

Representations of Feminism in the Australian Print Media: The Case of Pat O'Shane

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Forward

Research for this paper is drawn from a large ARC funded project that considers the politics of representing feminism for popular consumption in the Australian print media from 1970 to 1995. Chief Investigators are Associate Professor Susan Magarey (Adelaide University) and Professor Susan Sheridan (Flinders University). The project examines nine key events during this period to provide a snap shot impression of media reporting of feminism over the period. Some of these events relate to specific political issues, such as the 1972 election campaign when the Women's Electoral Lobby surveyed the candidates and received extensive publicity in the mainstream press (Lilburn, 2000). Other events include the debate surrounding the passage of the Sex Discrimination Bill in 1983 and 1984 and the staging of the four United Nations Women's Conferences in 1975, 1980, 1985 and 1995 (Lilburn & Sheridan, 2001). Other events in this project have focussed more intently on specific individuals who are publicly associated with feminism. Germaine Greer's tour of Australia in 1971/1972 to promote the paperback release of *The Female Eunuch* (Lilburn, Magarey & Sheridan, 2000) and the appointment of Elizabeth Reid as the first Women's Adviser to the Prime Minister in 1973 have been researched for this project (Lilburn & Magarey 2000). The appointment of Pat O'Shane as a NSW magistrate in 1986 is another of the events and the relationship between media representations of feminism and O'Shane's public identity is the subject of this paper.

Introduction

Pat O'Shane is a sometimes controversial public figure who has maintained a media profile alongside her public service roles as head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and as a magistrate in New South Wales. Born in Northern Queensland to an Aboriginal mother and Irish father, O'Shane describes an early life of family poverty and discrimination in school. She recalls being subject to both racist and sexist taunts. Despite a period of mental illness and an early divorce, O'Shane has, by any standards, been a high achiever (O'Shane 1984b; Mitchell 1984, 2001). Expressing a strong commitment to promoting social justice for marginalised groups, she has made contributions to Aboriginal and feminist politics in deed and in the public debate. Yet her views do not always accord with the views of the political communities (or publics) she supports. Her public observations about sexism within the Aboriginal community and about racism within the Women's Movement (O'Shane 1976) have made O'Shane's public voice unique.

The intent of this analysis is not to provide a profile of a public individual as much as to gain some insight into how feminism has been represented in the context of media reports about Pat O'Shane. This paper characterises O'Shane as an example of a synthetic

identity – a public figure marked by identity difference but able to achieve media publicity for political causes within the norms and conventions of news reporting. O'Shane's public identity has been forged by a public status as "first Aboriginal woman to..." and by a narrative of individual struggle and achievement which she and the media have cultivated and sustained. An analysis of reports in the mainstream press (including the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), the *Age*, the *Australia* and the *Canberra Times*) indicates that identity difference is marginal to a populist narrative about individual struggle and success. Yet, in the wake of media publicity O'Shane creates opportunities for public debate about race and gender politics. And whether we agree with her comments or not, O'Shane often provides opportunities for Aboriginal and feminist groups to establish a position within the mainstream public debate. Yet, the high visibility of synthetic identities is a mixed blessing in the promotion of these political causes because synthetic identities also work to imply democratic access rather than to challenge the myth of a unified and accessible public sphere. I argue that synthetic identities should not be viewed for their mimetic accuracy but should be appreciated as an example of diversity in the public sphere. Whether diversity furthers identity politics remains the question.

Feminist Politics and Media Publicity

During the period under research (1970–1995), the media has provided an important context for public political activity in general and identity politics in particular. It may even be that during this period media space has become the quintessential political space as our experience of citizenship has become increasingly mediated. Not only is our information about the practice of government, as individual citizens in contemporary democracies like Australia, principally derived from news reporting, but democratic political practices like debate, protest and dissent are increasingly conducted in media space. Media publicity is a central strategy in all political campaigns – a key component in articulating a political position be it a party political platform, a public policy rationale, or a campaign drawing attention to the injustices experienced by a marginalised social group. From the late 1960s, as the Women's Movement expanded, became highly organised, and established an intense public presence, media publicity became a crucial political tool used to highlight the inequities and the disadvantages experienced by women and to make claims for just treatment and for social change.

Many commentators have noted that gaining publicity for a particular cause is an essential ingredient in successful social group, or civil rights, politics (Dahlgren 1995; Thompson 1995; Curran 1997). This success can be understood in two ways. In the first instance, publicity helps to legitimate group identity and to mobilise broad-based support for the cause. As like-minded others, or those with similar experiences, hear about identity group activity they are encouraged to lend active or moral support to the cause. Identity groups form a distinct "public" (or what Nancy Fraser (1997) calls a *counterpublic*) articulating a distinct group identity and a united political opinion in the mainstream public debate. In achieving a level of broad-based support, these identity groups can exert influence in the public debate and bring pressure to bear on governments. Recognising this shift in public opinion, governments may be compelled to change policy, amend or introduce legislation, or conduct information campaigns

designed to extend public support for change as matters of justice. The capacity of identity groups to influence public opinion and government policy is the second measure of success – albeit one that requires a more complex gauge. The linkage between publicity, public debate and public opinion formation is difficult to achieve as it involves the multi-levelled politics of institutions, resources, ideologies and culture – a huge area of inquiry. My objective here is to highlight the media space as a site where some of this politics is conducted and to try and make sense of media processes as a factor in identity group politics.

John Thompson (1995) observes that identity politics in mass media societies essentially revolves around the question of visibility and invisibility in the public sphere. For feminist activists, political visibility involves the active (relentless) negotiation of women's visibility and invisibility in the public sphere. Yet, the strategy of publicity can generate unexpected visibility outcomes for groups who do not achieve the media response they had anticipated – negative publicity or little media interest about the issue is a very real possibility. For identity groups, these experiences raise puzzling questions about gaining access to the public sphere space and require a negotiation of constantly shifting, media-driven distinctions between what is designated to be of public interest and what is private. This dichotomy is central to questions of media visibility and invisibility.

First, as John Hartley (1996) observes, the cultural ambiguity of public and private has always been central to journalistic technique. The news media have always been interested in the tensions between public issues and private lives making this an important dynamic in shaping media space and an important dynamic in determining visibility or publicity. So feminist publicists must consider who determines news-values and thus, which issues will be accorded publicity and which issues will remain issues of privacy (for example, the appeal of celebrity lifestyles over reporting about the everyday problem of domestic violence, see McLaughlin 1998). They must also consider why the news media become fascinated with the individual or with diverse (sometimes perverse) cultural identities rather than the objectives and goals of the collective. And they must also negotiate the persistent use of gender categories to frame media content (as in representations of sexualised or maternal women versus representations of authoritative and powerful men, see Holland 1998). Secondly, distinctions between the public and the private resonate in a very specific way in a feminist inquiry. Public recognition is both a condition and an entitlement of liberal democratic citizenship – the citizen being able to publicly articulate their interests and opinions and thus able to influence government policy and practices. As feminist theorists like Carole Pateman (1988) and Anne Phillips (1991, 1998) argue, the traditional relegation of women to the private sphere and to the rule of male heads of the household, has been a tangible impediment to their full enjoyment of citizenship entitlements – including their capacity to publicly articulate their interests and opinions. Providing the central arena(s) for the formation of public opinion, the media has a pivotal role to play in this manifestation of gender politics through the representations of women.

Nancy Fraser's interpretation of the public sphere is particularly apposite for this analysis. Fraser is best known for her deft mediation between critical theory and

postmodernism, advocating the pragmatic value of discourse analysis for feminist political theory (1989; 1995; 1997; Fraser & Nicholson 1990). Using this approach in a critique of Jürgen Habermas' idealisation of the bourgeois public sphere – the sphere where “private” individuals discuss “public” issues – Fraser observes that there are several different meanings evident in the concept of *public*. Public can designate something as state-related; or as accessible to everyone; or of concern to everyone; or public can designate matters related to the common good. As Fraser points out, each of these meanings carries a corresponding sense of privacy. However, there are two other implicit uses of privacy that influence the treatment of issues in the public sphere – the designation of property and of domestic life, including sexual relations, as private (85-86). Fraser's objective is to demonstrate that public sphere debates can not be an open discussion because they are conducted within a discursive space pre-defined by the cultural classifications of public and private. So subordinate identity groups seeking publicity for their cause often confront the dilemma of a public sphere defined to preclude their concerns as private. It is hard to enter or introduce matters into the political debate when the experience to be reported is pre-defined as not state-related; of no interest or relevance to the collective of “everyone” or to the common good. Consequently, identity groups often have to first contest the classification of the public in order to be heard. That is, there is a political contest for publicity. For instance, feminists had to first contest the boundary of the domestic sphere in order to gain recognition of domestic violence – a phenomenon without public classification until feminist publicity about the abuse of women within the home. For feminists in the public sphere then, media visibility and invisibility is often connected to a broader politics. For this reason, those with marginal political identities (like Pat O'Shane) who can achieve media publicity are immensely interesting examples of identity politics.

'A highly respected Aboriginal activist and well-known left-wing feminist'

In 1982 after the then Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen characterised Pat O'Shane as a ‘communist agitator’ the Sun-Herald set the record straight describing her instead as ‘a highly respected Aboriginal activist and well-known left-wing feminist’ (24/10/82: 15). In the minds of some readers, the subtlety of the distinction may well have been lost, but from my reading of O'Shane's public presence, none of these mantles always fits. In fact, O'Shane, as an Aboriginal feminist, is often decried by the counterpublics that bolster her identity. For example, when she was Head of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Charles Perkins publicly claimed that she was simply ‘out of touch with Aboriginal organisations’.

During the recent controversy over gender and violence in Aboriginal communities, O'Shane invoked the ire of feminist activists like Sarah Maddison who, despite finding O'Shane an ‘inspirational figure’ thought ‘her claims regarding women's honesty in sexual assault matters irresponsible and inexcusable’ (Maddison, 2001). Evelyn Scott suggested that ‘there is a very real possibility that because of her remarks, Aboriginal women, who have only just started to speak out against sexual assault, will now feel constrained from doing so in the future’ (SMH 20/6/01). Nonetheless, it was in the context of this debate that Scott and other Aboriginal women had the opportunity to highlight Aboriginal women's experiences of sexual assault as a serious issue of public

importance. The issue has achieved some level of prominence in the public sphere and thus has been drawn to the attention of political decision-makers. Clearly, the publicity O'Shane generates does not always hit the mark accurately – at least from the perspective of feminist and Aboriginal counterpublics. But publicity is inherently unpredictable.

In a 1993 controversy, O'Shane was applauded by feminists for her decision to dismiss charges of property damage against five Sydney women who defaced an advertising billboard. The advertisement for Berlei underwear contained an image of a woman wearing only bra and knickers preparing to be cut in half by a magician. The women charged with property damage had added the caption "Even if you're mutilated" to the advertising caption "You'll always feel good in Berlei". O'Shane found the charges proved but dismissed the case without sentence or damages, claiming the advertisement was indeed offensive. After making her decision, O'Shane offered a feminist reasoning about the clear connection between violence against women in representation and in fact. This was later published in the Sydney Morning Herald, in a profile piece on O'Shane that appeared towards the culmination of a public debate which was particularly intense on Sydney talk-back radio. According to O'Shane:

It is no accident in a society dominated by males that we get this kind of advertising that is depicted in these photographs. It is no accident that we do not see similar depictions of men being disembodied, dismembered and it is no accident therefore, in fact it flows indeed, that we have laws framed in the terms of section 195A to protect the property of a male-dominated society. The real crime in this matter was the erection of these extremely offensive advertisements (*SMH* 20/3/93: 39).

The substance of O'Shane's view found little support in the public debate. Berlei management dismissed the claim that the advertising campaign was offensive, saying that the matter had been 'blown out of proportion' and the decision 'reflects a minority opinion' (*Australian* 22/1/93: 3). The Advertising Standards Council promised to assess the billboard for sexism and offense, but the spokesperson was reported to have claimed that 'it would be treated like any other matter and would not result in advertising standards being changed' (*Australian* 25/1/93: 3). A little later, the Director of Public Prosecutions, announced that an appeal against the decision would be mounted (*SMH* 17/2/93: 3). As it turned out, the appeal was not upheld because O'Shane's decision was within the parameters of her magisterial prerogative. One Melbourne based magician did add weight to O'Shane's comments with the claim that the illusion had been devised by an English magician to 'deride the suffragette movement' (*Australian* 22/1/93:3), but even this misses the point about systemic patriarchy. The public debate focused instead on the issue of judicial interpretation and whether judges should use political interpretation in applying the law – the threat to principles of judicial independence and equality before the law being key discussion points.

In an editorial, the *Australian* took O'Shane to task claiming that her legal reasoning (as outlined in a radio interview on talkback radio, mind you) was flawed. In this radio interview, O'Shane was reported to have

offered a statistical and personal method of discovering a "just" verdict. Women, she said constituted 51 percent of the population. She could think of no woman in

her acquaintance – and neither could she imagine any women unknown to her – who could fail to see that the bill board in question did incite violence against women. The very first call taken by the radio host proved to be a woman who dismissed Ms O’Shane’s reasoning as “rubbish” and questioned her suitability to be a magistrate (*Australian* 22/1/93: 14).

The editors of the *Sydney Morning Herald* were content to speculate on O’Shane’s reasoning suggesting that ‘she appears to have seen the case as involving the important principle of free speech and to have allowed that to be weighed in the balance’ (*SMH* 23/1/93: 24). In an opinion piece published in the *Australian* on the same day as that paper’s editorial, David Weisbrot, the NSW Law Reform Commissioner, made the more astute point that:

The fact that the overwhelming number of our judges and magistrates are – and always have been – politically and socially conservative middle-aged men of Anglo-Celtic background has meant that the world views, social mores, tastes and general sensibility common to such people have become accepted as natural, uncontroversial, and “the law” (*Australian* 22/1/93: 15).

Maybe this is closest to O’Shane’s feminist intent. Letters to the editor of the *Australian* suggest that most remained unpersuaded, Richard Stone calling Weisbrot ‘patronising’ and Juliette Overland railing against the application of ‘a “politically correct” opinion’ in place of the law (*Australian* 27/1/93: 10).

The other factor that complicated the issue and no doubt exaggerated the concerns about judicial interpretation in the public debate was a spate of judgments that indicated a level of tolerance towards male violence against women. Justice Bollen of the South Australian Supreme Court made now infamous comments about the acceptability of ‘rougher than usual handling’ of wives by their husbands in order to facilitate sex as he dismissed a case of rape against the victim’s husband (*SMH* 21/1/93: 11). A few months later, in a Victorian County Court, Judge Bland, while hearing a rape case had said that despite criticism that has been directed at judges lately about violence and women, (and) men acting violently to women during sexual intercourse, it does happen, in the common experience of those who have been in the law as long as I have anyway, that no often subsequently means yes (*SMH* 6/5/93: 11).

Another Victorian judgement was overturned on appeal when a lesser sentence was imposed on a rapist because the sentencing judge, Justice O’Brien, had determined that the victim had been less traumatised because she was unconscious during the attack (*SMH* 13/5/93: 1). These events seemed to vindicate O’Shane’s judgement – at least in providing the sense that her judgement was one end of a very wide spectrum of opinion. So much so that her view that these decisions accurately reflected ‘fundamentally sexist attitudes when dealing with issues such as violence against women’ (*SMH* 6/3/93: 11) and ‘a very deep core of hostility against women in the community’ (*Sun-Herald* 16/5/93: 19) were reported by the mainstream press.

As these few examples demonstrate, we need to appreciate her capacity to achieve recognition in the mainstream press even if the publicity can be unconventional or seem politically misdirected. With this mainstream recognition O’Shane has achieved publicity and raised the level of public debate around particular issues or extended the public

recognition of particular disparities in the institutions and practices that govern us. However, this is not an achievement for identity politics *per se*. Although O'Shane has persistently demonstrated a connection to Aboriginal and feminist counterpublics, she does not claim to speak for these publics in the mainstream public debate. Thus, the strength of her voice for Aboriginal and feminist politics can not be assessed through the accuracy or authenticity of the expression, but in the media space that she opens up in the wake of her sensational or provocative comments. We need to consider the case of O'Shane's public recognition in a way that is not contingent upon her different identity, but is contingent upon her ability to sustain her identity in media space.

In my reading of O'Shane's public identity, she (like other feminist identities) does not automatically belong in the public realm, but she found an avenue of inclusion through media publicity which fits with the norms and conventions of news reporting.

Synthetic Identities

Representations of feminist identities in the Australian print media can be characterised as synthetic. They are synthetic because they build upon existing representations of women but move beyond or challenge aspects of the stereotype to present complexity in women's identities. They are synthetic because they fill some of the gaps and the silences in media space yet are adaptive of existing discourses. A feminist identity in media space will raise the public profile of women – sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. So, synthetic identities of the likes of the feminist celebrity Germaine Greer, have used the characteristics of female celebrity – charisma, beauty and sexuality – to challenge the limits of the media boundaries that define "woman". Using this tactic, Greer's impact on the public debate about women's social and political position was ground breaking in the early 1970s (Lilburn, Magarey & Sheridan 2000). Although Greer relied heavily on her heterosexual appeal to create a public identity as "the saucy feminist even men like" (*Australian* 8/5/71: 16), it was this very appeal that secured her publicity and gave her a public voice.

Representations of feminism and feminist identities in the Australian print media often reflect these kinds of tension and a hybrid quality. Despite the caricatures of feminists as antithetical to all semblance of femininity, the hybrid qualities of feminist women are often central in the construction of their public identity. So, the curiosity value of Greer's presentation of feminism was the seemingly contradictory presence of a strong heterosexual identity. Other feminists too have faced the challenge to reconcile their feminist and "feminine" identity as their public profile is being established. For instance, in 1983 after being elected onto the Executive of the ACTU, Jennie George was asked repeatedly by a male reporter attending her first press conference whether she was married. According to the *Age* reporter Sarah Chester, her eventual response – that her husband was recently deceased – silenced the reporter. As this exemplifies, women who resist this dichotomy between public and private life, when pressed, can use this tension to deliver a feminist political message about representations of women and women's access to the public sphere. The impact of the message was in the public telling, in the mainstream press *and* in moral outrage, of the stereotypes women confront in becoming public figures. However, what is important is that this message was advanced in a

newspaper profile (published the week following the press conference in the women's pages called *Accent*; *Age* 21/9/83: 230). The creation of a feminist identity is a hybrid or synthetic construct created in and against the boundaries of existing media discourse. In this sense, a feminist public identity is always conditional on the media context.

'I have been described as a controversial figure and God forbid I should have been a milksop'

O'Shane's public identity is also a synthetic identity shaped by her identification with feminism and Aboriginality within a media context. In interviews and media profiles, O'Shane bristles against categorisation. In a report by Larry Schwartz at the time of her appointment as magistrate, she acknowledged the controversy that had accompanied her tenure in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and told Schwartz that she 'was not "one-dimensional"...and did not like to be seen only in the context of Aboriginal concerns' (*SMH* 11/6/86:2). Yet, it is in this context that O'Shane's public identity takes shape with the achievement of a number of firsts during her career. Not only was O'Shane the first woman Aboriginal magistrate to be appointed in Australia in 1986, she was the first woman to be appointed as the head of a state government department – the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in NSW in 1981. She is also the first Aboriginal woman to complete a law degree and be appointed to the NSW bar in 1976. These firsts are constantly reiterated in the construction and reconstruction of her public identity and offer important markers in the history of Aboriginal and women's public achievements.

However, "first" status is an arbitrary basis for a public identity. Indeed, despite the intended focus of the Feminism and Media project on the print media's reporting of her appointment to the magistracy in 1986, there was actually relatively little interest shown in the Australian mainstream press. The designation of "first Aboriginal women to..." provides an interesting "spin" for a news story but it is not consistently applied. At the time of her appointment to the magistracy, the *Herald's* report by Larry Schwartz emphasised her Aboriginality describing her as 'Australia's first Aboriginal magistrate... [and] the first Aborigine to graduate in law at an Australian University, the first Aboriginal barrister and the first Aborigine to head a Government department' (*SMH* 11/6/86: 2). In this report, there is no mention made of her "first woman" status as a magisterial appointment and as the head of a state government department. So although the designation has persisted in establishing O'Shane's public identity and is a marker that is often invoked by the media and by O'Shane herself, it is not a static signifier.

In a 1993 profile in the *Australian Magazine*, Kate Legge takes up the arbitrary application of "first" status in a profile of O'Shane. As Legge notes, when it comes to listing firsts, the media often gets it wrong – as Schwartz did by forgetting Lloyd McDermott who was actually the first Aboriginal barrister. Legge ponders the significance of the media's focus on being first and sees it as an historical curiosity – the "how do they do it" tone sounding 'twee' in retrospect. As she observes:

in the late seventies and early eighties Helen Reddy's "I am woman" anthem was playing full blast. O'Shane was at the head of the parade. After all, she had double

trouble. She was up against racism and sexism, and black women often were expected to suppress demands for sexual equality in the broader struggle against bigotry. She was noisy about her success. She made the most out of her line honours (Legge 1993: 8).

What is different in this report is that Legge acknowledges the contribution of the subject in constructing a public identity. Here, we can recall Greer's skill in creating and sustaining a media identity and appreciate something of the same skill in O'Shane. There is more to constructing a public identity than having "first" status, but in terms of achieving publicity, it does provide an appealing angle for a story by offering a personal narrative about identity difference in the public sphere. Rather than being an historical artifact, as Legge implies, the designation shifts according to context. In 1989, O'Shane appears in a profile piece on four NSW women called "Women of the eighties" (*SMH* 19/12/89: 16). The piece (published in the "social issues" section of the paper called *Agenda*) begins with the observation: 'According to the statistics, women are still trailing the men in positions of power and influence. But as the decade ends, it is clear that the fair sex is making headway'. Here, the narrative of individual success despite gender and race marks O'Shane out in the same way as did her "first" status. In 1993 O'Shane's name (and a list of her firsts) appears on a *Herald* list of 45 as one of 'the most influential women in Australia' (*SMH* 6/2/93, Good Weekend 26). In this case, it is the fact that 45 women have been recognised by the mainstream press for their public influence that constitutes a significant first. But in terms of the techniques of reporting, the spin remains the same.

In journalistic terms, what seems to make O'Shane and other "firsts" newsworthy is their transcendent status in the public sphere. Through hard work and determination, O'Shane demonstrates qualities of individual persistence and tenacity – she also signals her distance from the politics of the identity group. Rather than raise public debate about the politics of exclusion (and debate about the democratic benefits of a diverse public sphere), the status of being "first" suggests an individual who has defied an ideology of disadvantage. "First" status acts to confirm a view that gender does not preclude women or Aborigines from the status of liberal individuals and acts to affirm the democratic potential of the liberal public sphere. In O'Shane's case, this recognition of race and gender as disadvantage serves to intensify the application of the narrative of individual struggle and achievement in the construction of her public identity.

For instance, not long after O'Shane had played the role of whistleblower in identifying "cronyism" in 'publicly funded Aboriginal organisations' (*Canberra Times* 2/11/88: 10; *SMH* 4/11/88: 2) and Charles Perkins had been forced to resign (*SMH* 5/11/88: 1), the *Herald* ran an intriguing article in the sporting section headed "My Great Sporting Moment" which observed that 'Pat O'Shane has made a career of defying the odds. But she is a good judge of when to quit while she's ahead' (*SMH* 19/11/88: 78). Here O'Shane was said to epitomise "the long shot":

Go back 20, 10, even five years and what odds would the local SP have given on the O'Shane career? Study the form, field and track conditions and what self-respecting punter would have parted with his precious pence? For starters, O'Shane is a woman, born in Queensland's deep north. Nor seconds, she's the

daughter of an Irish cane-cutter and an Aboriginal mother. What odds that O'Shane would be the first woman and Aboriginal to head a government department in 1981, become the first Aboriginal to receive a Master of Law degree and last year become the first woman Aboriginal magistrate? The most desperate punter would have thought thrice about taking the plunge on O'Shane garnering this collection of blue ribbons.

Yet, it is precisely these long odds that have sustained her track record in media space. By blending public success with the story of her private struggle, O'Shane is a perfect subject for media attention.

So whereas Cathy Greenfield and Peter Williams (1987/88) have characterised this representation as one of a number of media stereotypes used to represent Aboriginal women, it is the case that O'Shane actively cultivates the narrative of high achiever in sustaining her public identity (see O'Shane 1984 and Mitchell 2001). And as I have demonstrated, it is in the wake of this media publicity that O'Shane opens up some opportunities for public debate about race and gender politics. Whether we agree with her comments or not, O'Shane does provide opportunities for identity groups to establish their position in public debate. Yet, the high visibility of synthetic identities is a mixed blessing in the promotion of identity group politics because O'Shane's media identity works to demonstrate the possibility of democratic access rather than to challenge the myth of a unified and accessible public sphere.

Synthetic identities and feminist publicity

The implications of a news focus on synthetic identities for identity groups seeking publicity and involvement in mainstream public debates are complex. Feminist media analysts have offered two perspectives on this complexity. On the one hand, feminists expected the media (self-characterised as the Fourth Estate) to take seriously women's claims and to facilitate political equality between women and men. Much feminist anger and distrust of the media has occurred when it is evident that this expectation has not been met (IWY Secretariat 1976; Haines 1992; Jenkins 1993; van Acker 1999).

Feminist's pro-active media strategies over the past three decades have focused on the establishment of alternative media sources (for example, Media Women's Action Group established in 1973), the infiltration of women into the mainstream media (Film and TV School report in 1976) or the better management of media publicity (National Women's Media Centre established in 1994). Patricia Bradley (1998) observes that in the United States, early sensationalist reporting of feminism saw an upsurge in feminist strategies designed to reform the institutions of the media. Bradley argues, however, that these strategies assumed that the media was an institution of change and that a bigger dose of "reality" in the representations of women could generate political change.

More recent work in feminist media analysis has questioned the view of the media that underpins this early strategy. Lana Rakow (2001) observes, the mimetic qualities of the media have been viewed with increasing scepticism – both in terms of the accuracy of the representations of women the media produces *and* in terms of limits on the media's capacity to reflect. So, a focus on infiltrating or improving the media can tend to assume

that mimetic accuracy is worth pursuing. Rakow argues instead that we must abandon the distinction altogether and adopt a

more complex theoretical notion of media [which] begins with an understanding of media systems as not simply producers of messages about reality, but as part of reality themselves. Media texts do not present messages about our culture; they ARE culture. Similarly, there are not women and then representations of them, which are more or less accurate. Women are representations of themselves (42).

Catherine Lumby (1997; 1998) also believes that our perception of the media as an institution of change is too simplistic. Lumby argues that many feminists have missed the point about the potential for feminists (and others) to use mediated public space to mount challenges against rigid and exclusive ideas of subjectivity. Lumby points out that it is the media that facilitates the expression of a diverse range of identities — identities which have challenged the narrow limits of masculine, heterosexist and raced citizenship. For Lumby, this confirms that the media do have a democratising function in contemporary societies. And she is critical of feminists for failing to recognise the role of the media in creating diverse publics, including feminist publics. Indeed, the contemporary media (incorporating a broadly defined set of communication technologies) provides seemingly endless opportunities for subjective differences to be expressed and for predefined boundaries to be challenged. Lumby points out that the contemporary media provides a context in which feminists have pushed against and redefined the cultural definition of woman. Lumby's approach confirms the political potential of synthetic identities for their capacity to diversify the public sphere.

However, I have argued in this paper that while we can appreciate the success of synthetic identities in achieving media publicity, the crucial point is not just whether feminist identities are being advanced in media space, but how this subjective perspective is positioned in relation to other perspectives or publics. For this reason, feminist analysts like Lisa McLaughlin (1998) argue against being overly optimistic about diversity. McLaughlin's analysis of the OJ Simpson trial demonstrates how race and gender differences became the focus of media attention and limited the opportunity to extend the public debate about domestic violence issues. A news focus on diverse identities in public can in fact limit public understanding and stifle debate. Furthermore, as Nancy Fraser (1997) explains, some issues spark a public debate that seems to come close to an idealised liberal public sphere. Debate over the issue is extensive, multi-leveled and thorough. People in a variety of publics — from expert publics to groups within the general public — bring a number of perspectives to the question at hand and the ensuing discussion demands attention and may even change people's minds. However, as Fraser notes, the power of various publics, or individuals within publics, to influence a discursive space varies between and across publics. So, the public debate over controversial issues is not necessarily democratic in outcome, although it may be in potential.

'I hope I shall always dare to struggle'.

In O'Shane's identity it is the synthesis of her public and private lives which has constructed a story of individual struggle over adversity (poverty, illness as well as gender and race) and an apparently relentless struggle to rise above these early

disadvantages. It is this struggle that has marked O'Shane out as a newsworthy public figure. For this story, O'Shane is hard not to admire – it is a narrative of determination and commitment and there is something undeniably virtuous and remarkable in that achievement. Through her public presence, O'Shane extends the subjective diversity of the public sphere and provides opportunities to introduce diverse identity perspectives into the public debate. The crucial point is not whether representations of synthetic identities are unreal or need to be considered as something other than real – as in the real versus the synthetic or the authentic versus the inauthentic. As Rakow (2001) points out the critical question is how these representations are judged and the public standards that are used to evaluate them. In a sexist and racist society, these representations will most often work to affirm and authenticate race and gender hierarchies. So, the way these representations are woven into the public sphere is crucial. A final example from O'Shane's publicity serves to illustrate.

The representation of O'Shane while she was the Head of Aboriginal Affairs in a *Sydney Morning Herald* profile as 'a lonely fighter' confirmed the identity narrative we associate with her but it obscured some of the underlying tension within the Aboriginal Affairs Department and the Aboriginal community more generally (*SMH* 7/10/82 Life & Home 1 & 4). Some of these tensions surfaced the following year when the Deputy Secretary of the department, Bob Hunt (a non-Aboriginal appointment) resigned because he disagreed with O'Shane's approach and criticised her outspokenness designed, he claimed, only to find appeal with Aboriginal communities. (*SMH* 4/1/83: 8). Another article reported that Aboriginal groups led by Paul Coe had threatened to set up a tent embassy opposite the Premier's office because of a perceived lack of consultation (*SMH* 21/1/83: 15). The tension between O'Shane and Charles Perkins became very personal when he claimed that 'her term has been a disaster in every way. She never gets out to meet black people. I think Pat O'Shane has shown over the years that she is out of touch with Aboriginal organisations right throughout NSW' (*SMH* 28/2/82: 3). A month later, four Aboriginal members of staff in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs walked off the job in protest over the introduction of what they viewed as 'racist legislation, designed to take away Aboriginal land rights' because the legislation revoked Aboriginal control of reserve lands (*SMH* 26/3/83: 2). By May 1983, Pat O'Shane's office was the site of a "sit-in" by 25 Aboriginal women claiming that 'she could not relate to the problems of NSW Aborigines' (*SMH* 6/5/83: 17). These were not occasions when debates in Aboriginal publics were explored in the mainstream press as a way of informing public opinion and decision-making. These were occasions when Aboriginal politics is represented as divisive and driven by conflict. In this context, the characterisation of O'Shane as 'the lonely fighter' is neither adequate nor appropriate.

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