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## **Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2009 Feminist and Women's Studies Association Annual Student Essay Competition**

By Michelle Addison and Srila Roy

In this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (FWSA) is pleased to present the winner and shortlisted entries from its annual student essay competition. The FWSA was founded in 1987 by a group of women who were dedicated to researching and talking about women's lives. As well as being a proactive presence around feminist issues in the political, social and cultural sphere, the FWSA sponsors a biennial international conference, a postgraduate seminar series, as well as a celebrated book prize which recognises innovation across disciplines in feminist and women's studies. The student essay competition is an opportunity for early career academics to enhance, extend and challenge feminist debates. Each year, the competition attracts ambitious and talented individuals who deserve commendation for their participation and efforts in developing and pushing the boundaries of women's studies through imaginative themes and interesting debate.

Seemingly anticipating the popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt with which this year began, many of the essays in this special issue turn to the question of resistance – one that has arguably been neglected in the feminist focus on uncovering and theorising contexts of oppression. In an uncertain moment of large-scale socio-political transformation, forms of resistance have also changed demanding new conceptions of political agency and indeed, new understandings of the political itself. Through close ethnographic and textual readings of women's everyday lives, these essays begin to map what feminist philosopher, Patricia S. Mann has called a gendered 'micro-politics' embracing diverse forms of intersectional agency and activism.

The winning entry by Teodora Todorova titled '*Giving memory a future: confronting the legacy of mass rape in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina*' exemplifies such an endeavour. In the immediate aftermath of the 1990s Balkan civil war, women's testimonies of wartime rape have forced open the silence that surrounded this subject especially the question of the children who were born as a result of such inter-communal violence. Women's critical and reflective cultural works – around which the discussion of the essay is centred – not only provide an alternative reading of the legacy of mass rape in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina but also raise larger questions with regard to the politics of remembrance, forgetting and reconciliation. In making the silence of rape speak, women's testimonies provide an alternative vision of a shared future based on recognition and therein, the possibility of reconciliation.

Mika Pasanen's essay titled *Visual Violations: The Ban on Extreme Pornography, Politics of Representation, and the Discursive Creation of 'Docile Bodies'*, is a challenging and thought-provoking entry. Pasanen looks at a Foucauldian concept of the 'docile body' as it is figured in extreme pornography. The author examines how ideas about the 'docile body' come to be represented and reinforced in law. Pasanen looks at a British law which was passed in 2009 prohibiting the viewing and possessing of 'extreme pornography' as a case in point, asking key questions about the production of sexuality in/through the family, and pornography's relationship with the family, as well as the problematic nature of the politics of representation and the realm of the imagination. Pasanen gives attention to how the law aims to create 'docile bodies' through the control and regulation of the 'pornographic imagination', and queries whether this process actually reiterates the discourse of sexuality found in the institution of the family. An interesting discussion is conveyed here in which Pasanen argues that the law is limited in its ability to create 'docile bodies' due to the nature of pornography that eroticises the transgression of restrictions.

In 'Palestinian Women's Everyday Resistance: Between Normality and Normalisation', Sophie Richter-Devroe presents a fascinating account of the various coping strategies that Palestinian women adopt in their everyday lives under physical and *ideational* occupation.

Richter-Devroe reads their seemingly banal practices of travelling for leisure as a form of resistance aimed not only at the Israeli control over physical and ideational spaces but also over patriarchal control within Palestinian society. The very attempt at reclaiming normalcy and pleasure through leisure trips becomes an act of resistance in a context where neither seems possible. The definition of resistance is itself expanded – beyond violence and martyrdom – and its gendered ‘micro-politics’ are made salient in the manner in which women’s agential acts challenge patriarchal forms of control exercised by secular-nationalist, religious-political and other actors at national, family and community level.

Rosemary Langridge’s entry, titled ‘The Tearful Gaze in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*: Crying, Watching and Nursing’ looks engagingly at representations of the sexualised sinner as a Mary Magdalene figure in literature. Focusing here on the female protagonist, *Ruth*, Langridge looks at themes of redemption, emotional expression, female sexuality and female pain and pleasure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Giving attention to fallen tears in this novel, Langridge discusses the significance they hold, over and above their simplistic, and perhaps misleading, relation to the penitential tears of the Magdalene. Interestingly, this essay looks at how expressions of emotion are bound up with a gendered gaze and power relations. What happens when our leading lady, in the midst of tears, looks back at observers? Langridge notes Elizabeth Gaskell’s call to empathy in this novel, and argues that this draws attention away from some of the more challenging questions raised by the tearful gaze.

Turning to the figure of the ‘new *mestiza*’ in ‘Rearticulating the New *Mestiza*’, Zalfa Feghali provides an overview and critique of Gloria Anzaldúa’s influential theorization of the new *mestiza* before providing a refiguration of the same. Feghali shows the enormous political potential of this figure whose multiplicity allows a new kind of consciousness to emerge. This *mestiza* consciousness moves beyond the binary relationships and dichotomies that characterize traditional modes of thought, and seeks to build bridges between all minority communities in order to achieve social and political change. Pointing to some of the weaknesses in Anzaldúa’s account – such as the manner in which it ends up reinforcing the very borders it attempts to transgress – Feghali asks for a broader, more inclusive and transnational conceptualisation of the *mestiza* that could, in turn, remobilise the conceptual force of hybridity and *mestizaje* in contemporary thought.

Erika Kvistad discusses representations of death and Victorian women by two esteemed authors in her essay titled ‘What Happens, or Rather Doesn’t Happen’: Death and Possibility in Alice James and Christina Rossetti’. Kvistad is interested in the central role of death in the work of Alice James and Christina Rossetti as a way of articulating a space of possibility beyond what life has to offer. For Kvistad, these authors write about death in a way which is neither definitively conforming to nor subverting social norms about the links between death and femininity. Kvistad offers a poignant and well reasoned reading of these texts in which these death explorations create a more complex conception of the role of women as active participant, as well as victims of Victorian death culture, and of the strategies available to women writers facing the problem of an existence that could itself seem deathlike. We hope you enjoy reading this year’s competition winner and short-listed entries; we look forward to hearing readers’ responses to the essays featured in this special issue of *JWS*. For more information on the FWSA, and the student essay competition in particular, please go to the FWSA website at [www.fwsa.org.uk](http://www.fwsa.org.uk).