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Identity Politics in Australian Context

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Identity mobilises feminist politics in Australia and shapes discursive and theatrical practices. Energised by the affirmative politics of hope, celebration and unity, Australian feminism is also motivated by injustice, prejudice and loss, particularly among Indigenous women and minorities. During the 1970s, when feminist theatre opened up creative spaces on the margins of Australian theatre, women identified with each other on the basis of an unproblematized gender identity, a commitment to socialist collectivism and theatre as a mode of self-representation. The emphasis on shared experience, collectivism and gender unity gave way in the 1980s to a more nuanced critical awareness of inequalities and divisions among women based on sexuality, class, race and ethnicity. My discussion spans broadly the period from the 1970s to the present and concludes with some commentary on recent twists and turns in identity politics.

On reflection, Australian identity politics can be viewed in two phases. The first arises from the second-wave assertion of a shared identity among women as a class oppressed by patriarchy. The second phase both reacts to the first and arises from the struggle of Indigenous women to identify and name different and oppositional sets of interests from those of non-Indigenous feminists.

The first or white phase of identity politics in Australia grew out of the second-wave women's movement, the local chapter of which responded to national conditions but was also deeply connected to the international women's movement, especially in the English-speaking cultures of Great Britain and America. White, middle-class, educated women marked their identities as women at large gatherings such as International Women's Day festivities in city parks in the early 1970s. However, discussions and speeches at these events hinted at the differences within that would gain momentum towards the end of the decade.

In the theatre, practitioners, including Kerry Dwyer and Evelyn Krape, contested women's exclusion from the New Wave of Australian drama that saw dozens of male-authored plays appear in the flourishing alternative-theatre scene. The group-devised *Betty Can Jump*, performed by an all-women cast at Melbourne's Pram Factory Theatre in 1972, was a pivotal event that launched a decade of feminist theatre activism. Shortly after, Dwyer and Krape agitated for the Australian Performing Group (the APG) to stage a new play, *The Joss Adams Show*, by unknown woman playwright and New Zealander Alma De Groen. The play was a critique of the medical profession and the punitive and repressive regimes of childbirth and motherhood; its cartoon-like pop aesthetic made it all the more shocking when, at the end of the play, the audience realizes that the shopping

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bag that the helpless Joss carries contains her dead baby. *Joss Adams* was the first of the second-wave feminist plays in Australia to make the critical observation that modern capitalist culture neglected and disempowered women, providing its female audience with a rallying point for anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal politics.[1]

Peta Tait notes that feminist theatre in Australia in the 1970s attracted women from socially oriented consciousness-raising groups as well as those from radical alternative theatres such as the APG who felt that women's issues were not addressed by the male-dominated collective.[2] Groups included the Melbourne Women's Theatre Group (MWTG), the Sydney Woman Action Theatre, Home Cooking Theatre Company, Vitalstatistix and the Wimmen's Circus, to name a few.[3] They made work that was a cultural expression of identity politics. Workshops and performances 'explored' issues of interest to women, including sexuality, the body and desire, as well as the more liberal feminist concerns of equal opportunity and legal reform. Tait's analysis of *Wonder Woman's Revenge*, staged in 1976, identifies the emergence of a more radical sexual politics involving guerrilla terrorism, lesbian identity and body image.[4] By the 1980s, diverse forms of feminist activism and identity politics provided the necessary break with the dominance of white, middle-class, heteronormative feminist politics.

The proliferation of feminist identities in the 1990s is expressed by artists such as Jenny Kemp, who explores the female psyche in terms of its multiple, contradictory and creative aspects.[5] Performed by up to four female actors who represent the contradictions, ellipses and fragmentary phrases of the psyche, Kemp's theatre aligns itself with the critique of identity politics in favour of a post-structuralist and postmodern investigation of performativity. In the 2000s, Moira Finucane and Jackie Smith's *The Burlesque Hour*, whose performance of drag and queer identities is influenced by Judith Butler, adopts 'a fluid and performative approach to gender'.[6] At this point, within the dominant white population, identity politics wanes in favour of pluralism and gender fluidity.

The second important shift in identity politics in Australian feminism concerns Australian Indigenous women, who are twice marginalized as women and as colonised subjects. The assertion of an Indigenous feminist identity acknowledges that 'the societal and economic positioning of Aboriginal women has remained stagnant for many years and continues to be an everyday struggle even within feminism'.[7] Indigenous women argue, justifiably, that 'nonindigenous women have benefited and profited from the past and continued marginalization and oppression of Aboriginal women'.[8] Indigenous women's theatre plays a pivotal role in the re-empowerment of Aboriginal women and in the assertion of a female Aboriginal identity. The one-woman show *The Seven Stages of Grieving*,[9] first performed by Deborah Mailman in 1995, mourns the loss of land, identity and human rights and questions the possibility of reconciliation and healing. Indigenous women's theatre, including Jane Harrison's *Stolen*,[10] shows how white colonial women participated in the removal of mixed-race children from their Aboriginal mothers and are implicated in the loss of kinship, the abuse in missions and the incidence of sexual slavery in white homesteads. White Australian women, including feminists, are negatively identified with the regimes of power that marginalize Indigenous women. This tension speaks powerfully to the question of what is at stake for race and gender identities in a postcolonial but also multicultural, cosmopolitan society such as

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Australia. Tracey Moffat's photographic essays, on the other hand, including the much-celebrated *Something More* (1989), parody white, Indigenous and Asian stereotypes, showing race, gender and sexuality to be performative and ambivalent.

As I reflect on the shifts in identity politics in the Australian context, recent public debate about the Australian prime minister, Julia Gillard, turns my attention from theatre to politics. While a female journalist celebrates the idea that 'Our Prime Minister chooses a necklace in the morning and not a tie',[11] the Right refers to Gillard as the Greens' Bitch, referring to her government's coalition with the Australian Greens, and calls on voters to Ditch the Witch. On talkback radio, complaints that 'her' tampons are paid for by taxpayers and that she is unmarried and childless are signs of a resurgent anti-feminism. What is happening in Australia today is that the opposition to Gillard's policies is all too readily expressed in gendered language that questions a woman's capacity to govern and delegitimizes her right to do so. In this recent turn, identity politics reappears in an appropriated form to mobilize hate speech that goes beyond political opposition. Feminists will need to assess how identity politics in its affirmative mode can counter the resurgence of gender-based defamation. Whether or not that happens will determine if feminist ground lost can be regained.

NOTES

1 Denise Varney, *Radical Visions 1968–2008: The Impact of the Sixties on Australian Drama* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2011), pp. 25–6.
2 Peta Tait, *Original Women's Theatre* (Melbourne: Artmoves, 1993), p. 11.
3 Ibid., p. 9.
4 Ibid., pp. 31–2.
5 See Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney, *The Dolls Revolution: Australian Theatre and Cultural Imagination* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2005).
6 Georgie Boucher and Sarah French, 'Postfeminist Pleasure and Politics: Moira Finucane and *The Burlesque Hour*', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 58 (April 2011), pp. 193–211, here p. 194.
7 Bronwyn Fredericks, 'Reempowering Ourselves: Australian Aboriginal Women', *Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, 1 March 2010, pp. 546–50, here p. 547.
8 Ibid., p. 547.
9 Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, *The Seven Stages of Grieving* (Brisbane: Playlab Press, 1996).
10 Jane Harrison, *Stolen* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2000).
11 Julie Szego, 'Revolution Is Worth a Shout', *The Age*, 25 June 2010, p. 5.

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