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REVIEW SERIES

**Dis/identifications and
Dis/articulations:**

**Young Women and Feminism
in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

Reviewed by
Dr Helène Connor

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THESES REVIEW SERIES 1/2015

Thesis Review: Dis/identifications and Dis/articulations: Young Women and Feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand by L. Ashton

By Dr Helene Connor



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THESIS REVIEW

Ashton, L. (2014). **“I don’t necessarily go out there and tell everyone that I’m a feminist, but I won’t go out there and tell everyone that I’m a musician either”**: Dis/identifications and Dis/articulations : Young Women and Feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Unpublished thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Practice.

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In this thoroughly researched, skillfully written thesis, the author explores young women’s dis/identifications with feminism, and dis/articulations of feminism, within contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand. The premise of the research is that whilst many young women value the work of the early feminists in terms of gender equality and individual freedom for themselves, only a small number position themselves as feminist. Indeed, the author identified research with young women in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and Canada which supported this premise. Comparative research on young women’s identifications with feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand, was however, absent within the literature and this thesis set out to address this gap. Overall, the thesis addresses the New Zealand context with considerable scholarly integrity and depth, demonstrating originality and a well-considered analytical response to the data.

The thesis commences with the author situating herself and her interest in feminism in all its multiple forms. This initial *Preface* contextualizes the research with regards to the author’s own story and the immediate context of her research within contemporary New Zealand society and culture. She states:

I believe that women the world over continue to be disempowered, disenfranchised, and oppressed by virtue of their sex and gender in myriad ways, both subtle and highly apparent. I believe that feminism – in its wonderful and varied multiplicities – must continue in order to change this state of affairs. This thesis is one way in which I hope to contribute to the continuation of feminism – particularly within Aotearoa/New Zealand (Ashton, 2014, p. xiv).

The thesis is divided into five chapters which follow both a chronological and a thematic order. *Chapter One – Contextualizing the Research*, presents a snapshot of existing research and theorizing relevant to the research. It discusses the definition of feminism and provides an overview of feminism within present day Aotearoa/New Zealand, including an outline of key “empirical” markers of gender inequality. The section on Feminism in

Aotearoa/New Zealand provides an excellent historical and sociological context with regard to feminist activity and politics. It begins by pointing out that New Zealand was the first nation in the world to grant women the right to vote in 1893 and that we were also the first country to have an autonomous, stand-alone Ministry of Women's Affairs. Within this section there is also a substantial discussion on the development of indigenous feminist theoretical perspectives where Māori feminism has been positioned with the discourses of decolonization and mana wahine in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The literature on young women's feminist dis/identifications and the discourses of post-feminism, heteronormativity and neoliberalism as they relate to young women and feminism are also explored in this chapter.

Chapter Two – Research Process, presents an in-depth discussion on the theoretical and practical aspects of the research methodology including the process of recruitment which was carried out over a six week period through a Facebook page and an e-mail. Grounded within a feminist poststructuralist approach, the author, carried out 14 semi-structured interviews with young women asking them about their lives and their views on feminism and post-feminism. The women were aged between 18 and 30 and came from diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, sexuality and class. She then employed a discursive psychological analysis of the transcripts of the interviews.

The chapter outlines the ways in which feminist poststructuralism provided a context for the interviews with participants on their relationship with feminism and post-feminism. The chapter also discusses the author's use of a "hybrid" discursive psychological approach to the analysis of the interview data, recognizing "individuals as both producers and products of discourse". The chapter also highlighted the practice of reflexivity (generally understood as involving an on-

going process of self-awareness throughout the research which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research) as being central to the research.

Chapter Three – Dis/identifications with Feminism, outlined the discourses prevalent in the interviewees' dialogues on feminism. The author identified and evidenced two interpretive repertoires on feminism that were repeatedly used by interviewees: the liberal-equality-feminism interpretive repertoire and the radical-extreme-feminism interpretive repertoire. One of the ways in which the liberal-equality-feminism interpretive repertoire occurred was through participants referencing historical events, such as women getting the vote, when asked what feminism meant to them. The radical-extreme feminism interpretive repertoire drew on images of extreme, angry, radical, bra-burning feminists which enabled the interviewees to discursively position themselves in particular ways and to construct its alternative: a liberal, equality-focused feminism.

Chapter Four – Dis/articulating Feminism, outlined the concept of a disarticulation of feminism and then discussed the discourses implicated in the research participants' disarticulations of feminism. Discourses included: post-feminism, the notion that women in "other" countries are more in need of feminism than women in Aotearoa/New Zealand and neoliberal discourses of individualism. *Chapter Five – Conclusion*, synthesizes the research and linked it into existing scholarship. It also highlights the similarities between her research and that carried out by Edley and Wetherell (2001) situated in Britain and Scharff (2012) situated in Germany which provides an interesting cross cultural appraisal of young women and men's perspectives on feminism, the women's movement(s), identification and *dis*-identification with feminism.

In contrast to the studies carried out in Britain and Germany, the research participants in Ms Ashton's study were all women aged between 18 and 30 with varied ethnicities and sexual orientations and educational backgrounds who, from the outset were positioned differently in relation to feminism in that they either identified with feminism in some way or had a strong interest in talking about it. Significantly, however, Ms Ashton, has identified that each of the research projects found the same interpretive repertoires about feminism: one, the radical-extreme feminism repertoire, and the other, liberal equality. The discussion on these and other findings is considerable with convincing and compelling arguments put forward to offer explanations as to how participants drew upon seemingly contradictory repertoires to make sense of feminism within a postfeminist climate. For example, the author found that there were times when the majority of interviewees drew on a construction of feminism as anti-men (positioned within the radical-extreme feminism interpretive repertoire), while at other times those same interviewees constructed some men as feminists (generally, but not always, positioned within the liberal-equality feminism interpretive repertoire). The author argues that it is through precisely this type of contradiction and the multifaceted positioning that these discourses on feminism work to maintain existing gendered power relations.

The research also argued that the disarticulation of feminism through discourses of the 'other' was concerning, mainly because it seems to be to enable what the author terms a "double" disarticulation of feminism. That is, it disarticulates feminism within contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand, by constructing it as more relevant elsewhere in the world, whilst simultaneously disarticulating any sense of community, connectedness or commonality between women "here"

and women "there" – a connectedness that might constitute feminisms of transnational solidarity.

This thesis demonstrates an excellent understanding of the subject area. It provides meticulous attention to the practice of reflexivity and indeed positions this practice as central to the research. Overall, the research offers nuanced and thoughtful analytic interpretations of the data, and provides a compelling analysis, which is robust, insightful, and coherent.

Locating the Thesis

This thesis can be located within Feminist and Post-feminist scholarship, Gender Studies, and Women's Studies.

Potential Publication Impact of the Thesis

This thesis epitomises the goal of 'feminist research' in that it is informed by an active engagement with feminist scholarship and investigates questions of power and difference through the lens of gender and feminism. It would make a significant contribution to feminist research both within Aotearoa/New Zealand and abroad, particularly within the areas of 'Gender and Culture; Young Women and Feminism and Post-feminism.

Primary Sources

Fourteen qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted within young women aged between 18 and 30.

References

- Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (2001). Jekyll and Hyde: Men's constructions of feminism and feminists. *Feminism & Psychology, 11*(4), 439-457. doi:10.1177/0959353501011004002
- Scharff, C. (2012). *Repudiating feminism: Young women in a neoliberal world*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Review Author bio:

Dr Helene Connor is of Māori, English and Irish descent. She has whakapapa (genealogy) links to Te Atiawa and Ngati Ruanui iwi (tribes) and Ngati Rahiri and Ngati Te Whiti hapu (sub-tribes). Helene's research interests include the exploration of constructions of identity and multi-ethnic identity and the intersections between gender, ethnicity and cultural representation; narrative and auto/biographical research; Maori feminism, mana wahine Maori and women of colour feminism and mothering. She is also interested in New Zealand colonial history, and 19th century literature and the lives of 19th century women novelists, particularly from the North of England, such as Geraldine Jewsbury, Elizabeth Gaskell and the Brontë sisters. Helene is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader in the Department of Social Practice, Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand.

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Thesis Author bio:

Laura Ashton's career and research interests have had a dual focus since she graduated from her BA with majors in psychology and women's studies. She has worked in the mental health sector since 2003, in both management and research roles. She has a Postgraduate Diploma in Counseling from Unitec and has worked as a therapist with women struggling with eating difficulties. She is a member of the national committee and the organising group of the Women's Studies Association of New Zealand.

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