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Michelle M. Lazar

FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Articulating a feminist discourse praxis¹

This article outlines a 'feminist critical discourse analysis' at the nexus of critical discourse analysis and feminist studies, with the aim of advancing rich and nuanced analyses of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining hierarchically gendered social orders. This is especially pertinent in the present time; it is recognized that operations of gender ideology and institutionalized power asymmetries between (and among) groups of women and men are complexly intertwined with other social identities and are variable across cultures. Gender ideology and power asymmetries in late modern societies also have become increasingly more subtle and, at the same time, as a result of backlash against feminism, have re-emerged with a new blatancy. The article offers a rationale for highlighting a feminist perspective in CDA, and proposes five key principles for a feminist discourse praxis. In concluding, a brief analysis and discussion of some data on postfeminism is provided, illustrating some of the current concerns in feminist critical discourse analysis.

Keywords feminist critical discourse analysis; gender structure; power relations; critical reflexivity; analytical activism; radical social change

Motivated by goals of social emancipation and transformation, the critique of grossly unequal social orders characterizes much feminist scholarship and, in regard to discursive dimensions of social (in)justice, research in critical discourse analysis (CDA). This article brings CDA and feminist studies together in proposing a 'feminist critical discourse analysis' (or 'feminist critical discourse studies'), which aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements.

This is all the more pertinent in present times, when issues of gender, power, and ideology have become increasingly more complex and subtle. First, feminist theories since the late 1980s have shown that speaking of 'women' and 'men' in universal, totalizing terms has become deeply problematic. Gender as a social category intersects with other categories of social identity, including sexuality, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, social class and position, and geographical location. Patriarchy as an ideological system also interacts in complex ways with, for instance, corporatist

and consumerist ideologies. Second, the workings of gender ideology and asymmetrical power relations in discourse are presently assuming quite subtle forms in (late) modern societies, albeit in different degrees and ways in different communities. At the same time, though, in some quarters, new forms of blatant sexism as well as claims of reverse sexism have emerged in the wake of a (post)feminist backlash.

The aim of feminist critical discourse studies, therefore, is to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities. Such an interest is not merely an academic de-construction of texts and talk for its own sake, but comes from an acknowledgement that the issues dealt with (in view of effecting social change) have material and phenomenological consequences for groups of women and men in specific communities. A feminist CDA perspective is obviously interdisciplinary in nature. On the one hand, it contributes to (critical) language and discourse studies a perspective informed by feminist studies, and on the other hand, it suggests the usefulness of language and discourse studies for the investigation of feminist issues in gender and women's studies.

The article is organized to provide, first, the rationale for a feminist CDA, and then five principles for a feminist discourse praxis. I conclude with a brief analysis of a small sample of data as an illustration of the principles discussed.

Towards feminist critical discourse analysis: what's in a name?

*Why a **feminist** CDA?*

For over a decade, in several branches of language and discourse studies, there has been a concerted move towards explicitly including the term 'feminist' in various sub-fields by feminist scholars working in these areas, such as 'feminist stylistics' (Mills, 1995), 'feminist pragmatics' (Christie, 2000), and 'feminist conversation analysis' (e.g., Kitzinger, 2000). In all these areas, the mainstream research has been characterized by a supposedly neutral and objective inquiry, which feminist scholars operating within have challenged. Writing more broadly about feminism and linguistic theory in 1992, Cameron explained that one of her main objectives was to 'question the whole scholarly objective bias of linguistics and to show how assumptions and practices of linguistics are implicated in patriarchal ideology and oppression' (1992, p. 16). The need to claim and establish a feminist perspective in language and discourse studies is of course part of what feminists in academia have for many years criticized and sought to change across male-stream disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences (Gordon, 1986; Harding, 1986; Spender, 1981).

Still, one might quite reasonably ask, 'But why a *feminist* CDA?' – for CDA, as a research program, is known for its overtly political stance and is concerned with analysis of various forms of social inequality and injustice. Moreover, the debt CDA owes to feminist approaches in women's studies, which provided an impetus

to the fledgling field in the 1980s, has also sometimes been openly acknowledged (van Dijk, 1991). Not surprisingly, therefore, feminist linguists have been working quite happily under the rubric of CDA without needing to flag a feminist perspective explicitly.

Why then a need for an explicit feminist label now? First, the most straightforward reason is that many studies in CDA with a gender focus adopt a critical feminist view of gender relations – they are motivated by the need to change substantively the existing conditions of these relations. This said, it is worth emphasising that not all studies that deal with gender in discourse are necessarily feminist in this critical sense.

Second, reservations expressed by some feminist scholars about CDA invite pause for thought. Cameron (1998, pp. 969–970) wrote: '[CDA] is one of those broadly progressive projects whose founders and dominant figures are nevertheless all straight white men, and Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995) specifically remark on these men's failure to give credit to feminists by citing their work.' For sure, most feminist research in CDA is not undertaken by 'straight white men', but by a diversity of feminist women in a wide range of geographical locations, not all of whom are white and heterosexual. With regard to Wilkinson and Kitzinger's observation, one might note that more recent theorizing in some quarters of CDA does acknowledge and include, among other critical social scientific research, feminist works (e.g., Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). In terms of a feminist CDA, however, we might envisage more than citations of feminist scholars, important as that is. It is necessary within CDA to establish a distinctly 'feminist politics of articulation' (to borrow a phrase from Wetherell, 1995, p. 141), by which I mean the need to be guided by feminist principles and insights in theorising and analysing the seemingly innocuous yet oppressive nature of gender as an omni-relevant category in many social practices. Eckert, for instance, has noted how gender operates in a more pervasive and complex way than other systems of oppression:

Whereas the power relations between men and women are similar to those between dominated and subordinated classes and ethnic groups, the day to day context in which these power relations are played out is quite different. It is not a cultural norm for each working class individual to be paired up for life with a member of the middle class or for every black person to be so paired up for life with a white person. However, our traditional gender ideology dictates just this kind of relationship between men and women. (1989, pp. 253–254)

Third, a consequence of the absence of self-naming has meant that growing numbers of feminist critical discourse analysts dispersed across the globe have not sufficiently organized them/ourselves to come together in a common forum.² The issues of collectivity and of gaining group visibility are now important for another reason. Although CDA in its early years had a marginal status within the more established mainstream fields in linguistics, its popularity over the years has resulted in a shift towards the centre and, as some have argued, has itself become an orthodoxy (see Billig, 2000). Writing in the early 1990s, van Dijk, one of the leading figures in CDA, remarked: 'For CDA to become a prominent approach in the humanities

and social sciences, we should expect dozens of books, hundreds of articles and conference papers, and special symposia or conference sections yearly' (1991, p. 1). More than a decade later, all these have been achieved and more: this journal is testament to that, along with the growing number of CDA books, articles, and international conferences, as well as CDA's inclusion as a taught subject on many linguistics programs worldwide. Feminist visibility and voice in 'mainstream' CDA scholarship then, interestingly, also has a timely political function.

Why a feminist CDA?

The 'discursive turn' in much social scientific and humanities research, as we know, has given prominence to issues of language and discourse. Poststructuralist theorization offers a critically useful view of discourse as a site of struggle, where forces of social (re)production and contestation are played out. Within feminist scholarship, the discursive turn is reflected in books outside linguistics (e.g., Weedon, 1997; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995) as well as within linguistics under the rubric of 'gender and language' research (e.g., Baxter, 2003; Hall & Bucholtz, 1995; Wodak, 1997). Feminist CDA, with its focus on social justice and transformation of gender, is a timely contribution to the growing body of feminist discourse literature, particularly in the field of gender and language where feminist CDA has occupied a surprisingly marginal position.

Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995, p. 5) have noted that there is really 'no necessary coincidence between the interests of feminists and discourse analysts', even though the possibility for fruitful engagement exists. In terms of feminism and CDA in particular, however, there is actually much overlap in terms of social emancipatory goals. Indeed, unlike feminist approaches that apply descriptive discourse analytic methods, feminist CDA has the advantage of operating, at the outset, within a politically invested, explanatory program of discourse analysis. CDA offers a considered theorization of the relationship between social practices and discourse structures (see, e.g., Wodak & Meyer 2001, for various types of theorization), and a wide range of tools and strategies for detailed analyses of contextualized uses of language in texts and talk. Further, under the umbrella of CDA research, explicit analyses of various forms of systemic inequality have been developed (refer, e.g., to articles in *Discourse and Society*). Feminist discourse scholars can learn much about the interconnections between and the particularities of discursive strategies employed in various forms of social inequality and oppression that can feed back into critical feminist analysis and strategies for social change. The marriage of feminism with CDA, in sum, can produce a rich and powerful political critique for action.

Feminist CDA as a political perspective on gender, concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power, and ideology in discourse, is applicable to the study of texts *and* talk equally, which offers a corrective to approaches that favour one linguistic mode over another (see Lazar, 2005a). Frameworks for analysis of discourse in CDA also, importantly, acknowledge a multimodal dimension (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Scollon, 2001) that is generally missing in other approaches in linguistics. Increasingly in CDA research, language is critically analysed together with other semiotic modalities like visual images, layouts, gestures, and sounds, which makes for an enriching and insightful analysis. Clearly, a

multimodal view of discourse has great value for a holistic feminist critique of discursive constructions of gender (Lazar, 1999, 2000).

Articulating a feminist discourse praxis

Key interrelated principles of feminist critical discourse studies, as theory and practice, are outlined below.

Feminist analytical activism

CDA is part of an emancipatory critical social science which, as mentioned above, is openly committed to the achievement of a just social order through a critique of discourse. The central concern of feminist critical discourse analysts is with critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order – relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group. In CDA, where there is an understanding of social practices as reflected in as well as constituted by discourse (Fairclough, 1992), a feminist perspective reminds that many social practices, far from being neutral, are in fact gendered in this way. The gendered nature of social practices can be described on two levels (Connell, 1987; Flax, 1990). First, gender functions as an interpretive category that enables participants in a community to make sense of and structure their particular social practices. Second, gender is a social relation that enters into and partially constitutes all other social relations and activities. Based on the specific, asymmetric meanings of male and female, and the consequences assigned to one or the other within concrete social practices, such an allocation becomes a constraint on further practices.

A feminist political critique of gendered social practices and relations is aimed ultimately at effecting social transformation. The social status quo is contested in favour of a feminist humanist vision of a just society, in which gender does not pre-determine or mediate our relationships with others, or our sense of who we are or might become (Grant, 1993; Hill-Collins, 1990). Analysis of discourse which shows up the workings of power that sustain oppressive social structures/relations contributes to on-going struggles of contestation and change through what may be termed 'analytical activism'.

The radical emancipatory agenda makes for praxis-oriented research, centrally based upon a dialectical relationship between theory and practice (Lather, 1986). This entails mobilizing theory in order to create critical awareness and develop feminist strategies for resistance and change. The imbrication of power and ideology in discourse is sometimes not apparent to the participants involved in particular social practices, as it is from the point of view of critical theorization of their interrelations (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Kress, 1990). In other words, to speak from the position of a 'woman' is not the same as speaking from the political perspective of a feminist. To know as a 'woman' means to know from the perspective of the structure of gender, whereas a feminist perspective means that one has a critical distance on gender and on oneself (Grant, 1993). The critical praxis orientation not only informs the approach to social justice, it also shapes the theory itself. Kress

(1990, p. 88) noted of CDA that such an orientation entails making 'linguistics itself more accountable, more responsible, and more responsive to questions of social equity'. Moreover, critical praxis research also dissolves the dichotomization between theory and practice among feminists, whereby academic feminists get associated with 'theory' and grassroots feminist activists with 'practice'. Instead, I suggest that the work undertaken by critical academic feminists can be seen as *academic activism* – raising critical awareness through research and teaching – of which feminist CDA constitutes a form of analytical activism, through its theorization and analysis of gendered discourse practices.

Critical praxis-oriented research, therefore, cannot and does not pretend to adopt a neutral stance; in fact, as Lather (1986, p. 259) notes, it is scholarship that makes its biases part of its argument. To critics who discount overtly political research as lacking in 'objectivity' and 'scientificity' (see, e.g., the linguist Widdowson's 1995 criticism of CDA), the feminist position has raised as problematic the notion of scientific neutrality itself, as failing to recognize that all knowledge is socially and historically constructed and valuationally based (Fox-Keller, 1996; Harding, 1986; see also Chouliaraki & Fairclough's 1999 response to Widdowson). In fact, one could argue that if anything feminist theorization and analysis, like CDA, which include a variety of social considerations (such as group identities and identifications, power relations and ideologies) that typically get precluded from other types of research, make critical/feminist research more objective than most others.

Gender as ideological structure

From a critical view, ideologies are representations of practices formed from particular perspectives in the interest of maintaining unequal power relations and dominance. Although such a view of ideology was developed in Marxist accounts specifically in terms of class relations, the concept now has wider currency and encompasses other relations of domination, including gender (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). From a feminist perspective, the prevailing conception of gender is understood as an ideological structure that divides people into two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively. Based upon sexual difference, the gender structure imposes a social dichotomy of labour and human traits on women and men, the substance of which varies according to time and place. Feminists have criticized the easy mapping of physiological sex onto social gender, as well as the naturalness of 'sex' itself, showing that this too is socially constructed (Butler, 1993). Grant (1993, p. 185) puts it this way: 'It is true that the structure of gender acts through and is inscribed on sexed bodies, but the whole idea of two sexes only has meaning because those meanings are required by the gender structure in the first place.' Although as individuals people may deviate from the archetypes of masculinity and femininity pertinent to a community, this nonetheless occurs against the ideological structure of gender that privileges men as a social group, giving them what Connell (1995) terms a 'patriarchal dividend', in terms of access to symbolic, social, political, and economic capital. An example of the symbolic capital accrued to men in English-speaking cultures is the way in which male pronouns and nouns ('he'/'man') have been given

generic status in the English language, which by default always assures men of visibility while simultaneously rendering women invisible (Spender, 1985).

Gender ideology is hegemonic in that it often does not appear as domination at all, appearing instead as largely consensual and acceptable to most in a community. The winning of consent and the perpetuation of the otherwise tenuous relation of dominance (Gramsci, 1971) are largely accomplished through discursive means, especially in the ways ideological assumptions are constantly re-enacted and circulated through discourse as commonsensical and natural. The taken-for-grantedness and normalcy of such knowledge is what mystifies or obscures the power differential and inequality at work. One persuasive and enduring commonsensical assumption has been the 'naturalness' of the 'two sex only' idea, where of necessity the two, also in social terms, must be inherently contrastive yet complementary.

To claim that patriarchal gender ideology is structural is to say that it is enacted and renewed in a society's institutions and social practices, which mediate between the individual and the social order. This means, therefore, that asymmetrical gender relations cannot merely be explained by individuals' intentions, even though often it is individuals who act as agents of oppression (Weedon, 1997). Connell (1987, 1995) argues that institutions are substantively structured in terms of gender ideology so that even though gender may not be the most important aspect in a particular instance, it is in the majority of cases. This accounts for the pervasiveness of tacit androcentrism in many institutional cultures and discourse, in which not only men but also women are complicit through their habitual, differential participation in their particular communities of practice. Various ways in which the institutionalization of gender inequality is discursively enacted have been critically examined in a wide range of institutions such as the media (Caldas-Coulthard, 1995; Lazar, 1993, 2004; Talbot, 1998), education (Remlinger, 2005; Swann, 1988), government (Lazar, 1993, 2000), and various professional and organizational settings (Ehrlich, 2001; Walsh, 2001; West, 1990; Wodak, 2005).

Although the prevailing gender ideology is hegemonic and routinely exercised in a myriad of social practices, it is also contestable. The dialectical tension between structural permanence and the practical activity of people engaged in social practices (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) means that there are ruptures in the otherwise seamless and natural quality of gender ideology. While a focus on transgression and creativity is important, this has to be carefully considered in relation to the constraints and possibilities afforded by particular social structures and practices. Otherwise, a celebration of agency on its own can become romanticized; as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 48) note, the extent to which, and for whom, interaction can be creative largely depends on the particular social structures. Also worth considering, in my view, is whether going against gendered expectations in some settings could (inadvertently) result in reinforcement, instead of the eradication, of the existing gender structure. For instance, studies have shown that in negotiating an appropriate style of 'doing' power in the workplace, women managers sometimes steer clear of 'feminine' speech styles and opt for more authoritative speech styles associated with men (Holmes, 2005). In a study of media representations of parenthood, I found evidence of a reverse practice where men as fathers were sometimes depicted like mothers – these were sensitive 'new age' fathers who bore signifiers conventionally associated with motherhood (Lazar, 2000, 2005b). The masculinization of talk by women in

power, and the feminization of forms of masculinity in the home, on one level may appear to redefine conventional gender norms for women and men in particular communities. However, on another level, these gender crossings index (and perpetuate) the underlying dualism of the gender structure – the behaviour of the masculine woman and the feminine man gets read against the expected behavioural norm of the ‘other’. These studies also suggest that deviations from gender-appropriate norms are policed and contained in the presence of a prevailing discourse of heteronormativity.

Complexity of gender and power relations

Contemporary feminist and poststructuralist theories have contributed to complex and nuanced understandings of power relations and gender at work within particular social orders. Two important insights for a feminist CDA have been the recognition of: difference and diversity among ‘women’ (and ‘men’), which has called for undertaking historically and culturally contingent analyses of gender and sexism; and the pervasiveness of subtle, discursive workings of modern power in many societies today. (Both of these are discussed below.) While there is a diversity of forms which gender and sexism assume in different cultures and across time, the structure of gender (and the power asymmetry that it entails) has been remarkably persistent over time and place. An important goal, then, for feminist CDA is to undertake contingent analyses of the oppression of women, as Rubin has put it, in its ‘endless variety and monotonous similarity’ (quoted in Fraser & Nicholson 1990, p. 28).

Power relations are a struggle over interests, which are exercised, reflected, maintained, and resisted through a variety of modalities, extents, and degrees of explicitness. Overt forms of gender asymmetry or sexism, traditionally, have included exclusionary gate-keeping social practices, physical violence against women, and sexual harassment and denigration of women. Such overt manifestations of power (or the threat of it) remain a reality for women in many societies, even where there is legislation against blatant gender discrimination. At the same time, pervasive and insidious in (late) modern societies is the operation of a subtle and seemingly innocuous form of power that is substantively discursive in nature. This form of power is embedded and dispersed throughout networks of relations, is self-regulating, and produces subjects in both senses of the word (Foucault, 1977). From a feminist perspective, it is necessary to note, though, that even though power may be ‘everywhere’ (as theorized by Foucault), gendered subjects are affected by it in different ways. From a critical discourse analytic perspective, too, it is useful to complement the concept of modern power with the view of power relations as dominance, particularly in Gramsci’s terms of hegemony (see Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Modern power (and hegemony) is effective because it is mostly cognitive, based on an internalization of gendered norms and acted out routinely in the texts and talk of everyday life. This makes it an invisible power, ‘misrecognized’ as such, and ‘recognized’ instead as quite legitimate and natural (Bourdieu, 1991).

Relations of power and dominance (cf. Foucault, Bourdieu, and Gramsci), however, can be discursively resisted and counter-resisted in a dynamic struggle over securing and challenging the interests at stake. For example, objections by

feminist critics to sexist representations in the media have sometimes led to the recycling of these same images dressed up in seemingly inoffensive parodic ways. Williamson's (2003) idea of 'retrosexism' is a case in point; in the British context, blatantly sexist content framed in a period style is presented to a contemporary audience in a light-hearted, nostalgic way.

The task then of feminist CDA is to examine how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter-)resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk. Also of concern are issues of access to forms of discourse, such as particular communicative events and culturally valued genres (see van Dijk, 1993, 1996) that can be empowering for women's participation in public domains.

The mechanisms of power not only often work in subtle and complex ways, but the relations of asymmetry are also produced and experienced in different ways for and by different groups of women. A major advance in current feminist theory has been the acknowledgement that the category 'woman' in second-wave theorization lacked generic status – it did not stand universally for all women – in the same way that second-wave feminists found that the category 'man' did not encompass all of humankind. Even though women are subordinated to men structurally in the patriarchal gender order, the intersection of gender with other systems of power based on race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age, culture, and geography means that gender oppression is neither materially experienced nor discursively enacted in the same way for women everywhere.³ For example, Butler (1990), among others, has argued that systems of heterosexism and gender combine to produce normative gender identities that are implicitly heterosexist, which affords relatively more privilege to heterosexual women than to lesbians. Lesbians, in fact, may experience greater discrimination in that not only are they marginalized by the hetero-gendered order, they are made further invisible as women even within the discourse of the gay community.

Acknowledging differences among women and the forms of sexism to which they are differentially subject does not eschew the broader feminist political project of emancipation and social justice for women. Rather, there is a need for feminist political action to be inflected by the specificity of cultural, historical, and institutional frameworks, and contextualized in terms of women's complexly constructed social identities. Feminist CDA, then, would suggest a perspective that is implicitly comparative rather than universalizing, and attentive to the discursive aspects of the forms of oppression and interests which divide as well as unite groups of women.

Discourse in the (de)construction of gender

Poststructuralist conceptions of discourse as socially constitutive signifying practices have been fruitfully combined with linguistic approaches in many CDA and recent gender and language studies. Feminist CDA takes a view of discourse as being one (among several) element of social practices; of particular interest to discourse analysts are those aspects of social practices that are discursive in character (e.g., talking and writing are discursive ways of acting), and which are discursively represented in particular ideological ways (Chouliariaki & Fairclough, 1999). The relationship between discourse and the social is a dialectical one, in which discourse

constitutes (and is constituted by) social situations, institutions, and structures (Fairclough, 1992). The notion of constitution applies in the sense that every act of meaning-making through (spoken and written) language and other forms of semiosis contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order, and also in the sense of resisting and transforming that order.

The discursive constitution of the social can be analysed broadly in terms of representations, relationships, and identities (Fairclough, 1989, 1992), following the social functions of language use as theorized by functional linguist M. A. K. Halliday (1978). The interest of feminist CDA lies in how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people's social and personal identities in texts and talk. Underlying a critical feminist analysis of discourse in these areas is the principle of 'gender relationality', which may be either explicitly or implicitly at work (Lazar, 2000).

Gender relationality entails a focus on two kinds of relationships. The first focus is on discursive *co-constructions* of ways of doing and being a woman and a man in particular communities of practice. The concern is not with women in isolation, but *vis-à-vis* men within particular gender orders. Gender relationality in this sense also renders analysable, from a feminist perspective, how men talk (see Johnson & Meinhof, 1997) and are textually represented. Second, gender relationality also entails an analytic focus on the dynamics between forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Lazar 2005b) specifically, in terms of how these participate within hierarchies of oppression that affect women. Similarly, there needs to be a critical awareness of relations among (groups of) women. For example, how women may rally together in solidarity to oppose some form of discrimination, or how women operating within androcentric cultures (e.g., at home or at salaried workplaces) help perpetuate sexist attitudes and practices against other women. Where the aim of such analysis is praxis-oriented and concerned with the social transformation of structures of gender oppression, awareness and attitudinal change by both men and women are necessary.

Social constructionist approaches emphasize the on-going, iterative, active accomplishment of gender (along with other social identities) in and through discourse (West, Lazar, & Kramarae, 1997). Accomplishment suggests that people, through their linguistic (and non-linguistic) behaviour, produce rather than reflect *a priori* identities as 'women' and 'men' in particular historical and cultural locations, although these produced identities are often viewed as natural, immanent, and transhistorical. Within feminist CDA, both the ethnomethodologically-based concept of 'doing gender' and the postmodernist idea of 'gender performativity' have a place, although neither is discussed within wider CDA research. The ethnomethodological uptake is quite clearly compatible with feminist CDA research in its insistence on situating gender accomplishments within institutional frameworks, and in asserting that doing gender in interactions means creating hierarchical differences between groups of people (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Postmodernist understandings of 'gender as performance', however, have been notably problematic for some feminists (e.g., Grant, 1993; Hekman, 1999; Kotthoff & Wodak, 1997), who rightly point out that there is a tendency (e.g., by Butler) to locate everything in discourse and overlook experiential and material aspects of identity and power

relations. That is, instead of viewing discourse as one element of social practices, the inclination has been to view discourse as wholly constitutive of the social. Also problematic from a critical feminist perspective is the celebration of individual freedoms to perform transgressive acts like cross-dressing or cross-talking (see Hall, 1995), which are not tantamount to a radical subversion of the gender structures; indeed, as I mentioned, such acts may unwittingly help reinforce those very structures. However, it needs to be noted, too, that Butler (1990) does acknowledge the coerciveness of 'rigid regulatory frames' that police gender performances in a way which makes the accomplishment of identities neither freely chosen nor entirely determined. Therefore, a political uptake on performativity, based on empirical studies, is of value to feminist CDA. Although some studies on gender and language have applied gender performativity to research on individuals in talk, it is worth considering also how gender identities can be performed representationally in texts, and by institutional bodies (see Lazar, 2005b).

Investigations of the interrelations between gender, power, ideology, and discourse are necessarily complex and multi-faceted, which explains why feminist studies and CDA alike (and feminist CDA at their confluence) are open to interdisciplinary research. The interdisciplinarity – indeed, it might be suggested a 'postdisciplinarity' – in feminist CDA may be thought about in three ways: first, in terms of the kinds of social and political questions it seeks to address, and the theoretical and empirical insights from a broad range of disciplines which it draws upon and with which it enters into dialogue; second, in terms of methodology, as some feminist CDA studies collect and contextualize their linguistic data based on ethnographic methods, which include interviews and participant observation, while others undertake close textual analysis of written and spoken discourse with a view to interpreting and explaining societal structures; and third, in terms of building collaborative feminist research projects and opportunities for interdisciplinary publications. A special issue on 'new femininities' published in the fall of 2006 in *Feminist Media Studies*, for instance, is one example of an interdisciplinary feminist discourse publication.

The scope of and approach to analysis of discourse within feminist CDA is catholic. Based on close empirical analysis, the data in feminist CDA include contextualized instances of spoken and written language along with other forms of semiosis such as visual images, layout, gestures, and actions in texts and talk. While the analysis includes overtly expressed meanings in communication, it is also attentive to less obvious, nuanced, implicit meanings to get at the subtle and complex renderings of ideological assumptions and power relations in contemporary modern societies. The approaches and tools for this principled analysis of talk and text are many and varied, and further indicative of the postdisciplinary direction of (feminist) critical discourse studies. The discourse analytic frameworks and categories used come from fields including pragmatics (Austin, 1962; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Thomas, 1995), semantics (Saeed, 1997), social semiotics and systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978, 1994; Hodge & Kress, 1988), narrative structures (Labov, 1972), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1981), and conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974).

The levels and foci of analysis in feminist CDA are also wide-ranging, including choices in lexis, clauses/sentences/utterances, conversational turns, structures of argument and genre, and interactions among discourses. The latter, also known as

'interdiscursive analysis' (Fairclough, 1992), is primarily influenced by Bakhtin's (1981) ideas of heteroglossia and the dialogicality of texts, and is concerned with the identification of and, more importantly, the interaction among different discourses within particular texts and talk. For instance, researching a government advertising campaign in Singapore, I analysed the presence of and negotiations between two seemingly competing discourses of gender relations, based on traditionalism and modernism, respectively (Lazar, 1993, 2000). The double-voicedness in the texts, I explained, indexes social and cultural changes within contemporary Singapore and recognizes the complexity of audience positions with regard to views of gender relations; it also contributes to the form(ul)ation of complex, hybrid gender identities.

Critical reflexivity as praxis

According to Giddens (1991), reflexivity is a generally pronounced characteristic of late modern societies, by which he means there is an increased tendency for people in this period to utilize knowledge about social processes and practices in a way that shapes their own subsequent practices. A critical focus on reflexivity, as a phenomenon of contemporary social life, must be an important facet in the practice of feminist CDA. I will highlight here two areas of interest. First, how reflexivity is manifested in institutional practices, with implications for possibilities for change in the social and personal attitudes and practices of individuals. Second, there needs to be on-going critical self-reflexivity among feminists keen on achieving radical transformation of gendered social structures. Each of these will be elaborated below, with implications for a critical feminist discourse praxis.

Reflexivity of institutions is of interest to feminist CDA, both in terms of progressive institutional practices engendered and in terms of strategic uses of feminism to further non-feminist goals. Awareness of feminist concerns about women's inclusivity and opportunity for just participation in the public sphere is reflected in the implementation of women-friendly programs in at least some organizations in some contexts. For example, it is now commonplace in many universities in the global north/west and in some universities in the south/east to include gender-related modules – such as 'gender and language' in linguistic programs – in their curricula. The relative acceptability and respectability of such studies in universities today is in no small part due to the efforts of feminists. When taught from a feminist perspective, such studies afford a space for discussion and reflection on, for instance, gender and language issues, and have the potential for raising critical language awareness among students.

Unlike the above, there are also institutional reflexive practices that recuperate feminist values of egalitarianism and empowerment for non-feminist ends. The advertising industry, notably, is notorious in this regard (Gill, 2003; Goldman, 1992; Lazar, 2004, 2006; Talbot, 1998). The problem is not so much a case of appropriating feminism merely for commercial gain, but that such appropriation entails a subversion of feminism as a political force, rendering it instead only a sign value. As noted by Goldman (1992, p. 131), 'The process of turning feminism into sign values *fetishizes* feminism into an iconography of things. When advertisers appropriate feminism, they cook it to distill out a residue – an object: a look, a style.' Recuperative reflexivity, however, is not limited to consumerism. It is also used for persuasive effect by

governments and other institutions, which may be obliged to acknowledge the existence of progressive (feminist/anti-racist/anti-homophobic) discourses for pragmatic reasons or from a desire to project an enlightened self-image, yet may only superficially attend to them.

Aside from focusing on institutional forms of reflexivity, feminists also need to be critically reflexive of our own theoretical positions and practices lest these inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation, rather than the elimination, of hierarchically differential and exclusionary treatment of some women. One issue in need of clarity is what we mean and expect by the term 'emancipation'. For feminist critical discourse analysts, the ultimate goal is a radical social transformation based on social justice that opens up unrestricted possibilities for both women and men as human beings; a discursive critique of the prevailing restrictive structures is a step in that direction. From this view, liberal reformist positions – even when embraced by some feminists – are inadequate and can be easily co-opted by the dominant structures. Contemporary feminist theorists have pointed to the inherent flaws in classical liberal notions of equality and freedom, as premised upon an abstract universalism and 'sameness'.

First, equality from this perspective implies 'same as men', where the yardstick is that already set by men. Instead of a radical shift in the gender order, women therefore are required to fit into prevailing androcentric structures. Many of the problems encountered by modern women in the public sphere, in spite of (and as a result of) gaining access to education and paid employment, are due to unchanging gendered social structures (Lazar, forthcoming). Among the difficulties are exclusion and alienation among peers and by subordinates, the lack of female role models and self-determined leadership styles for women managers, suppression of non-mainstream voices in peer discussions, and the double-shift work shouldered by women in the office and at home. These social issues are in part also discursive in nature.

Second, the dominant liberal ideology assumes the sameness of all women. It has allowed middle-class, heterosexual, western, white women to represent their partial experiences as universally shared by all women, thereby ignoring the material conditions and needs of non-western, non-white, lesbian, disabled and poor women around the globe (hooks, 1984; Moghadam, 1994; Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991). It is imperative for feminist critical discourse scholars, therefore, to be mindful of the pitfall of liberalism and avoid replicating it.

At the same time, although the existing liberal ideology is flawed – and what is required in the long-term is a serious re-visioning of gender – there is implicit consensus among many feminists regarding the value of the *ideals* of liberalism for a current pragmatic feminist politics. Hirschmann (1999, p. 28), for instance, reminds that the ideals of freedom and equality are historically important for politically disadvantaged groups of women who have been systematically denied equality under the law, and denied the freedom to control their lives, make choices, and act as agents in the world. It is necessary, however, to reconceptualize universality and rights along the lines of current third-wave feminist thinking. As proposed by Hirschmann (1999) and Benhabib (1987), this involves viewing universality in concrete rather than abstract terms, based on acknowledgment of specific differences in the material conditions, contexts, and situations of women's lives. Only by attending

to, instead of negating, difference can feminists identify and theorize more accurately the commonalities of gender oppression, and build alliances among women in tackling specific issues and achieving concrete political goals. Feminist CDA based on close analysis of contextualized instances of texts and talk in a variety of local situations aims to contribute to feminist politics in this way.

Even while acknowledging the usefulness of certain liberal ideals reconceptualized in critical feminist terms, there is a need to safeguard against slipping into the mainstream neo-liberal thinking pervasive in late modern societies today. Of particular concern to feminist CDA is the global neo-liberal discourse of postfeminism (Lazar, 2004). According to this discourse, once certain equality indicators (such as rights to educational access, labour force participation, property ownership, and abortion and fertility) have been achieved by women, feminism is considered to have outlived its purpose and ceases to be of relevance. Although this discourse tends to be particularly associated with the developed industrialized societies of the west, dichotomous framing in terms of the global west/north versus the south is quite misleading. Even in the case of the former, women's rights and freedoms cannot be assumed as a given, for these can be contested through conservative backlash discourses and changing public policies (e.g., the recent contestation of abortion laws by the Bush government in the USA). Also, rights and freedoms are neither total nor even; for example, a gendered wage gap continues to exist in a number of these societies, as does systematic male violence against women in a variety of forms and permutations, which curtails women's full social emancipation.

The discourse of popular postfeminism requires urgent need of critique, for it lulls one into thinking that struggles over the social transformation of the gender order have become defunct. The discourse is partly a reactionary masculinist backlash against the whittling away of the patriarchal dividend. However, it is equally important to recognize that some third-wave feminists (e.g., Walter, 1999; Wolf, 1993) also contribute to this discourse, albeit in different terms. For them, this is a time for celebrating women's newfound power and achievements; in Wolf's (1993) account, this is the moment of 'power feminism'. While it is important to acknowledge the social, economic, and political achievements of a growing number of young women in many industrialized societies today, there is a need also to exercise critical reflexivity on the matter. One of the problematic assumptions of postfeminist discourse is that women can 'have it all' if only they put their minds to it or try hard enough, which reframes women's struggles and accomplishments as a purely personal matter, thus obscuring the social and material constraints faced by different groups of women. Ironically, this represents a backsliding on (second-wave) feminists' efforts to put the 'personal as political' on the social agenda. Concomitantly, there seems to be an inward-looking focus, and contentment only in the achievement of personal freedoms and fulfilment. A self-focused 'me-feminism' of this sort shifts attention away from the collective 'we-feminism' needed for a transformational political program. A focus on freedoms alone, moreover, is inadequate; as some have argued, freedom for feminists is only the beginning, not the end (Grant, 1993, p. 189). In the current sway of postfeminism in late modern societies, Segal pointedly argues for the continued relevance of feminism as follows: 'Why feminism? Because its most radical goal, both personal and

collective, has yet to be realised: a world which is a better place not just for some women, but for all women' (1999, p. 232).

Finally, feminist self-reflexivity must extend beyond a position of theoretical critique to include one's own academic and other practices. Here, I shall reflect on some research-related practices (see also Lazar, forthcoming). The importance of internationalizing the scope of research in order to theorize more carefully the endless variety and monotonous similarity of gender asymmetry across diverse geographical contexts has been discussed above. Also important is to include and represent where possible international feminist scholarship in research articles, authoritative handbooks, readers, and textbooks, and plenary addresses at international conferences. Referring to the overwhelming representation of (white) scholars from the north/west in academia, including in the more critically-oriented fields, van Dijk (1994) has noted a form of academic ethnocentrism, based upon seldom-questioned feelings of scholarly and cultural superiority.

Although feminist linguists and critical discourse scholars today are increasingly reflexive on the issue of representing and including diversity, two points may be worth further critical consideration. The first pertains to researching a community that is not one's own, which can be problematic when the direction of expertise flows from traditionally privileged groups at the centre to subaltern groups. It is problematic when the research is undertaken not in collaboration with the locals or native scholars of the community but from an external position of authority, and when the researcher's positionality is left inexplicit (i.e., the researcher's social/cultural identity and political investment in the persons or community researched or the data analysed).⁴ In such cases, when (white) scholars from the north (or west) make authoritative knowledge claims about communities in the south, there is danger of re-enacting historical imperialism in academic neo-imperialistic terms.

The second point worth critical feminist reflexivity pertains to what I call 'marked inclusion'. This refers to the benevolent inclusion of critical and/or feminist discourse studies from non-western geographical regions in international fora, but marked as 'other' instead of mainstreamed. For example, some years ago, an academic report written after a 'Language and Masculinity' seminar held at a university in the northwest of England scrupulously named the geographical locations of the non-western studies presented at the seminar, but left unmarked those studies from the west. In a separate incident, the organizers of the third International Gender and Language (IGALA3) conference held in Connell (USA) in 2004 mentioned in the conference publicity their aim to highlight the 'international' in the conference title. This was done by devoting a plenary session to 'international perspectives', in which four speakers from diverse non-western countries (and a western white male as the panel moderator) shared an extended timeslot. In both examples, good intentions notwithstanding, the practice of marking inadvertently emphasizes non-western research as 'other' from mainstreamed western studies or studies undertaken by scholars in the west, which purportedly are not part of the 'international'. (Perhaps in the 'Language and Masculinity' report, the geographical specificity of all studies could have been made explicit, and in the case of IGALA3, one of the non-western panellists could have been offered an unmarked full plenary slot just like the other plenary speakers in the program.)

Critical feminist analysis of a discourse practice

The objective of this article has been to offer a theoretical discussion of the rationale for a feminist CDA and set out the principles of FCDA as discourse praxis. In concluding, I shall briefly consider some empirical data selected from an advertising context for the purpose of demonstrating some aspects of the FCDA principles. Information about the data and its analysis (rationale, scope, topic, and method) are outlined below, followed by analysis and discussion of a couple of the advertisements in relation to the five principles. The analysis here is not intended to be comprehensive, but only to provide a focal point for discussion.

Whereas much CDA research (including some of my own) has focused on 'serious' political, professional, and news media contexts and texts, little attention has been paid to consumer advertisements, which are considered rather banal. However, such banal texts are no less important for critical scrutiny (Toolan, 1997) precisely because they do not invite serious attention, are fleeting, and yet are everywhere in modern, urban industrialized societies. From a critical perspective, consumer advertising offers a productive site for the study of cultural politics – relations of power and ideology as they appertain to cultural processes and practices in the public sphere.

The advertisements discussed in this section are drawn from a larger research project on the advertising of beauty and body enhancement products, which I collected from English-language newspapers and women's magazines in my native Singaporean context in 2000–2006.⁵ The study, concerned to examine the emergence of a discourse of popular postfeminism in this corpus, analysed the configurations of meaning constitutive of the discourse across the intertextual archive of advertisements, and how the popular postfeminist discourse itself was in part interdiscursively constituted through the appropriation of elements of other discourses from other social fields. These were analysed in terms of their semiotic expression through choices in language and visual images (cf. Lazar, 2000). The multimodal analysis here drew on linguistic-based frameworks, specifically, systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) and speech act theory (Searle 1969), as well as from semiology (Williamson, 1978). A multimodal approach to the study of discourse, as I earlier indicated, is necessary for a holistic analysis of meaning-making practices. Such an approach refuses to privilege language above other forms of semiosis, and is open to drawing upon interdisciplinary analytical frameworks (in this case, from linguistics and semiology).

For the purpose of this section, I will present and discuss only one aspect of the popular postfeminist discourse, namely, focused on feminist concerns of empowerment; more specifically, how feminine (hetero)sexuality is construed as women's power. (For a comprehensive analysis of the discourse of popular postfeminism and aspects of power/empowerment in the discourse, see Lazar, 2004, 2006.)

Advertising is notorious for using (hetero)sex(uality) to sell virtually anything. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the overlexicalization of such words as 'seduce'/'seduction'/'seductive', 'intoxicating', 'tantalizing', 'magnetic', 'provocative', and 'sexy' (Dior, 20 February, 2004; Elizabeth Arden, 20 August, 2004) in advertisements, which seem to perpetuate age-old stereotypes of women's sexual appeal. However, although in a number of advertisements the representation of women as

sex objects for the gratification of the (straight) male gaze persists, in some, like the Dior and Elizabeth Arden advertisements from which the words were quoted, this is not the case. Instead, these same lexical tokens are embedded in quite different, popular postfeminist scenarios.

One of these scenarios involves the reclamation of women's sexual desire and the celebration of sexual agency. Gill (2003) expresses this as the re-sexualization of women in contemporary popular culture and media, from a position of sexual objectification to sexual subjectification. That is, instead of presenting women as passive objects for men's sexual pleasure, there is a shift towards presenting women as sexually autonomous, active, and desiring subjects. Such a shift entails a re-signification of the sexual terrain, such that these representations are no longer a sign of women's exploitation, but of women's empowerment. The popular resexualized media images resonate with Wolf's (1993, p. 137) views of what she calls a 'power feminism', which is 'unapologetically sexual; [it] understands that good pleasures make good politics' and 'believes that what every woman does with her body and in her bed is her own business'. Another popular postfeminist scenario of sexual power exaggerates the gains of the women's movement to suggest that women's struggles for equality with men are a thing of the past, for women now have come into their own. In fact, it paints a world in which power relations have become reversed: it is women who, through their sexual prowess, wield power and control over men.

The representations of sexual power as agency and as supremacy combine in two advertising campaigns that I will analyse here. One is for a regional Asian company, Unisense Slimming Centre, and the other is for Elizabeth Arden, an international cosmetics company.

The Unisense campaign ran three advertisements with equally eye-catching visuals and captions depicting women's sexual power. Each of the advertisements represents a heterosexual couple, where the woman, slender and beautiful, is visually salient. In terms of spatial composition, either she is in front of him (in one ad, she is casually reclining on a sofa in her silk night dress, with a well-built man in the background bringing her breakfast on a tray; in another ad, the woman stands ahead with her back to the man, beckoning him with the crook of her index finger), or standing on top of him, with a stiletto heel resting on his bare back. The latter pose is reminiscent of an infamous Lee Jeans ad that appeared in Britain in the 1990s, in which a woman had her stiletto boot pressed into a man's naked buttock. Except for one ad in which the model's face is not shown, the women look straight into the camera with a composed and self-assured countenance which, interpersonally, challenges female viewers to identify with them. Whereas the women in all the advertisements are clothed (in a plain white chemise or in short black dresses), the men are partially naked, drawing attention to well-toned, muscular torsos. Visually, it is he who is sexually objectified, not her, and becomes the object of the (straight) female gaze.

Congruent with the visual representations are equally arresting captions in the form of imperatives: 'Discover the power of femininity' (followed immediately by copy that reads) 'Defy conventions and take the lead' [the stiletto ad]; 'Fetch. Make them work for it' [the reclining woman ad] and 'Heel. Take the lead' [the beckoning woman ad]. A signature line is common to all the advertisements: 'Discover the alpha female in you.'

The language invokes a curious mix of discourses of empowerment (note the ideas regarding self-discovery and challenging the status quo in 'Discover the power,' 'Defy conventions,' and 'Take the lead') and dominance, which invites the reading that women's empowerment *is* dominance over men (and vice versa). Dominance in this case is patterned on a hierarchical relationship among non-human animals and between human and non-human animals. The term 'alpha female' (like alpha male) refers to the leader of a pack; the same kind of relationship is advised also in dog training between owners and their animals. In fact, the speech acts of command (to dogs) 'fetch' and 'heel' and instruction (to people) to 'make them work for it' and 'take the lead' are all part of the language of obedience training and the handling of canines. This language, in the context of gender and sexual relations between women and men, constructs women as agentive subjects, assertive (even aggressive) and in charge. Sexually, the alpha female is not coy and eager to please, but is the one to call the shots on her terms.

Whereas dominance is established in quite crude, domesticating terms in the Unisense campaign, Elizabeth Arden's approach is more subtle, yet no less arresting. Elizabeth Arden's print ad for the fragrance 'Provocative Woman' features actor Catherine Zeta-Jones, also visually salient, against a deserted Wall Street-like backdrop, looking sultrily into the camera, with lips parted, hair tousled, and legs apart, in a figure-hugging black dress. Her shoulders are bare and her dress is lifted to reveal a thigh. Next to the thigh, on her right, a brief statement with modality of high certitude 'Men will melt' is printed in descending fashion, which moves the eye downwards towards the ankle-deep water in which she steps. From the relationship between image and text, clearly a causative structure is implied – namely that her sexual presence has reduced all men in the vicinity into water swirling at her feet. The advertisement, though, is making a larger claim than that of Zeta-Jones as uniquely capable of overpowering men in this fashion; rather, any woman who wears this fragrance will have a similar power. Following Williamson's (1978) classic semiological analysis, juxtaposing the image of the fragrance bottle next to that of Zeta-Jones entails a process of meaning transference, whereby the fragrance derives signification with reference to the sexually provocative quality signified by the actor, and transferred onto the consumer who wears the perfume. The statement 'Men will melt' in the advertising context, therefore, carries the illocutionary force of a promise or guarantee to female consumers, as if such power over men is a coveted goal and within reach of any woman. While such scenarios may appear to trade on fantasy rather than reality, there exists some ambivalence about this in the broader discourse. One of the Unisense advertisements, in fact, outrightly counters the interpretation of fantasy. Following the caption 'Fetch. Make them work for it.', printed at eye-level of the female model who coolly gazes out at the reader, there are two other clauses at the foot of the page – 'This is not a fantasy. Discover the alpha female in you.' The text–image placement suggests that women readers are assured that the performed scenario of empowered, authoritative femininity is 'real', and can be personally experienced by them also.

Popular postfeminism, as the above show, is a media-friendly, consumer-oriented discourse, which indexes the institutional reflexivity of popular culture and media industries. In this case, the advertisements recuperate socially progressive notions of women's empowerment, agency, and self-determination, and in so doing deflect

long-standing second-wave feminist criticisms of the advertising industry for its oppression of women in setting up narrow and impossible standards of beauty and social acceptability, and for its perpetuation of exploitative, stereotypical images of women. Postfeminist advertising suggests that patriarchal ideologies of gender in terms of women's powerlessness and oppression are outdated. Instead, this is fast becoming a women's world, in which relations of power are shifting in favour of women.

Such representations, however, far from supporting the feminist cause, are quite detrimental to it. Feminists' concern for women's empowerment is appropriated and recontextualized by advertisers, evacuating it of its political content and instead infusing meanings quite antithetical to feminism. Empowerment of women here is presented *vis-à-vis* the disempowerment of men. Structurally, the gender order remains dualistic and hierarchical, but the players have been switched. There appears to be at work a perverse sense of equality – if women traditionally have been the subordinated group, and in the media sexually objectified, it is a sign of social progress to turn the tables on men along similar lines. This is hardly the kind of gender order restructuring envisaged by feminists of any persuasion. However, repeated circulation of such images (not only in advertising but also in movies, comics, 'chick lit', and so on) plays into popular (mis)conceptions about feminism. More importantly, as did the Lee Jeans advertising campaign in Britain, the present images of female sexual dominance can contribute to a backlash effect against women and the women's movement because of the symbolic threat they represent to men. Images of women beckoning to and stepping on men, along with the dehumanization (as animal and as thing) and disembodiment (formlessness of water) of men, even where this is metaphorical, have the potential to goad antifeminist suspicion that feminism has gone too far and that women are all out to take over and subjugate men.

In the popular postfeminist scenario, men are made over as the new subordinate group. However, this is not borne out systemically in the material reality of gender relations. The power reversal – let alone gender parity – depicted in sexual advertising is hardly matched by fundamental shifts in social relationships between women and men outside the world of the advertisements. In fact, as Williamson (2003) notes, the sexual dominatrix images of women in advertising beguile a social reality where the level of violence against women continues to be staggering. Such representations also reduce the quest for women's social empowerment to that merely of bodily or sexual empowerment. Even then, not all women can be powerful in this way; only 'beautiful' women can rule over men. Conventional beauty for women, as defined by the media and evident in my data, is young, able-bodied, heterosexual(ized), tall, slender, light-skinned, and with straight hair, which selects out a diversity of races/ethnicities. Only some women, therefore, can be alpha females and capable of melting men, which divides and ranks women hierarchically as well. All women, nevertheless, can aspire to 'the top' – elusive and unattainable, though, for many – by entering and remaining in the never-ending cycle of consumption.

The convergence of capitalist consumerist and patriarchal systems, in this case, co-opts and subverts progressive discourses while maintaining the social status quo. Popular postfeminism, a common global discourse put into circulation by multinational Asian and western corporations, however, offers (Singaporean) women a

reiteratively performed identity position of a global 'power femininity' (Lazar, 2006). Unlike advertising in earlier periods, which depicted women in obviously demeaning and sexist ways and made feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism a relatively straightforward affair, critique of postfeminist advertising is less clear-cut. For one thing, the incorporation of feminist signifiers, and the representation of women publicly as powerful, even if in a strategic and narrow way, obfuscates issues of social progressivism through their suggestion that feminism and sexism are passé and no longer on the social agenda for discussion – if anything, the suggestion is a situation of reverse sexism against men! Popular postfeminism also has vague resonances of third-wave feminist ideas in some quarters that reject the 'victimhood' of women and instead celebrate (some) women's individual choices, agency, and sexual autonomy (Wolf, 1993). All these make for a plurality of reading positions, depending on audiences' social and ideological positionings, and could invoke such diverse responses as hostility, pleasure, or apathy.

The place of feminist CDA is to offer a critical perspective on such discursive representations *vis-à-vis* the prevailing structural relations of power. The discourse of popular postfeminism, circulated in culturally banal texts, is one of many areas requiring critical attention in late modern societies for it muddies questions of power and ideology in contemporary gender relations and stalls critical social awareness. The intervention of a feminist CDA in current practices of recuperative reflexivity is a form of analytical activism, which keeps going critical feminists' efforts at radical social change.

Notes

- 1 This article is an expanded version of the introduction in M.M. Lazar *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* (Palgrave, 2005).
- 2 Examples of attempts to bring together, internationally, feminist scholars in CDA are a 'Gender and CDA' colloquium, which I organized at the Sociolinguistics Symposium in Bristol (UK) in 2000 after eliciting contributions on the internet, and my recent volume titled *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* (2005).
- 3 Feminist theorization of intersectionality, in fact, offers a valuable insight for wider CDA scholarship, which is underdeveloped in this regard.
- 4 My thanks to one of the reviewers of this article for her/his comment on researcher positionality, which was made in the same critical spirit as my own argument. In relation to my use of data taken from a Singaporean context, s/he remarked that without making my own social identity as a researcher explicit, I was engaging in 'subtle and not very tasteful co-optation of a colonial context for yet another instance of neocolonialism' – an issue that I myself had raised. For the record, I am a Singaporean (and an ethnic minority in my country). The comment has led me to consider that while making one's researcher positionality is important in cases where one is writing about a subaltern context/community that is not one's own, given that a praxis-oriented approach builds the researcher's positionality into the research itself, critical research in *all* contexts would do well to heed this.
- 5 This research was funded by the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Academic Research Fund (Project No. R-103-000-012-112).

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