Pacific women's art can not be dismissed as craft, fashion, women's art, or any other label offered to trivialise, but must be recognised as a significant movement within New Zealand's art history.

A brief segue into New Zealand's migration history and its social ramifications is essential. New Zealand's post-war economy was prosperous. Yet, with a weakened labour force, labour was sought from the islands associated with New Zealand – Samoa, Rarotonga, Tokelau, and Niue. Seeking access to a monetary economy, many left their homelands to find opportunity. The waves of migration that followed continued, although the dream sought was not easily accessible. The foundations of an urban pacific culture slowly emerged.[4]

New Zealand, as a Pacific island, was a foreign environment, confusing and rarely friendly. By the mid 60s, there was a substantial population with its attendant social problems. Women around the country formed PACIFICA: a place where they could meet, help and learn from one another.[5] In essence, they created an island reality in their urban environment. PACIFICA was a social organisation, whose objectives were to provide opportunities for Pacific women to contribute effectively in their new homeland.[6] This organisation enabled the transition from the island to the urban, using cultural traditions and ideologies as their bridge.

These traditions have become stereotyped and, as such, have come to signify the Pacific as popular culture in New Zealand. *Pasifika* is the mama's crocheting and making tivaevae;[7] it is also hip hop and urban Pacific fashion and design. Perhaps, more than anything else, it is the myriad of opportunities that foster and participate in a vital artistic phenomena, currently recognised as *Pasifika*. Focusing on the contemporary art production of Pacific women, as well as the traditions and cultural values from where it derives, this essay will demonstrate the complexity and variety of these art forms.

Most traditional arts are categorised as craft. They are not

allocated the cultural significance they imbue. The fact that we are discussing women's art forms, which have never been labelled 'art' in the societies that produce them, does not enhance their position as they move to another cultural sphere. However, these were labelled 'taonga', which is the essential indicator of their cultural value. This ambiguity is complicated by the realities of living in New Zealand, where the fabric of Pacific societies is at odds with the western mindset, which is New Zealand.[8] These differences are the basis for cultural misunderstandings, both from inside and outside of these communities.[9]

One response has been the assertion of cultural identity. Drawing upon Pacific personae, individuals can create their position within a new cultural milieu. The Pacific, though, has become popular culture, and the perpetuation of Pacific stereotypes has become rampant. Seeing the islands as little more than holiday destinations, the concept or label of 'Pacific' immediately conjures up numerous mental images, involving sun-drenched beaches, palms, a beautiful maiden, and sweet-smelling flowers. For artists, or those involved in their culture, the label has both opened and closed doors. Most artists who fit the label do not appreciate having it placed upon them. Issues of identity come into play – often that of artist taking priority over Pacific islander. At the same time, the Pacific label can come with funding, exhibitions, and recognition. The result is a negotiation between traditional/contemporary, art/craft, urban/island, forming the unique practice which is Pacific art in New Zealand.

Pasifika has become a blend of traditional culture/language/ideology with an urban sophistication and savvy. *Pasifika* addresses the urban reality of islanders and their attempts to balance notions of identity and loss, migration and place, youth and age, tradition and change. These contrasts create ambiguity and the need to challenge, to experiment, to find one's place. Traditionally based ideologies (especially those based in an urban environment) create contradictions. Artists discriminantly embrace particular aspects of their heritage, which enable them to exemplify their position within this contemporary practice. The question, then, is how does the practice of traditional women's art integrate with contemporary art forms? Is there an art/craft dichotomy, or does it/can it work within the context of contemporary Pacific art?

The work of Ani O'Neill engages with these questions. Her work

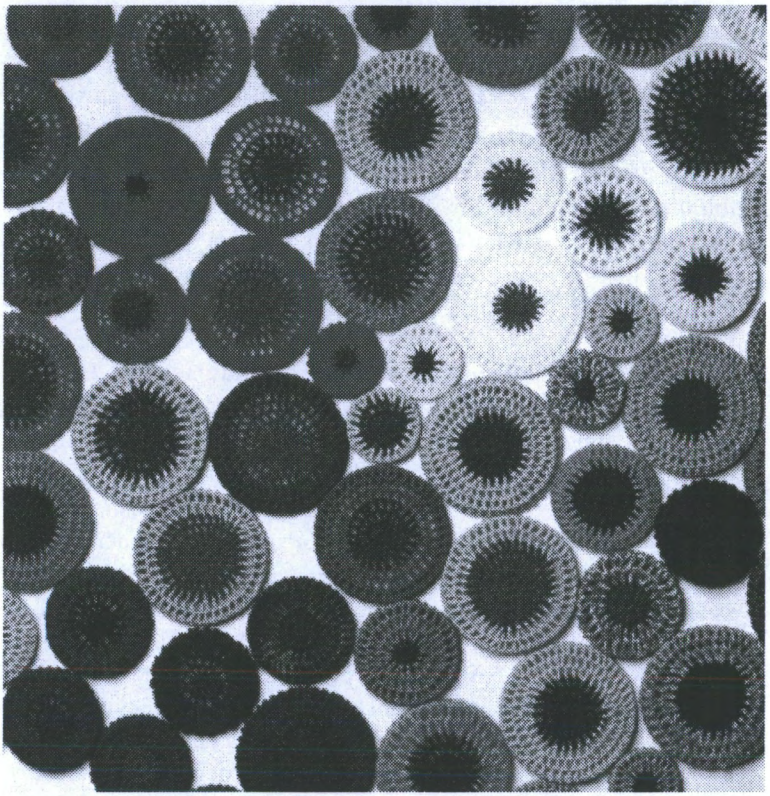


Fig. 1 Ani O'Neill, Rainbow Country, 2000. Crocheted wool. Variable sizes.

has taken a variety of directions in a very short time. The issues that she has embraced include: stereotype, tourism, representation, and the art/craft debate. These are interwoven in her practice; a practice: of hand work – crochet, plaiting, embroidery – and of women's work. *Tangaroa*, sewn from brown corduroy with embroidered eyes, acknowledged the god image, while questioning its denigration through mass production. What happens to a god once he becomes an object of ridicule? The social implications of this light-hearted work touch a very real cord of cultural loss. This loss, however, is countered by the dissemination of knowledge, and here again O'Neill is a good example. She was taught appliqué and plaiting by her grandmother, an example of Cook Island traditions spanning another generation.

O'Neill combines these techniques, creating a practice based in tradition. In the past year, she has crocheted 'paintings' (Fig.1), focusing on the issue of value *vis-a-vis* women's art. Placing these within the Gallery, O'Neill has challenged the attitudes that dismiss women's art as craft.[10] At the same time, she identifies herself as an urban Polynesian combining the needlework traditions of her grandmother with the global hip hop traditions of Auckland. This is recognised in her role as one of the founding members of the Pacific Sisters – a perfect example of *Pasifika*. The Sisters combine an energised street culture with fantastic reinterpretations of Pacific tradition, thereby creating their own. With costume (Fig. 2) and performance, they play into the 'neo-tribal', recontextualising and reinterpreting ritual activity in the Pacific. As such, they do not draw on the traditional, but create traditions for a contemporary audience. Their costumes are energetic, playful, dynamic, alive. Using feathers, shells, bark cloth, and fibres the Sisters create truly remarkable ensembles. Having fabricated their own multi-cultural traditions has placed the Sisters in a unique position. Brought into the mainstream, as recognised players they have been taken off the fringe, thereby losing the edge on which they depended.[11]

The urban Pacific is ever changing, constantly becoming, incorporating new ideologies and technologies. New media both define and re/present *Pasifika*. Veronica Vaevae's practice is an integral part of this new wave. Experimenting with the moving image as well as sound, Vaevae uses motifs of the Pacific to move beyond the stereotype. She plays with the oppositions and contradictions that create and challenge *Pasifika*. Her artwork draws upon her cultural knowledge packaged in a medium that addresses a new island culture. Vaevae's use of video imagery and sound links Pacific youth, who understand the saturated video image that comes from, and participates in, popular culture.

Writing about a series of works titled *Mix that Scratch*, John Pule comments:

> The two worlds Vaevae presents to her audience are those of a young video artist. Excessive with sound, expressive with her carefully chosen subjects. Dance, music, and family are integral to Vaevae's ideas...She succeeds in a quiet way to instil a sense of cultural creativity coming to fruition, a cool handler of domestic life. Combine that with hip rhythms,

familiar grounds, and we get a glimpse of songs and dreams that represent a small portion of her psyche.[12]

It is this blending of ideas that is so exciting in Vaevae's work. She plays to her audience, Pacific youth, and captures fragments of their lives to reinterpret anew. In *O's and X's,* she combines a children's game with the foundations of Pacific culture – bark cloth and tattoo. In this way, Vaevae creates a new tradition drawn from the plaiting techniques of old. Her work reflects a very basic tendency in Pacific art to work from the grid; yet to create a variety of interesting patterns that are layered with complexity. This archetype is embedded in Polynesian cultural traditions, traditions that for many urban youth would be subconscious – and are yet, as real as *O's and X's.*

I have used 'tradition' to access the knowledge of the past, but I have also used the word to acknowledge its vitality in the present. I do so fully understanding the debate that has surrounded this battered word. Before attempting to discern the relationship of tradition to the contemporary, it is necessary to discuss the concept of 'tradition'.[13] Recently, Albert Wendt stated: 'I don't like the word "tradition" – let's just throw it out.'[14] His reasoning is that the word places Pacific art in a bell jar that was sealed in 1768, when Cook first ventured into the region. This notion ties art production into a masterpiece mentality, in other words, only that collected by or produced around the time of Cook is valid Pacific art. Wendt is not new to this argument. He entered into the authenticity debate as early as 1983.[15] Since then, he has encouraged Pacific artists to speak for themselves – to discontinue the colonial process – to find their own language. He seems to forget, however, that their language is, for the most part, English.

But tradition is not a nasty word, and their language is an artistic one.[16] Tradition is loaded with ambiguity. It has survived many a battle and is, perhaps, a bit threadbare. The debates that hijacked its essence are similar to those that focused on authenticity and tourist art, as well as the art/craft debate. Scholars have grown weary, and the debate is passé. Yet, the problems surrounding these issues have not been resolved, just dismissed. Notwithstanding, artists continue to peruse these issues and have added a further dimension to the above, when the concepts of ownership, knowledge, cultural property, appropriation, and representation are also acknowledged. What we see in contemporary practice is the attempt to negotiate tradition, which

Fig. 2 Pacific Sisters performing at the VIIth Festival of Pacific Arts, Samoa 1996. Photograph, Karen Stevenson.

is at the heart and soul of Polynesian society, to address other social and historical inequities, which are the consequences of colonialism.

One such is cultural loss. Lily Laita's work focuses on the complexities of this issue. She is interested in knowledge, its dissemination, its importance, its essence in tradition. Language, a key to knowledge, is an important element in her work. She includes a phrase here, a word there – either Maori, Samoan, or English – her languages. Interested in the relationship of idea and image in oral tradition, Laita uses words, colour, and metaphor to strike at the heart of Polynesian culture and tradition, that of 'veiled knowledge'. Her figurative (yet often seen as abstract) canvases reinterpret a knowledge acquired over time. An obligation to learn, to look, to understand is demanded from her viewer. With this knowledge comes responsibility. *Vahine Pasifika* offers a narrative over time and space. Re/presenting Samoan élite placed on exhibition in German zoos, the colonial history is not alluring; nor is the migration history – grandmothers with grandchildren in tow break the link of cultural knowledge. Most horrifying, however, is the contemporary *taupo* consigned to her position as cleaning woman. Such images of Pacific women are real, but what does one do with these insights? Clearly, the viewer's social and cultural background, and the knowledge which that provides, are necessary components to Laita's work.

Laita does not restrict herself to the canvas,[17] but works in a variety of media – whichever is most appropriate for her narrative. Her focus brings cultural values into question. Drawing upon the value of cultural treasures, as well as current attitudes towards their imprisonment, Laita has challenged the notion of ownership – both of knowledge and objects. Many believe that the gods and their realm, in both oral traditions and physical manifestation (their sculpted or woven form), have been captured from their rightful owners and imprisoned within western institutions. The Auckland Museum was the focus for such an inquiry – *Redress*. Feeling that 'a sadness prevailed over the room; that valued objects, taken from their homes, [were] dusty and mistreated', Laita placed cloth over the old cases as references to shrouds and colonial flags. In this way, Laita offered the objects and the space its rightful burial. In this work, she demonstrates that the issue of cultural property is not being acknowledged in this 'post-colonial' era.

Yet, there is an ambiguity here, for without the museum many of

the objects they hold in trust would have disappeared. This does not present a contradiction, because Laita's work thrives on ambiguity. Nothing is straightforward – abstraction becomes figurative, theory becomes real. The multiple layers, the variety of readings, depend not only on the viewer, but on the traditions, the ideologies, the knowledge that Laita instils in her work. She creates a visual language reflecting the complexity and importance of these traditions. In this way, the past and the present combine. Referencing the political energies of PACIFICA, Laita offers a different perspective into the current phenomenon of *Pasifika*.

Representation, the way that Pacific islanders have been portrayed by others, plays a large role in the positioning of New Zealand as a Pacific island. Recognising both a geographical and social reality, it also continues the colonial process by subscribing to the Pacific as popular culture, as stereotype. Many artists wanting to express or draw upon the cultural practices, either traditional or contemporary, comment upon and critique this stereotype. As such, *Pasifika* invigorates the artistic debate. *Pasifika* enables urban/New Zealand-born Pacific women to create an art of their own – their own traditions, derivative of the cultural and ideological practices of the islands. But islands often not theirs. The relationship between an idealised past and an all too real present demands a critical reappraisal of cultures changed through migration. More than a cultural heritage, the fact that these artists are all New Zealand born is essential. The re/presentation of the myth – the cliché – offers a cultural critique and underlies this growing artistic movement. Drawing upon culture, tradition and identity, these women have created a niche that is uniquely theirs.

Using the familiar to critique the stereotype, ideally to demand a second look, is also evoked in Pacific jewellery. Niki Hasting-McFall and Sofia Tekela-Smith create jewellery which allows the wearer to signal an allegiance to and, ideally, an understanding of, the derivative tradition. This is a tradition often based on hierarchy and status; and status is signalled by adornment. Both Hastings-McFall and Tekela-Smith unabashedly take on the Pacific (Fig. 3). The lei, frangipani, and cowry shells are refashioned, often entwined into contemporary lei, creating jewellery immediately recognisable as Pacific. The frangipani or hibiscus, those ubiquitous Pacific icons, are the cornerstone of *Pasifika*. One would be hard pressed to find a more

familiar icon. Yet these are not the floral variety that greet one on arrival in the Pacific. These works of art become individual statements of both cultural loss and critique, as well as pride and aspiration for the future.

Hastings-McFall is interested in cultural impact and its consequences. Using the necklace/lei as her object, she creates a contemporary piece of value intermingling modern and traditional materials. In *Two Kinds of Gold* and *Past Currency II,* she addresses the value placed upon objects, combining valued currency from Pacific and Western cultures. Sofia Tekela-Smith also creates contemporary lei, which allude to objects of cultural value. Pearl shell and pearls are fashioned with twined silver. The frangipani, as a motif, comes forth again, often comprised of cowry shell, beads or greenstone. The importance of status objects – objects reflecting the hierarchical societies of the Pacific – offers another dimension. As artists re/presenting ethnocentric stereotypes, attributing chiefly status and authority to the lei suggests a forgotten nobility. Pacific peoples, once seen as Noble Savages, have become little more than objects of lust. This is clearly seen in the representation of the dusky maiden, a pliant female ready for the taking. Tekela-Smith renounces this myth with her 'Dusky Maiden' label. Using images created for the male gaze, she turns the cliché around. As brooches or lapel pins, they redefine the Pacific woman as self-confident and assertive – matching the male gaze at every turn.

In these ways, and again through the guise of a Pacific icon, Hastings-McFall and Tekela-Smith redress historical interactions re/presenting the Pacific. The exploration and promotion of valued cultural traditions – traditions created within the Pacific but for communities in New Zealand – link the past, its knowledge, custom, and ritual, to an assertion of identity.

Challenging the conventions of the Pacific, wanting to undermine the paradigm, underlies the intent of Sima Urale's film *Otamaiti.* She constructs an image, not of bright colours and hibiscus, but of a bleak reality of Pacific immigration. Drawn to New Zealand with a dream of economic prosperity, many find the socio-economic reality hard to negotiate. These issues are articulated in a number of ways. Laugutu Poloai focuses upon the economic, creating in *Economical Resources* (Fig. 4) a spiralling piece made from plastic shopping bags. Referencing the change from a subsistence to market economy, she

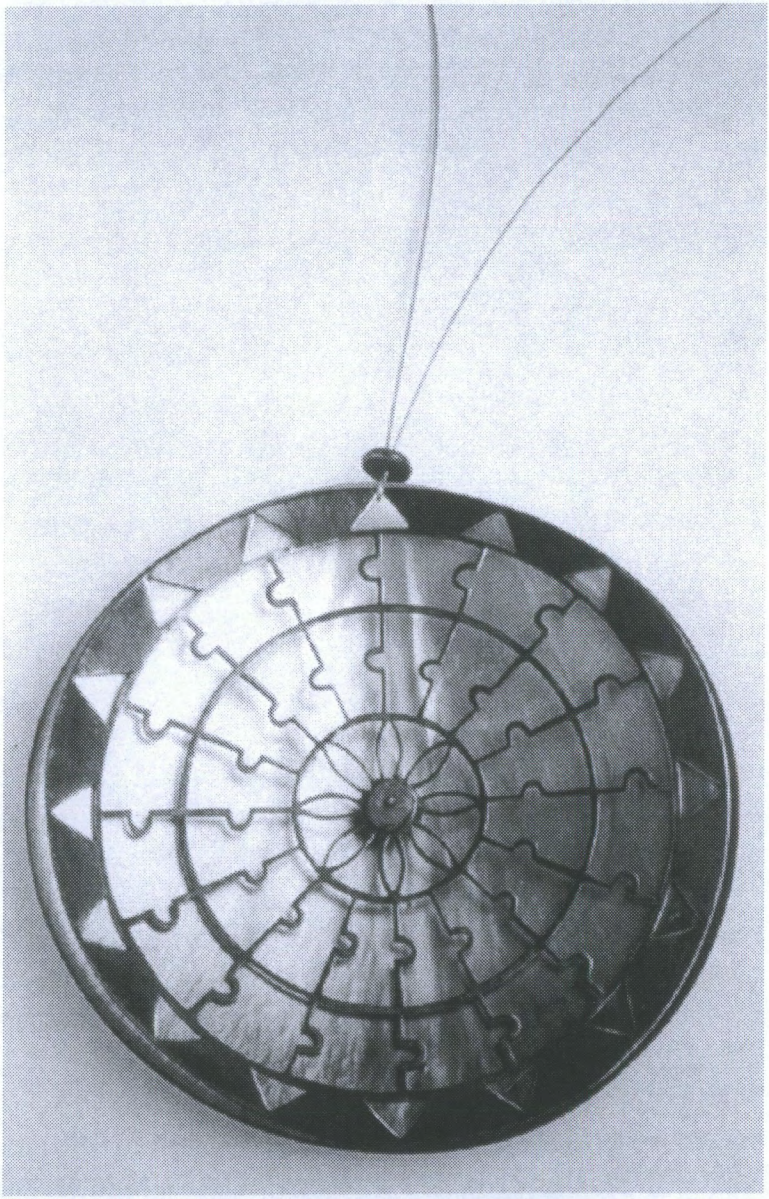


Fig. 3 Niki Hastings-McFall, Silver Kapkap, 1997. Sterling silver and black lipped pearl. 10cm in diameter.

Fig. 4 Laugutu Poloai, Economical Resources, 1994. Recycled shopping bags.

reflects both the dream and the nightmare.

Urale's work deals with this economic reality, and, more importantly the social ramifications appended to it. *Otamaiti* ('The Children') demonstrates the losers in the desire to get ahead. Parents with multiple jobs leave children to fend for themselves. With the extended family left behind in the islands, the network of social responsibility has unravelled. This film not only critiques this social truth, but questions the cultural obligations that *fa'asamoa* both enforces and perpetuates. The question is not whether *fa'asamoa* is good or bad, but whether it can play itself out in a new land.

The importance of the church within the Samoan community is one outcome. The church, dominated by male elders, emulates the chiefly system of the islands. A refuge where one can find familiarity in a foreign environment, the church has reinforced many cultural traditions. However, the church is also an object of cultural critique. Loretta Young exposes the control the church wields over the community, as well as its greed.

In *O Le Salamo 23* Young creates an installation using gold and silver fabric. With this she plaits mats – integral to Samoan culture – on which sit beanbag chairs: the old and the new combine. On each seat the 23rd Psalm is printed. The contradiction between the 'We shall not want ...' and the material on which it is placed is quite unsettling. Young is not the only woman to vilify the church. Hastings-McFall, in *Red Feather Ula*, questions the sanctity of a religious endeavour which sought to destroy that which it did not understand. These critiques of the church demonstrate the importance of women's art production in New Zealand. As noted above, the politics of PACIFICA have engendered this art movement. PACIFICA can also be seen as the balance or contrast to the church. An organisation of women for women, emulating the roles of women's art forms in the islands, has encouraged and supported the artistic critique seen today. These artists illustrate the complexities of cultural change and acknowledge the social ramifications that are the consequence of missionisation, migration, and integration.

Challenging the boundaries of traditional art practice in the Pacific, these women move beyond the past, beyond the stereotype. The traditions, oral histories, the cultural value of women's art – the islands left behind – are re-negotiated to create new traditions, histories, new value in their art practice. *Pasifika* as a movement has

been fuelled by a sense of loss and the necessity to reinforce a cultural identity. More than fashion, *Pasifika* gives women a platform, a voice, a means of expressing their creative potential. Critical of the *status quo*, yet wanting to assert their position, Pacific women are the driving force behind *Pasifika*. Integrally linked to place – identity – tradition, these contemporary art forms demonstrate that the past is not static. By negotiating tradition, challenging its boundaries, Pacific women are creating a vital and living future.

KAREN STEVENSON *is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch New Zealand where she teaches the Arts of the Pacific. She received her PhD in Oceanic Art History from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1988 and the following year was spent as a Rockefeller Fellow at the Center for Pacific Studies at the University of Hawaii. Her writings and research have focused on the politics and institutionalisation of culture, art and identity, the Pacific Arts Festival, and most recently on Contemporary Pacific Art, particularly that produced by 'urban Polynesians' in New Zealand.*

Notes

[1] There are exceptions to this, including the work of Willowdean Handy, Teuira Henry, and Margaret.

[2] A brief example of this literature includes: Easterday, Kaeppler, Linnekin, Shorr, Teilhet-Fisk, and Weiner.

[3] See Shorr, Brad. Mana and Tapu, in *Developments in Polynesian Ethnology*, Howard and Borofsky, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989.

[4] For an intriguing literary account of urban Pacific culture in New Zealand, see Pule, *The Shark that Ate the Sun*, Penguin Books, 1992.

[5] PACIFICA stands for: Pacific Allied (women's) Council Inspires Faith in Ideals Concerning All.

[6] PACIFICA's objectives are:

a) To present policies and programmes that will provide opportunities for Pacific women to contribute effectively to the social, economic, and political development of New Zealand and its people.

b) To give Pacific women opportunities to plan and work together for the stability and development of themselves, their communities and so contribute to the development of the country.

c) To create ways and means of involving Pacific women in overcoming obstacles on the achievement of equal opportunities and responsibilities.

d) To master the means of communication bringing Pacific women to the point of understanding a vision of a life in which they are fully participating.

e) To inspire unity among women of Pacific island origins in the furtherance of these aims so that all can speak with one voice, in true fellowship.

[7] This cliché, seen as popular culture in television advertising, suggests a sedentary, matronly role for Pacific women. This is in distinct contrast to the politically active women who organised and maintain PACIFICA.

[8] One example of this dialogue focused on an exhibition of *tivaevae* at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Critic, Keith Stewart, titled his review of 'Patterns of Paradise, Cook Island Tivaevae' Craft Not Art. *Sunday Star Times*, 22 January 1996, p.D4.

[9] These social realities and contradictions are the focus of Tiatia's *Caught Between Cultures, a New Zealand Born Pacific Island Perspective.* Auckland: Christian Research Association. 1998.

[10] These paintings were the focus of Cottage Industry in Wellington and Auckland, and have been O'Neill's contribution to a variety of other exhibitions, including the Sydney Biennial and Close Quarters.

[11] See also, Vercoe and Leonard. Pacific Sisters, Doing it for Themselves. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1997, 14:42-45.

[12] Pule, John. The Navigator, *The Log Illustrated*, Winter 1997 1(1):8-9.

[13] Jocelyn Linnekin reviews this literature in The Politics of Culture in the Pacific, *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific,* Linnekin and Poyer eds, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1990. See also Keesing and Tonkinson, *Mankind*, 1982, v13, and Linnekin, J. Defining Tradition: Variations on the Hawaiian Identity, *American Ethnologists*, 1983, 10:241-252.

[14] This comment was made at the Tautai Trust Sculpture Symposium, Auckland Institute of Technology, March 1998.

[15] Wendt, Albert. Contemporary Arts in Oceania: Trying to Stay Alive in Paradise as an Artist. *Art and Artists of Oceania*, Mead and Kernot, eds. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1983.

[16] See Stevenson, Karen. Negotiating Tradition: The Art of Lily Laita and Ani O'Neill, in *Art and AsiaPacific*, 1998, 18:68-73.

[17] Her paintings are actually on builders paper and not canvas.

References

Easterday, Anastasia. The Concept of Gender in Hawaii: Art, Society, and Western Mediation. 1993, ms.

Handy, Willowdean. *Tattooing in the Marquesas.* Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 1.

Handy, Willowdean. *Handicrafts in the Society Islands*. Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 42, 1927.

Hawtin, Fiona. Greenstone for Gaultier. *New Zealand Herald* Wednesday 21 July, G8.

Henry, Teuira. *Ancient Tahiti*. Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 48, 1928.

Kaeppler, Adrienne. Geneaology and Disrespect: A Study of Symbolism in Hawaiian Images, in *RES*, Spring 1982, 3.

Kaeppler, Adrienne. Art and Aesthetics, in *Developments in Polynesian Ethnology*, Howard and Borofsky, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989, pp. 211–240.

Keesing, Roger and Robert Tonkinson. *Mankind, Special* Edition, v.13, 1982.

Linnekin, Jocelyn. Defining Tradition: Variations on the Hawaiian Identity, *American Ethnologists*, 1983, 10:241–252.

Linnekin, Jocelyn. Who Made the Feather Cloaks? A Problem in Hawaiian Gender Relations, in *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 1988, 97(3):265–280.

Linnekin, Jocelyn. *Sacred Queens and Women of Consequence.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.

Linnekin, Jocelyn. The Politics of Culture in the Pacific, in *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*, Linnekin and Poyer, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

Mallon, Sean and Fuli Pereira. *Speaking in Colour.* Wellington: Te Papa Tongarewa, 1998.

Mane-Wheoki, Jonathan. The Resurgence of Maori Art: Conflicts and Continuities in the Eighties. *The Contemporary Pacific* 1995 7(1):1–19.

Mead, Margaret. *Coming of Age in Samoa*. New York: William Morrow and Co. 1928.

Mead, Margaret. *Social Organisation of Manu'a*. Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 76, 1930.

Panoho, Rangihiroa. *Te Moemoea no Iotefa, The Dream of Joseph: A Celebration of Pacific Art and Taonga.* Wanganui: Sarjeant Gallery. 1990:24.

Peterson, Giles. *Fireworks: Art of Pacific Age*. Exhibition catalogue, 1998:7–8.

Pule, John. *The Shark that Ate the Sun*, Penguin Books, 1992.

Pule, John. The Navigator, *The Log Illustrated*, Winter 1997 1(1):8–9.

Rongokea, Lyndsay. Tivaevae: Cook Islands Quilting. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1995, 2(4):68–75.

Shorr, Brad. Mana and Tapu, in *Developments in Polynesian Ethnology*, Howard and Borofsky, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989. pp. 137–173.

Simpson, Emily. Dusky Maiden. *New Zealand House and Garden* July 1999:105–109.

Smith, Bernard. *Imagining the Pacific*: *In the Wake of Cook's Voyages.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Stevenson, Karen. Culture and Identity: Contemporary Pacific Artists in New Zealand. *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History* 1996, 17:59–68.

Stevenson, Karen. Wicked Magic: The Seventh Pacific Festival of Arts. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1997, 14:22–24.

Stevenson, Karen. Negotiating Tradition: The Art of Lily Laita and Ani O'Neill. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1998, 18:68–73.

Stevenson, Karen. O's and X's, Veronica Vaevae. Exhibition Catalogue, School of Fine Arts Gallery, 1998.

Stevenson, Karen. Sum Niu Mahi, Lily Laita. Exhibition Catalogue, School of

Fine Arts Gallery, 1998.
Stevenson, Karen. Pacific Art: Moving Beyond the Stereotype. *Art New Zealand* 1999, 90:64–69.
Stevenson, Karen. The Island in the Urban: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand. ms.
Stewart, Keith. Craft Not Art. *Sunday Star Times* 22 January 1996: D4.
Taouma, Lisa. Cottage Industry. Wellington City Art Gallery. 1998.
Taouma, Lisa. Velvet Dreams. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1999, 23: 38–39.
Teilhet-Fisk, Jehanne. The Role of Women Artists in Polynesia and Melanesia. *Art and Artists of Oceania*, Mead and Kernot, eds. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1983. pp. 45–56.
Teilhet-Fisk, Jehanne. To Beat or Not To Beat, That is the Question: A Study on Acculturation and Change in Art Making Process and its Relation to Gender Structures. *Pacific Studies* 1991, 14(3):41–68.
Thomas, Nicholas. Reflections on South Pacific Art. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1995, 2(4):46-48.
Thomas, Nicholas. The Dream of Joseph: Practices of Identity in Pacific Art. *The Contemporary Pacific* 1996, 8(2):291–317.
Thomas, Nicholas. From Exhibit to Exhibitionism: Recent Polynesian Presentations of 'Otherness'. *The Contemporary Pacific* 1996, 8(2):319–348.
Tiatia, Jemaima. *Caught Between Cultures, A New Zealand Born Pacific Island Perspective*. Auckland: Christian Research Association, 1998.
Vercoe, Caroline. Postcards as Signatures of Place. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1996, 3(1):84–89.
Vercoe, Caroline and Robert Leonard. Pacific Sisters, Doing it for Themselves. *Art and Asia Pacific* 1997, 14:42–45.
Vivieaere, Jim. Past Pacific. Exhibition Catalogue, Auckland, 1997.
Weiner, Annette B. *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives in Trobriand Exchange.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976.
Weiner, Annette B. Inalienable Wealth, *American Ethnologist* 1985, 12:210–227.
Weiner, Annette B. Why Cloth: Wealth, Gender, Power in Oceania. *Cloth and Human Experience* Weiner and Jane Schneider eds. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1989.
Wendt, Albert. Contemporary Arts in Oceania: Trying to Stay Alive in Paradise as an Artist. *Art and Artists of Oceania*, Mead and Kernot, eds. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1983.

Visual Culture, Public Stories and Personal Experience: Young heterosexual women discuss *Sex and the City*

KAREN DUE THEILADE

Introduction

Cass: [For] ages I didn't want to do it and I didn't have the ability to say, 'No, I don't want this'. Yeah because (...) I just had ...horrendous headaches and I was just numb and aching from head to toe and the last thing I wanted when my skin was on fire (...) was to be touched, and I felt so horrible doing this and it took me probably about a year to actually say, 'Actually I really, really don't want this.' And he was just like, 'Why didn't you say so?'

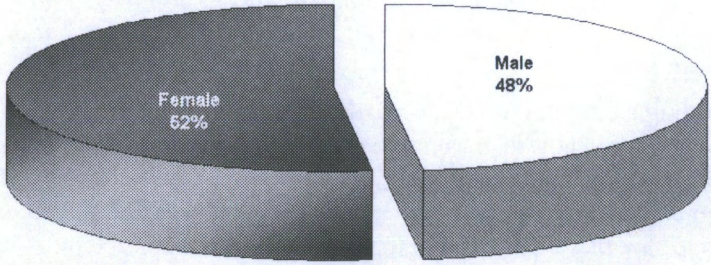
Cass is one of eighteen young women who participated in focus group discussions about the U.S. TV programme *Sex and the City* in Christchurch in late 2000.[1] Her comments were part of a discussion of how different ideas about sexual relationships coexist and sometimes contradict each other.[2] Cass related her experience of negotiating her sexuality to a scene in *Sex and the City*, where the character Samantha, who appears to be 'sexually liberated', consents to unwanted sex.

The idea that women 'traditionally' had to constrain their sexual pleasure in their relationships with men was challenged in western industrialised societies during what is often referred to as the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s.[3] Since the 1980s, feminist writers have stated that the choice to actively seek sex is also a sexual convention.[4] Ryan and Gavey[5] and Shalit[6] argue that heterosexual women's real experiences of sexual pleasure contradict the idea that women are sexually liberated, and research suggests that both young women and men may experience the 'right' to have sex as more constraining than liberating.[7] Cass expresses contradictions between her view of herself as sexually liberated and her practice of consenting to unwanted sex. This paper explores the complexities of contemporary heterosexual relationships through a discussion of how *Sex and the City* portrays sexually 'liberated' women and how three groups of heterosexual women spoke about the connections between

this programme and their lives.

Sex and the City has become popular in New Zealand over the last two years. While new programmes are currently being produced and broadcast in the US, the first series was repeated on TV3 in early 2001 and was viewed by women and men in almost equal proportions.

Gender profile based on April 2001 episodes



Source: Channel 3

The programme appears to present a 'new' story about 'sexually predatory' females. It portrays four conventionally 'attractive' and 'successful' female friends who continually engage in new heterosexual relationships in their search for 'true love', which they both pursue and critique. They are, however, simultaneously portrayed as independent, desiring, needy and emotionally vulnerable. As Wendy Shalit[8] has pointed out, the story about predatory women in control of their sexual lives is a new version of old ideas about women and sex. *Sex and the City* represents established discourses of the 'vamp' and the 'slut', as well as of romantic and mutual heterosexual love.

There has been little qualitative research on how young women respond to *Sex and the City*. Feminist studies of visual culture discuss viewers' active responses from within their own cultural milieux. Lacking such information, Shalit attends only to the variety of discourses in *Sex and the City*. She does not explore how this variety opens up possibilities for different readings of its story lines. Tiina Vares[9] used focus group discussions to prospect varieties of possible readings of movie action heroines, depending on the women viewing these texts and on the dynamics of conversation in particular contexts. Inspired by Vares' research, I relate the pleasures women articulated when they met to talk about *Sex and the City*.

I argue that the key to the success of *Sex and the City* is that it combines a variety of discourses about heterosexual relationships, while presenting stories about female 'sexual predators'. As Alice from the first focus group stated:

> *Alice: I've just realised that (...), because Charlotte (...) and (...) Carrie want a relationship, we are treating them differently in our minds. They are sleeping with the same amount of people, but [we're] calling Sam[antha] a slut but [not] Charlotte. (...) All those women are sort of exaggerations of characteristics that we all have.*

Although each focus group participant articulated her response slightly differently, themes emerged in each of the three groups. Most women in the first focus group were attracted to the idea of powerful women who were in control in sexual encounters, while the second group saw these 'powerful' and 'liberated' women as 'victims' in a number of sexual encounters. The third group tended to constitute themselves as sceptical feminists who were not 'taken in' by superficial representations of 'sexual liberation'. Although the women related the complexity of sexual relationships in the programme to their own lives, they wanted to distance themselves from the stereotypical display of sexually liberated women. The responses are examples of how some young women relate to power, choice, freedom and heterosexual practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The women were contacted through my networks of flatmates, friends and university classmates. All identified as heterosexual and Pakeha, except for one woman in group two, who was of Indian origin. The first focus group consisted of five regular watchers of *Sex and the City* in their early thirties. They were currently undertaking or had finished their tertiary education. The second focus group consisted of five women in their mid-twenties, who were irregular viewers of the programme. Two were undertaking a university degree and three had left school after the seventh form. The third group consisted of eight women in their twenties, of whom seven were regular watchers. All but one was currently undertaking a university degree.

Public Stories and Discourses

According to Lynn Jamieson, public stories represent stereotypical and judgmental 'narratives that anyone can draw on or distance

themselves from when telling their own story'.[10] In the opening statement in this paper, Cass tells her story about consenting to unwanted sex. She feels pressured by ideas about sexually liberated women and the importance of having a good sex life, which she relates to having herself consented to unwanted sex. Her story illustrates how social life is constructed around the circulations of public stories. Margaret Somers[11] calls the stories we make about who we are *'ontological narratives'*. They are expressed through social interactions within a given time and space, using public stories.

Scholars writing about people's ability to resist or receive messages from the media recognise that media images and viewers operate with the same public stories, and that these stories on a deeper level are embedded in discourses.[12] Foucault argues that these discourses relate to existing power/knowledge relations, since both dominant discourses and disruptive or innovative discourses express prevalent ideas in a particular context.[13] These young women drew on *counter discourses,* when they did not identify with stories about women as passive victims and objects of male sexuality, and embraced identities that challenged these assumptions. For example, in one of the focus groups, the women discussed a scene in *Sex and the City*, where the four key characters talk about 'fuck buddies', a man you meet only to have sex:

Bianca: I don't think women have emotionless sex, even if it's just like a one night stand (...)

Alice: (...) Most men I talk to, (...) if I tell them about fuck buddies (...), they say well that's impossible – you can't do it, because women just get emotionally involved. (...) That's why they feel so guilty sometimes when they have one night stands, because they felt like they probably lead the woman on. And I'm trying to get across to them that maybe they haven't (...).

Karin: Maybe the woman has lead them on ...

In the New Zealand context, Vares demonstrated how viewers create their own meanings, which often differ from the dominant messages in a film text.[14] Likewise, I regard the young women's responses to public stories presented in *Sex and the City* as an active process of meaning construction. Participants refer to the public stories, while simultaneously interpreting their own experiences of sexual relationships.

Sociologist, Anthony Giddens, has identified one dominant story, which is currently circulating in Western public life, as that of mutual, *confluent love,* and which 'presumes equality in emotional give and take.'[15] It builds on what Jamieson[16] refers to as 'disclosing intimacy' and what Giddens[17] names the 'pure relationship', 'which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction'. Despite poor evidence for such relationships, Giddens argues that love, sex and disclosing intimacy are increasingly prevalent. This public story appears in *Sex and the City*. In contrast, Jamieson recognises *romantic love* as a traditional story about the woman who passively gives herself in return for the protection of her male hero, who in return gives her pleasure.[18] This story also circulates in *Sex and the City*. A third public story in *Sex and the City* celebrates a sexually active, hunting heroine, who has the power to 'choose' men.

The Characters in *Sex and the City*

A columnist in *Time*[19] stated that *Sex and the City* portrays men as dogs, and that 'women can live well without being at either end of a man's leash'. Seeing the women in *Sex and the City* as sexually liberated 'predators' who also embrace romance, is a common reading of *Sex and the City*. The contradictions in sexual conventions and the portrayal of vulnerable, sacrificing women are seldom recognised. Wendy Shalit, however, reads *Sex and the City* symptomatically as concerning the failure of the sexual revolution, arguing that the female characters gain less, and not more, power in their relationships with men. Shalit recognises the discourse of mutual love, but argues that as 'sexual predators', the four female characters are unable to achieve this goal. Their unrealistic hope is evident in the 'monogamous' character of Carrie, who articulates Giddens' faith in confluent love. Shalit does not recognise that, as the main narrator in the series, Carrie is in a powerful position to articulate the possibility of mutual, confluent heterosexual love. This is combined with the celebration of women as active seekers of sexual pleasure. Although *Sex and the City* appears to highlight the discourse of women sexual predators, the possibility of combining confluent love with sexual liberation was its main attraction for some of the women in the focus groups.

The different discourses evident in *Sex and the City* are associated with particular characters. Carrie mainly sleeps with men to achieve long-lasting relationships; she is unsuccessful in both romantic and

confluent love. Charlotte is more vulnerable and innocent, and represents the discourse of romance. She sometimes acts as a 'victim', who sacrifices herself sexually to gain love. Performing what Duncan and Marsden[20] refer to as 'sex work', in which sex is used as a strategy to achieve intimacy or power in a relationship, Charlotte tends to get hurt when men do not pay her back with love.[21] Samantha is the model of independence, and her desire is achieved through sexual experience. This model of women's sexuality is, nevertheless, undermined through incidents in which the character has unwanted 'consensual' sex. Having sex for pleasure rather than love, Samantha mirrors stereotypes of male sexuality. Miranda is the feminist who believes that there is more to life than men and sex. She is less hopeful than Carrie about her possibility of confluent love, and tends to question the intentions of men in her sexual encounters.[22] Miranda is sceptical of all the stories presented in *Sex and the City* and appears to look realistically at the content of the heterosexual encounters.

Identification with *Sex and the City*

Focus-group participants used a variety of strategies to express their feelings of ambivalence, when relating their own lives to *Sex and the City*. The women in group one accepted the idea that women are sexually liberated and that mutuality in sexual relationships is possible because of this liberation. They therefore identified most closely with the character, Carrie. Asked whether it is a problem that Carrie has sex early in a relationship, Alice and Bianca responded:

Alice: Don't you want to find out if the sex is going to be good so [you can] decide whether you want to have a relationship? (laughing)

Bianca: Try before you buy. (laughing)

Explaining why Samantha consents to unwanted sex, Alice referred to the stereotype of the female slut:

Alice: You can't be a strong independent woman and sleep around.

The solution is to be clear about one's intentions and to remain in control. Talking about Carrie's one-night stands, Susan stated that this was all right since women in control are able to communicate their intentions when seeking the relationship:

Susan: As long as people are honest, as long as they both have the

same expectations. If you're going home with someone and they [are] going home with you for exactly the same reason then there's nothing wrong with it.

And Karin and Alice further commented:

Karin: If you're getting what you want, you're a strong independent woman. If you're doing something that underneath you really don't want, then you are hiding your own insecurities, that's what I think.

Alice: [Samantha] is having doubts about it, (...) because that's the strong independent woman coming out saying ooh, you shouldn't be doing this.

Mutual sex without love then, is possible for these participants, since mutuality in sexual relationships becomes a question of expressing desire rather than intimacy and love.

Arguably, Susan's understanding of confluent love mirrors the 'disclosing intimacy' found in Giddens' pure relationship, but I think it is closer to Ryan's definition of the first step to liberation in sexual relationships, expressed as the ability to communicate needs. Unlike Gavey, Ryan[23] argues that, if women became economically independent from men, they would achieve sexual liberation. This is possible through 'democratic autonomy', where both partners listen to the other's pleasures and emotional needs. This, however, demands equal resources.

The women in groups two and three were more sceptical about the idea of sexual liberation, seeing it as holding potential problems for women and a source of pressure for unwanted consensual sex. Both groups related more to the ambivalent feelings of the characters, Samantha and Charlotte. Women in group two recognised the way characters in the series were victims rather than powerful. During the discussion, Cass and Bec told stories about how they also felt constrained in sexual relationships:

Bec: Suppose when you are in a relationship you do have to compromise and the hardest thing also is when (...) either one of you wants to have sex or wants to have anything and the other one doesn't. You feel like you're really being quite hurtful to the other actually saying, 'No'. And they would pack a big sad and then you feel really guilty, so you feel like you have to do it anyway.

Ella: The hard thing is asking for it and not getting it, eh? Terrible place.

Cass: If you are truly in love with a person like when I started going out with [Peter] I went through [a] phase [where] sex ... I ... just [felt] like [I would rather] vomit ... than have sex. You know, it was the most horrible thing and I would still do it and I just [one] day said, '[I] just can't do it. Get off.' And he went, 'Oh my God, oh my God. How long have you felt like this?' And I went, 'Oh, my God'. I told him the whole story, and he went, 'Oh my God, we are not having sex until you say...' He was totally understanding; it blew me away. But I'm sure that was a complete fluke. Not all boys are like that.

Cass and Bec tended to relate these incidents as past experiences. They were now presenting as powerful women who, as Cass stated, would not engage in unwanted sex.

Women in group three, seeing themselves as feminists, identified the sexual contradictions in *Sex and the City* as structural problems of male dominance. They did not need to identify personally with powerful women in control or with vulnerable women characters, but enjoyed the boundary-breaking, funny comments about men, women and heterosex. They did, however, feel ambivalent about their pleasure in recognising the relation between sexual contradictions and an unequal power balance in social life, while dreaming of a different world, a world where women could gain a real sense of liberty.

They discussed how programmes usually portray women as objects, while *Sex and the City* reverses stereotypes, making the series less attractive for men. The viewer figures contradict this view. They argued that while Samantha appears powerful, she remains a male sex-object. Carol and Elaine commented:

Carol: If [she was not an object], people would find it too disturbing or too different.

Elaine: (...) [Sex and the City is] still is very male-oriented... They are all looking for the right guy.

When Samantha consents to unwanted sex with two gay friends who stop the sexual encounter in the middle, participants in group three did not see Samantha as personally responsible for her lack of control. Her act was interpreted as an outcome of structural in-

equalities between women and men. Kim, Margit and Anna commented on the two men breaking off the sexual act:

Kim: They are in control of the whole thing (...) It was their idea and (they) decided right, we don't want any more. (...) she's left dangling (...) They didn't seem to take her feelings into account.

Margit: (...) It was they [who] wanted to experience [it].

Anna: And so they used her body. You are a female; we want to try your body. (laughing)

A Distant Reading of the Characters

Each of the focus groups in various ways distanced themselves from the characters. Sexual problems were seen as the problems of 'weak women', particularly older, married women and teenagers, who would stay in relationships which were not sexually satisfying. In group two, Bec talked about gender issues and housewives, and Cass and Kea talked about 'the old days':

Bec: I could just imagine a housewife having to continually cook meals for a family and maybe she didn't want to. I don't really want to cut these carrots again and again day by day. But maybe the pressures on women [are greater] to conform and be submissive and be (...) things they don't actually feel they want to be.

Cass: Like in the old days where you got together with someone, you got married, you had six kids and that was it. There was no such thing as affairs or divorce or whatever.

Kea: It seems to be that there were always affairs but never [for] the female. The wives stayed completely faithful and had sex when required and stayed home and cooked the meals and had children, you know.

Group one also suggested that *other* women had problems with their sexual boundaries, while talking about themselves as having clear boundaries. In reference to Charlotte performing sex work, asked whether all women should work so hard to please a man, Alice responded:

Alice: No! She just wants to please him. There's nothing wrong with that. It depends what your reasons [are].

In this group, Charlotte was not seen to sacrifice herself sexually, but to perform an act of mutual pleasure. Alice talked about an earlier boyfriend whom she did not sleep with right away and referred to herself as a woman who can say 'yes and no', for the sake of the relationship.

Alice: I think we were a bit worried that [sex] might be all there was, so [we] wanted to prove to ourselves that we actually had something more. So, we kinda just drove each other around the bend for about three (...) months or something.

Susan: It makes it worse, you are getting even more aroused.

Alice: Exactly. It was stupid but it [was done for the] best intentions.

Alice presents as a sexually liberated woman, able to control her sexuality. Nevertheless, the consensus in the group was that sex is important to pursue. Asked if it is possible to say no to sex on a third date in spite of expectations about sex, and in contrast with what appears in *Sex and the City*, the women in group one all burst out 'yep', and Bianca declared:

Bianca: It's possible if I want to sleep [with] someone, I will. I think why would you want to [say no].

A similar question in group two led the women to talk about how bad it feels to have sex when it is unwanted.

The need for the women in group one to distance themselves from stories in *Sex and the City,* where women consent to unwanted sex or perform sex without pleasure, potentially challenges Giddens' assumption that confluent love is an increasing reality. The feelings group one read into their experiences may also suggest that they do not *recognise* those experiences as being the consensual unwanted sex documented as widespread by O'Sullivan, Holland and Shortland.[24] Reading their own experiences as women in sexual control means that they can engage in the complexity of sexual activity without feeling vulnerable or passive. They recognise women's vulnerability, but emphasise their power in sexual encounters and men's possible vulnerability and low self esteem. Karin refers to the pressure on men when Alice talks about the pressure upon women to consent to sex:

Alice: [I was] like 'we can't do this on our first date'. And he was

already saying, 'well what are we going to do tomorrow night. Are we going to go to the movies? (...) So, he was already planning ahead (...)

Karin: I always feel sorry for guys. I think they feel pressure to want to try it on. (...) I think [that] generally they've got more pressure on them.

Women in all groups distanced themselves from the programme by highlighting its American origin and by reflecting critically on the intentions of the producers. Kea commented:

Kea: Whenever you're a child you never ever make the worst of a situation. It's always the best of the situation, and that's what that program is all about. It's what you can imagine if your life was really on track and perfect.

Thomas[25] and Vares[26] also found that participants in their focus groups avoided personal identification with film characters by referring to the American content and to the producers' and directors' intentions.

In their reference to the programme as American, group three, however, also criticised the fact that in *Sex in the City* the sexual contradictions they saw in their own daily encounters were not recognised. A number of women in group two recognised Samantha's ambivalent feelings and did not judge her as a 'slut'. They saw in their own lives her desire to be seen as attractive and the pressures on her to feel good through being sexually active. Asked why a strong and powerful woman like Samantha consents to unwanted sex, some women first related to her as the one who is portrayed as the 'slut' in the programme, then as someone who just enjoys sex. Finally, Ella stated:

Ella: I think (...) she is quite the epitome of the show [by representing] a male. (...) Don't think about the consequences, just do it. And don't worry about (...) if it's right or wrong; or what it means. The drive to have sex is bigger than anything.

In Ella's perception, Samantha is a woman-who-acts-as-a-man, but is nonetheless the victim in the scene in which she makes herself available for heterosex with her gay male friends.

Referring to structural male dominance enabled the women in group three to avoid relating their identification of sexual contra-

dictions in the programme directly to their own lives, while still being able to analyse and critique incidents in the series. A repeated phase in their discussion was 'power relations'. Samantha was seen to consent to unwanted sex because male flattery about her 'looks' is worth more than women's appreciation. Kim commented:

Kim: Like the flattery you get from guys might seem more important to some people than the flattery you get from women (...) Often that is (...) the case. Lots of women want flattery from guys.

Like Ryan,[27] these women recognised that structural, economic inequality is a source of social pressure on women to consent to unwanted sex, but they also spoke about the pressure women feel from physically stronger men. Carol commented:

Carol: It's like that sort of power difference (...) If a woman is being pressured for sex, she is going to feel ... worse about it. (...) Also, it is quite often (...) a safety thing as well. Like, ah ... I'm being pressured and I don't have a lot of physical power or (...) a lot of power (...). But if a guy was being pressured, he will always have that knowledge that he can always just say no; and they will always be followed through. If he says no, then that will just be it. But if a woman thinks, you know in the back of her mind (...) there will always be [the] knowledge that they are often the weaker person[s] (...) It may just be easier for some to just go, 'Oh yeah'.

Referring to socially dominant ideas, Karin stated that men gained more right to own women's bodies during the sexual revolution, because the birth control pill put more pressure on women to consent to sex. Explaining why Samantha consents to unwanted sex, Karin said:

Karin: It goes back to the idea of the sexually liberated woman. (...) Since the pill and the sixties (...) Women now have the freedom to have sex without getting pregnant, and with that (...) goes the expectation that we will have sex whenever a male wants you to ... that you've become available.

In contrast, Giddens[28] argued that removing the threat of becoming pregnant with the birth control pill caused men and women to increasingly engage in confluent sexual relationships. Unlike Giddens, these women reflected upon power relations and their personal experiences and argued that men's dominant status is further established

when women no longer have pregnancy as an excuse for saying no to sex, a reality also recognised by Shalit,[29] Gavey and Ryan[30].

Unwanted 'Consensual' Sex

'Ego' and 'pressure' were two key terms that all focus groups used when explaining ambiguous feelings in sexual encounters. For example, the women in group two related to Samantha as having a 'strong ego' when experimenting with sex, but a 'weak ego' when consenting to sex for attention:

Bec: It's meant to be (...) based on their ego. At one point [Samantha] sort of said, 'No, no I won't do it'. But as soon as [she] saw them (...) both going, 'Ahh, you're absolutely gorgeous you look like so and so', she [thought], Oh, maybe I [should] do it. (...) So it seems to be based on what other people thought of her.

The second focus group related to unwanted consensual sex as a strategy used within relationships, in contrast to the 'slut' who lacks a mutually negotiated contract when consenting to unwanted sex. For both the woman in sexual control and the 'slut', it is difficult to say no to sex. In the following excerpt, Kea felt responsible for her partner's self-confidence, while Cass stated that this responsibility makes it easier to fake an orgasm than to say 'no':

Kea: It was the hardest thing for me to ever say to anyone, to actually go: Nah, go away I can't handle any more — and he's hardly ever talked to me since. It's a huge ego thing and a huge self-confidence thing, because I found out that he was a virgin and I didn't know that. And he couldn't come, because he was too drunk, and then it wasn't till (...) months later that I found out he was a virgin. I felt soo bad because (...) I must have shattered his confidence way low. I mean, how bad is that? That is so bad, but (...) what can you do about it? You're lying there going: OK! I'm actually due home any time now ... it's like six o'clock in the morning, I really would like to go home and get some sleep.

KDT: But some women [would] do it anyway, because if they knew that he was a virgin then they ...

Cass: Oh, definitely that's when you fake an orgasm, but ... well it's either that or say something and it's just so much easier to make a noise than say something.

KDT: But doesn't that make people feel bad afterwards?

Kea: Who, you or the other person? I made him feel terrible, but at the time, I was just like: No, [I] just can't do this anymore, this is just [it], I'm over it.

Kea responded to my question as if she was responsible for her partner's emotions, although I was asking whether *she* felt bad afterwards. Group three related to this responsibility as a general male pressure upon women:

Karin: There's often that pressure that if a guy's turned off, it's the female responsibility to relieve him. (laughing)

Anna: Sometimes guys make it seem like it's the woman's fault for them to be turned on.

Trine: And [their] responsibility... to follow through.

According to all three focus groups, another reason for not being able to say no to sex is 'low self-esteem'. Group two stated that women with low self-esteem consent to unwanted sex to gain intimacy in the relationship, while women with no self-esteem consent to unwanted sex for attention or in order to gain material and other needs. The price for these women is intimacy, since their act is not part of a sexual negotiation within the relationship. This important issue is not addressed by Ryan and Gavey.[31] According to Kea in group two, low self-esteem also causes women to be unaware about their rights to say no:

Kea: Now I've just gotten to the point where if I don't want to do it, I'm just like 'No, don't even start'. I've gotten to the point where if he wasn't cool with that then I just wouldn't be there. I would' never ever want to be in [such] a position again, because I put up with it for such a long time without realising that I could actually say 'no'. But then my self-esteem was really low ... because my headaches were affecting me so badly...

Bec, in focus group two, thought of women who seek material gain and not intimacy in sexual relationships as lacking decent values. She preferred to see herself as in sexual control, when negotiating her sexuality, rather than being unable to say no to sex:

Bec: Wouldn't that come back to values and ethics, that essentially,

depending on how you're feeling, you're gonna have certain values and ethics that are reflective of that? So, you know, you'd expect someone who kinda wasn't maybe your type, but maybe fulfilled you in some way. Like gave you money or whatever … if you … [felt] low in [your] self worth, that could happen.

Not only women consent to unwanted sex because of a low self-esteem. Abbey and Ella drew on a discourse of powerful women to explain:

Abby: They are too tired. Maybe they're not turned on that particular night. The same reasons women do – you're too tired, you're too stressed out, you can't actually be bothered. I'm not going to disappoint them. Let's just fake it.

Ella: Self-esteem is so in tune with (…) this whole sex stuff, and if (…) your partner's going for gold and you just want to get finished (laughing), you don't just want to (…) roll off (…). You want to (…) give him the thing that he's trying to obtain, which is you having pleasure.

In a different context, Ella explained unwanted consensual sex as a physical drive that is hard to control. In the following example, she was supported by Kea:

Ella: Yeah, it's the human way of kind of being on heat, isn't it?

Kea: But it's like you were saying before, sometimes the brain can say no but emotion-wise you can [only] say, yes. If you persist with a guy long enough, like if you sit there and play with his crutch or do anything like that, I mean he's not going to be able to help it. He's going to get aroused by that … I mean for guys it's so easy to turn them on, and probably to turn them off as well.

Drawing on discourses about women as victims, Cass raised the question of unclear boundaries between unwanted sex and rape. Suggesting that unwanted consensual sex is related closely to rape, she recognised these feelings in herself:

Cass: Oh, it is so awful having sex when you don't want to be having sex; it's just the worst feeling. And you can remember that same moment for weeks afterwards; it's just awful. It's not like you're being raped or something, but it just feels … it's horrible. And to be in a position where you're with a person where you can't say, 'I don't wanna do it', you shouldn't be there.

Meanwhile, Bec choose to see an unwilling sexual act as a sign of unclear boundaries in order to avoid having felt raped and to remain a powerful woman in control:

Bec: I think there's got to be a willingness there. I don't really know of [other women] or even for myself I wouldn't go home with someone that I didn't want to sleep with. Or you know, I wouldn't sleep with them if I didn't want to. I'd always come up [with] those sort of boundaries and ... [think]; nah, this isn't happening. Otherwise, it would be rape! Otherwise, it would be doing something I wouldn't want to be doing.

Ella immediately contested Bec's view that rape happens to women who are in control over their sexuality. Unlike other women in the group, Ella drew a clear boundary between rape and consensual unwanted sex by stating that rape is only an issue when the woman has clearly said no. Seeing herself as a woman in control who is capable of taking care of herself, Ella argued that the responsibility to say no remains with the woman. This is an important issue, since scholars writing about consensual unwanted sex have been unable to agree upon a distinction between the two concepts.[32] Kea relates the same feeling of unwanted sex to something like Duncan and Marsden's 'sex work':

Ella: [If we go] back to that bloody self-worth thing (...) I know so many who would probably get themselves into really unsafe situations because they can't say no, or they don't think that they're worth saying no...

Kea: Not that they can't say no, more that they think 'I'll feel so much better in the morning because somebody would have wanted me all night'.

The many reasons to consent to unwanted sex were in most cases collapsed into the notion of 'pressure', although the meaning of this term varied with the identities constructed in the groups. Group one members spoke about the social pressure that prevented them from having sex with men in order to avoid being confronted with expectations of having a relationship or traditional sexual conventions. Although the women were sexually active and 'liberated', they all experienced contradictions in sexual conventions, when they chose to engage in a sexual act. After having criticised the programme's

unrealistic 'double standard' (a reference to the 'slut' versus 'liberated woman' dichotomy), Alice challenged this view, talking about her two dates in one weekend:

Alice: When I went out in the afternoon with the other guy, I ... just felt totally confident and relaxed. (...) I felt great. (...) Because I felt no pressure. (...) If it worked out with him, it worked out with him. If it didn't, it didn't. No big deal. I really didn't care either way (...) [I think that was because] I had just spent this time with the other guy and really enjoyed his company, and that was it, and I knew that was finished.

KDT: So it's really also about controlling the situation then?

Alice: Yep. That's probably why I felt so confident too, because of what (...) I gave. I was a real man-woman.

As a confident 'man-woman' and not a 'slut', Alice engages in sexual activity without feeling pressured by sexual conventions. A key term to explain a man-woman was the relief from 'internal pressure' to seek a long-term relationship, which, the women agreed, derives from social pressure. While group one spoke of pressure as restraining sexual desire, the other groups referred to pressure as a reason for consenting to unwanted sex. This confirms the findings of Shortland and Hunter's[33] survey.

The dominant women in group two related the feeling of pressure to their own experiences mainly in the context of relationships. One suggestion was to 'keep the relationship going' as a natural 'give and take'. This included the need to 'compromise' to avoid feeling 'guilty of hurting' the partner, which has been discussed earlier. There is also the risk that the partner leaves for a better relationship and sex, which creates a need to hold on to the partner through sex:

Kea: In this day and age (...) you can't rely on a relationship lasting forever (...) You sometimes do it to maintain your relationship, otherwise you're so scared that they're going to go and find it elsewhere.

A third issue discussed was traditional power relations and gender roles, where women are expected to be sexually 'submissive', as Bec mentioned when talking about house wives and gender issues.

Group three used the term 'pressure' extensively. As feminists,

'male pressure' and stories about sexually liberated women were key factors in their explanations of consensual unwanted sex. A key term used to describe the content of pressure was 'expectations'. According to this group, and what other research in this area has not clearly stated, is that conventional expectations of being 'good looking' and sexually assertive cause women to compete with each other. Talking about how bad the character Charlotte felt, when her partner fell asleep during sex, Anna said:

Anna: Her initial reaction was to compare herself to other women. She went to her friends and then they talked to their friends. You know, have you ever done that? That's what women seem to do, it is that pressure.

Both men and women pressure their friends to appear sexual. Sexual conventions that put pressure on men to be sexually aggressive relate closely to the pressure on women:

Elaine: Men put pressure on men who [then] put pressure on women.

This pressure related both to one-night stands and to long-term relationships. In the one night stand the key term 'expectations' described how the pressure on the sexually liberated woman to be 'good in bed' and 'deliver' sex to men. Karin spoke about Samantha as an object for male desire:

Karin: [Samantha] could have felt pressured, because of the expectations that they thought about all of the women they knew (...) They thought of her that she would be good in bed, so there was (...) an expectation of her as well (...) [Expectations of] delivery to put it crassly...

Women's accounts of themselves as sexually liberated included that they have to be sexually *experienced*:

Trine: [Samantha] gives that expectation to people as well. She likes to be thought of as the sexual bang or the most experienced one and (...) she jokes about it all the time (...) I guess it's just the next step to go.

Expectations on women to deliver sex derive from the idea of the 'sexual revolution'. Talking about the two men accessing Samantha's body, Trine said:

Trine: They respond to (...) the 21st century. It was free loving (...) and there was (...) that pressure and expectation for a lot of people to stretch those boundaries (...) (laughing) regardless of how they feel about it, because everyone stretches.

The pressure on men to be sexually aggressive causes men to be coercive to their female partners. In long-term relationships, this was related to 'the need to keep the relationship together' and to 'coercion':

Sarah: I think there's more pressure (...) to keep a relationship together by having sex when he wants it and in the way he wants.

This situation might also be described as legal rape, but such coercion can be 'subtle'. 'Coercion', or a subtle pressure, finally cause women to accommodate, not realising what they are doing:

Trine: It can be really ... really subtle sometimes and it's when coercion has been used or when somebody is accommodating the other person, and often they don't realise it.

Unlike group one, the women in group three did not find a middle way between the sexual dichotomy of 'innocent girl' versus 'whore'. These women did not use the story of the sexually liberated powerful woman to neutralise the feeling of pressure to either engage or not engage in sexual activity.

The groups also discussed whether men or women are most pressured to consent to sex with their partners. All groups drew on the stereotype that men sleep with women for sex and women for love. Cass in group two says:

Cass: Like my mum said something to me once, 'Guys give love for sex and girls give sex for love.' It's totally true. Like when you were sixteen you slept with all these boys and when you look back on it you just want one of them to say, 'I will be with you tomorrow and the next day'. And they just want to say, 'I'm leaving now. I've done my business, and now I'm going and you'll never see me again. I won't ring you'.

Every group agreed that men are pressured to perform through sexual intercourse. While women were seen as the most pressured, in group one Karin stated that men are victims of their 'pride', and Bec in group two said:

Bec: There's probably a lot of pressure on guys, because if you think in

terms of sexual intercourse (...) the act is fairly reliant on the male performance.

Unlike group one, groups two and three saw the pressure on women as an outcome of the pressure on men to perform sexually. Gavey and Ryan concur. Group three suggested that women, on the other hand, do not pressure men because they respect men's bodies and, unlike men, are not governed by a pressure to perform sexually:

Anna: If a guy (...) wakes up and he's horny (...) and the woman's like, 'I'm exhausted after a long day', he will keep going or keep pressuring (...) in a subtle way, or keep trying. And perhaps the woman will just think 'Oh well. May as well' (...) Whereas ... quite often, if the woman was horny at a different time and the guy was not receptive she may not press it. It's more (...) of a respect of bodies (...) people's own bodies.

The women are, nevertheless, expected to give away their bodies in a relationship. As if commenting on Cass' headache in the opening paragraph, Karin said:

Karin: For a lot of men it's harder to express their love and so for women it's tied up with how much sex they get. Say a heterosexual couple is in a long-term relationship, there's quite often the expectation that sex is going to be there on tap. You know. And it doesn't matter someone's going to get it. I think that's fairly common (...) There's more of an expectation from guys (...) that once you [have] joined (...) someone's body isn't their own so much. So it's like (...) consensual but it [is] not always wanted. And so that's where things like, 'I've got a headache' and all that ... all those sayings come in.

Conclusion

The focus-group discussions suggest in a preliminary way several keys to the success of *Sex and the City* among these young, well-educated, heterosexual New Zealand women. The first is that this is a polysemic text. It combines several conventional discourses about heterosexual relationships with a simultaneous representation of the *conflicted* experiences of four conventionally attractive and 'sexually liberated' young women. A related key is perhaps its soap-opera and sitcom uses to viewers in performing and representating 'selves' and discussing life experiences. The characters and the stories are

resources for discussing personal and group conflicts and pleasures (after Ien Ang's work in *Watching Dallas*). A third theme, the vexed issue of sexual consent, is undoubtedly in need of further research. Many women noted that so-called 'sexual liberation' and the pill were experienced as increased pressure to have sex. Most used conventional dichotomies of women as either 'liberated' 'strong' and 'in-control' or 'sluts' and 'weak' in order to distance themselves publicly from experiences such as unwanted sex, rape and abuse. This occurred despite (or perhaps because of) the high statistics for rape, date rape and partner violence affecting New Zealand women of their age. In noting that the majority also agreed that economic equality and self-esteem in both partners are important for the sexual empowerment of heterosexual women, these patterns carry a sobering message in times when too many New Zealand women remain underpaid, underemployed and undervalued, relative to equivalent men.

KAREN DUE THEILADE *was an exchange student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Canterbury in 2000 when she engaged in research on young women's responses to* 'Sex and the City'. *She has recently facilitated a similar set of focus groups in Denmark and is currently completing a masters' degree in sociology at the University of Copenhagen. Her political interests include anti-racist activism and support for Danish immigrants. She is planning to return to Aotearoa/New Zealand for Doctoral study.*

Notes

1 The names of focus-group participants have been changed.

2 Jamieson, L. *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, pp. 159–160.

3 Ehrenreich, B., Hess, E., Jacobs, G., *Remaking Love. The Feminization of Sex*. Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1986, pp. 2, 193; Jamieson, 1998; Giddens, A. *Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992; Shalit, W. 'Daughters of the (Sexual) Revolution', *Commentary* 1997, 104(6):42 (4); Ryan, A, *Safe Sexual Freedoms: a New Narrative for an Age of Risk*, Massey: Massey University, 1997.

4 Jamieson, 1998.

5 Ryan, A., Gavey, N. 'Women, Sexual Freedom, and The Coital Imperative' in Du Plessis, R., Alice, L. (eds.), *Feminist Thought in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Connections and Differences*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 147–155.

6 Shalit, 1997; Shalit, W, 'Sex, Sadness, and the City' in *Urbanities*. http://www.city-journal.org/html/9_4a4.html, 2000.

[7] O'Sullivan, L. 'Decision-making in college students'. Heterosexual dating relationships: ambivalence about engaging in sexual activity', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 1998a, 15(3):347–363.
O'Sullivan, L., and Allgeier, E.R., 'Feigning Sexual Desire: Consenting to Unwanted Sexual Activity in Heterosexual Dating Relationships, *The Journal of Sexual Research* 1998, 35(3):234.

[8] Shalit, 2000.

[9] Vares, T. *Reading Film And Doing Talk: The Pleasures, Dangers and Possibilities of Women as 'Violent Subjects'.* Christchurch: Department of Sociology, University of Canterbury, 2000.

[10] Jamieson, p. 11.

[11] Somers, M.R. 'The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach', *Theory & Society* 1994, 23:618.

[12] See Ang, I., *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination.* London: Methuen, 1985; Burr, V., *An Introduction to Social Constructionism* London: Routledge, 1995; van Dijk, T.A. 'New Racism. A Discourse Analytical Approach' in Simon Cottle (ed.), *'Race', Racism and the Mass Media.* London: Open University Press, 1998; Fairclough, N. *Discourse and Social Change.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992; Jamieson, p. 11; Hervik, P. *Den generende forskellighed.* København: Hans Reitzels Forlag A/S, 1999; Togeby, L.'Er vi ved at vænne 'os' til 'dem'? Ændringer i danskernes holdninger til flygtinge og indvandrere, 1993–96', *Politica.* 29 årg. Nr. 1, 1997.

[13] Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality.* London: Penguin Books, 1976.

[14] Vares, 2000, p. 103.

[15] Giddens, 1992, p. 62.

[16] Jamieson, 1998, p. 1.

[17] Giddens, 1992, p. 58.

[18] Jamieson, 1998, pp. 19–110.

[19] 'Time *Flying Solo*' by Edwards, T, M. (New Zealand: Time Inc), 11 Sept., 2000, p. 42.

[20] Duncan, J., Marsden, D. 'Whose orgasm is this anyway? 'Sex Work' in long-term heterosexual relationships' in Weeks, J., Holland, J. (eds), *Sexual Cultures: Communities, Values and Intimacy.* London: Macmillan, 1996.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Shalit, 1997, p. 3.

[23] Ryan and Gavey, 1998, p. 149.

[24] Holland, J., Ramazonoglu, C., Sharpe, S., Thomson, R. 'Pleasure, Pressure And Power: Some Contradictions Of Gendered Sexuality', *The Sociological Review* 1992, 40(4):645(30); O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998; Shortland, R. L., Hunter, B. A. 'Women's 'Token Resistant' and Compliant Sexual Behaviours are Related to Uncertain Sexual Intentions and Rape', *PSPB* March 1995, 21(3):226–236.

[25] Thomas, L. 'In Love with Inspector Morse: Feminist Subculture and Quality Television', *Feminist Review* Autumn 1995, 51:1–25.

[26] Vares, 2000.

[27] Ryan and Gavey.
[28] Giddens, 1992.
[29] Shalit.
[30] Ryan and Gavey.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Himelein, M.J., Vogel, R.E., Wachowiak, D.G. (1994). 'Nonconsensual Sexual Experiences in Precollege Women: Prevalence and Risk Factors', *Journal of Counselling & Development* March/April 1994, 72; O'Sullivan, 1998a; O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998; O'Sullivan, L. 1998b. 'A Comparison Of Male And Female College Students' Experiences Of Sexual Coercion', *Psychology of Women's Quarterly*, 22:177–195; Shortland and Hunter, 1995.
[33] Shortland and Hunter, 1995.

Acting on Impulse, Claiming Sexuality and Kicking Ass: New women's heterosexualities in Aotearoa New Zealand popular culture

SHERYL HANN

We become girls and women within the limited sets of meanings available to women within our cultural setting and historical moment. These meanings are more diverse and contradictory than our old feminist analyses have often allowed; and these diversities might offer possibilities for change. Maybe the diverse meanings and various subjectivities have been opened up by feminism itself and some feminist analyses do not recognise this.[1]

A woman is sitting alone in a trendy underground bar. A conveyor belt loaded with sushi on delicate dishes spins past as she looks down, smiling, engaged in writing. From across different sides of the bar, two men stare at the woman desiringly. The woman notices the men's attentions and continues to smile to herself, raising her eyes to meet each gaze separately, just to let the men know she has noticed them. She thinks she might have some fun here. She shares a knowing look, a silent conspiracy, with the manager, an older woman in traditional Japanese attire.

A message arrives in front of one of the men, tucked between rolls of sushi. 'Meet me in the powder room, xxx' it reads. The man smiles. Convinced that his good looks have worked and this is his lucky night, he leaves his seat at the bar. A similar note circulates and arrives in front of the next man, who smiles, unaware of the other note and the other admirer. He also saunters off to the women's bathroom for the anticipated rendezvous.

There is a moment of confusion as the men meet face-to-face in the powder room looking around for the woman they are expecting. In a rush of recognition, the two men, shocked and embarrassed, stare at each other. The manager bursts into the bathroom, shooting them a stern disapproving look, while holding the door wide open so other restaurant patrons can laugh at the men, caught short (of a female) in the women's bathroom. The woman at the bar remains in her seat smirking to herself as the men are exposed.

This is the narrative of a television commercial advertising the quick thrill of *Instant Kiwi* (gambling) tickets. Other ads on TV in Aotearoa New Zealand have similar images: the *Toffee Pops* ads where a woman creates her perfect partner by eating chocolate biscuits; a *Lynx* deodorant ad where a woman stops the lift and takes advantage of a nice-smelling naive young man; and a *Diet Coke* ad that shows three women friends conspiring to get an attractive but casually dressed man into a suit and tie event.

Popular culture[2] images showing women setting sexual agendas in heterosexual relationships, acting on their own desires, getting even with problematic men, resisting the male gaze and asserting their sexual autonomy can be seen as part of what Angela McRobbie terms 'new sexualities for women in contemporary popular culture'.[3] McRobbie identifies a recent trend in British popular culture, particularly depicted in girls' and women's magazines, which is characterised by 'new' representations of women's sexual agency and autonomy. These are images and texts which break decisively with traditional Christian conventions of 'feminine' behaviour by representing young women as lustful, and desiring.[4] While McRobbie is concerned with the British context, I would argue that this trend also exists in Aotearoa New Zealand, heavily influenced by American and British commercial culture. Here, we see the 'strong, sexy and successful' representations of women in ads, such as those mentioned above: the bad girl Girl/Grrl Power of women pop groups music videos; tough girl superheroes, such as Buffy and Xena; and financially successful, pleasure-seeking women in shows such as *Sex and the City*. In a local example, *Mojo* Advertising recently launched a new ad for *Bendon* lingerie in an Auckland sex shop, claiming that the commercial and the launch reflect the 'new feminism' where women can reveal their sexuality.[5]

Along with the *Mojo* advertising executives, some cultural critics believe that these new sexualities confirm the realisation of gender equality. While these new images may in part have come about through the influence of feminism on popular cultural production and consumption, many feminists are not optimistic about the potential for equality or empowerment in, and through, these new sexual representations. Images of women and sex in commercial culture, especially in advertising and pornography, have long been sites for critique and protest from feminists who argue that popular culture

contains myths about women and sex,[6] fantasies of femininity,[7] or intensified femininity.[8] Among other things, these myths and fantasies idealise feminine passivity and women's dependence within heterosexual relationships. Commercial popular culture has been seen as a central site where gender inequalities are learnt and reconstructed.[9]

The Call for Positive Images of Women

Since the early days of second-wave feminism in Aotearoa New Zealand, a common strategy for those concerned about popular images of women has been to join the campaign for more positive images. This continues today. Broadcaster, Pam Corkery, for example, recently complained to the Women's Educational Network that the media is sexist and racist and needs to 'show us the truth about ourselves'.[10] Labour Minister of Broadcasting, Marion Hobbs, argued that TVNZ should reflect the diversity of the community and provide positive role models for young people.[11] And, at a press conference, World Triathlon champion, Erin Baker, criticised the 'false stereotypes' of women, arguing that women are 'not portrayed properly on television', which, in turn, affects the way women perceive themselves.[12]

While the goal of having more positive images is admirable, the problem lies with the focus in these statements on the *production* of images and with defining what is 'positive'. Seeking positive images of women means that change in popular culture can only come about at the level of cultural production. Feminists can lobby profit-oriented multi-national companies to change their images of women, but responsibility for change lies in the hands of editors and advertisers. Perhaps consumers or audiences can be involved through consumer responsibility strategies (not buying products that use negative images of women). This has been a tactic of those women's groups who have lead campaigns against the use of the heroin or anorexic young models in women's magazines. Urging the magazine to change their images, threatening consumer boycotts, and praising the use of 'larger' models (sizes 12–14) only goes so far though. Magazine editors throw in a token larger woman, claiming that bigger models are hard to find.

Of course, if feminists want to see positive images of women in popular culture, they can always produce them themselves. This has been the goal of a wide range cultural producers from k.d. lang's music videos to Candida Royalle's women's erotica, the *Spice Girls*

'Girl Power' messages, and Drew Barrymore's tongue-in-cheek *Charlies Angels* remake. 'Women doing it for themselves' is a strategy that feminists need to encourage and support. However, we cannot rely solely upon the feminism of artists and writers, and the influence of a small group of women producers within the popular culture industries. As Segal notes, 'we cannot leave the goal of expanding personal liberation to a commodity consumer culture eager to expand it's markets'.[13]

The claim that there can be positive images or feminist messages in pop culture raises a burning question: what *is* a 'positive image'? As feminist debates around pornography have shown, it becomes problematic when feminists seek to define or dictate good and bad, feminist and patriarchal, images of women and sex. The positive image relies just as much on bias and generalisations as bad stereotyping does. 'Positive images' are usually those that fit a white, middle-class, heteronormative, couple-oriented view of what would be 'good' for all women.[14] On-going calls for positive images, however, signal that some feminists see hope for a commercial culture which is more empowering for girls and women. There is a recognition of the need to generate within popular culture representations of women's sexual agency, to encourage and nurture new discourses[15] of desires, sexual agency and autonomy for women.

In a study of young women, sex and risk in London, Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson conclude that, when girls and women only have access to representations of male sexual power and female dependence, they learn only feminine passivity and their own desires are silenced.[16] Catriona Mackenzie argues that sexist or male-centred cultural representations work not only to restrict women's development of autonomous skills and abilities, and encourage women's passivity and dependence, but that a limited cultural imaginary can restrict the formation of women's desires, emotions, and self-conceptions. Thus, the capacities of agents for autonomous action can be impaired by their own inability to imagine themselves otherwise.[17]

In their study of the sexual understandings and practices of young women, Thompson and Scott assert that, in order for girls and women to be able to control and shape their sexual experiences, an understanding of women's sexual pleasure and a positive sexual discourse are required.[18] Holland *et al.* argue for a model of positive

female sexuality which offers women a way of reflecting on their experiences by listening to other women's accounts of their own contradictory sexual practices of constraint and resistance.[19]

Michelle Fine argues that this 'missing discourse of desire'[20] means that girls and women do not have ways of imagining or practicing sexual agency or autonomy, where they are confident to negotiate sexual relationships with men. New popular cultural discourses of an empowered female sexuality are central to changing the women's subjectivities, values and practices, and to changing social context of gender relations. Likewise, for Mackenzie, popular culture is more than a fantasy world of entertaining stories. Imaginative repertoires available through popular culture can aid self-understanding and self-definition:

> [b]y virtue of its power to rearouse or stimulate emotions, imaginative mental activity initiates self-reflection by prompting an emotional response and, through that, an evaluative judgement ...[Furthermore] by removing us from the habitual, imagining also opens up a space within which we an try out different possibilities for ourselves- different possibilities of action, desire, emotion, and belief.[21]

Thus, new representations and cultural imagery can be liberating, as they allow new possibilities and can loosen the grip of dominant culture and socialisation.

Social recognition, which is linked to self-worth, autonomy and agency, is available to women when cultural images, representations and stories reflect women's desires and experiences. While we need to open up spaces in popular cultural discourses for imagining otherwise, we also need to do this with feminist discourses. Thompson and Scott claim that the traditional disempowering discourses which frame women as passive victims who need protection from the dangers of heterosexual relationships have come both from the commercial culture of femininity *and* some feminist representations of sexuality. They argue that feminists need to move away from dichotomised understandings of repressed or liberated sexuality which are ultimately unhelpful for young women struggling for sexual autonomy.[22]

Hollway is similarly critical of dogmatic feminist discourses of heterosexuality that do not allow spaces to talk about women's power in heterosex, or the egalitarian practices that exist in some heterosexual relationships. She is concerned that there is no emancipatory discourse

concerning women's heterosexual desire; that is, there is no current way of conceptualising women's pleasure and sexual desire (active sexual wants) in heterosexual sex which is regarded as consistent with principles of women's liberation.[23]

Considering Women's Everyday Engagements with Popular Culture

So, while I argue that more feminists need to continue exploring and encouraging discourses of an empowered women's sexuality, calling for 'positive images' is not the best way to achieve this, because it leaves the responsibility for change at the level of production and it can perpetuate existing biases. One way forward is to reject a liberating/oppressive or positive/negative evaluation of images, and to turn to an exploration of contradictions and tensions. McRobbie takes this approach when she suggests that feminists should by-pass the sticking point of whether a visual representation is good or bad, feminist or not feminist, and instead look at how feminism exists as a productive tension in relation to other competing and contradictory discourses.[24] Dawn Currie also adopts this perspective when she urges feminists to move beyond the impasse caused by the polarisation of the debate around whether images perpetuate oppression or enable empowerment and pleasure.[25]

To explore these tensions, I propose (after Currie) to use a feminist cultural studies 'active audience' perspective, which centralises audiences' negotiation with popular culture and considers contradictory and multiple discourses. The research uses audiences' discussions and thus does not rely upon feminist gaze and agency. This highlights the discursive negotiation of meaning of inconsistent, contradictory and changeable messages in context. However, audiences' chatter is not taken as the final account, as feminist researchers must consider the everyday operation of power and the connectedness of the cultural and the social.[26] A feminist discourse of active heterosexual desire which speaks about everyday experiences, equality and empowerment can thereby be developed through an analysis of women's existing understandings and practices.

My research on 'new' sexualities in popular culture in Aotearoa New Zealand analyses audiences' discussions to explore the possibilities of new discourses of women's sexual agency and autonomy. I showed groups of young female friends several television

ads from the last two years.[27] Ads were chosen to cover both traditional discourses about women's dependence and sexual objectification in heterosexual relationships and new discourses about sexualities.[28] My readings do not take the foreground in the women's discussions. However, as I note below, some of the ads which I considered classic examples of traditional sexist discourses about women were linked by discussants to ideas about 'being in charge', 'doing what you want', and being strong and successful. My analysis of the group discussions examined tensions relating to social expectations of traditional femininity and heterosexuality, being an active desiring subject, and acting ethically (that is, what the participants said was 'good' and 'right' in heterosexual relationships).

Throughout the group discussions, women both used and critiqued patriarchal discourses about heterosexual sex and desire. Wendy Hollway has outlined two conventionally 'conflicting' central discourses traditionally employed to talk about heterosexual desire: male 'sex drive' discourse and female 'have/hold' discourse. The first represents men as having active, uncontrollable sex drives, and women as objects for their sexual pleasure. This discourse does not allow women sexual agency or independent desire. Women, however, are the subjects of the have/hold discourse in which we seek relationships, intimacy and commitment from men, who are unwilling to be trapped into monogamy and responsibility.[29]

My focus is on discourses of women's sexual agency and autonomy, not upon these patriarchal stories of passivity and dependence, which have been the subject of much previous feminist analyses. Of interest in this paper are any discourses that differ from these, any moments of critique and possibilities for new ways of thinking and talking about women's sexual agency or autonomous heterosexual desire. I use excerpts from the focus group transcripts to explore the themes of women's sexual agency and autonomy. These themes, generated from the women's discussions about the TV ads,[30] involve appropriating the male sex drive discourse to allow for a legitimate female sex drive; moving beyond the female sex object to become confident strong and sexy women; and using feminine manipulation and humour as strategies for women's revenge.

'Acting on Impulse': Female Sex Drive

Julie: The Lynx one is good, 'cause it gives her intelligence, as well as sexuality. Which gives her an added thing, whereas the other is just sexuality. But in the Lynx, she's a business woman. She's got intelligence. She's not dolled up, so she doesn't have to be pretending, whereas [in the Toffee Pops ad] she turns into this beautiful dream-like creature. The Lynx woman doesn't change at all.

Anna: But she is actually doing it. The other woman is just fantasizing. She's actually taking the freedom of her own to do it. This woman is seizing the moment and being spontaneous and being happy with it.

Julie: She's heaps more … She's got it together. She's out there. She's sleeping with who she wants to.

Katy: She could get AIDS. You never know she might have had a condom in her pocket.

Julie: That's right she probably did. […]

Vick: She was pleasing herself.

Julie: Yeah she has. She has pleased herself.

Katy: She had the wrong guy though. And we all know…The other ad was about women pretty much taking the piss out of guys, so I thought that was quite good. There was nothing against women in that ad.

Anna: And it was good when women were being themselves, doing what they wanted. It's being positive. They are being independent and doing their own thing. They are able to do it, without thinking, 'Oh, I better not do that'.

Katy: They were preying on men's fantasy and men's hormones.[…]

Julie: I think it's quite derogatory about men in some ways, but it's very true.

Sheryl: Why?

Julie: Well I think men are quite ruled by their hormones and even though in this, it's the woman that's going on her hormones. He didn't even know the woman! Where's his morals, you know? He

could say no. He would have sex with anything, most men would.

Vick: Yeah it is eh? Men would have sex with anybody given the opportunity.

Anna: Yeah I think it shows that she wants to do that, and she acted on impulses that lots of women would like to but they are afraid to because of their reputation or wreck their good honour.

In the discussion quoted above, one of the ways that female sexual desire is framed is in terms of seizing the moment, being spontaneous, being ruled by hormones and acting on impulse, without having to think. This female sex drive discourse refers to women initiating or actively participating in, and seeking pleasure from, sexual situations where social constraints and concerns can be sidelined. For example, ideas about female hormones, impulses and instincts were used to explain doing what you want, having a quick fuck in the lift with a stranger, sex without emotional attachments, flirting, imagining another lover while having sex with your partner, non-monogamy, and women dominating men in sexual relationships.

Many similar statements are made about 'natural', uncontrollable sexual impulses that require free expression. I term this 'the female sex drive discourse', after Hollway. While Hollway identifies another permissive discourse about heterosexuality, whereby both women and men want physical pleasure from sex and neither wants a relationship,[31] the group discussions in my research did not generally reflect this gender-blind acceptance of sexual pleasures. That is, several discussions favoured ideas of active women's sexualities, while simultaneously critiquing the same attitude and behaviour in men. For example, in the discussion above, Julie accepted and approved of women spontaneously acting on their desires, but argued that men needed to have morals, to stop themselves and curb their sexual attentions.

Being driven wild by hormones is a common argument used to devalue women's abilities and sexualities, and both sexists and feminists are concerned when women are not in control of their bodies or their desires. However, in the focus group discussions, the hormones argument is given a new spin. The idea of an unbridled sex drive allows women to refuse responsibility, avoid deliberation and behave in ways that might be conventionally seen as immoral, while escaping social sanctions. Women justify their sexual agency with reference

to a strong 'natural' desire. Giving in to their desires can mean taking control rather than relinquishing it.

Did the women believe that in real life there is a way to avoid ethical responsibility and social sanctions? Katy talked about active female desire as being dangerous and unhealthy. She reminded the women in her group that sexually-active women could get AIDS and later claimed that women's hormones can lead them to behave in stupid and degrading ways. Some discussions highlighted the concern about using men in much the same way that men have used women. There is a problem when women only focus on sexual attraction and not the 'whole person' or 'real relationships', as Sue and Tania discuss here:

Sue: I think it shows women as being pretty silly really.

Tania: Yeah, materialistic and that isn't it? It's going on ...

Sue: How a guy smells or 'Oh he's so good looking' or 'he's got a nice car' sort of thing. 'I've got to jump on him right now.'

Tania: But that can't really happen. It's just another dream fucken land that's all.

However, the discourse of female sex drive can play a part in changing social attitudes that denigrate active women's sexualities and make women feel selfish for considering their own sexual pleasures. It could be seen in tandem with other feminist efforts to reframe negative labels or stereotypes associated with female desires, such as the culture jamming[32] that occurs when young women proudly walk down the streets wearing T-shirts emblazoned with slogans like Bitch, Nympho, Slut, Porn Star, Sex Goddess and Whore.

When women are seen to have 'natural' sexual desires, our sexual agency is legitimised and normalised, in a similar way that the 'male sex drive' discourse can be said to legitimise active male desires and practices. However, in the female sex drive discourse, sexual impulses become a *resource* to be deployed by women in order to argue for the legitimacy and inevitability of active female desires and do not have to be reduced to biological determinism. There may be spaces for women to resist and recast the existing disciplinary and ideological power of the male sex drive discourse[33] and the waiting-to-be-romanced other-oriented femininity of the have/hold discourse. Female sex drive discourse does not have to involve an evacuation of

ethical responsibility: it can just mean a shift in what are regarded as ethical acts. For example, in the first discussion quoted above, carrying a condom and being honest about sexual desires are seen to be moral behaviours.

'Claiming Sexuality': Strong and Sexy Women

Women talked about the importance of being more than just sexy. I use 'strong and sexy women discourse' to refer to a set of statements about women being both sexual and successful, the object of desire and the subject of strength and independence. It is significant that some of the women's discussions showed a resistance to viewing images of women only for their 'to-be-looked-at-ness',[34] but, nevertheless, did not totally reject sexualised images of women. Participants favourably discussed women who were acting or looking sexy, and claimed that they were also intelligent, successful, business-like, active, being true to themselves, being 'whole', independent, confident and in control. A desire for the best of both worlds can be seen in the discussions, where being independent, strong, successful and respectable does not mean having to give up their sexual attractiveness or sexual desire.

Strong and sexy women discourse was used in relation to the image of the leather-clad dominatrix in the Rock FM ad. Several participants talked about the dominatrix as a successful independent woman who was in control of male sexual desire. As Anna said, 'The men are the biggest tossers around, but the woman is doing exactly what she wants to do and she is getting paid for it. So good on her.' The image did not have to represent female sexual passivity (which was my first reading).

Women's confidence and power were central factors in the discourse of strong and sexy women. The discussants referred to women's sexuality *adding* to self-esteem and assertiveness, instead of being a source of inferiority and danger. In some discussions, women's confidence was linked not to conformity to social norms (as it may be in the male sex drive discourse), but to being herself, refusing to be just a sex object, or a passive female. As Jess explained:

Jess: What I mean is I'd like to show women as fully sexual beings, not as someone just going 'Oh, I'll lie back and get it over with'. It's totally claiming their sexual thoughts and their sexuality. They

control it. They are in charge, they are assertive. They are strong women.

This narrative challenges common assumptions that women cannot be both credible or liberated *and* be sexy, i.e. the Madonna/whore, career woman/ bimbo, feminist/ porn star, oppositions that exist in traditional, patriarchal and feminist discourses.

Is it possible for women to be both sexy and powerful? Tensions evident in the strong and sexy women discourse converge around discontinuities between women's intention and men's or other women's perceptions. In talk about the image of the dominatrix, for example, there was concern that the woman might have been independently earning money, or feeling as though she was in charge of the sexual situation, while the men might see her as a sex object, subject to the customer's whims and wishes. Some participants said that in their lives, flirting, having flings or one-night stands may allow them to feel like they were liberated, single and free; whereas the men might just think that they had managed to 'score another chick'. One way to change social perceptions is for everyone to have access to representations that challenge the link between passivity and sexual attractiveness and show women as being strong *and* sexy.

'Kicking Ass': Women's Revenge

Vivien: [The woman in the Instant Kiwi ad] has control. She's so in control she doesn't even have to go there. Like it's not even involving her.

Nicola: But it's so manipulative, eh? The woman will just say ...

Sharlene: 'Ha ha I've got you both under control'. But the guys do that most times.

Vivien: But they say that women are more like that than men though. The music is kind of laughing as well, like they are laughing at men and the women are just like ... I kind of like the way that she treats them really.

Sharlene: It's a kind of role reversal as well.

Nicola: And she kicks them out and says 'Yes what are you doing in the toilets you two?' and they say 'No, I'm not gay. It's this girl you know'. They start questioning their masculinity.

Sharlene: 'cause they are too masculine, anyway.

Vivien: But yeah, she is not really involved sexually anyway.

Sharlene: How awful, 'I get my thrill out of being mean to people.'

Nicola: She gets her kicks out of messing with people's minds. She's manipulative.

Vivien: But she's not even interested in them ... either of them sexually at all, she just wants to mess with them and have a bit of fun and laugh at them when they get confused.

Nicola: She uses her sexuality. She's getting them back.

Sharlene: She's bumming them out man.

Jess: But she uses her power. She uses her sexuality. She is beautiful.

This discussion refers to the discourse of women's revenge or 'pay back' for the way that women are treated. It involves images of active women who employ tactics of manipulation, humour and ridicule to assert power and control within sexual situations. The participants talk about the images of a woman who is subverting heterosexual traditions of flirting and seduction. She meets the male gaze with her own, undermines the 'too masculine' macho confidence of her admirers, and uses her feminine charms and sexuality to her own advantage. The woman makes use of humour (taking the piss, laughing at men) as a strategy to deflate male egos and create a space that is safer for women. The revenge, according to the women's discussions, is personal, and at the same time for all women who have been subjected to unwanted male sexual attention. The collective support and protection of women friends figured strongly in the discussions of women's revenge.

In a further example of revenge discourse, the friends in one group talked about getting their own back on a sleazy and egotistical guy. One of the women chatted to him in the middle of a crowded party, pretending to be interested and polite, while the other pinned a tampon onto his back. It stayed there for several hours and was noticed by many people. The desired effect was revenge, undermining what the women saw as illegitimate male sexual power, and alerting others to the offending male. This kind of revenge is framed in discussions, such as the one below, as a celebration of female solidarity, and a public recognition of women's power and strength, where women get

their own back and show, that we are not prepared to be walked over.

Adele: The best ones here are women doing it for themselves. They are the best for women.

Sheryl: Why is the Instant Kiwi ad the best for women?

Lily: 'Cause it's revenge.

Adele: I like it because she's kicking ass.

Lily: Yeah, 'cause she's kicking ass and she's saying 'Ha ha, you guys are just staring at me and I am going to beat yous'.

The humour seems to involve women remaining at some emotional distance from men: they are not interested or involved, and so are able to stand back from the usual games of attraction and chase played in heterosexual relationships to look at them differently. By remaining detached, women can be themselves, feel safe and control sexual situations.

The morality of manipulating and laughing at men in order to advance women's power appears as a central tension in the participants' discussions. Manipulation is commonly known as an indirect strategy of influence that is associated with femininity and weakness.[35] In the discussion above, manipulation is said to be hurtful and 'mean' to men, and unethical, due to the fact that it is hidden strategy which plays on men's hormones, messes with their minds, and forces them to question their masculinity. Some women talked about it as being embarrassing to women, showing women to be shallow, desperate, and playing silly games. Manipulation and humour can also be dangerous for women, if injured male pride leads to a violent reaction.

Feminists largely regard manipulation involving the use of conventional femininity as a resource for sexual agency as an ineffective long-term strategy of empowerment, because it is thoroughly contained within the frame of male sexual power in heterosexual relationships.[36] However, in my view, a significant social and sexual power is available to women through the use of manipulation. Participant's discussions about the Instant Kiwi ad and other attempts women have made to put men in their place show how the dangers of manipulation can be minimised and the effectiveness strengthened, when the strategy of influence is used within the public

arena with the support of female friends. As a public tactic, women's revenge can be a way of undermining male sexual domination and asserting women's sexual agency and autonomy with wider social implications beyond a feeling of superiority and one wounded male ego.

Conclusion

Julie: If the woman isn't being abused, or made to look like a pathetic twit, then that's a good ad. When it's a woman taking control of the situation and laughing at someone, or having power, or getting well paid to make someone else look like a dick, then it's all good.

Framed through my identification of the female sex drive, strong and sexy women and women's revenge discourses, the discussions enable the exploration of the contradictory and multiple meanings of aspects of the 'new' sexualities represented in popular culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have argued that, while patriarchal discourses of women's sexualities are still to be found in commercial culture, and while new discourses involve tensions around being in control and acting ethically, the new sexualities may provide opportunities for the personal and social recognition of women's sexual agency and autonomy. Feminists must continue to create, explore and encourage discourses in popular culture that provide a space for women to imagine themselves otherwise.[37]

SHERYL HANN *is a Researcher and Policy Advisor for the National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges in Wellington; a PhD candidate in Sociology at Massey University; a feminist; and an activist interested in peace, environmental, and anti-capitalist issues. She likes the colour purple, full moons, and loud music.*

Notes

1 Alison Jones, 'Is Madonna a Feminist Folk-Hero, Is Ruth Richardson a Woman?: Postmodern Feminism and Dilemmas of Difference', *Sites*, 23:84–100.

2 I use popular culture and commercial culture interchangeably throughout this article to refer to mass culture including visual and media culture, advertising, television, film and videos, magazines, and rock and pop music.

3 Angela McRobbie, 'More! New Sexualities in Girls and Women's Magazines' in Angela McRobbie (ed.) *Back to Reality?: Social Experience and Cultural*

Studies, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 190.

[4] ibid. p. 191.

[5] Wane, 'Prepare for Millennium Woman', *Sunday Star Times*, 27 June 1999, pp. A2.

[6] Myra McDonald *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*, New York: Edward Arnold, 1995.

[7] Jane Ussher *Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex*, London: Penguin, 1997.

[8] McRobbie, p.190.

[9] See for example Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising,* London:Marion Boyars, 1978, and Robert Goldman *Reading Ads Socially,* London: Routledge, 1992.

[10] *Waikato Times* Media sexist, racist, out of touch: Corkery, 30 May 1997.

[11] *New Zealand Herald* Try an Oldie, TVNZ told, 15 September 1997.

[12] Williamson, K, 'NZ media sexist; legislation needed', *Otago Daily Times*, 31 August, 1998.

[13] Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*, London: Virago, 1994, p. 312.

[14] Patricia Mann, 'Glancing at Pornography', in Diana Meyers (ed.) *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader,* London: Routledge, 1997, p. 420. Also see Richard Dyer, 'Stereotyping' in Dyer (ed.) *Gays and Film*, London: BFI, 1977.

[15] I use discourses here to refer to a set of statements or shared assumptions or ways of seeing the world that categorise and bring the social world into view. See Ian Parker, *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 4.

[16] Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson, 'Pleasure, Pressure and Power: Some Contradictions of Gendered Sexuality', *Sociological Review* 1992, 40(4):645–73. Also Janet Holland, et al. *Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality*, London: Tufnell, 1994.

[17] Catriona Mackenzie, 'Imaging Oneself Otherwise' in C. Mackenzie and Nancy Stoljar (eds) *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives On Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.144.

[18] Rachel Thompson and Sue Scott, *Learning About Sex: Young Women and the Social Construction of Sexual Identity*, London: Tufnell, 1992, p. 41.

[19] Holland, *et al.*, 1992, pp. 668–9.

[20] Michelle Fine, 'Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire', *Harvard Educational Review* 1988, 58(1): 29–53.

[21] Mackenzie, p. 136.

[22] Thompson and Scott, p. 41.

[23] Wendy Hollway, 'Feminist Discourses and Women's Heterosexual Desire', in Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (eds) *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives*, London: Sage, 1995, p. 86.

[24] McRobbie, p.200.

[25] Dawn Currie, *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 127.

[26] Currie, pp.125, 128, 146. Despite the 'active audience' theorists' calls to look to audiences in order to understand visual representations, very few research-

ers actually do this. Currie is one of the exceptions.

[27] Hollway (1995), p. 101.

[28] The focus groups were each made up of 4–5 women aged 18–35, who were contacted through advertising and a snowball sampling method (friends contact friends). Two women identified as bisexual, the rest of the women identified as heterosexual. Focus groups took place in the homes of one of the women and involved semi-directed discussions about the messages of the ads and the way that women were shown. The discussions were audiotaped.

[29] The ads used were: the Sushi Bar *Instant Kiwi* (described above), the *Lynx* elevator ad, the *Toffee Pops* 'dream man', *Diet Coke*, *Whittakers Chocolate* (husband and wife in a plane bite into the 'good honest chocolate' and both admit to seeing 'another woman'); *Rock FM* (two naughty school boys whipped by their teacher are, years later, still 'bad boys' being disciplined by a dominatrix); and *Flora* margarine (a husband/father rushes away in the morning without saying good-bye, but when his partner puts margarine on the toast, he gives her a passionate kiss).

[30] Wendy Hollway, 'Women's Power in Heterosexual Sex', *Women's Studies International Forum* , 1984a, 7(1):63–68. Also 'Heterosexual Sex: Power and Desire for the Other' in Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (eds) *Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions*, London: Women's Press, 1983; and *Gender Difference and The Production of Subjectivity* in Julian Henriques, Wendy Hollway, Cathy Urwin, Couze Venn, and Valerie Walkerdine (eds), *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*, London: Methuen, 1984.

[31] I generated these from the transcripts of women's discussions, drawing upon my own readings of the ads and other representations of new sexualities in popular culture, as well as my readings of feminist theories of sexual politics and cultural studies.

[32] Hollway (1983), p. 131.

[33] A strategy of sampling, reclaiming and reworking popular culture. Turning culture back on itself for political critique.

[34] As seen in the first discussion quoted above, women's active sexuality also highlighted concerns with male sexual behaviour and attitudes.

[35] Laura Mulvey, 'From Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). Reprinted in Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (eds), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 1992, p. 162.

[36] Lynda Sagrestano, 'The Use of Power and Influence in a Gendered World', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 1992, 16:439–47. Sagrestano claims that this is a myth: men and women do not differ in their use of 'weak' strategies of influence such as manipulation. She argues that the gendered value judgement on manipulation as an inferior strategy needs to be challenged.

[37] Sandra Lee Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power', in Diana Meyers (ed.) *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, London: Routledge, 1997.

Feminist Walls: Abbey Road and popular memory

TARA BRABAZON

> From far LA Mike Simmons Came, Saw, Photographed and Vandalized. Forever Fab, August 2, 1991
> *Graffiti, Wall of Abbey Road Studios, London*

Two moments are plucked from time. The first is peppered with humour. On Friday, 12 May, 2000, a man in a blue van stole the gates of Strawberry Field, a children's home in Liverpool. News broadcasts around the world bubbled with mock concern and bemusement.[1] The most irate voices belonged neither to the children nor the Salvation Army majors who ran the home. Instead, incensed tourist operators complained at their loss of revenue and a sightseeing location. The gates have not been recovered, but the tours continue.

Second moment: 8 December, 2000 – the twentieth anniversary of John Lennon's murder. Radio fans throughout Australia remembered where they were 'twenty years ago today'. Voices trembled with emotion, relating stories of sobbing shoppers in supermarkets, and deep, personal shock. The intimacy of these emotions betrays much more than the death of a public figure. Instead, these narratives of Lennon's assassination have been entwined with personal and family histories. As I listened to these stories, my mind drifted to other pilgrimages, and other times. The tracing of popular memory is a promiscuous intellectual business, refusing to obey disciplinary boundaries. The re-presentations of place, space and identity envelop theories of power that transgress the limits of history, heritage studies, cultural studies and geography. As Liliane Weissberg has recognised:

> memory's stock has not only had a low and a high. Memory's own history, our understanding of what it is and how it functions, has radically changed in recent years. The computer is not the sole challenge to our notion of a personalised, individually owned memory.[2]

The careful tracing of popular culture – particularly music – has

challenged the textual fibres of oblivion and recollection. Popular memory does not signal the end of history, but the cessation of a clearly confined 'private life.' To exhibit this process, I take a personal recollection, and demonstrate how feminist collectivity is reclaimed from the bedrock of the past. Nearly ten years ago, I visited a major site of Beatles' tourism – the Abbey Road Crosswalk. Unlike the volatility of the Strawberry Field Gates, the concrete-rendered wall has permanent protection from fans in blue vans. However, it remains a reminder of how women's visual culture is marginalised and buried beneath the crust of history.

Every site has both signifying potential and authoritative meanings, as determined by empowered institutions. The relationship between social subjectivity and cultural practices is an ambiguous and contradictory topic, and is most effectively explored through a specific textual focus. This paper invokes a reading of a wall, the barrier that encircles the Abbey Road studios in London. As a site of liminality – between text and context, memory and history, Beatles and fans, repression and autonomy – the wall corrupts the demarcation of time and space. In this liminal zone, feminist visual culture is located, serving to reinscribe and rewrite the form and content of popular memory.

The wall, as a component of the built environment, is simultaneously an historical source, a sign, a text and part of a surveillance system. While the wall presents a dull white surface, its constituent, underlying semiotic bricks propose an evocative project that revels in Jon Goss's problem: 'How function and form interrelate to communicate meaning.'[3] My investigation in urban semiotics uses photographs, street signs and graffiti as its textual database. Three issues are explored. The first part probes the meanings encircling a structure that is temporally disparate, but spatially located in London. The second element works through the multiplicity of readings that encroach upon the wall and grant it touristic value. The final section (over)reads the surfaces of the wall's white facade, exploring the feminine modality of textual poachers and Beatles' fandom. These visual shards show how the wall is bathed in a conflictual visual system. My writing watches fans as they rewash the surfaces of history.

Speaking Spaces

> If walls could speak.[4]
> *J. Hilier and P. Manus*

If walls could speak, who would hear their words? Michel de Certeau, in his theoretical wander with the walkers of a city, suggests that these mobile bodies 'follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it.'[5] Walkers situate the city in a meaning system, meandering through the contradictions of power structures. He is suggesting that these semiotic pedestrians are not literate in their own reading/walking practices. Certain walls, however, do speak and leave their traces within memories.

On 2 August, 1991, as a young History student conducting research for a Masters Degree, I visited London on study leave. At the first stop on a trip that aimed to research Liverpool's tourism industry, I wandered through the streets of the capital city to see and photograph the Abbey Road Crosswalk. This landmark formed the basis for the cover of the Beatles' last studio album. As I moved into Abbey Road, the street sign that was meant to signify my arrival was almost illegible, as it had been covered in graffiti by fans. This 'authentic' Beatles' moment was not corrupted or effaced by these trivial scribblings. Instead, the 'actual site' was enhanced by this sense of communal interest and engagement. As I continued to walk, the street sign foreshadowed an even more unexpected touristic find. When I discovered the entire wall of the Abbey Road Studios covered in graffiti, I could only ask, like Marcus, Francis and Meunier, 'Where and when is this place?'[6] This wall offered a trace of the receptive capacity of the Beatles, a vestige of the fan experience, and a location for the meeting of text and context. These writings on the wall spoke to walkers and offered a space for cultural commentators to transcend the current difficulties facing practitioners working within cultural studies. As Adrian Mellor suggested:

> in the study of 'lived cultures', we have increasingly developed a one-sided approach to cultural analysis, in which texts are (valuably) explored, but in the absence of any real check on their reception by lay audiences.[7]

My study offers an inadequate, partial snapshot of a 'moment' within lived culture. There is no 'authentic voice' of the Beatles' fans

to be reclaimed. Such an inability to grasp the ephemeral nature of memory has always posed challenges for feminist cultural theorists. Although the knowledge is tentative and the meanings fallible and fleeting, popular memory has an interventionist imperative in the solid, scholarly foundations of heritage and the intellectual core of history.

The city, when viewed at ground level, has its own eloquence that speaks to passers-by. The Abbey Road wall is a metonymy of popular culture more generally. Fans engage in the playful (re)inscription of media texts. Yet media controllers (such as the managers of EMI Studios) perpetually reclaim the right to paint over the words of these textual poachers. Through this struggle to write and be read, ephemeral meanings become attached to the landscape. This wall provides an opportunity to grasp the fleeting moments of consciousness and play that are white-washed by memory professionals who control the word and the wall.

Cosgrove stated that 'on Saturday mornings I am not, consciously, a geographer.'[8] Similarly, I was not a cultural historian during that walk through London in August 1991. The discovery of the wall remained the evocative surprise of the trip. The meanings that have swirled around that volatile, hot memory in the ten subsequent years are granted a release within this cool, ordered, typeset prose. The crisp syntax offers a chance to read the insights of fans that have been long since painted over, and removed from the gaze of walkers and semioticians.

Sharing the Signs

> If frames of mind are sources of cultural understanding and identity for people and institutions, they are also sources of control, conflict and contest. While all of us participate in symbolising the world, people do not enjoy equal access to the conditions for creating those shared symbols.[9]
> *Kay Anderson and Fay Gale*

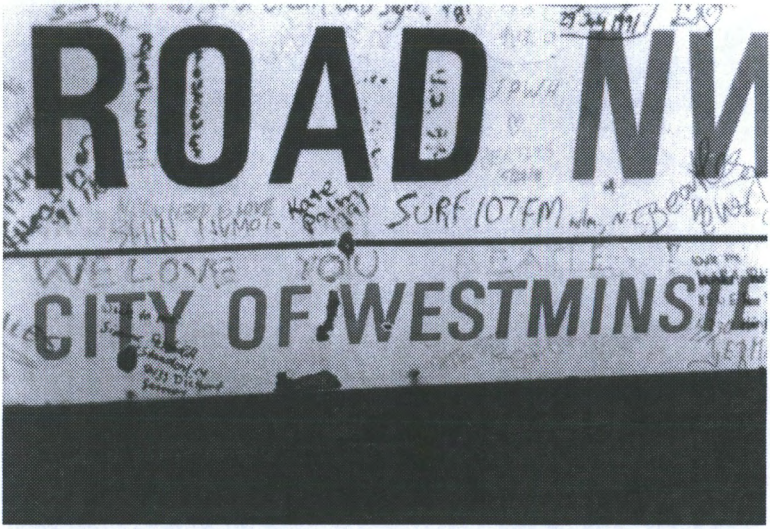
The cultural meanings decoded from space and the built environment have been a recent focus of investigation for those working within both heritage studies and cultural studies. Innovative linkages with the cultural components of geography have resulted in an inventive fusion of approaches and paradigms. The study of space and place enters the material and symbolic spheres, displaying the way in which a place is named and described. As landscapes are

textualised and situated in specific contexts, they become clearing houses for power structures. They also embody the resistive potential of groups to semiotically appropriate and reinscribe a site.

The radical spatialism of postmodern thought, which flattens out time and denounces the linearity of historicism, grants a topology and roughened texture to history. The empowered, disciplinary binaries of geography and history have cleaved the study of space and time. Through the inter-disciplinary conjuncture of cultural studies, place is temporalised and time is spatialised.

London is a postmodern text, being simultaneously pluralistic, playful, ironic, schizoid and mockingly solemn. The lexicon of London frames and contextualises the microknowledges of Abbey Road. The Beatles are not locked into the time-frame of the 1960s, but are continually reinvented and respatialised in the present. The *Beatles Anthology*, the 'authentic history' of the group, was released worldwide in 2000 to queues of eager fans desiring the real story from the Liverpool lads themselves. For other fans, craving physical rather than textual confirmation, Abbey Road summons a spatial medley that clears a path through the polyvalence of both London and time. There is a Beatles' London that imposes its relevances on the landscape.

There are numerous, separate passages through the Beatles' London. These flexible reading strategies can be monitored by invoking the potentials of postmodern thought. One entry point into the Abbey Road semiotic system is a sign located at the commencement of the street. While the dominant meaning, 'ABBEY ROAD NW8', is prioritised on the surfaces of the sign, this functionalist purpose is immediately corrupted by the graffitied shar(e)d culture of the Beatles fans. Their use of the sign does not provide information for the commuter or traveller, but ushers Beatle fans into their destination. This cross-referenced writing corrupts the boundaries between official and unofficial, sanctioned and unsanctioned, communication. The sign of a Beatles' trace on this Road is enough for the fans to claim their right to write. The comments vary from 'We love you Beatles' to the visitor's name being scratched into the iron edifice. The connection between the fans and this site is articulated through the act of 'defacement'. This contortion of the dominant meaning systems instigates an adjacent set of interpretations that draws the Beatles' fans to the crossing. Through such a



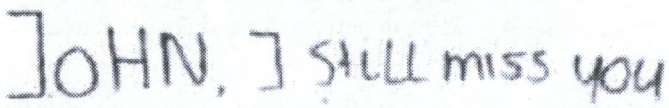
(d)effacement, the painted layers of the Abbey Road wall become a capricious surface for the conveyance of meaning. While the wall can stand in textual solitude, it is also enmeshed in a larger sign system. The touristic value of Abbey Road, as a venue of 'significance', transforms the place into an arena for photographic opportunities.

Abbey Road, as an album, crosswalk, street sign and studio, is a constituent element in visual memory. The crossing has gained a relevance and importance that extends beyond the rim of a vinyl album. Traces of the Beatles are found on that road. As a Beatles tourist guide explained:

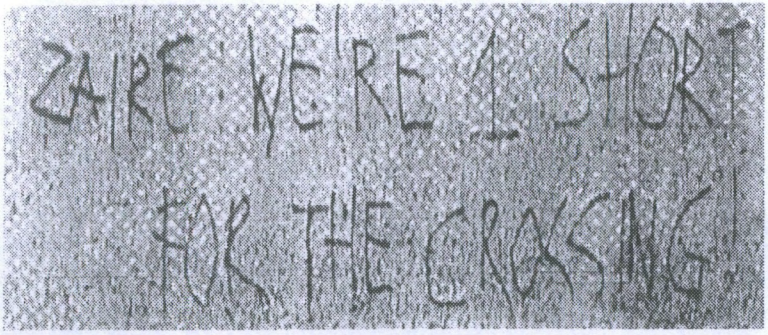
> In Rome, Catholics first visit the Vatican, and Jews in Jerusalem go to the Wailing Wall and manic depressives in San Francisco head straight for the Golden Gate Bridge. But you, the true Beatlemaniac, must go straight to the Abbey Road crosswalk. Nowhere else is more sacred.[10]

Tourism is the consumption of uniqueness, authenticity and the origin. The rise in the heritage industry, which coincided with the cultural shifts of Thatcherism, reconstituted national icons and invented traditions. Via the wall, the past is spatially replayed in the present. It is an over-painted history where the Beatles' Yellow Submarine continues to live beneath the waves. While the crossing and the studios offer a safe retreat to a controllable past, the frayed

scrawls on the wall and frantic scratches into the street sign are outside what Tony Bennett termed 'the bourgeois myths of history.'[11] The fans reclaim and rewrite their Beatles outside the considerations of the safe past and conventional narrative that has dominated the histories of the Beatles written after Lennon's death.



The affirmation of this imagined community reconnects identity and collectivity through the generation of meaning within the Abbey Road semiotic system. Cultural continuity is formulated in urban places through a storytelling process that grants authenticity to specific sites. The wall is semiotically permeable, soaking in meaning from the surrounding textual sites. Fandom is constituted by the possession of knowledge, and a huge database of information establishes 'street credibility' about the Beatles. The iconography of the Abbey Road album has been naturalised to such an extent that a conversation between two of the fans, Marlie and Zaire, resulted in an evocative, graffitied comment. The two fans did not have to articulate the crossing to which they referred, or the reasons why being 'one short' was a problem. The context formulated by the wall's location perpetuates and naturalises this interpretation. While the 'importance' of the studio and the cover has been stored in a collective visual memory, the Beatles' fans are rewriting the group's iconography for their own purposes. The need to follow in the footsteps of the Beatles and replicate their visual configuration fills the semiotic

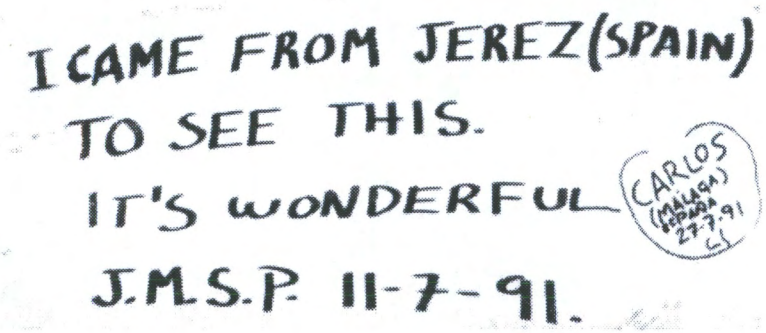


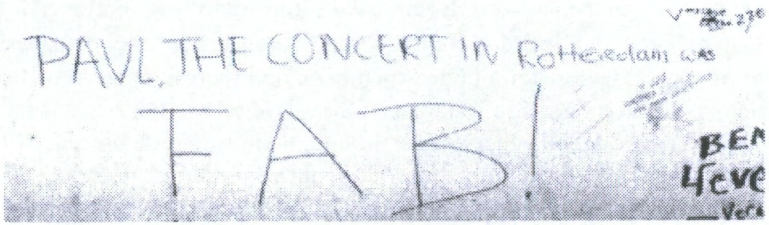
landscape of a crosswalk with reinscribed fan meanings.

Identity and difference are negotiated within the site of the crosswalk, particularly as the desire to cross the street clashes with the obstacles that prevent a crossing. Those walking, scribbling grammarians are negotiating a literacy of Abbey Road that separates a community – with a Beatle-based literacy – from its other. The General Manager of Abbey Road Studios, Ken Townsend, questioned the messy, confusing and irrational connection between fans and 'their' crosswalk:

> Picture yourself as a motorist driving down Abbey Road, a quiet north-west London suburb when suddenly in the pouring rain you are confronted by a strange sight. In front of you standing on a zebra crossing are four tourists, one minus shoes and socks, being photographed … Why you ask yourself, some twenty years on from the time the Beatles used this same zebra crossing for their album cover, should there still be so much interest?[12]

Townsend did not answer his own question. The connective space between the Beatles and their fans is played out on the crossing. The strength of that link is the rationale for the interest. For Townsend to commence his review of fan behaviour, by 'picturing yourself' as a motorist rather than as a fan traversing the crosswalk, involves the instigation of a frame of aberrance or deviance. The agency of fans is circumscribed by the logics that circumscribe official space and normalised behaviour. The wall remains a record of the interconnections between the fans and the meaning of their particular crossing. The wall is a testament to the continued relevance of the studios and crossing to fans.





Visitors from Spain, Holland, Bulgaria, France, Russia, Australia and New Zealand are not only drawn to the Crossing, but also compelled to scrawl their name and comments on the wall. This illogical and illegal act is rendered meaningful through its placement within the Beatles' meaning system on Abbey Road. This manner of active consumption is part of what John Hartley asserted:

> sets incivility or 'parodic politics' apart from straight or 'well-tempered' society … a critical, creative and performative reading practice.[13]

The performance of fandom, where the imagined community of a Beatles' audience is actualised through the graffitied traces of textual phantoms, remains a resistive force in the official history of the Abbey Road studios. Yet, in themselves, these scrawls have gained a tourist value. The final component of this paper questions why these resistive, trivial commentaries on the wall are deemed worthy of feminist attention.

Scribbled History

Women's history in popular music is denied, displaced or decentred. Rock journalism affirms performers and recordings of credibility and authenticity, which actually allows the survival of conservative modes and patterns of rhythm, melody and grain of voice. Yet young women are the most visible and explosive of fans. Often forgotten is that Boy Bands, with their attendant feminine screams, have a history only slightly shorter than rock and roll. The Beatles were the first group to mark each individual member with attributes, specificity and personality. In this way, a diverse audience of women (and men) was drawn to one (or all) of the shy/pretty/funny/smart Beatles. Few groups of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s managed this together-alone relationship as effectively as the fab four. The Supremes were Diana Ross. The Osmonds were Donny, and later Marie. The Jacksons were

Michael – and then the rest. By the 1980s, this trend was continued by Wham, Bros and Spandau Ballet. Duran Duran, for a time, managed to maintain support for all band members, and therefore had a wider audience and longer pop life than Andrew Ridgeley's fan base. If the 1990s had a marked generic form though, then it was the presence of male and female singing groups. The personalities were managed, marketed and performed. The culmination of this principle was obviously the Spice Girls, where the name of the group infiltrated the personality of the singers: Ginger Spice, Posh Spice, Baby Spice, Scary Spice and Sporty Spice.[14] These names were secondary to their tightly toned role. Their trajectory has an earlier resonance in British music, a Beatles' model that was followed to fame. Frequently – too frequently – the screaming girls evaporate from the credible parchment of the Beatles' history, in favour of the 'quality' of *Sgt. Pepper*, or the artistry of *Revolver*. The Beatles were fortunate: they were granted a decade to evolve, grow and change. They were also contextualised by the fashionable radicalism of the 1960s. Compare their power and long-term presence in the charts to the hyper-rapid rise and fall of the other great British Boy Band with a huge female audience, Take That.

Take That split in early 1996. The fan allegiance evaporated very quickly. While a *Take That Appreciation Page* survives on the web,[15] the bulletin board shows highly intermittent messages. There are very few regular members, so few that an event scheduled to commemorate the group's dissolution became embarrassing in its *unpopularity*.

> It is with much sadness that we have to announce that the 2001 Thatters Reunion has been cancelled due to lack of response. We are very surprised that so few Thatters wanted to get together to remember the guys on the 5th anniversary of their split, but we guess a lot of fans have moved on. We have received a total of 25 payments so far but unfortunately because we have to pay the hotel by the end of February, we cannot wait any longer to see if more fans will be coming.[16]

Melancholy punctuates this message. There is a tragedy in establishing a relic of youth that no one visits. It is a virtual ghost town. This vacant fandom is odd, not only when considering the place of Take That in recent memory, but also the current fame of Robbie Williams. His present fans practice textual amnesia about his Boy Band past. 'Thatmania'[17] has disappeared even faster than

Duranmania, Rollermania and Beatlemania. The popcult clock is increasing in speed. To make this dismissal of the fan past even more bizarre, those who leave messages on the discussion forum now deny their own commitment of five years earlier. As Deborah remembers:

> I remember I was so down after they'd split up and I never thought I'd be able to cheer up again. I wouldn't say that I'm a TT-fan now. I don't think I ever was actually. I was just a teenybopper having a huuuuuge crush on Mark Owen.[18]

The statement was made at the same time that the Beatles, thirty years after their breakup, were holding a number one chart position for a retrospective album of their singles. Some memories are more acceptable than others. The obsessions and desires of the girls (we were) are exfoliated from the skin of memory. We lose, deny and forget much of our (present) selves through this process. Popular music is a demanding musical form, and young women are a demanding audience. Willie Dixon realised that 'the men don't know, but the little girls understand.'[19] Obviously though, women grow to deny what, as a little girl, we comprehended and shared.

The power held by these screaming girls is difficult to pinpoint. Yet the grazing female gaze, and the intensity of its desiring power, is a troubling concern for Men's Studies theorists. The siren song of feminism is calling out men's uncoiled fear of the feminine. As Kevin Goddard feared:

> Medusa's gaze is deadly because it is self-defensive, the snakes obvious phallic symbols – the female assuming male power, turning the male into stone.[20]

Once more, the female gaze is a threat to masculine expectations and executions of power. There is no doubt that the spearing attention of young women is combustible and shrill. In their collectivity, there is safety in moving outside of normative sexual behaviour. These fans express desires that, because of their ephemerality, cannot be contained in heteronormative discourses of sexuality. Although loud, the voices of these girls are vaporised from acceptable, credible history. Sheryl Garratt has reclaimed some of this past, through the transformation of private recollection into a public memory:

> One of my clearest memories from nine years ago is of a bus ride from my housing estate in Birmingham into the city centre. An atmosphere

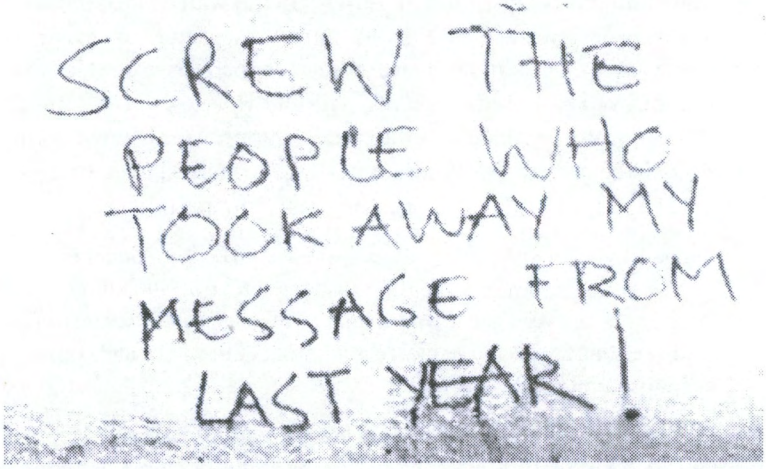
> like a cup final coach, but with all of us on the same side and with one even more radical difference – there were no boys. At every stop more and more girls got on, laughing, shouting, singing the songs we all knew off by heart. We compared the outfits and banners we had spent hours making, swapped jokes and stories, and talked happily to complete strangers because we all had an interest in common: we were about to see the Bay City Rollers … Most of us scream ourselves silly at a concert at least once, although many refuse to admit it later, because like a lot of female experience, our teen infatuations have been trivialised, dismissed and so silenced.[21]

Garratt has added much to the historical record because of her disclosure. While most post-boy band singers insist that they have serious (male) fans, this invariably decentres the millions of female screamers who granted them an original audience. Not surprisingly therefore, as these girls become young women, they decry these memories within themselves, dismissing them as a stage, phase or crazy summer. When these desires and collective hopes are lost, so are significant micro-moments of power and autonomous sexuality. Significantly, because the 'serious music press' is written for men and by men, the source material survives through time. Christenson and Peterson were correct: 'gender is central to the ways in which popular music is used and tastes are organised.'[22] This tendency only increases through the digitisation of documents. While *Billboard*, *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair* are enfolded into the Expanded Academic and ProQuest databases, *Smash Hits* and *No. 1* remain outside the parameters of their interest and, one would assume, a University market.[23] Therefore, those of us interested in preserving the feminine complexity within the past and the present must textualise the few sources of passion, desire and fantasy that remain.

The Beatles' female fans connect with the wall by scrawling graffiti over its white surface. As a devalued form of writing that is regularly painted over by the management of Abbey Road studios, the fans' words are a trivialised and mocked. Jenkins suggested these texts are a form of 'scribbling at the margins.'[24] These scribbles are a monitor of how the passions of fandom are manifested on/in/through the landscape. With Beatles historians, tour guide writers and the Abbey Road Studios Management attempting to make their truths authoritative and authentic, the scrawls on the wall offer an outside to this official history. As Cosgrove stated:

> Alternative cultures are less visible in the landscape than dominant ones, although with a change in the scale of observation a subordinate or alternative culture may appear dominant.[25]

This investigation of the Road encircling the Abbey Road studios is an example of this 'change in scale'. Instead of exploring the 'big picture' Beatles tourism industry, the small scale contestations of culture and meaning are watched through the graffitied texts on the wall. The struggles involved in generating this alternative memory occasionally extracted direct commentary from the fans.



This aggressive response to those who wiped away the fan's words is precise and unambiguous. This retort also exhibits the way in which fans return to Abbey Road to photograph, view, cross and scrawl. The regular 'whiting out' of the wall is a form of graphological abjection, the removal of words and ideologies that threaten the integrity and authenticity of the Beatles' safe, ordered history. The disorganisation of the surface, which contains haphazard phrases and pastiched images and lyrics, grants a fluidity to the London Beatle experience and frays the rationality of the 'sensible' tourist. The questioning of societal rules is a tactic to confirm space. For example, a fan scratched an ideologically provocative question into the Abbey Road street sign:

These textual poachers, scribbling at the margins, problematise the rational world of urban planning and the sanitisation of space. Why should this Beatle space be clean and ordered?

The cluttered composition of graffiti on the wall of the studios is also used as an interface by fans to convey messages to Harrison, Starr or McCartney. Others leave notes for their friends. The fans utilised the wall to link themselves with the Beatles, formulating a connection with the place to efface the temporal gulf between the 1960s and the 1990s. As Pred suggested through his rewriting of Marx's 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte':

> Women and men make histories and produce places, not under circumstances of their own choosing but in the context of already existing, directly encountered social and spatial structures, in the context of already existing social and spatial relations that both enable and constrain the purposeful conduct of life.[26]

Pred is articulating that the generation of meaning from a place is a productive, imaginative enterprise. The textual poachers who scrawl on the Abbey Road wall are directly engaging with – and corrupting – the spatial structures that inhibit the imposition of ideology. In rupturing planning and development, a flexibility is factored into the cultural logic of the Beatles' history. The politics of the crossing that feature in the graffitied elucidations instigate a conflict between the fan and official vernacular. The thoroughly postmodern fight over surfaces has been described by Henry Jenkins as

> a tug-of-war over meanings, one which can never be totally won by any party but will nevertheless continue to be fought.[27]

The Abbey Road scribblers are not outside ideology: they 'know their place.' While they freely write on the wall, the fans do not venture into the studios. Their space and role is circumscribed and naturalised.

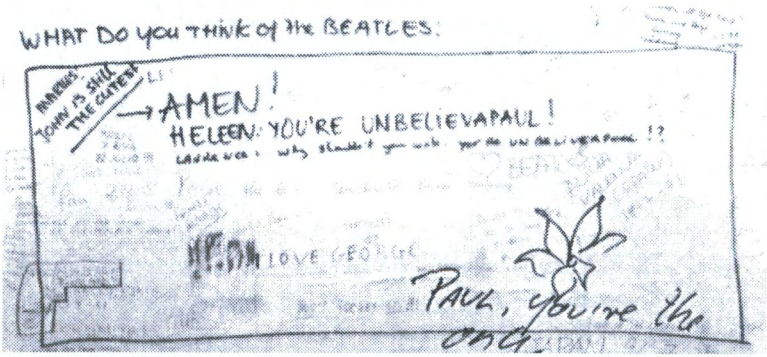
The place of female fans in the semiotic landscape is particularly limited. As Cosgrove realised, 'women represent the largest single excluded culture, at least as far as impact on the public landscape is concerned.'[28] If Abbey Road has a visual language, then the modality of that literacy is feminine. The wall remains an alteritous structure through which to negotiate the limits of the public and private spheres. The gendering of a place results in the semiotic landscape being divided between the moral and the immoral. While Jackson showed that prostitution is organised geographically,[29] the sexuality of the Beatles' female fans is dynamic and continually renegotiated through the 'conversations' on the wall.

The negotiation of feminine sexuality, which manifests itself on the wall through the affirmation of the favourite Beatle, publicly performs private desires. Some of these longings are expressed overtly and concisely.

Song lyrics are poached from the Beatles albums and their solo careers. Lennon's 'Imagine' was used as the basis for a memorial to Lennon. This memorial encompassed the entirety of the corner pillar of the wall.

The death of Lennon had a profound effect on the fans that left their mark. They required Lennon to 'mean' something to them. After Lennon's murder, the cultural pastiche of the 1980s British Beatles fandom was filtered through a bloodied gauze. Twenty years after the assassination, it is clear that the loss remains semiotic and social, private and public.

The female fans discuss more than their desire for Paul, John, George or Ringo. They also engage in strangely mediated commentary 'conversations.' Although the female fans visit the wall at different times, the wall provides an analogue, asynchronous discussion forum to reveal their fandom, their obsessions and themselves.



This segment of the wall conveys a temporally disparate but spatially localised discussion between Marlie, Heleen and Zaire. Although they did not meet at the wall, they conveyed information about sightings of Paul, tours and the problems involved in being 'one short for the crossing.' This 'trivial' dialogue is an ephemeral on the landscape, but it conveys much about power, sexuality and the connections between women. But further, it exists, as Joseph Roach realised, 'on the cusp of the most intimate of memories and the most public of historical events.'[30] The wall is not an inanimate effigy. It is a moving, changeable whitewash of social and personal possibilities.

A history of place is written using the iconography of landscape. As Giorgio Agamben has offered, 'every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned.'[31] Memory is woven through a tenuous tissue of experience. While Abbey Road may be a suburban street within North West London,

this public, masculinist map making discourse is corrupted by the trivial tinkerings of spatial scribblers. Edward Soja stated that 'we still know too little about the descriptive grammar and syntax of human geographies, the phonemes and epistemes of spatial interpretation.'[32] Instigating a small scale study at the nexus of space and time, geography and history, forms a beginning for such a project. In affixing our gaze to visual cultures, cultural theorists can agitate the scriptorial domination of historical evidence.

The textual traces of graffiti that were recorded at the wall of Abbey Road Studios on 2 August, 1991, have been effaced. Those particular histories have been removed from the historical database. The musings of Heleen, Zaire and Marlie have been whited out from the official record of the Beatles' history. They cannot be reclaimed. The wall remains, like the best of popular culture, an ever-changing library display, scrawled on textured concrete. It is a bag-washed surface on which we find what Daniel Traister describes as 'uncontained cultural memories.'[33] If the potentials of heritage studies, cultural studies, women's studies and popular memory are accessed, then the historical past can be re-placed and remoulded. Global travellers reclaim iconographies of the past through a visit to London, and to a wall. It is a nostalgic imagining, affirming the centrality of London to fashion, style and music. The trade route has been reworked into a text route, enacting a new, unequal exchange: of tourist revenue, iconography and imagining. There are disturbing colonial consequences of this search for meaning and community.

A study of popular memory demonstrates that there is a feminist imperative beyond scholarly and professional responsibilities. Occasionally, we need to put down our notebook, silence the clatter of keys, pick up a camera and flood the shutter with meaning. The digital age will not be kind to ephemera. Researchers need to become amateur archivists. Alternatively, we may have to hop a ride on the blue van, and commence the poaching.

TARA BRABAZON *is a senior lecturer in Communication and Cultural Studies at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. Her book,* Tracking the Jack: A Retracing of the Antipodes, *has just been published by the University of New South Wales Press.*

Notes

[1] An example of these stories is found in 'Strawberry Field gates stolen', BBC Homepage, http://newssearch.bbc.co.uk/hi/English/uk/newsid_7460000/746683.stm http://newssearch.bbc.co.uk/hi/English/uk/newsid_7460000/746683.stm, accessed on 7 August, 2000.

[2] L. Weissberg, 'Introduction', in D. Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (ed.), *Cultural memory and the construction of identity*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999, p. 13.

[3] J. Goss, 'The built environment and social theory: towards an architectural geography', *Professional Geographer* 1988, 40(4):398.

[4] J. Hilier and P. Manus, 'Pull up the drawbridge: fortress mentality in the suburbs', in S. Watson and K. Gibson (ed.), *Postmodern cities conference – proceedings*, Sydney: University of Sydney, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, 1993, p. 221.

[5] M. de Certeau, 'Walking in the city', in S. During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 153.

[6] C. Marcus, C. Francis, C. Meunier, 'Mixed messages in suburbia: reading the suburban model home', *Places,* 1992, 1(1):27.

[7] A. Mellor, 'Enterprise and heritage in the Dock', in J. Corner and S. Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 95.

[8] D. Cosgrove, 'Geography is everywhere', in D. Gregory and Walford (eds), *New Horizons in Human Geography*, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1989, p. 118.

[9] K. Anderson and F. Gale, 'Introduction', in K. Anderson and F. Gale, *Inventing Places*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992, p. 7.

[10] D. Bacon and N. Maslov, *The Beatles' England*, London: Columbus Books, 1982, p. 16.

[11] T. Bennett, 'Museums and "the people"' in K. Lumley (ed.), *The Museum Time Machine*, London: Comedia/Routledge, 1988, p. 84.

[12] K. Townsend, 'Preface', in M. Lewisohn, *The Complete Beatle Recording Sessions*, London: Hamlin, 1988, p. 6.

[13] J. Hartley, 'Citizens of the Media: the public domain and technologies of readership', *Paper for the 4th International Symposium on Film, TV and Video*, 1994, p. 8.

[14] As the group have aged and gone on to 'solo projects,' the labels have followed them. Spice World has become Spite World, Posh Spice (Victoria Beckham) transformed into Skeletal Spice and, with great cruelty, Sporty Spice's weight gain remade her into Sumo Spice.

[15] 'Take That: the appreciation pages', http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/3005/takethat.html, accessed on 30 March, 2001.

[16] '3 February 2001: Thatters Reunion Cancelled', http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/3005/ttnews.html, accessed on 3 March, 2001.

[17] Alex Kadis, *Take That: In private*, London: Virgin Books, 1994, p. 10.

[18] Deborah,http://pub17.bravenet.com/forum

fetch.php?id=9566345&usernum=1436661303, accessed on March 30, 2001

[19] W. Dixon, cited in S. Daly, 'Like an artist', *Vanity Fair*, November 2000, p. 54.

[20] K. Goddard, "Look maketh the man': the female gaze and the construction of masculinity', *The Journal of Men's Studies* Fall 2000, 9(1), p. 28.

[21] S. Garratt, 'All of us love all of you', from Sue Steward and Sheryl Garratt, *Signed, sealed and delivered: true life stories of women in pop*, London: Pluto, 1984, p. 140.

[22] P. Christenson and J. Peterson, 'Genre and gender in the structure of music preferences', *Communication Research* June 1988, 15(3):282.

[23] A survey of *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory* (2001), http://www.ulrichsweb.com, (accessed on May 1, 2001) reveals that *Melody Maker*, *Q*, *Rolling Stone* (Australia), *Rolling Stone* (US), *Vanity Fair* (UK) and *Vanity Fair* (US) are all distributed in alternative media such as online fulltext and CDRom. *Smash Hits* (Australia), *Smash Hits* (UK) and *No. 1* are only available in print form. There are no commercial publishers or distributors who make these popular cultural texts accessible to scholars. There will be long-term consequences of this historical gap for feminist researchers of popular music.

[24] H. Jenkins, *Textual poachers*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 152.

[25] Cosgrove, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

[26] A. Pred, *Making Histories*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1990, p. 9.

[27] H. Jenkins, 'If I could speak with your sound', *Camera Obscura* 1990, 23:168.

[28] Cosgrove, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

[29] P. Jackson, *Maps of meaning*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

[30] Joseph Roach, 'History, Memory, Necrophilia', in Peggy Phelana and Jill Lane (ed.), *The ends of performance*, New York: University of New York Press, 1998, p. 23.

[31] G. Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of experience*, London: Verson, 1993, p. 3

[32] E. Soja, *Postmodern geographies*, London: Verso, 1989, p. 247.

[33] D. Traister, 'Libraries as a locus of cultural memories', in Ben-Amos and Weissberg, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

Confronting 'Critical Unease': Women talk about Representations of 'Killer Women' / 'Action Heroines'

TIINA VARES

In the early 1990s, there was a discursive explosion around the topic(s) of women, violence and representation. The release of a number of films with 'killer women', 'action heroines', or 'women warriors' (as they came to be called) provoked often heated and polarised discussions. *Thelma and Louise, Terminator 2, Blue Steel* and *The Silence of the Lambs,* amongst others, contributed to making the issue of female violence a topic of controversy and debate. The surprisingly large numbers of reviews of *Thelma and Louise,* for example, involved a 'whole lot of heavy thinking ... and some pretty heavy journalistic breathing too' over whether the film 'celebrates liberated females, male bashers or outlaws'.[1] The debates centred around the female protagonists as 'subjects' of aggression and violence against men.

Barbara Ehrenreich suggests that *Thelma and Louise* started a 'grass roots female militancy' amongst American women who were tired of being victims and were eager to see women fight back by whatever means necessary.[2] Some textually based analyses of 'killer women' films also provide anecdotal accounts of viewer response or make broad assumptions about female viewers' responses to action heroines.[3] These accounts indicate women's pleasures in representations of women who can fight, shoot and defend themselves.

A great deal of film theorising has focused on the pleasure(s) we take from our engagement with cinema without attending to what viewers specifically have to say about their responses to films. There have also been a number of assumptions made about women's responses to gun-toting heroines, particularly the 'pleasures' these representations facilitate in female viewers. In this paper, I examine the pleasures articulated by the women who participated in this study. I argue that we cannot theorise how female viewers will respond to these representations from textual analysis or anecdotal accounts alone. The talk of the women in the focus group discussions for this project illustrates that responses to these representations are not

univocal. For some participants, there were no 'pleasures' in the violent and aggressive actions of 'killer women'. For others, their pleasures were ambivalent and muted. In examining the ways in which the research participants articulated their ambivalence, acceptance, and rejection of the potential 'pleasure(s)' of seeing women act violently in contemporary movies, I argue for the need to pay attention to the *range of different* pleasures produced by particular viewers in specific contexts.

My reflections on the responses of some female viewers to representations of action heroines are based on five focus group discussions with women drawn from different political or social networks in Christchurch in 1996.[4] My interest was not in research which would be the basis for claims about 'women' in general. I sought out five groups of women, who through their engagement with particular practices, might view films with action heroines pleasurably and for whom these pleasures might produce tensions. In some cases, the groups were 'pre-existing' – they were drawn from the women's refuge movement, the peace movement, and a martial arts club. Another group shared the common characteristic of being university students with an interest in gender and representation. The last group of women all worked in a specialist video outlet and were knowledgable about films and the film industry.

Using focus group discussions facilitates a consideration of the meaning-making process as a group activity rather than a concern with individual cognitions. This allows us to investigate the construction of meaning as a social process. Thus, the study of responses to film in this context recognises that these responses are frequently interactive, and modifiable over time and across social contexts. Furthermore, as identity is largely constructed through dialogue,[5] the use of the focus group in this study allows for the exploration of the ways the participants construct selves/positions in dialogue with other women, and with myself as the researcher.[6]

While this study was concerned with the potential pleasures of women acting violently or aggressively, for many participants the pleasures of the film *Thelma and Louise* were *not* the moments in which they use weapons. Rather, they were the moments of escape from the ordinary, moments of female bonding and togetherness. The following extracts from the martial arts and university students groups articulate the pleasures expressed by many women in the focus groups:

Sharon (M)[7]: It was a fun movie. They were good looking women – they were both really gorgeous women – they had a great car. They were having a lot of fun together – the friendship was just great.

Amy (U): ... I just liked seeing them driving together – Thelma and Louise – through that fantastic desert landscape. ... There was just something about them taking a break. I'm just trying to remember – the woman who was married and left home and left a note – Thelma – that was what I found really inspiring – not necessarily the violent focus.

These comments relate to feminist discourses which are critical of traditional domesticity and passivity. The women's pleasures are associated with women being in the driving seat, as agents of travel and speed. They are on the road, a new space for women in this genre where they traditionally get left behind in domestic settings. In appropriating and redefining the themes and forms of the road and buddy movies, *Thelma and Louise* offers the specific pleasures of these genres to female viewers.[8] These are also pleasures associated with the friendship between women. These are not, however, the 'popular pleasures of female revenge'.[9]

In fact, the pleasures the women articulated rarely refer to women's violent actions. The focus is on the 'body' of the action heroine, her 'actions' for 'good' and her 'attitude'. In framing my analysis in this way, I draw on what Sherrie Inness refers to as four groups of traits which characterise the 'New Tough Women' in popular culture: first, the physical body, which includes clothing and the presence/absence of muscles; second, the woman's attitude, for example, the lack of visible fear as well as appearing competent and in control of even the most threatening of circumstances; third, a woman's actions which, along with stamina and strength, reveal her intelligence; and fourth, authority which the tough woman must have if she is to be heeded.[10] Inness' approach to examining the construction of action heroines connects with the talk of the women in the focus group discussions. In these contexts, the bodies, the actions and the attitudes action heroines were discussed and debated. The focus of this paper on the selective pleasures identified by participants in a variety of repertoires of interpretation[11] provides a means of exploring the co-construction of meaning in the focus group contexts.

The Pleasure(s) of 'Tough', 'Hardbody' Heroines

Representations of action heroines emphasize, in particular, the physical aspects of action. The bodies of both the action hero and heroine are important sites on which particular signifiers of gender are both constructed and challenged. As Tasker says:

> One of the pleasures of the cinema is precisely that it offers a space in which the ambiguities of identities and desires are played out. This blurring of categories is crucial to understanding the play of masculinity and femininity over the bodies of male and female characters, a process that has been inflected significantly in the action cinema of recent years in which the body is brought so much to the fore.[12]

The body of the action heroine was raised in the group discussions in a variety of ways. Much of the talk about these female bodies centred on their 'musculinity',[13] and the degree to which the muscled female body posed a transgression or challenge to representations of gender. The participants often articulated particular pleasures, while simultaneously being critical of these pleasures. For example, some women drew on feminist understandings about the sexual objectification of the female body for a male gaze which, at times, complicated/problematized their own pleasure(s) in these representations. Two cases give insight into the particular pleasures of the hardbody heroine: Lucy Lawless in *Xena: Warrior Princess* and Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2*.

Sexualised Muscles and 'Doing Good' – Xena: Warrior Princess

Talk about women as violent protagonists included conversation about *Xena: Warrior Princess,* particularly in the refuge activists and martial arts group discussions. At the time of these discussions this television series was still relatively new. Marie, one of the refuge activists, spoke about her pleasure in the representation of Xena, although she also looks critically at this pleasure as the discussion proceeds:

Marie (R): I take a lot of pleasure in the way she's dressed – it's just my raging hormones.

[laughter]

Marie (R): She is very physically fit ... and I quite often look and think gee! But I haven't watched it a lot although I did notice in the shops that there is a Xena doll – reverse of the Barbie – the Xena's real muscly. But it's the same kind of thing except disguised

as something else – she's still got big boobs ... I think she's better than Barbie but it is made in the same kind of way. It's both. It's good that she's there with Barbie but we're always co-opted because although she's a strong woman, she's fit and she's fighting for good she still is a sex object. She's got muscles really.

Sarah (R): But that's not a sex object in mainstream is it?

[all talking]

Marie (R): I just thought it is good, it is different and it's still ... very sexualized, in my opinion, it was still a very sexualized doll, although it's disguised because it's not as overt as Barbie. It's a different kind of woman but it's still very sexualized.

Gillian (R): She hasn't got a bush shirt on.

Sarah (R): But it's a bit – what's that programme on TV – like Gladiators. *Now I actually think – some people say it's total nonsense – but I don't mind the kids watching it. I think the women, even though they have clothes like this [indicates smallness] they're not worried out there about looking pretty. They're out there going for it – and it's the same with the men, they have their skimpy stuff. I think they're actually quite good role models because they're really good sports and the women aren't sexual. I don't think that they're at all sexual – even though they've got skimpy clothes on because they're going for it.*

In this discussion, discourses concerning the representation of women as sexual objects for the voyeuristic pleasure of men are raised and negotiated. While Marie draws on the notion of sexual objectification, she also discusses some of the difficulties with this idea. For example, she begins by talking about a female/lesbian sexual gaze which problematises the notion that Xena is a sexual object for a male gaze alone. Marie is thus attempting to find a position which takes into account her pleasure in Xena's body and yet acknowledges the representation of women as 'sex objects'. Tasker describes this as a contradiction between what 'we' know and what 'we' enjoy. This, she argues, is because the kinds of fantasy investments at work in the pleasures taken from the cinema cannot be controlled by conscious political positions in the ways some criticism seems to imply.[14]

Marie also points to the ways in which Xena challenges representations of gender – she is strong and fit, has muscles and

fights for 'good'. In these respects, she transgresses traditional constructions of women as victims of violence and/or as 'bad' or pathologised violent women. Nevertheless, Marie still frames her as a sex object, primarily because of her 'big boobs' and the way in which she dresses. This position is similar to that of Inness who argues that action heroines use toughness in complicated ways to challenge gender stereotypes while simultaneously affirming them.[15]

For Marie, it is the combination of particular signifiers of 'femininity' (long hair, skimpy clothing and exposed bosoms and bottoms) alongside particular signifiers of 'masculinity' (height and a muscular physique) which undermine the challenges these women pose to constructions of gender. Marie uses the example of the Barbie doll as an example of an idealised female image for young girls. She compares it to the Xena doll and suggests that, although Xena is different to/better than Barbie, it is nevertheless the 'same kind of thing', that is, a sex object. I assume she is suggesting that Xena's clothing emphasises her breasts and legs for a voyeuristic male gaze. Gillian seems to pick up on this when she refers to Xena not wearing a bush shirt (which in New Zealand is a signifier of a tough, rugged masculinity). This shirt would also cover her breasts. Thus, as Marie says, Xena is both a 'sex object' and a challenge to a particular idealised female body, as represented by the Barbie doll. For both Marie and Inness, the toughness in women is toned down by emphasising the connections between women, sexuality and femininity.[16]

Marie's response, which takes pleasure in the way Xena is dressed as well as being critical of her as a 'sex object', illustrates a tension between particular feminist understandings of representations of women and particular pleasures. In a reception study on *Doctor Who,* John Tulloch refers to this tension as 'negotiating contradictions' between one's ideological attitudes (for example, against sexism) and one's liking of a programme.[17] He suggests that one's ideological attitude can act as a check to one's potential pleasures. In the above extract, Marie's 'ideological' position on representations of women 'appears' to act as 'a check' on her own pleasures. This demonstrates the tension between legitimating women's pleasures and the desire to assess representations politically.

Sarah, however, contests Marie's understandings of what constitutes a 'sexual object' in mainstream television. She suggests

this is not generally a muscled, fighting heroine and argues that it is not simply clothing and exposed body parts which make women 'objects'. In her reference to the television programme *Gladiators* (which features a number of women body builders), Sarah's focus is on the women's 'actions' and 'attitude' rather than their 'skimpy' clothing. This focus serves to position these women as 'subjects' of action rather than passive 'objects' of a male gaze. Sarah sees these women as challenging gender roles rather than confirming them and therefore frames them as 'role models', or as a 'cultural resource', for her children.

Xena: Warrior Princess was also the focus of discussion in the martial arts group. Sharon began by making a reference to the part Lucy Lawless played in a Bank of New Zealand advertisement before she took on the role of Xena:

Sharon (M): I really like Lucy Lawless. In those BNZ ads she was so bad, so insincere, but in Xena I think she's great. She's big – she's not a thin buxom – it's not a gorgeous model body. She's like got thighs of steel – but she's still very feminine. She's got round hips and a round bum and round breasts – 'wonder bra' breasts and [name], my partner, thinks that she is hot – and she's got a bit of muscle. Man, she's got good legs.

Cathy (M): [male partner's name] thinks she's overweight and gross

[all talking]

Sharon (M): She's a good role model – come on – face it. Both Hercules and Xena are honest – they're on the side of good. She's her own person – she's got good skills – she thinks about other people – she helps people – and *she looks damn good.*

As with the refuge activists group, the discussion in this group contrasts Xena's body to the idealised feminine slender, model-type body. Sharon, for example, points out some of the ways in which Xena challenges particular constructions of femininity. She takes great pleasure in Lucy/Xena's body, as does her partner, and attributes this to its combination of Xena's 'round breasts' and 'round hips' (that is, a mature, overtly sexual and reproductive body) with her muscularity ('thighs of steel') and action. Furthermore, Xena's action is not just 'exciting' but 'moral' (that is, she helps people). Thus, for Sharon there are the complex pleasures of Xena both doing good (subject)

and looking good (object). In other words, Sharon refers to Xena's body, attitude and action (to use Inness' framework for representing toughness) as contributing to her pleasures in this representation. This also connects back to Sarah's earlier comment on *Gladiators* in which the women are admired for their physical prowess/action and their sporting attitude. Both Sarah and Sharon frame these women as good 'role models' because of the ways in which their bodies, attitudes and actions portray women as strong, competent and capable, but also 'feminine'.

It is interesting to look at the way in which these discussions frame Xena's breasts as an important signifier of femininity in a muscular female body. Like Xena, other action heroines, such as Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* and Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens,* also 'perform masculinity' through their actions and attitudes, but, Brown argues, they 'embody it physically'. 'The thick waist, boy's hips, *no bosom,* overlaid by combat boots and ammunition clips, worked for many critics to efface femininity altogether' (emphasis added).[18] Julie Baumgold also refers to Hamilton having a 'bosom so small it does not require a bra'.[19] Xena, however, does not 'efface femininity altogether' and it is, in fact, Xena's 'round breasts' and hips, which although read differently by Marie and Sharon, are nevertheless a source of pleasure for both women.

An 'Anti-Beauty Heroine': Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2*

The 'hardbody' of Linda Hamilton, who plays Sarah Connor in the film *Terminator 2*, and the potential pleasures this representation offers were discussed in the martial arts and film buffs group. Baumgold argues that female body, and its potential for violence, is a particular site of fascination in this film.[20] Released seven years after *The Terminator,* the character/body of Sarah Connor has been radically reconstructed and transformed. From the soft, fearful and traditionally feminine character/body in the first film, she is transformed into a tough, fearless, physically and emotionally hard heroine in *Terminator 2.*

Discussion in the martial arts group turned to the pleasures men had in the hardbodies of Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens* and Linda Hamilton:

Sharon (M): In your research is Aliens *classified as a violent movie?*

Tiina: Yeah.

Sharon (M): Isn't it interesting that so many men have fallen in love with Sigourney Weaver after Aliens*? They think she's just the hottest thing on the face of the earth and she's running around with the biggest damn gun .... And* Terminator 2 *some guys really liked [Linda Hamilton] in that, but then some guys liked her in* The Terminator *where she's all soft – with the big lips*

[laughter]

Tiina: What about women – do you like those muscled heroines?

Sharon (M): Oh definitely – well yeah – to a degree.

[all talking]

Sharon (M): I went on a binge for a few weeks – I've got to have that body – I've got to have those arms.

Sharon discusses these films in terms of male responses and indicates a variety of pleasurable reactions to both the muscled and more 'feminine' action heroines (both embodied by Linda Hamilton). She does seem to find the attraction of men to Sigourney Weaver with her 'big gun' somewhat amusing. This could be because of the irony of men taking pleasure in a woman who has 'usurped a particularly phallic means of power'.[21] Yet, while Sharon wants to acknowledge the pleasures for men in hardbody heroines who wield guns, she also wants to claim her own pleasures, which include a desire for imitation (particularly Hamilton's body and arms). Hamilton's arms have been the object of much commentary. Baumgold, for example, writes of Hamilton/Connor:

> She is sleeveless the whole movie to show her arms. The arms have rivers of veins rising above the bulging muscle. The arms, even at rest, show their muscle. The arms are polished weapons. They show scars. They show hair.[22]

In her article, Baumgold, like Sharon, was uneasy about her pleasures in viewing the female hardbody. With respect to Sharon, one possible interpretation is that she does not want her pleasure in the female body to be seen as a sexual one. She clarifies this by explaining that she wants to 'have that body' in terms of 'being like' that body. As Sharon Willis comments, 'we may fantasize *being* such bodies, *having* them, or both' (emphasis added).[23] Willis is referring to the mix of desire and identification which these hardbodies enable.

For many heterosexual women, there are potential difficulties in finding ways of talking about being attracted to, and/or taking pleasure in, the female hardbody. Maria Pini refers to the difficulty of 'languaging' certain pleasures and explains that 'these pleasures do not clearly 'fit' standard patriarchal definitions of sexuality and eroticism'.[24] Thus, Sharon talks of wanting to imitate Hamilton's body, as well as discussing male approval for these bodies, as being 'safe' ways of articulating the pleasures of this hardbody.

In the following extract, the women in the martial arts group continue this discussion about Linda Hamilton's muscled body:

Sharon (M): [Linda Hamilton] worked out with Arnold Schwarzenneger at his gym for like – oh – a year wasn't it?

[all talking at once about how 'gross' Arnie's muscled body is]

Cathy (M): He was over the top. Bev someone [Francis] – she was too. …

Sharon (M): They're not being honest with their own bodies – they're not natural. They've gone too far. Linda Hamilton in that Terminator 2 *movie – her body was functional – she was healthy – you could see the health oozing out of her and that's what's attractive about her.*

Rather than using muscles to code the 'naturalness' of sexual difference, Sharon and Cathy frame an 'excess' of muscle on both men and women as 'too much'/unnatural. While this works to disrupt gender differences and frame the body as a construction (it took Hamilton a year to craft her hardbody), it also sets limits to the acceptable level of muscularity for both men and women. There appears to be a boundary between the 'natural' muscle of Linda Hamilton and the 'unnatural' muscle of Schwarzenegger and Bev Francis. It is as though the more visible the muscle, and hence the more time and effort involved in achieving it, the more 'unnatural' it is. The irony is that all three bodies required a great deal of work in their production.

Sharon frames Linda Hamilton's muscularity as acceptable and attractive, because it is not excessive. In part, this reflects the contribution the 'fitness phenomenon' has made in constituting a new standard of beauty for women, which is determined by 'flex appeal'.[25] This 'new ideal of female beauty' is achieved by working out and

being fit. Sharon describes Hamilton as 'healthy' (in fact, 'with the health oozing out of her'), which Laurie Schulze argues is the kind of language this ideal of beauty invokes.[26] Brown also argues that the 'well toned body is currently more of a female ideal than the voluptuous but weak body'.[27] However, while contesting traditional constructions of femininity this new ideal nevertheless resists the incorporation of too much muscle (which may signify too much 'masculinity').

The martial arts and film buffs groups also considered Hamilton/Connor's actions and attitude. In the following comment from the martial arts group, Jane tells of the way in which her response shifted with a subsequent viewing of the film:

Jane (M): But I have to say for me personally – in Terminator 2 *I loved it the first time and I just dug [Hamilton/Connor] a lot. But then I watched it again on video and I just freaked out at the violent scene where she goes into the black guy's house. I couldn't watch it actually – I had to go out of the room because it was too [all talking] it was incredibly disturbing with the guy lying there and the little kid screaming. I thought – that's too much for me.*

Jane responded positively to Hamilton's strength and style in her first viewing. On her second viewing, however, she had to leave the room when Connor/Hamilton blasts her way into the home of the scientist responsible for the technology which threatens human life in the future. She found the 'violence', or rather the threat of violence, in this scene overwhelming. Thus, while she admires Hamilton's body and its 'potential' for violence, she finds the representation of 'actual' violence disturbing. It was also in this scene that Connor's action was dependent on her armed rather than physical strength. Thus, Jane's pleasure is possibly in the potential power and symbols of strength rather than actual use of weapons/violence. It is interesting to note that much of the commentary on the potential pleasures which the action heroine offers female viewers focuses on her use of weapons.[28] In the focus group discussions, however, the women rarely talked of how action heroines 'usurped' the traditional male signifiers of guns/weapons. They tended to focus on the body as emblematic of the strength/power of the action heroine.

Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* also had an impact on the women in the film buffs group in terms of her body, action and attitude:

Kate (F): The first film I saw that really made an impression on me

was Terminator 2 *and Linda Hamilton – and that totally took me ... that was great – it was just dynamic*

Claire (F): ... I think it's because she's so androgynous. When she's first introduced she doesn't seem to be male or female. She's like a trapped animal in that hospital and she's just really tight and really hard ... and she just busts out of there...

Nicky (F): And it's amazing to see her too – she's so that anti-beauty heroine.

Claire (F): Her hair is like straw

Penny (F): And she doesn't have make-up to hide the lines

Claire (F): She just looks strung out

Kate (F): I think it's also with her character. In that film, the thing I related to was what she was saying about the way things were going to go in the future. I know it was a futuristic film but at the same time – like Strange Days *– I think that is a possibility and I think the whole thing of the warning that things are going to get real bad – that there is going to be some horrible apocalypse – there's that whole side to it as well ...*

In this extract, the appeal of Hamilton/Connor is in the way she collapses traditional gender boundaries. For Claire, this is framed in terms of androgyny – she is neither clearly male nor female. The words she uses, for example, 'tight' and 'hard' and 'busts out' are more commonly associated with 'masculinity'. As Brown says, 'the use of 'hard' as descriptive of the heroine emphasises the removal of the 'soft' (read feminine) qualities'.[29] Nicky and Penny also comment on particular aspects of her representation which challenge traditional signifiers of femininity, for example, her lack of make-up and straw-like hair. In a similar vein, Baumgold refers to her square jaw, the hidden eyes (by hair or dark glasses), no make-up and her short, square unpolished nails as representing 'a new standard of beauty'.[30] Nicky echoes this with her description of Hamilton as an 'anti-beauty heroine'.

For Kate, however, the focus is on the characterisation of Connor with respect to the narrative. It is Connor's attempt to 'do good' and make sure the destructive future does not eventuate, which is the source of appeal. As Dana Heller argues, in *Terminator 2,* it is a woman who becomes the agent for humanistic reform, a liberalising influence on power-greedy men who are moving the world unwittingly toward

nuclear holocaust.[31] This demonstrates the pleasures available through the 'action' and 'attitude' of the character, and the ways in which different viewers focus on different aspects of the action heroine.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at the ways in which the research participants articulated certain pleasures in various action heroines, while at the same time being critical of aspects of their representation. The pleasures in the bodies, actions and attitudes of particular hardbody heroines, demonstrated a focus on the 'potential' of these bodies for 'doing violence', rather than 'actually' performing such actions. There was almost no mention of their use of weapons/guns, which has been a focus of much critical commentary. The focus was on the body of the action heroine as emblematic of the strength/power rather than her use of this strength/power.

This analysis demonstrates the ways in which the potential pleasures the action heroine offers female viewers cannot simply be read off the image/film. The women in these group discussions did not embrace the pleasures of female revenge and were, in fact, often critical of the representations of women as violent subjects. The 'critical unease' around action heroines articulated by the women, film critics and commentators indicates that representations of action heroines are important sites of contestation over meanings of gender and violence. The pleasures and critiques of 'hard body' heroines demonstrate the ways these representations function as sites of experimentation and transformation, as well as reinforcing more traditional conceptualisations of gender. The participants construct interpretive repertoires which draw on a variety of often contradictory discourses; for example, the tensions between women as objects of violence and the male sexual gaze, and women as subjects of violence and the narrative. Through these struggles over the meanings and pleasures of action heroines, viewers engage in reconceptualisation of female subjectivities, both in film/television and in their own lives.

TIINA VARES *currently teaches in the department of Gender Studies, University of Canterbury, Christchurch. Her research interests include the cultural reception of popular media texts, particularly the ways in which viewers read/interpret representations of gender, health and sexualities.*

Notes

[1] Richard Schickel, 'Gender Bender', *Time,* 24 June, 1991, p. 52.

[2] Barbara Ehrenreich, 'Feminism Confronts Bobbittry', *Time,* 24 January, 1994, p. 62.

[3] See Marthe Kirsten Lentz, 'The Popular Pleasures of Female Revenge (or Rage Bursting in a Blaze of Gunfire)', *Cultural Studies,* 1993, 7(3):374–404. Jeffrey Brown, 'Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and *The Point of No Return*', *Cinema Journal*, 1996, 35(3):52–70.

[4] This study was conducted in Christchurch, New Zealand, in late 1996. There were 19 women who participated in this research – aged between 25 and 56, with the majority being in their late 30s. The majority, but by no means all, were heterosexual. There were between 3 to 6 women in each group. With the exception of the university students' group, the women knew each other prior to the focus group discussions. The women either worked together (for example, the refuge workers and film buffs); belonged to a voluntary organisation (the women's peace group); or participated in a sport together (the martial arts group). I made contact with the refuge, martial arts, film buffs and peace groups through a contact person. This person in the group/organisation gave out information sheets. Women who were interested in participating in the study returned these sheets to me. I contacted the women, discussed the study in more detail, answered any questions, and if they agreed to participate, organized the times for the group discussions and their access to a video copy of *Thelma and Louise.* The university students responded to an information sheet distributed in Arts Faculty lectures. I then met with them face-to-face and invited them to participate in the project. The meetings were held as informally as possible in either my own home or that of my research assistant.

[5] David Buckingham, *Moving Images – Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television,* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 58.

[6] My own interest in this topic area was aroused by reading Lentz's article and reflecting on my ambivalent and contradictory responses to films, such as *Thelma and Louise, Terminator 2* and *Blue Steel.* I took great pleasure in the 'popular pleasures of female revenge', while also holding an 'anti-guns/violence' position.

[7] Pseudonyms were used for all participants in this study. The (M) which follows the name of the participant refers to the martial arts focus group in which she participated. Likewise, (F) refers to the film buffs' group, (P) the peace group, (U) the university students' group and (R) the refuge activists.

[8] Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies – Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, p. 155.

[9] Lentz 1993.

[10] Sherrie Inness, *Tough Girls – Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, pp. 24–26.

[11] I employ interpretive repertoires as an orientation for the analysis of women's talk in the focus-group discussions. As do Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan

Potter, *Mapping the Langauage of Racism – Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation*, New York: Colombia University Press, 1992; Vivien Burr, *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, New York and London: Routledge, 1996, I use interpretive repertoires as a way of understanding the content of discourses and how that content is organised. This facilitates an exploration of the variability, flexibility and interactive nature of the repertoires of interpretation participants employ and how they implement these in the group context.

[12] Tasker p. 17.

[13] Tasker 1993.

[14] ibid., p. 136.

[15] Inness, 1999.

[16] Inness, p. 67.

[17] John Tulloch, 'But Why is Doctor Who so Attractive? – Negotiating Ideology and Pleasure', in John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins (eds), *Science Fiction Audiences – Watching* Dr Who *and* Star Trek, London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

[18] Jeffrey Brown, p. 59.

[19] Julie Baumgold, 'Killer Women: Here Come the Hardbodies', *New York,* July 29 (1991), pp. 24–29.

[20] Baumgold, 1991.

[21] Brown, p. 61.

[22] Baumgold, p. 28.

[23] Sharon Willis, High Contrast – Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 100–111.

[24] Maria Pini, 'Women and the Early British Rave Scene', in Angela McRobbie (ed.) *Back to Reality – Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 167.

[25] Laurie Schulze, 'On the Muscle', in Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (eds), *Fabrications – Costume and the Female Body*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 60.

[26] ibid., p. 62.

[27] Brown, p. 62.

[28] see Lentz 1993.

[29] Brown, p. 60.

[30] Baumgold, p. 26.

[31] Dana Heller, *Family Plots – The De-Oedipalization of Popular Culture*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, p. 191.

Lesbian Landscapes: A little oral history

MARIAN EVANS

Vernissage: An Opening

> Tap roots neither out
> nor in, the vision changes. We
> look for kin
> Heather McPherson *Journeys into the Bay of Plenty*[1]

As I start to write this article, I live on the beach front at Owhiro Bay, a tiny community ten minutes from central Wellington. The coast and the horizon remind me of sea and sky paths to other coasts I've lived on, that I'm marginal as an immigrant and a lesbian, temporary as a human being, and of the potential for earthquakes. The narrow strip of motorway I drive along each day to work follows the harbour's curve along a major fault line and is Wellington's only land route north. After two years living inland in France and the United States, I find all of this new and exciting again.

But I experience a strong sense of displacement: for the first time in twenty years I work in an institution and with men, at a small new art school within a trades-based polytechnic. Heather McPherson's *Journeys into the Bay of Plenty* is a sustained meditation on the way her move north from Christchurch affected her interior landscape. Elements of my response are similar: I look for kin at the art school, within the polytechnic; and as I search for resources.

I enjoy the students and other staff, the exposure to new works, artists and ideas, the collegial debate and friendships. The context is half the work we teach the students. The landscape of gender and identity, their experience and privilege, is part of that. There are more women teachers and more women artists' work in curricula than there used to be at art schools (thanks to feminism), but heterosexual white male artists, teachers and students appear to be privileged still. Artists who are explicit about the lesbian element of their identity and who make images for a lesbian audience as well as a general one are almost invisible in the resources available to me. I do my best: the head of the school calls me 'camp mother'.

...Hollows
were kumara pits, mounds
are burnt-out pa sites with old
flints...under pipe dreams
and careers such history
moves only the dispossessed.
Exiles brood on battlegrounds[2]

As I walk from my place to the dairy, I see one of the pou that mark historical sites around Wellington. Owhiro Bay is known as a domestic rather than a battle site. Yet, where all of us inherit the history of a treaty between indigenous peoples and colonisers which has not been honoured, every piece of land, the sea and the sky, are reminders of disputed territory. I try to incorporate this reality and the many elements of my own reality into teaching. There is some resistance from other staff. I feel like an exile, brood on battlegrounds, bring in kin of various kinds as guests, to feel more at home. My kin's ideas are often different from mine, but I feel supported by their presence.

When some long-lost slides of work by Sharon Alston (1948–1995) turn up around this time, they become another kind of guest, kin in an alien place. They remind me, too, of the fragility of lesbian history, how easily we lose our sources.

Background: Sharon Alston's Story

Sharon Alston was, as Aorewa McLeod wrote in an obituary published in Wellington's *Evening Post* and in *Broadsheet:*[3]

> ... a strong, talented artist, yet exhibited only spasmodically as much of her energies went into political activities and the support she gave to other artists. She put her art into causes. She never lived in a house she owned or travelled overseas.

McLeod quoted from Sharon's farewell letter to her friends:

> Why haven't I achieved very much? I haven't honoured my creativity; I've not carved out a fabulous niche for myself in this world. I've failed. Not a lot of time left to be a famous painter.

And McLeod noted that Sharon possessed the qualities of passion, compassion, humour and style which she gave to the lesbian community: 'In the lesbian community,' McLeod wrote, '[Sharon] carved out a 'fabulous niche' for herself'.

After Sharon's death, artists and supportive friends organised a commemorative exhibition. The exhibition did not include images of Sharon's *Ironical Journey,* nor of *Frolicking in the Valleys of Death,* both made for Women's Gallery exhibitions in 1981. During the fifteen-year period since they were made, slides of these installations had disappeared, one copy having been held at Creative New Zealand and the other in someone's office. Sharon had not kept copies. They were also unavailable to accompany Tilly Lloyd's interview of Sharon published in *A Women's Picture Book.*[4] In late 1996, the office in which the slides were lost was emptied. By chance I was visiting, recognised familiar slide holders and claimed the slides. The images of Sharon's installations are now at the website associated with this article (http://www.vuw.ac.nz/wisc/spiral/index/html).

Neither installation is recognisably 'lesbian'. *Frolicking in the Valleys of Death* was a model of sheep on a grassy New Zealand green hillside and a New Zealand flag with little white sheep replacing the stars of the Southern Cross.[5] It was exhibited with a page of information about the days when this country's flags are officially flown. The shed featured in *Ironical Journey* was a shed-like structure made of corrugated iron 'thrown together at the last minute'. Sharon told Tilly:[6]

> It was made to be destroyed, removed. I wanted a kitsch element there because it makes me laugh and it was me not being serious about me. I had charged at the iron with the spray paint [...] with a gaudy lime and a bright pink. I loved the rawness of the iron and the patterns that the rips and the rust made. It was like my skin with scars and wrinkles, and patterns of ageing taking place ... a few laugh lines too.

The slides could have ended up in university art history files labelled 'Installations – New Zealand', and a student looking for women artists' work might have located them under Sharon's female name. They might have been filed in a women's studies collection labelled 'Feminist art – 20th century' or, if the cataloguer knew of Sharon, under 'Lesbian Art'. A student looking for lesbian art might have found the slides, if she had known Sharon was a lesbian artist and looked under Sharon's name. But, an encounter at an Auckland polytechnic around the time the slides were found led me to believe that this was unlikely.

I was visiting an old friend teaching at an Auckland polytechnic. We had begun to make a documentary about her life and work and

our long friendship. As a deeply committed high-profile lesbian artist during the 1970s and an exhibitions officer at a public gallery, my friend had searched out, with difficulty, some earlier women artists whose work is held in public collections. Many publications refer to her work, which is studied at secondary school and tertiary level. She now teaches, paints and is committed to community environmental projects. Like Heather McPherson, she has encouraged, sustained and challenged me many times over the last 23 years.

We walk around the studios. Students are working for their end of year shows. One young woman's work seems to have a lesbian theme. We ask her about it, I talk about myself as a lesbian artist and my friend mentions that she too was involved in the women's art movement as a lesbian artist. The young woman, says my friend later, has probably known her only as a middle-aged, quite supportive woman. But she seems pleased to learn that a lesbian teacher exists in her daily environment. We share some interesting talk. The student has been involved in lesbian community life in the city where my friend lives and where Sharon lived and worked for years. But she did not recognise my friend's name as that of a well-known lesbian artist. Nor did she know Sharon's work.

Foreground: Locating Lesbians in the Landscape

This potential invisibility of significant individuals and events is not unique to lesbian history, though because we are also women and because we are involved in many activities not immediately recognisable as 'lesbian' our visibility is always at risk. One day, I showed a class Merata Mita's *Patu!*, a film about the protests against the Springbok rugby tour of Aotearoa New Zealand in 1981, the same year Sharon made her installations. Most of the class were pre-schoolers then. Some had heard about 'The Tour'. As a group, they were amazed and deeply moved by the images of police brutality and by the passion of the Tour's protestors and supporters. They found it hard to believe that what they saw on the screen took place in the country where they live, fewer than twenty years ago, some of it on the familiar motorway into Wellington. And there was no way they could know of the lesbian contribution to the protest movement.

Similarly, lesbian artists' work within any art tradition may be located – or lost – within that tradition and, either way, lost to lesbian history. Land-related imagery, like Sharon's in particular, can very

easily become part of a complex and formalised art historical discourse. Because of this, I decide to write about land-related images made by lesbian artists with an accompanying website,[7] to honour the art work by reproducing it in full colour and ensure that students have access to related works, as well as to connections between electronic and conventional research sources.

I invite artists I know as lesbians, and whose work I have recently seen or heard about, to contribute. Because this project became an extension of the idea that context is half the work and the content and intent of some land-related images may be particularly ambiguous, I also question the artists about their life and work in relation to their lesbian identity and to the land. This context, I hope, will make it less easy for viewers of the images to subsume them into more familiar artistic constructs.

Only older artists – all over 40, except for Maria MacKay – respond to my initial letter and eventually eight offer images for the website where I have also included images by Sharon Alston: Adrienne Martyn, Fiona Clark, Fran Marno, Gail Wright, Jane Zusters, Kindra Douglas, Lauren Lysaght, Linda James and Maria MacKay.[8] Six send answers to my questions. One says, 'I didn't feel that more needs to be said', a response I'm familiar with from my curatorial work; many artists want their work to stand on its own regardless of context. Poet Heather McPherson, whose text runs through this article, also answered the questionnaire. In making a decision to take part, no artist is concerned about who the other participants are, as has happened with other lesbian artist projects I've been involved with.[9]

The artists are engaged with a rich diversity of land-related practice. For the website, I choose works that reflect this, as well as works that relate to those of other participants. The process becomes a curatorial one, in a new context for me. Some artists contribute works in which they explore purely painterly or aesthetic concerns. For instance, Gail Wright says of her work:[10]

> As a photographer my works are about space, light, composition, colour rather than location or place. I have related to abstract painters for composition colour and light.

But some make land-related images for a range of 'politically delicious' reasons, including images that relate directly to their lesbian identity.

Identity

Fran Marno sends slides of *Fleshbites* and *Lipservice*, two oil paintings. Her exploration of painting processes refer to a lesbian landscape. She writes:

> My work at present is very body-orientated but it is often read as landscape & I like the idea of multiple meanings in the work – the coming and going of body/landscape as the eye jumps from one perception to the other [....] I hope these [...] add a sort of sideways glance at the landscape of the lesbian body. People often initially assume they are landscapes. I've included short statements [...] as (I think) their conceptual and contextual intent is made clearer with an accompanying text.

In *Read My Lips*, the text that accompanied the exhibition of these and other works, Fran Marno writes for the viewer familiar with the unstable properties of art processes, as well as the viewer who is drawn to the unstable qualities of sexuality:[11]

> The act of painting asks: does the paint touch the canvas first or does the canvas touch the paint? Does the paint move into an image or does the image move the paint? Neither movement can sustain itself as the original movement. Both positions are unstable [...]
>
> Just as the homosexual reminds the heterosexual that without its other it wouldn't exist, so the margin reminds the centre that without its outsider it wouldn't exist. Neither side can claim permanence or stability. The margin that my painting references is a slippery, unstable site of radical possibility.
>
> Within this marginal site I am attempting to expand, intensify and remap the location of desire, eroticism and speech. These exaggerated images of lips, which are metonyms for the body come from this strange place, this alien place.

But she is not producing images only for a lesbian audience. In response to my question about her work's relationship to her lesbian identity and her relationship to lesbian viewers and a lesbian community of support she writes:

> I'm interested in my work reaching a wide and diverse audience – I see my identity as integral to my work whether or not it's read as lesbian by viewers. I like the idea of the work having other levels of meaning – a reading/viewing of the subtexts in the work which offers special alter-

> native discourses & narratives to the lesbian community. Most viewers know I'm lesbian &, depending on where I show my work, feel included in the visual dialogue [...] or seem interested in my discussion (both visual and theoretical) of lesbian visibility & its difficulties in a post modern, post everything era.

This integration of her lesbian identity into her work and concern for dialogue, both with the lesbian community and with 'others', appears to be shared by Jane Zusters in her recent collaboration with poet Sue Fitchett on the book *Charts & Soundings; some small navigation aids.*[12] This includes both easily accessible lesbian material and subtexts which may be more easily read by a lesbian audience. Riemke Ensing, in her introduction,[13] locates the work in a wide New Zealand literary and artistic context. Zusters' biographical note does not refer to her lesbian identity – although in her acknowledgments [14] she refers to a woman muse. The biographical note reads in part:[15]

> [She] has had a life lived in making art. She is a painter as well as a photographer [...] Her manifesto [in 1981] said she was interested in colour, light and love. These themes continue today.

Fiona Clark has documented the various communities she's been part of for a long time. One image on the website, from her *Club 49* series, about a now defunct lesbian club, is part of her and other lesbians' history and emotional landscape. The series, shown in an Auckland dealer gallery at the time of Sharon Alston's commemorative exhibition, is also now part of the memory landscape of a wider viewing audience. The content of the work, its explicit references to a lesbian landscape, ensured that viewers could not miss nor avoid a response to that content, by referring only to photographic and other aesthetic values, which are implicit in a dealer gallery.

And part of Heather McPherson's response to my questions is that:

> It's probably difficult to read my work and not know my lesbianism ... it may not be overt but I like to engage with both its issues and suppressive forces. A named identity matters to me because it will matter to others, especially young isolated lesbian writers for whom the publishing landscape can appear monoculturally heterosexual. And one wants to do more than one's predecessors...

The responses of other participants are mixed and sometimes ambivalent. One writes:

> I don't have much to do with lesbian artists and being a lesbian is of no consequence in my being an artist [...] I am a lesbian amongst a whole lot of other things [...] I would rather definitions be more fluid and radiate out from the individual as opposed to boxing them in where they cannot move around freely, reflecting the complexity of who they are.

Another states:

> I do not care that viewers know I am lesbian, I do not however identify as a 'lesbian artist'. I am an artist [...] who is a lesbian. Being so has informed my identity but is not wholly it, it is only part of what informs me and thus is expressed in my work. Being lesbian and feeling centred in that has allowed or given permission to me to explore the feminine as 'other' to some degree. I choose that word with some trepidation as it is overlaid with so many meanings and interpretations [...]If being lesbian might compromise an open-heartedness to my work then I am happy to step back from that identity and remain private so that the work itself speaks its own truth. My being lesbian informs <u>all</u> my work, whether it be about land, or heart, or spirit, but is not the only informant and will never be weighted in such a way: in my being/knowing, heart/mind.

For a third,

> I don't actively promote [my sexuality] or repress it either. It doesn't particularly matter to me how I am seen regarding which way I go. Why? I don't have strong desires to know the sexuality of the viewer. And my work doesn't refer to sexuality. (If it did, then there would be a reason to refer to my sexuality. Because it would be relevant to the content of the work.) Right now I am continuing to make images of water surface – no land in sight. All sorts of metaphoric meaning[s] emerge – who knows, maybe some images that allude to sexual identity may emerge from this?

Finally, in relation to community and audience, one artist wrote to me of experiences that presumably make her less inclined to exhibit works that explore elements of her lesbian identity:

> Sadly the most awful experiences I have had re. support with my art have been within the lesbian community. In some way I feel I have always been an 'outsider' – even in the lesbian community. One thing that used to drive me crazy – when I was illustrating many many [lesbian] organisations always tried to get my skill for zero – it used to be dreadful – almost like it was their right & that it was distasteful of me to mention

> money. Most of this was I believe a 'class' issue – I dealt with a lot of middle class [lesbians] then & they were weird about **payment** ????

Sharon Alston did not refer explicitly to her lesbian identity in either of her 'landscapes'. But she was interested in images about sexual identity. She co-ordinated an exhibition in 1981 at the Women's Gallery called *Sexxuality* (sic), to which she invited lesbians and heterosexual women to contribute. And she made at least one image that was '150 per cent lesbian', *My Bloody Hand*(1979)[16]; this had a powerful effect within one context where it was reproduced.[17] And in an interview with Tilly Lloyd, she said she wanted ' to begin a series of images containing emotional, sexual, and sensual elements of my own lesbian lifestyle'.[18]

In the same year that Alston made *My Bloody Hand*, Melanie (Read) Rodriga made *My first conscious cunt painting* and wrote, when she exhibited it in *Women and Violence* at the Women's Gallery:[19]

> It took me over two years to do this. It's about changes in my sexuality – before during and after coming out. The grey daggers mean the better a woman feels about her cunt and her lesbianism the more dangerous for her, because men will feel threatened and respond the way they usually do.[20]

That year, I contributed a piece called *O baby take off your dress yes yes yes* to a *Lesbiana* exhibition at the same gallery.[21] A number of exhibitors and visitors told me sternly that lesbian identity was not just about sex. I was surprised at their response. And I remember that a lot of work in the exhibition was about community. Like Rodriga's piece – and unlike Sharon's *My Bloody Hand* – mine was connected to my coming out. I've never made another work about being a lesbian, and am not sure why,[22] though I have often written about aspects of it. Perhaps my 'prolesbianism' works better with words.[23] But I also remember Jane Zusters saying:[24]

> Now my feminism is something I've internalised so I don't feel the need to make self-consciously feminist images.

Perhaps some of us make art about aspects of our sexual identity as part of a process of internalising it, in the same way we may make self-consciously feminist images, as we become feminists. My experience teaching public art offers some support for this theory.

Many discussions with students refer both to the history and processes that brought an object, an art-maker, or an event to a particular time and place and to the history of the place itself. From the beginning of the course, we encourage students to make works about their own contexts, including elements of their identity. Once students feel affirmed in their identity, particularly any aspect of it where their confidence has been undermined, they seem to find it easier to explore a range of ideas, to learn to work collaboratively, to network, to embrace difference and to experience conflict as normal and potentially creative. It also helps if they understand how power works and how to harness the resources they need for their work.

This has resulted in their making diverse and confident art in a variety of contexts. The shy, older student who loves to paint flowers turns himself into a cockroach and marches against genetic modification. The painter and computer enthusiast creates a beautiful flowing costume, mask and stilts and stands within a chalk circle in downtown Manners Mall silently enchanting passersby, while intermittently handing out beautiful silver stars. One woman makes a wonderful poster challenging the publicity for Xenical. Another makes a series of sharp, well-designed political posters and a group pastes them all over town. One makes a work to commemorate a public art work that had been defaced and then destroyed. Another pastes up a huge cartoon at 6 a.m. at the Wellington Railway Station and documents the responses of commuters. While developing their professional focus, which often precludes overtly political activity, students can also find politically delicious reasons for doing things.

Politically Delicious Reasons

As she carved out a fabulous niche for herself in the lesbian community, Sharon Alston created art for a women's audience, as well as a lesbian one. On the evidence of her work with both *Broadsheet* and the Women's Gallery, part of the political activity that kept her from making art was creating space for other women and other lesbians to become artists. Towards the end of Tilly Lloyd's published interview with her, interviewer and interviewee refer to the relationship of Sharon's art with her political activity and another reason emerges as to why she exhibited only spasmodically:[25]

Sharon Alston (SA): It demands a certain faith in your intuition to

work towards a far away ideal whilst presently undermining what is in the here and now. If I didn't think this way I couldn't create an image. There has to be a politically delicious reason why that image has to happen. It's grist to the mill for me.

Tilly Lloyd (TL): Do you think working full time doing design for Broadsheet *has taken the grist out of your other mills?*

SA: It's brought them to a temporary halt, but that's partly in myself as well.

TL: Because you're trying to outdo Nathalie Barney?

SA: Did she die young?

TL: No.

SA: That's good.

Some of the artists who sent me slides of their work make art for politically delicious reasons unrelated to their lesbian identity. Lauren Lysaght, whose art consistently engages with political issues, has recently made the land-related work *Fear Stalks the Land*. It was shown in two public galleries and was made

> [w]hen I was observing the anxiety around land claims (little white bunnies as scared as hell!!) Made from a Warehouse blanket, & white vinyl. It is about the only image that I believe I have ever made about Land. I am not a great fan of the 'Land' issue – e.g. Painters & Land etc. – my reasons are mainly 1) Usually any traditional art about Land eg painting still has a Patriarchal interpretation – that is painting perpetuates the male 'way' of making art. In all my art life I have struggled with this & have tried to stay away from traditional methods of art-making. 2) I am not very interested in the land & believe we have 'evolved' away from it. I don't get 'glassy' eyed when I am in the great outdoors in NZ. But put me in Florence or Venice & I am so much more at home. Probably my Italian roots!! I am not entirely convinced & never have been about 'Goddess' imagery – that is Goddess/Mother/Land…I guess for me art is about trying to find new ways, new solutions, my most recent work has been/is/ about social issues, poverty, Bad Government & Home Invasion – I am deeply concerned about these matters and as usual woman are at the bottom of the Poverty, health, housing etc heap!!!

Fiona Clark, also consistently a political artist, has often been deeply engaged in issues around land, including Waitangi Tribunal

claims in Taranaki where she lives.[26] The work she contributes to this project's website includes a billboard of

> [l]ocal women from Taranaki most of whom are missing from archives, e.g. the first woman to lay a case of sexual assault in New Zealand. Amy [Bock] who married a woman and dressed as a man, imprisoned for doing so was in New Plymouth prison did Hard labour, only woman in New Zealand to do so. First woman photographer in Taranaki. They are sort of important to me as they were not wealthy women, they were not all pakeha, nor married.

And, just as some of the participants are explicit about not wanting to make work that refers to their lesbian identity or to seek a dialogue with lesbian viewers, many of the artists send have no political intent at all.

Reasons for Making Work about Land

Of those who respond to my question about their reasons for making work about land, Adrienne Martyn writes:

> I used to do work that was of the land last year. I focused on details excluding sky. My aim was to get away from spiritual references and sky was a strong spiritual reference in traditional landscape imagery. Excluding sky allowed for a different interpretation and meaning to emerge: abstraction engaged the mind and the intellect to wonder into ideas about survival, generation etc. The work[...] came from an interest in Maori land history (they were made at an old pa site). Also an interest in geology. The framing came from an earlier exploration of pared down minimalism and [was] reinforced by working with cartographic imagery.

Gail Wright uses New Zealand's coastline as her subject and wants to extend the language of landscape photography by shifting the picturesque and sublime to the abstract. Her investigations include scanning her printed images and inkjet printing them onto canvas, plastic and art paper as well as traditional photographic paper. She wants to reproduce the emotion generated by landscape rather than the landscape itself:

> The emotional response to a view is based on fact – the fact of scale and space. I don't mind if the viewer cares to find out I'm a lesbian. I am open about my sexuality but my interests in my art process are not about

debating sexuality or gender but issues of emotion and the mind.

Linda James writes

> My work is about the relationships between time, place and identity (when, where and who) therefore NZ as a place is an important component in my work and in my position as an artist.

From the many slides she sends, I choose some of rivers and trees. She has also made a significant body of work about another land-related topic, the sub-antarctic. Of the rivers and trees, she says:

> I'm never quite sure why I do things but I suspect that the rivers are about chaos and control and power, which is independent of human endeavour. Same with the trees…they have a naturally abstract structure which is beyond intervention.

Kindra Douglas works in clay; her material is the land itself. Some forms she makes are abstract. Having journeyed south, she lives on the Karitane estuary, in Otago. Of her relationship with the land, she writes:

> I have the perception and feeling of the land itself as sacred planetary body, from which I live, in which I be/become and from which I work. I work with the body itself taking that which is formed unformed, & reforming, forming anew.
>
> The clay I source is local, in a variety of colours and qualities. The 'finishes' I generate from other 'found material' to which I add other raw/earth energy – such as gravel, sand, crumbled rock, silt etc., and the raw materials of soda ash, or byproducts of clay making. I do not use [materials] which I love in various other forms but which are toxic.

Heather McPherson's response is as follows

> Living in restricted and sometimes isolated situations – emotionally as much as geographically (as in having been the only lesbian feminist writer in half a province) – I've found the land/scape to be vital to my well-being. As I've learnt more of our history and 'seen' this country's continued invisibilising and exclusion of tangata whenua…the more I perceive echoes and reverberations in the invisibilising of and prejudice towards gay and lesbian presence…Sounding the depths of racism, sexism and homophobia is a continual and subtle learning process…what a person does with and to land/scape, its exterior/interior meanings, may indicate spiritual short or long-sightedness, what is done with and to the land has parallels with the experience of minorities.

The Larger Context: A Supportive Framework?

At the art school, one colleague claims a solidarity with me that I do not feel. He is, he tells me, 'a queer heterosexual'. I like him, the fluidity implied by 'queer identity' and the idea that sexual practice and identity do not always mesh neatly together. But my perception, which I share with him, is that he takes up the same kind of space and enjoys the same privileges as the other white heterosexual males we work with and that his queerness is irrelevant in this environment. And I wonder if I am being unfair. Are the perceptions about privilege in the art world that I pass on to students out of date?

Every artist needs emotional and material support, including an appropriate physical context for her work. So the questions I ask participants about the context they work in and the sources of their support are important to me. Their responses are as varied as their art works, but there are some repeated themes. These responses deserve their own article. However, I include a few responses that represent the range I was sent since I concluded that privilege in the art world does still exist, but that each artist's experience also depends on chance factors like personality, geography, the medium and scale she works in.

One writes of art school support in one post-graduate course:

> My own supervisor [...] promoted other male artists in the course openly (couldn't remember the names of the women)

And, in contrast, elsewhere:

> [The] painting department is **very** supportive. The lesbians here are pretty 'queer' (nervous of labels!) but accepting of my outness re both my art theory & my paintings...it does make a difference: we can communicate on more levels than with heterosexual men & women.

Finding a dealer for one artist is easy:

> No difficulty organising a dealer [...] Dealers usually approach me – and they are responding to the eye, the mind, the technique, design, presentation, etc.

But for another equally experienced artist:

> I have found it increasingly difficult to get gallery space and funding.[...] I don't know if any of this relates to my being a lesbian or a woman.

And, a third, less experienced, offers a positive view:

> I believe there are networks for women from which we benefit, and I have always welcomed a chance to extend them, and support other women artists in their work. I believe that a clear market oriented focus is the best option – knowing where and who will provide support & encouragement and being very discerning and thoughtful will bring the results/ rewards.

For one, also less experienced artist, well supported within her art school and lesbian community:

> Dealers are tricky. Some love the work but are scared of the 'l' word in my statements & sometimes my titles....Getting a 'profile' [...] here means showing with certain dealers & not others. A profile is important if applying for art school teaching & so juggling ethics/politics & personal promotion needs isn't easy...[O]ur one reputable lesbian dealer (not that I know any of disrepute!) is nervous of being seen to promote or show [lesbian] work in case it's seen as privileging [lesbians] rather than the excellence of the work. Our top 'boys club' gallery has no problem showing 'boys work' and has recently begun unashamedly calling itself a 'boys' gallery'.[27]

Yet another, with a long exhibition record, also refers to the 'boys':

> I have had funding in the past and just recently as well. I think the art scene is just like any other once you work around the fact that the boys always get to the 'trough' first you can get on with it. I get concerned that lack of funding or lesbianism may just be a 'cover' for artists who will never get **there** (wherever **there** is??) This is an issue I often wonder about. Do you think others feel like this – of course it doesn't mean I am unaware of the boys power – in some ways I have almost given up trying to fight it an am simply getting on with my own art life.

Another established artist writes:

> I do still notice the style of work selected for shows is very boyzy and if not, young women fresh out of art schools are included and picked up...

These responses are valuable; I learn a lot from them.

Closing

> Between your lips live cities, continents, futures
> & a promise of combustion[28]

Between our lips live futures. Our artists can show us cities, continents and a promise of combustion. I have shown how we may lose 'our' images and our histories as artists, if we neglect to honour and record them within out own contexts, and have given a hint of some of the difficulties and potential resolutions facing lesbians who want to be fully themselves in their art practice and the art 'world'. I hope that other lesbians will continue a dialogue with these artists; and engage with other lesbian artists whose works are unseen and voices are not heard.

MARIAN EVANS *wrote this article as a senior academic staff member at the Wellington Institute of Technology. She is a resource associate at Women's Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, where she is completing a book about single motherhood and working on archive/documentary projects, including one with Artist, Allie Eagle.*

Notes

1 Heather McPherson, *Other World Relations*, Wellington: Old Bags, 1991, p. 15.

2 Ibid p. 9.

3 Aorewa McLeod, 'Sharon Kathleen Alston: Lesbian, Artist, Activist 1948–1995' *Broadsheet* Winter/Hotoke 1995, p. 1. *Broadsheet* was a feminist magazine, monthly for much of its life (1971–1996).

4 Marian Evans, Tilly Lloyd, and Bridie Lonie, *A Women's Picture Book; 25 Women Artists From Aotearoa New Zealand*, Wellington: GP Books,1988.

5 Women's Gallery Inc/ Spiral collection Alexander Turnbull Library: ATL 84-072-03/1.

6 Evans, Lloyd and Lonie, pp.132–3.

7 http://www.vuw.ac.nz/wisc/spiral/index/html

8 I approached artists in July 1999; by the time I sent the questionnaire, Maria planned to marry, so I did not ask her to respond. She states that she is 'currently experimenting with a heterosexual lifestyle and has a new baby. Quality of character and kindness became more important to me than gender. And I wanted to try everything and I hadn't been married. So far, so great,' she says. (Telephone communications 2000.) Some of the work she did while a lesbian appears on the website. I want to acknowledge our (continuing) long and productive friendship, which included sharing our last bread and milk on various occasions in our careers as single lesbian mothers. For discussions and reproductions of MacKay's work see Marian Evans, 'The Spirit of Blueskin Bay; Lesbian Artists at Okahau', *Art New Zealand*, Spring 1993, pp. 62–65, 114; and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, 'In and Out of the Closet; Lesbian and Gay Art in Dunedin', *Art New Zealand*, Winter 1993, pp. 54–57.

[9] I AM: Ko Ahau) a lesbian/gay exhibition (Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1992); see also Heather McPherson, Julie King, Marian Evans, and Pam Gerrish, Nunn eds, *Spiral 7: Lesbian Art and Writing from Aotearoa New Zealand*, Wellington: Spiral, 1992.

[10] Response to my questionnaire 2/2000. Where an artist's response to the questionnaire refers to her work, I name her, so that readers can relate the words to the images on the website. Where she discusses her conditions, she remains anonymous. I have usually retained the artist's spelling and constructions, but reduced her comments in many places, indicated by an ellipsis in square brackets. I have tried not to use the artists' words out of their context, but acknowledge that not including everything they wrote has perhaps altered an individual emphasis.

[11] Fran Marno, *Read My Lips* (the artist, Auckland, 1999).

[12] Auckland: Spiral, 1999.

[13] Fitchett and Zusters, p. 7.

[14] Ibid., p. 56

[15] Ibid., p. 54

[16] Evans, Lloyd and Lonie, p. 134, plate 24.

[17] Ibid., pp. 236–237; 244.

[18] Ibid., p. 134.

[19] Tempera/gouache/watercolour on paper: *Women and violence* catalogue Women's Gallery 1980, ATL 84/072/06/1.

[20] In a telephone conversation 1/2000, Rodriga, a film-maker, told me that this work started as a landscape. She emphasised that her work now and any commentary she might make about it are very different.

[21] Only one sheet of paper about this show appears to have survived in the ATL collection, a press release justifying it being open only to women : ATL 84-072-01/3.

[22] Heather McPherson wrote when she read this, 'One of my suggested reasons is lack of others – as models, as genre, as challenges, as measures, or even as old truths needing revising … invisibilisation leads to suppression, self and cultural censorship'.

[23] As well, if an artist who is lesbian wants a lesbian audience and a dialogue with that audience, there is the issue of the comparative roles of words and pictures in lesbian culture. As Tilly Lloyd wrote in Evans, Lloyd and Lonie, p. 243: 'Amongst all else we are an oral culture. Crucial understandings about the visual arts and our involvement came about [...] because [...] I was lucky enough to be living in a lesbian art factory which was a venue of constant traffic (erring at the time more towards band practice than towards watercolours). I learnt a great deal and I was reminded that our pro-lesbianism was more often in word than picture form.'

[24] Evans, Lloyd and Lonie, p. 163.

[25] Evans, Lloyd and Lonie, p. 137.

[26] http://www.fionaclark.taranaki.co.nz; http://virtual.tart.co.nz; Evans, Lloyd and Lonie, pp. 177–182; 222–223; 235; 249; 252, Plates 36–40.

[27] This artist was one of two to refer to the gay presence in the arts community. She wrote: 'NB The art world is very "gay" – as in "gay male" – and "gay" positioning has definite advantages in the [local] art scene. Lesbians being less visible than heterosexual women artists (we can say we're women, but lesbian.....) have a much harder time proving their artistic worth (if they're out)'. The other has 'one friend who is a dealer and is gay, is prepared to show work regularly but I don't believe it is to do with my sexuality – I think it is friendship and his relationship with my work.'

[28] Marno, p. 9; McPherson sent Marno her responses to her work and Marno selected some of these to include in her catalogue.

Book Review

Women in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*

***Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Vol.1, 1769–1869* (1990), Allen and Unwin and the Department of Internal Affairs**

***Vol. 2, 1870–1900,* (1993), Bridget Williams Books Ltd and the Department of Internal Affairs**

***Vol. 3,1901–1920,* (1996) and *Vol. 4, 1921–1940* (1998), Auckland University Press with Bridget Williams Books and the Department of Internal Affairs**

***Vol. 5 1941–1960* (2000), Auckland University Press and the Department of Internal Affairs.**

Complete set, $550.

DOROTHY PAGE

There is a whimsical exchange in Christopher Fry's play, *The Lady's Not For Burning;* one character, coming upon another in a supposedly empty room, exclaims, 'They told me no one was here', to which the other replies, 'It would be me they meante'. For me, this sums up the position of women in the historical tradition – present, but not part of the narrative. This situation has changed dramatically over the past 25 years in the English-speaking world but it is worth reminding ourselves, as a preliminary to any consideration of women in the five volumes of the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, that in New Zealand the process of incorporating women in our history had not gone very far when W. H. Oliver was appointed Editor and the first staff took up their positions in 1983.[1]

At that stage, there were a number of tributes to our settler foremothers of the 'petticoat pioneers' variety, lively but uncritical. There were extracts from the letters and journals of early settler women in Alison Drummond's *Married and Gone to New Zealand* (1960) and some memoirs of prominent women, such as Doris Gordon's *Backblocks Baby Doctor* (1955), but little else before the groundbreaking work of Patricia Grimshaw in *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* in 1972. The first of a group of well-researched, essay

collections, *Women in New Zealand Society,* edited by Phillida Bunkle and Beryl Hughes, had only recently been published, in 1980. The *New Zealand Journal of History* included a handful of articles on women's history, some significant, but standard texts here, as elsewhere, showed little interest. The flowering of specialised articles and books on New Zealand women's history that would take place in the decade after 1983 was not yet evident.[2]

If mainstream Western history – concerned with the great events of politics, war, the church, the law, and business – could virtually ignore women, it goes without saying that traditional biographical dictionaries would likewise honour the great men of their nation's history. In the nineteenth century, British *Dictionary of National Biography* entries on women are few and often less than informative. The few lines on Victorian novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, mention her father, an uncle and a family friend, but none of her writings.[3]

Nearer to home, the selection of subjects for the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography,* produced in 1940 by Guy Scholefield, parliamentary librarian at the General Assembly Library and dominion archivist, was based on the same criteria as his *Who's Who*: they had to be 'men of note in the country's political and military history, including Maori leaders, as well as in its economic and intellectual development.' Subjects were deliberately presented without critical evaluation. Unsurprisingly, the merest sprinklings of those selected were women.[4] W. H. Oliver and his Policy Committee were determined to be much more inclusive in selecting subjects, but they were working within limitations, not least the expectations of Government. An undertaking of the size and complexity of the DNZB, which has taken 17 years, employed, at different times, over 80 paid staff, as well as voluntary regional and specialist working parties, and commissioned 1,235 authors to write up 3,049 essay subjects, could only have been carried through with Government support. This has meant that the traditional criteria for selection, the eminence of the subject on a national scale, had to be upheld. As W. H. Oliver put it in his Introduction to the first volume, 'A work aimed at the reference sections of libraries and the shelves of individuals interested in the New Zealand past must deliver reliable information about well-known people.' But the DNZB policy-makers were also determined to modify the traditional selection criteria. They used a range relating to ethnicity,

gender, region and activity: recognising that Maori were a distinctive and numerous society, that women, by 1869 made up a third of the adult population, that life went on outside the main centres and that the past was shaped by people who were not powerful, rich, or eminent. The Maori component of the DNZB is not my concern here, but the project has led to an important partnership with the Maori community, an affirmation of Maori history, and the uncovering of the lives of Maori women, as well as of men. In the final total, the 100 essays on Maori women are a fifth of the Maori component.[5]

Each volume of the DNZB has its own particular character and focus, but the guidelines set for the first volume have generally been adhered to throughout. The 572 essays of volume one were chosen from 2,500 biographical files, the first stage in a biographical database that now numbers 12,000 names. Regional distribution was based on the 1871 census and targets were set for the representation of groups likely to be crowded out: one-third for Maori, one-fifth for women. It was decided to include 'community leaders as well as politicians, matriarchs as well as patriarchs, followers as well as leaders ... missionary wives as well as their husbands.' Few women in the nineteenth century achieved broad public prominence, but many were prominent in their own locality or tribe, and there were also the women who 'by-passed the conventional record by creating their own memorial, in diaries, letters, journals and published writings.' To include the key activities of settler New Zealand the representative principle was adopted: one person, whose story could be pieced together – a domestic servant, for example – would represent others of the same occupation who were beyond historical reconstruction. This was a significant principle for women subjects and brought many hitherto unknown women from obscurity. But, despite diligent research, major gaps remained, especially in women's history and Maori history.[6]

The five volumes of the DNZB are superbly indexed. Volume 1 (1769-1869) includes an index of proper names, a tribal and hapu index and an index of the categories of significance of the subjects. Subsequent volumes also have a regional index. Investigating the changes in the categories in which women feature is a fascinating exercise, not least because of the smallness of the shift in some areas. To take a male-dominated category, that of the Armed Forces, as an example: the volume 1 list contains 90 names, about half Maori, but

no women; nor are there any women in the much smaller list in volume 2 (1870–1900). In volume 3 (1901-20), which covers the period of the South African War and the First World War, there is a group of five military nurses and one prisoner of war, Jessie Scott, a doctor with the Scottish Women's Hospitals unit. The next volume deals with the inter-war period, 1921–40, and includes a handful of military nurses and matrons. By volume 5 (1941–60) there is a military aviator, a nurse who became a POW when Singapore fell, and Patricia Hond, a member of the peacetime army, whose primary significance was as the first Maori policewoman and detective.[7]

Women feature strongly throughout the five volumes in certain categories, but with a change of focus within them. In health, for example, whereas the nineteenth century volumes feature self-taught midwives and herbalists, by the early twentieth century the first women graduates of the Otago Medical School make their appearance – there are twelve women medical practitioners and a score of nurses in volume 3. There are fewer doctors, but an equally strong showing of nurses in the inter-war volume and some outstanding women medical specialists in the 1941–60 volume. Other categories where women maintain a solid presence are education, community service, religion, the visual and performing arts and writing.[8]

The women represented in the DNZB reflect the changes in New Zealand society. Among Pakeha women in the early years we find the expected stoic settlers, community leaders, midwives, teachers, diarists, a few singers and painters. There are also tough women of a much less respectable mould. One of the first European women known to have lived in New Zealand was Charlotte Badger, a convict. The ship on which she was being transferred from New South Wales to Hobart was taken over by its convict passengers and brought to the Bay of Islands, where Badger and her child stayed, helped by the Maori community. It is possible she later went to Tonga when the Maori turned against her. We are able to glimpse an extraordinary life from the piecing together of mere scraps of information – a process which has largely been lost in the more structured later volumes. Also outside the bounds of respectability were prostitutes whose stories have been reconstructed from police records and newspaper reports: Jessie Finnie of Auckland, who moved into prostitution when her husband deserted her and her three children in 1853, just four years after their arrival in New Zealand, and Barbara Weldon of the

West Coast. Both clocked up regular convictions for being drunk and disorderly and using obscene language, and formed part of a flourishing criminal sub-culture. Volume 1 also contains the first advocate of women's rights, Mary Ann Muller, who wrote as 'Femina'.

In a spin-off from volume 1, the Editor gathered together 130 of the essays into *A People's History.* He described the collection, with its focus on common people, 'the Vol. I cohort with its elitist head cut off.' It showcased women, who make up a full third of the essays. Accessible and generously illustrated, it gives a vivid insight into nineteenth century society. To illustrate the Dictionary itself would have been prohibitively expensive, but *A People's History* shows how much is added by the visual image.[9]

The late nineteenth century, the period of the second volume (1869–1900) which appeared in 1993, edited by Claudia Orange, was significant for Pakeha women: more than a fifth of the 617 essays in the volume are about women, who made up almost half the adult population by 1900. Women are evident outside the home, in social reform, such as the temperance movement and in the suffrage movement. Some, such as Kate Sheppard and Anna Stout, are already well-known. There are 24 suffragists in the volume, the basis for a collection, *The Suffragists,* published to mark the centenary of votes for women. The lists of women teachers and school principals are substantial; the first woman to graduate in Law, Ethel Benjamin, is here. Generally, this is a volume of respectable women, reflecting 'a country starting to emerge from its raw and tentative youth'. The one prostitute, Mary Ann Greaves, is really a contemporary of those in the previous volume, but the wrong side of the law is represented by confidence trickster, Amy Bock, whose most daring moneymaking feat was to pose as a man and marry, briefly.[10]

The first two decades of the twentieth century, covered by volume 3, which appeared in 1996, were prosperous years of emerging nationhood, with rapid advances in hydro-electricity, transport, communications and business. For women, they were comparatively quiet years, when motherhood and family were idealised, but radical women reformers still made their presence felt. The Introduction to this volume refers to its 30 per cent of essays on women as low, but in fact it was the highest proportion so far, and would not be surpassed. The representative woman has given way to the high achiever, often the first in her field. Women doctors and nurses come through strongly,

as do school principals. The first woman university professor appears, Winifred Boys Smith of the School of Home Science, and the first woman school inspector, Jessie Hetherington. There are lawyers, Ellen Melville of Auckland, the first woman to make a lifelong career of law, and a long-time city councillor, and Annie Lee Rees. There is journalist Ettie Rout, pilloried by the Establishment for distributing condoms to New Zealand troops in World War One. A few women were beginning to make their names in sport by this time, in golf, hockey, lawn tennis, even show-ring riding. And among the criminals is Alice Parkinson, sentenced to hard labour for life for shooting her deserting lover, after she had borne his stillborn child. Public outrage at the sentence led to Parkinson being released after six years, in 1921; she married and had six children.[11]

In the inter-war volume, essays on women also make up 30 per cent of the total and there is further expansion in the range of their activities. These women are in the public sphere, some – mostly unmarried – leaders in their professions. In 1933, Elizabeth McCombs became the first woman to enter parliament. Women were working for better conditions in their employment, especially in teaching and the public service, and health, especially in childbirth. While some worked through conservative organisations, such as Women's Division of Federated Farmers or Plunket, there were radical activists too. Women still featured strongly in the traditional categories of education, community service and health. This is no longer the period of 'the first woman to... ' Although there are plenty of women teachers, there are fewer principals, hardly any professors and no lawyers. Radio provides one of the most interesting characters in Maud Basham, 'Aunt Daisy'; and there is aviator Jean Batten.

The millennium volume of the DNZB (Vol. 5), containing those who flourished between 1941 and 1960, included people who died as recently as 1999, and many outstanding people are missing from it for the best possible reason, that they are still flourishing. Analysis of the gender balance in the categories index points to continuity rather than social revolution. Women still cluster in health, education, community service, and reform. There is only one woman among 28 of those in business – Nora Sipos, whose extensive business interests were in Hungary, well before she came to New Zealand as a displaced person. The proportion of women is down to under 28 per cent, in part at least because of women's favourable life expectancy. The most

eccentric and disreputable are not recorded in a volume whose subjects have the sensitivities of friends and relatives to consider. But there are still surprises, such as Essie Summers, Mills and Boon's most prolific author, whose 52 romantic novels are estimated to have sold 17 million copies in 17 languages; Sybil Lupp, mechanic, motor-racing driver and garage proprietor and Freda Stark, whose life took her from being star prosecution witness in a high-profile murder case, to dancing for visiting American troops in the 1940s in gold paint and a g-string, to a secretarial position at New Zealand House in London.

How well has the DNZB served women? I am not an unbiased witness here: I have been on the Otago Working Party from its inception, chaired it for some years and written essays on women for all five volumes. I know the frustration of abandoning an essay on a fascinating woman for sheer lack of information. I am aware of the commitment of DNZB staff to achieving a good proportion of essays on women and I admire their tenacity. How effective has it all been? The overall proportion of essays on women is just over 26 per cent. They are generally shorter than the essays on men and the sources on which they are based more elusive. They represent hard work for the biographer. Women subjects can be hard to find. Perhaps our 'eminence' is curtailed by our cooperative, informal way of working, which does not identify any one person as a clear leader. Certainly, the silence of Maori women on the marae has tended to obscure their real influence.

The representative principle, intended to promote women's visibility, has operated both for and against. It worked well in the case of obscure nineteenth-century women such as domestic servants, but, in more recent times, has tended to limit the number of subjects in a particular occupation. Because women had fewer career options – a high proportion going into teaching, for example – potential subjects have been eliminated on the grounds that their experience has already been represented. The formulaic structure of the edited essays, tight word limits and reduction to a minimum of the direct quotations so revealing of a woman's personality, have also been inhibiting. The DNZB essays on women generally lack the immediacy and charm of the brief, illustrated entries in that other repository of women's biography, the *Book of New Zealand Women*.[12] Nevertheless, what the DNZB has done for women's history over the last seventeen

years is incalculable. It has raised awareness to a new level and stimulated further research. Above all, it has provided us with 799 meticulously documented lives of New Zealand women, some poignant, some exhilarating, some solidly satisfying, some frustrating but all interesting, a resource to treasure and relish.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for information from DNZB staff, former Editor, Bill Oliver, Editor, Claudia Orange, and Assistant Editor, Nancy Swarbrick, in preparing this review.

Dorothy Page, History, University of Otago.

Notes

1 C. Fry, *The Lady's Not For Burning,* Oxford university Press, 1949, p. 4; W.H. Oliver, Introduction, Vol. 1, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (DNZB), 1990, p. x.

2 Examples of the petticoat pioneer genre are *Brave Days: Pioneer Women of New Zealand* (1939) compiled by the Women's Division of Federated Farmers and *Tales of Pioneer Women* (1940); A. Drummond, *Married and Gone to New Zealand,* 1960. Patricia Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand,* (1972); Phillida Bunkle and Beryl Hughes, *Women in New Zealand Society* (1980); Raewyn Dalziel's response to Grimshaw, 'The Colonial Helpmeet' appeared in the *New Zealand Journal of History (NZJH)* 1977, 11(2); Barbara Brookes' 'Housewives' Depression: the debate over abortion and birth control in the 1930s' in *NZJH* 1981, 15(2). Women's Studies Association began in 1976 and the first number of the *Women's Studies Journal* appeared in August 1984. Among works in the decade after 1983 was the first of two collection of articles on New Zealand *Women in History* (1986), edited by Barbara Brookes, Charlotte Macdonald and Margaret Tennant, Charlotte Macdonald, *A Woman of Good Character* (1990) and *The Book of New Zealand Women, Ko Kui Ma Te Kaupapa,* edited by Charlotte Macdonald, Merimeri Penfold and Bridget Williams, in 1991.

3 Introduction, *DNZB*, Vol. 1; Elizabeth Gaskell, in *Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press. This was cited as information about the author, in a 1947 edition of *Cranford* (Northumberland Press).

4 Scholefield in *DNZB*, Vol. 4.

5 W.H. Oliver, Introduction, DNZB Vol.1, p. vii; C. Orange, Introduction, Vol. 5, DNZB, pp xi – xii; Assistant editor Tairongo Amoana, assisted by Editorial Officer (Maori) Angela Ballara has overseen the Maori volumes. I am grateful to Claudia Orange for making available to me the latest (2000) statistics.

6 W.H. Oliver, Introduction, DNZB Vol. 1.

7 DNZB, Vols 1–5, Categories Index; biographies of Jessie Scott (Vol. 3); June

Watson; Lilian Tompkins and Patricia Hond (Vol. 5)

[8] DNZB, Vols 1–5, Categories Index. The earliest New Zealand-trained women doctors are Emily Siedeberg (graduated 1896), Margaret Cruickshank (1897), Constance Frost, Daisy Platts Mills and Alice Woodward Horsley (all 1900), DNZB, Vol. 3.

[9] W.H. Oliver, Introduction, *A People's History,* Bridget Williams Books and Department of Internal Affairs, 1992.

[10] C. Orange, Introduction, DNZB, Vol. 2, p. vii; C. Orange, ed., *The Suffragists. Women Who Worked for the Vote,* Bridget Williams Books and DNZB 1993.

[11] C. Orange, Introduction, DNZB, Vol. 3.

[12] Charlotte Macdonald, Merimeri Penfold and Bridget Williams, eds, *The Book of New Zealand Women, Ko Kui Te Kaupapa,* Bridget Williams Books, 1991.

Contents

Cover images from the article *Feminist Walls: Abbey Road and Popular Memory* by Tara Brabazon

University of Otago Press

ISBN 1-877276-24-3

9 781877 276248