FEMINIST THEORY AND DISCURSIVE INTERSECTIONS
ACTIVATING THE CODE OF ‘POLITICAL CORRECTNESS’

Alison Convery BA (Hons), MA

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Newcastle

February 2011
Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Alison Convery
Acknowledgments

That this journey is finally at an end owes much to my principal supervisor, Jim Jose, whose faith in me and this project never wavered, even at times when there was every reason for it to do so. Not once did I leave his office without having had my energy and determination renewed. This, and the deftness with which he managed to guide without directing, were his special gifts as a supervisor. His tireless promotion of feminist studies within our school, as well as his feminist practice in his daily life and work, have created a truly nourishing environment for me and all my women colleagues in what is often elsewhere a masculinist discipline. Augmenting his excellent guidance were Rob Imre’s spirited support and editing advice in the crucial final stages. Thanks also go to Rebecca Stringer, whose interest and encouragement at a conference of the Australian Political Studies Association in the early months propelled me forward with increased confidence.

Every doctoral student knows that the isolation of a long, single-handed project would be unliveable were it not for being able to walk alongside others who are similarly engaged. Over the years, a number of women have shared my physical and mental PhD space, especially Li Siqwen, Hawzhin Azeez, Taha Chaiechi, Dian Reindrawati, and Lisa Barritt-Eyles. Our achievements and disappointments have been collectively borne, and their company has sustained me considerably. Different nationalities, ages, and cultural and disciplinary backgrounds were represented in this group. Across these disparities, we recognised a common experience of living, working and partnering as women. This, more than anything else, has confirmed my conviction that what women share is far greater and more compelling than their differences. Special gratitude is owed to the most generous of colleagues, Phil Felton, sadly lost to us early in my candidature. He is still remembered and sorely missed. I have no doubt that Phil would be filled with utterly selfless delight that I have reached this point.

The full extent of the ups and downs of this project were known only to those closest to me – my partner Peter, and our sons, Sam and Tom. Sam and Tom grew to adulthood during the rather long gestation of this thesis. There were times when their pride in my endeavour seemed the only good reason to continue. Their enthusiasm for the broad issues taken up in this thesis is cause to be hopeful for the future of all women and men. During
this process, as in all things, Peter has provided perspective, calm and infinite forbearance. He has been my compass when my own sense of direction failed. I owe him much that cannot be accounted for here, and for which my simple gratitude is surely inadequate reward. They all helped me to understand that I was other and more than this project, which gave me the safety to pursue it and to bring it, at last, to fruition.
# Table of contents

**Abstract**........................................................................................................................................... i  

**Introduction: Feminist Theory And Discursive Intersections** ....................................................... 2  

**PART ONE. Setting the Framework: Reading Discourse into Texts**  
1  **Discourse And Feminist Texts: Theory As Practice** ................................................................. 26  
   Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 26  
   1.1 ‘Discourse’, ‘text’ and ‘language’ ............................................................................................... 28  
   1.2 Texts and reading: discourse at work ....................................................................................... 34  
   1.3 Texts and the ‘special competence of theory’ ......................................................................... 42  
   Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 52  

2  **Knowing Feminists: From Epistemology To Method** ................................................................. 55  
   Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 55  
   2.1 Surveying ‘feminist theory’: considering possibilities ............................................................ 58  
   2.2 Refining the approach: what counts as evidence? ................................................................. 70  
   2.3 Defining the method .................................................................................................................. 79  
   Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 90  

**PART TWO. Mapping the Terrain**  
3  **Academic Feminism And The Discourse Of ‘Political Correctness’** ...................................... 95  
   Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 95  
   3.1 Against ‘political correctness’: the attack on the ‘victim’s revolution’ ................................ 99  
   3.2 Enter the ‘prodigal daughters’ .................................................................................................. 106  
   3.3 ‘Political correctness’ updated: the contemporary attack on victimhood ........................ 116  
   3.4 Absorbing the attack: academic feminism and victimhood .............................................. 123  
   Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 135  

4  **In Search of ‘Victim Feminism’** ................................................................................................. 137  
   Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 137  
   4.1 The reification of ‘victim feminism’ ......................................................................................... 139  
   4.2 Conflicting narratives: where is ‘victim feminism’? .............................................................. 145  
   4.3 Haunted still: the spectre of ‘victim feminism’ ..................................................................... 154  
   Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 175  

**PART THREE. Reading the Map**  
5  **Victims And ‘Victims’ In Feminist Theory: Telling The Difference** .................................... 179  
   Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 179  
   5.1 Definitional essentialism and the semantics of victimhood .................................................. 180  
   5.2 Victimhood and its outcomes: ‘denying the antecedent’ ......................................................... 193  
   5.3 Beware the ‘passive victim’ ....................................................................................................... 199  
   5.4 The power of representation: victimhood as fiction ............................................................ 211  
   5.5 Victimhood and subjectivity: representation as objectification ......................................... 225  
   5.6 From victim to ‘victim’: the invisible transition ................................................................. 234
6  No Victims, No Oppression? Agency And The Erasure Of Victimhood ........ 251
   Introduction .................................................................................................................. 251
   6.1  Agency and victimhood: dichotomies and double standards ....................... 253
   6.2  Agency and the virtues of complexity ................................................................. 263
   6.3  Poststructuralism and feminist progress: back to the future? ......................... 271
   6.4  Questioning the ontological primacy of agency .............................................. 289
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 301

Conclusion: Navigating Discursive Intersections ....................................................... 306

Appendices
   Appendix 1 .................................................................................................................. 331
   Appendix 2 .................................................................................................................. 335
   Appendix 3 .................................................................................................................. 336
   Appendix 4 .................................................................................................................. 342
   Appendix 5 .................................................................................................................. 351

References ..................................................................................................................... 354
Abstract

This thesis is impelled by the unsettling suspicion that academic feminism has adopted modes of theorising which undermine its political raison d’être. Specifically it argues that certain discursive conventions observed in popular attacks on feminism have, somewhat surprisingly, been imported unchanged into feminist theory. From the late 1980s, attempts were made to silence minority claims of discrimination and subordination via the discourse of ‘political correctness’. In particular, this discourse belittled such claims as the exaggerated and irrational expression of largely self-inflicted ‘victimhood’, an argument which depended for its force on denigrating the figure of the ‘victim’ as a morally, and not just practically, diminished status. I suggest that the same logic occurs in a more or less sublimated form in feminist theory – the self-identified victim is positioned as having crossed a threshold of reasonableness, the standard for which is set by non-victim others. With a few notable exceptions most feminist scholars have failed to address, let alone notice, this resonance.

However, this thesis goes beyond documenting a surface correspondence between these two ostensibly incompatible discursive domains. Its significant claim is that a discursive strategy designed specifically to undermine the basis for feminist claims has become integral to the meaning-making practices of academic feminism. The issue is not simply one of a disturbing coincidence with a discourse from which feminist theory nevertheless remains largely autonomous. On the contrary, the claim here is that readers of feminist theory cannot make sense of certain modes of argument without reference to anti-feminist systems of meaning erected elsewhere. In that sense, the discourse of ‘political correctness’ has infected the very core of feminist theorising.

An additional contribution of the thesis is that, in the process of establishing precisely how this discursive imbrication is accomplished, it utilises a theory of reading practice which is applicable to the study of discourse more broadly. This approach addresses questions about the mechanisms by which prominent discursive tropes come to act upon and be transmitted by otherwise disparate subjects, a point which has remained largely unresolved by discourse scholars. The argument is that the discourse of ‘political correctness’ facilitates the accurate recognition by readers of the denigrated ‘victim’ in
feminist theory, normalising it and making it comprehensible in the absence of other explanation within the individual texts themselves. Successfully accomplishing these acts of recognition is furthermore a criterion of membership of the feminist discourse community, demonstrating competence at deploying its knowledge standards and a willingness to collude in the exclusions those standards entail.

Corresponding to the way the devaluation of victimhood has been discursively normalised in feminist theory, it is argued that the concept of ‘agency’ has achieved an ontological primacy in feminist thinking which is far from innocent. Analyses of agency and resistance operate as moral correctives to an alleged historical preoccupation with victimisation, rather than as disinterested scholastic endeavours aimed at expanding our knowledge of women’s behaviour under conditions of oppression. The binary opposition of victimhood and agency therefore oversees a normative structuring of feminist approaches and modes of argument, a structure supported at its origins by the meanings encoded in a hostile discourse.

In an attempt to disrupt that normativity, the thesis concludes by sketching the possibilities for a less coercive feminist rhetorical practice which does not embed exclusionary assumptions about victimhood. Such a practice would not have as its primary intention the resumption of supposedly more neutral modes of referring to victimhood, although that is certainly proposed as a conduit to greater inclusivity. Rather, that ostensible neutrality is itself a politically invested discursive usage which is aimed specifically at initiating only those interpretive processes that must refuse the discourse of ‘political correctness’ as a meaning enabler. This thesis therefore provides a method of discursively re-politicising feminist theory in a way which is neither simply reactive nor resigned to its inevitable imbrication with other discourses.