

FEMINIST EMERGENCY

International Conference, London: 22-24 June 2017

The Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities

in collaboration with
British Comparative Literature Association (BCLA),
Birkbeck Gender and Sexuality (BiGS),
the Birkbeck Institute for Social Research (BISR),
and Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics (MaMSIE)

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

listed in the order of their occurrence

Generations of Women

Six women representing six different decades of adult life were invited to write personal statements considering both their own situation and that of other women in the same age-band. They were asked to cover three broad areas:

- Responsibility and caring (for children, parents etc): [how] do these fall disproportionately on women?
- Professional life: how has it changed and, more generally how does it vary for the different generations?
- Love and intimacy: how has this changed in their lifetime, both/either specifically and/or generally?

In this Breakout session, the audience will split into 6 groups representing the 6 age-bands and discuss these issues; at the close of the meeting each group will report and there will be general discussion.

Speakers:

- 20s - Mathelinda Nabugodi (Newcastle University)
- 30s - Tamara Novis (SOAS, University of London)
- 40s - Ricarda Vidal (King's College London)
- 50s - Jean Owen (Independent Scholar)
- 60s - Fatemeh Ebtehaj (Independent Scholar)
- 70s - Chris MacDonald (Retired Teacher)

Facilitator: Naomi Segal (Birkbeck, University of London)

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Documentary Activism with Xiaolu Guo

Novelist and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo screens excerpts from her documentary work and discusses using documentary to activate debate and political change. One of Granta's best young novelists, Guo's work crosses genres and boundaries including prize-winning novels, memoir, feature films and documentaries.



B. Ruby Rich (Curator, Critic and Film Activist)

B. Ruby Rich's career has been closely tied to a succession of movements, in particular the emergence of feminist film criticism and production in the 1970s-80s and queer film praxis in the 1980s-90s. Unlike most academics, Rich started out in film exhibition and has remained closely tied to this sector, either through curating or film festival participation; as a result, there has always been an engagement, "on the ground" as it were, with the staged encounter between films and publics.

As a critic, Rich has never merely reviewed what comes to market, but has worked to shape the marketplace – for instance, by calling attention to a women's cinema that might otherwise be excluded. When writing on the emergence of a New Queer Cinema, she had to address its unequal gender representation, compensating at times by calling attention to short-form work or simply prioritising lesbian films in the early years. With Latin American cinema, she worked to undo masculinist assumptions.

Despite the best efforts of innumerable critics, scholars, and filmmakers over the decades, women have remained marginalized within the power structures of film. Taking up where a recent essay ('The Confidence Game' in *Camera Obscura*, Spring 2013) left off, Rich considers ongoing imbalances that easily survive efforts in the U.S. to build up new initiatives. The issue of legibility is not helped by the state of the critical trade, either, in terms of the gender imbalances in mainstream reviewing, television, online media, or cinephile definitions and determinations. Nor by the broader global 'emergency' of a right-wing authoritarian turn that sweeps away all such distinctions.



Why the UK's Border Regime is a Feminist Emergency

Women for Refugee Women is a charity that challenges the injustices experienced by women who cross borders to seek safety. We work at the grassroots to support and empower women to tell their stories, we raise awareness through media and public events of the issues that refugee women face, and we campaign to create a fairer asylum system. We know the refugee 'crisis' is a feminist issue, because every day we see the gender-specific challenges that many vulnerable asylum seeking women encounter – from fleeing for safety while pregnant or with young children, to the trauma of sexual and gender-based violence. Grassroots coordinator Marchu Girma will lead a discussion with refugee women about their experiences of the UK asylum system, and how you can support asylum seeking women who are organising to campaign for fairer treatment. Refugee women from our network will then perform some of their own poetry.

There Is No Word For It: The (Trans) Mangina Monologues. Verbatim Theatre as activism

Laura Bridgeman and guests present selected extracts from *There is No Word For It* with an opportunity to discuss the uses of verbatim theatre as a medium for activism.

Laura Bridgeman is a writer and a performer. Most recent writing projects have included *The Butch Monologues* (2013-2017) in collaboration with Vital Xposure and The Drakes. *The Butch Monologues* was ACE funded and toured Homotopia, Shout festivals and *Just Like A Woman* in New York's Abron Arts Centre, WOW theatre and Chelsea Theatre, London. For BBC Radio 4 *Dogfood Diary* co-written with Charles Lambert (2014) *Caterpillars* (2012). Bridgeman also has a Kindle out *How Was The Party* about their mother's experience of Alzheimer's. Bridgeman teaches creative writing in Kingston and Imperial Universities and has previously taught creative writing in 5 UK prisons.

There Is No Word For It

The (Trans) Mangina Monologues first toured in 2009, and directed by Lois Weaver of Split Britches this collection of trans masculine stories has played theatres, sex shops, nightclubs, schools and bookshops in London, New York and Ljubiana.

'This is the Vagina Monologues on steroids, literally.' Kate Bornstein.

'It is poignant, bawdy, lyrical and sometimes terrifying.' Roz Kaveney.

Written by: Laura Bridgeman and Serge Nicholson.

Facilitator: Julia Bell (Birkbeck, University of London)

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Collaborative Writing: A talk and workshop

Natasha Soobramanien and Luke Williams are collaborating on a novel-in-installments, *Diego Garcia*, about the island and military base of that name. They have recently completed chapter 3, 'Emergency'. They will give a short talk about their project as a form of resistance writing, inspired by the work of women writers who 'live in or under or report on some actual or psychic state of emergency' (in their latest chapter, poet, translator and emergency aid worker, Ariana Reines), before facilitating a workshop in which participants are invited to work together to produce a text, or texts.

Participants are invited to bring with them a text by a woman writer 'who lives in or under or reports on some actual or psychic state of emergency' to share with the group.

Chapters 1 and 2 of *Diego Garcia* were published in *The White Review* and *BOMB* magazine respectively and are now available to read [here](#).

Natasha Soobramanien's first novel was *Genie and Paul* (Myriad Editions, 2012). Luke Williams is a lecturer in creative writing at Birkbeck. You can read chapters 1 and 2 of *Diego Garcia* here: <http://diegogarciabook.tumblr.com/>

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Feminist emergency: The art field

As elsewhere under neoliberal governance, the art field is affected by the normalisation of precarity and austerity and the 'feminisation' of labour, even if art is still seen as a terrain for the privileged or, ultimately, of marginal relevance to 'real world' emergencies. Art workers are accustomed to suppressed or missing wages and reside at the bottom of the art pyramid; over 3/4 of art students, but 1/2 of art school lecturers, 1/3 of professors, and 1/3 of exhibiting artists; we legitimise antagonism in supporting business-oriented institutions from the museum as a collecting facility to art schools as hubs for entrepreneurial ideology; we participate in a degraded higher education often based on fees, debt, and rampant competition; we have achieved no consensus on whether artworks can be a site of oppositional politics as the structures and institutions in which artworks are encountered, and even produced, are often held responsible for affirming the status quo; our struggles are ridiculed as 'political correctness' or delusional utopianism; there is much uncertainty over forms of collective opposition; always short of time; our alternative formations and collectives are hard to sustain; we make do. Is it time to see these conditions as a feminist emergency?

What does it mean to live, work and struggle as feminists today? Is there really a feminist 'we' in the art field in 2017? 'Feminist emergency: The art field', involves a number of five-minute presentations, the purpose of which is to instigate debate.

'Feminist emergency: The art field' is initiated and intended as an informal platform for the exchange of thoughts and ideas. Instigators include:

- Angela Dimitrakaki (Edinburgh College of Art)
- Kerri Jefferis (Artist)
- Sophie Chapman (Artist)
- Kirsten Lloyd (Edinburgh College of Art)
- Helena Reckitt (Goldsmiths, University of London)
- Hilary Robinson (Middlesex University)
- Lara Perry (University of Brighton)
- Marina Vishmidt (Goldsmiths, University of London)



The Gendered Dynamics of Power

This workshop will take a closer look at the gendered dynamics of power, discussing how best to assess and intervene in its structures, symbolically and practically. On the one hand, symbolically, power and authority remain everywhere steadfastly glued to the white, straight and masculine, with women in particular the main targets of the rolling back and outsourcing of welfare provision, as well as of high levels of violence, exploitation and abuse. We are also in the midst of a radical crisis of care resulting from the many ways in which market values try to invade every nook and cranny of our lives, colonising our sense of self-worth, while forcing us to 'appreciate' our own personal 'value', as if we were, in the words of Wendy Brown, 'roving bits of human capital'. Women, too, have been drawn into this form of neoliberal rationality, with just a few of us now seated at the high table of global elites, responsible for furthering economic inequality both at home and, usually even more destructively, on a global scale. This workshop will provide a radical analysis of the nuance and complexities of today's gendered dynamics of

power, wondering what forms of feminist resistance can intervene to create a better understanding of its underpinning and to discuss possible forms of intervention towards more egalitarian, less precarious, more sustainable futures for everyone.

Speakers:

- Torkild Thanem (Stockholm Business School)
- Agnes Bolsø (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)
- Lynne Segal (Birkbeck, University of London)
- Catherine Rottenberg (Goldsmiths, University of London)



***Under the Skin of the City* – Film Screening**

Introduction by Laura Mulvey (Birkbeck, University of London).

Under the Skin of the City (Rakshan Bani-Etemad, Iran 2001, 1 hour 36 mins)

Rakshan Bani-Etemad is one of the key women film directors in Iran. In *Under the Skin of the City* she tells the story of a working class family in Tehran, particularly from the perspective of the mother, Tuba, a factory worker who struggles to keep her family together under pressures of class and of legal discrimination against women. The film begins as a social realist drama, but it subtly shifts its cinematic style as the family succumbs to external and internal tensions. The film is an intensely personal observation of its characters' dreams and aspirations, but also a rigorous analysis of their limited ability to inflect the social circumstances in which they are caught.



Gender, Brexit and Trump

In this breakout session activists will discuss:

- Equalities legislation after Brexit
- Gender and EU citizens in the UK: Rights, status and paperwork
- Islamophobia, the EU and Brexit

Speakers:

- Shaista Aziz (Journalist, Comedian and Documentary Filmmaker)
- Ruth Pearson (Women's Budget Group)
- Victoria Sharkey (MediVisas)



Feminism and Pornography

In the context of increasing pressures on and challenges for women, and of the growing involvement of feminists in the production and consumption of pornography, it is important that pornography is part of any discussion of feminist thought and activism. This breakout session provides space to discuss current developments in policy and law, particularly in the UK and the US, the rights and safety of porn workers, the framing of porn in relation to violence and public health, the regulation of media, and the relation of pornography to issues of representation, cultural expression and self-presentation.

Speakers:

- Feona Attwood (Middlesex University)
- Mandy Merck (Royal Holloway, University of London)
- Constance Penley (University of California – Santa Barbara)

Facilitator: Jacqueline Rose (Birkbeck, University of London)

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Anti-austerity skills-share:

Everyday activism around gender, disability and mental health

In this break-out session community activists involved in disability and mental health support and advocacy, will share their experiences and expertise around resisting and surviving austerity. The session will consider the impacts of austerity at the intersections between gender, sexuality, race, class, disability, health and well-being.

The discussion will focus on the following three questions:

- What are current key challenges of organising / surviving in the context of austerity?
- What strategies of resistance and survival have been most and least effective? What lessons have you learned?
- What skills / strategies / tactics can you share with others?

This session will be organised as a roundtable discussion followed by an open discussion amongst speakers and participants.

- Lamis Bayer (Mental Fight Club & The Dragon Café)
- Claire Glasman (WinVisible)
- Eleanor Lisney (Sisters of Frida)
- Victoria Lopez (Disabled People Against the Cuts)

Facilitator: Elinor Hynes

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Subversive Storytelling: A workshop

Julia Bell and Marina Warner will propose story-telling and -writing as a form of activism, and explore the potential of the imagination to dream of alternatives to the current state we are in. Using practical exercises, the workshop will take up stories as thought experiments. Drawing on examples from revisionings of myth, fairy tale, and fable the workshop will look at the history of storytelling as a political tool for change.



No space to breathe – Violence against women and girls

The crisis for Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) services and BME VAWG services in practice and survival, exploring the devastating impacts on women and our services from the multi-faceted assault we face from Brexit, austerity, gender neutrality, 'post-race', 'equality' – what it means for survivors and strategies for resistance and rebellion.

Speakers:

- Betty Sio (The Project, Aotearoa)
- Zlakha Ahmed (Apna Haq, Rotherham)
- Marai Larasi (Imkaan, London)

Facilitator: Camille Kumar (Women and Girls Network)