



Australian  
National  
University

# Archived in ANU Research repository

<http://www.anu.edu.au/research/access/>

This is an accepted version of

*Bode, Katherine*

*Divergent convergences : Manifesting Literary Feminisms conference, Monash University and University of Queensland, 13-14 December 2007*

*Australian Feminist Studies 23:58 (2008); 549-550*

This is an electronic version of an article published in *Australian Feminist Studies* 23.58 (2008): 549-550.

*Australian Feminist Studies* is available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08164640802433514>

## CONFERENCE REPORT

DIVERGENT CONVERGENCES: Manifesting Literary Feminisms Conference.  
Monash University and the University of Queensland, 13-14 December, 2007.

Katherine Bode

Over the past three decades, feminism has been a major force in literary studies, while literary studies have represented an important strand of academic feminism. This interrelationship has been reflected in the prevalence of feminist papers at literature conferences, and literary papers at feminist conferences. Few conferences, however, have focused exclusively on feminist literary criticism. The Manifesting Literary Feminisms conference therefore offered a rare opportunity for feminist literary scholars to come together with the purpose of listening and responding to, and being challenged by, the stimulating diversity of work in progress in the field. For this opportunity, participants at the conference repeatedly thanked the convenors, Margaret Henderson from the University of Queensland and Ann Vickery from Monash.

The conference was also an occasion to engage with and celebrate the contributions to feminist literary scholarship of the plenary speakers: acclaimed American poet and critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis, from Temple University, Philadelphia, and Susan Sheridan, one of Australia's most influential feminist literary critics, recently retired from the position of Head of Women's Studies at Flinders University. The experience of listening to these eminent scholars on consecutive days writ large the way in which many conference papers brought the Australian context into conversation with international and transnational themes, theories and debates in feminist and literary theory.

In her opening address, 'Manifesting Literary Feminisms: Thinking into Future Work', DuPlessis offered a thought-provoking list of some of the 'gender buttons' that feminist literary scholars are pressing. Among these was the idea of 'nexus'\*defined by the OED as a 'bond, link, or junction; a means of connection between things or parts'. DuPlessis identified 'nexus-thinking' as a way of moving beyond the hierarchical paradigm of major and minor writers, and instead considering the literary field in terms of connections, interactions, relationships and communities. Conference papers and sessions focusing on literary communities, and on genres such as detective fiction, ably demonstrated ways that 'nexus thinking' is informing work in contemporary feminist literary studies.

The 'nexus' theme continued in Susan Sheridan's address that opened the second day of the conference: 'Generations Lost and Found: Reading Women Writers Together'. Exploring the 'eclipse' of Australian women writers of the 1950s, Sheridan noted the value of 'nexus thinking' as a way of investigating groups, even when these groups do not see themselves as such. Susan Sheridan's attention to the social, political, economic and geographic conditions of Australian women writers of the 1950s demonstrated another way in which 'nexus thinking' is central to contemporary feminist literary scholarship: in its concern with interactions and relationships between texts and contexts.

This focus was also evident in the way in which a number of conference papers explicitly situated the texts they discussed in time and space, whether in relation to expatriate writers in Paris at the start of the twentieth century, contemporary Indigenous writing, or Israeli feminist fiction.

The *OED* also defines nexus as a 'point of convergence', a term that expresses what feminist literary scholarship has provided for many within the academic community, while capturing the nature of this particular meeting of feminist scholars from Australia and overseas. This conference, like the field of feminist literary scholarship in general, entailed a coming together of scholars with often very different ideas about both feminism and literature. Yet despite differences of opinion, the conference was characterised not only by the high quality of literary scholarship on display but also by the engaged and friendly atmosphere that prevailed.

Adrienne Sallay's paper, 'Bounce Titty Bounce: Representations of and by Women in Some 1970s Student Newspapers', offered a clear and wry image of where we have come from, and how much feminism has changed modern society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, no clear answer emerged to the question of 'where to now?', despite its being raised in many of the papers presented, in discussion between papers, and as the topic of the panel session presented on the second day by Bronwen Levy, Nicole Moore and Brigid Rooney. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that two issues emerged in this divergent-convergence of feminist literary critics that will define the future of the field: firstly, the question of whether feminism will continue to focus on women, or move towards what DuPlessis termed 'omnigendered alertness'; and secondly, the issue of how feminist literary criticism can remain (some might say become) politically useful and active. For some, meeting the requirements of this second issue would seem to necessitate that feminist literary scholars continue to adopt a political essentialism that aligns feminism with women. Personally, however, I was convinced by DuPlessis's suggestion that feminist literary studies in the future should be forged out of identification not with women but with feminism itself as a political and ethical choice.

As Levy asserted in her panel paper, feminists today will write on the blank pages of the future to determine what feminist literary scholarship becomes. While the papers, discussion and camaraderie at the Manifesting Literary Feminisms conference offered hope for the future of feminist literary studies\*and for the ability of feminist literary scholars to seize the opportunity to write on the future's blank pages\*how and what is written there will determine, perhaps, whether there will be another conference in Australia focusing on feminist literary studies.