RETURN

3 As part of her now well-known debate with Nancy Fraser over the best way to theorize and redress sexual inequality, Judith Butler makes the following remarks:

> Poststructuralism has thwarted Marxism, and . . . any ability to offer systematic accounts of social life . . . is now seriously hampered by theory that has entered the field of cultural politics, where that poststructuralism is construed as destructive, relativistic, and politically paralyzing. (1997a: 265–66)

Her comment here is ironic, its tone parodic; it is an overly simplistic Marxist critique that is left with egg on its proverbial face. At the time of writing, Butler caustically adds that in rejecting the "merely cultural," associating it with those social movements positioned as "derivative and secondary" to the Marxist analysis they are blamed for fragmenting, social theorists can embrace "an anachronistic materialism as the banner for a new orthodoxy" (1997a: 266). Butler writes from

within the twilight of poststructuralism's heyday, and so frames attachment to materialism as nostalgic, as does Wendy Brown in her own subsequent dismissal of what she characterizes as an outdated attachment to "the material" that "refuses the importance of the subject, the subjective, the question of style, and the problematic of language" (1999: 24). Further, for Brown, backwards turns instil "traditionalism in the very heart of praxis, in the place where commitment to risk and upheaval belongs" (1999: 25). There are perhaps clues about the direction of social theory in the possibility Butler signals of that "anachronistic materialism" becoming "a new orthodoxy," but in both influential theorists' accounts, materialism still imaginatively belongs to the past, and the techniques and politics represented by poststructuralist emphasis on language and the subject belong to the present. Yet what is striking to me about the first quote from Butler, above, is how easily it may now be read straight, as a description both of the relationship between these protagonists and as an account of the recent theoretical past.

By the late 2000s, indeed, it is hard to read Butler's comment as *anything other* than descriptive. Few social theorists would dispute that we currently occupy ground beyond the cultural turn, or that materialism warrants another look, investigated as either "the social," or "the embodied," or both. So when Antoinette Burton writes five years after Butler's intervention above that "it would seem that the pathologization of culture and the concomitant embrace of the social-as-savior is at work in a variety of professional venues" (2001: 65), there is no textual irony in evidence. Whatever we may think about that "pathologization of culture," we are by this point firmly post–cultural turn. Despite arguments back and forth between Butler, Fraser, and commentators in the late 1990s about the relationship of poststructuralism to politics (Fraser 1997; Butler 1999a; Fraser 1999; Adkins 2002), despite the strength of international opposition to Martha Nussbaum's public and infamous tirade against Butler (Nussbaum 1999; Kapur 2001; Bell 2002), it appears that we (social and cultural theorists) can now agree that cultural theory did indeed go too far in the direction of the textual. With hindsight one might say, along with Mandy Merck, that in the argument between Butler and Fraser introduced above, Fraser carried the day (Merck 2004). Not only can we agree that the cultural turn is over, we can also agree on what should be claiming our attention instead, what should be happening now or next: namely, that

renewed attention to materialism Butler warned us about. Thus, in the feminist literature I am primarily concerned with, and as indicated in the last chapter, we are exhorted to return to a focus on everyday lived experience and to material or embodied realities instead of remaining mired in a conceptual realm deemed to have no value outside of the academy (McNay 2000; Walby 2000; Sedgwick 2003). This is a more general trend within social theory, too, of course. Recent special issues of *New Formations* and *Boundary 2* simultaneously herald the demise of the cultural turn, and debate the significance of "the material," a concept whose current time is never doubted. Similarly, *Theory, Culture and Society*'s guest issue on "Cultural Theory and Its Futures" reflects on the strands of the "material turn" via the body, affect, biotechnology, and lives, and what is announced as a resurgent interest in political economy (Venn 2007).

Wary of Butler and Brown's combined scepticism perhaps, such claims for a return to the material are never framed as a simple recovery operation. The renewed interest in materialism is consistently represented as a knowing return, full of futurity rather than nostalgia. Thus we can be said to agree on a few more things. We can agree that identity and social movement critiques of The Left, or feminism, were important as a way of highlighting the exclusions generated by a unified approach to politics; and we can agree that postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of essentialist or determinist exclusions allowed us to value difference at the epistemological as well as the ontological level. We can also agree that these approaches went unnecessarily to the other extreme, evacuating progressive critique of any political certainties and contributing to the demise of The Left, or feminism; and that poststructuralism's attention to complexity of meaning and interpretation distracted us from more substantive concerns with inequality, experience, political economy, and justice, undercutting any real basis for political transformation. In short, then, we can agree that the last thirty to forty years have not been all bad, that there were some important political and intellectual lessons to be learned about difference and exclusion, but that it is now time to pull back from the deconstructive abyss—which has become its own orthodoxy anyway—and move beyond critique. We can no longer do so as innocents, but if we do not combine analysis and experience, deconstruction and material attention, if we do not return to something that we can really grasp, then we remain powerless to alter the pernicious power relations our poststructur-

alist tactics can cleverly identify but spectacularly fail to transform. We need a new direction that is neither nostalgic nor taken in by what is quite often rendered as the sheer silliness of postmodern and poststructuralist seductions. In the cold light of day, we know better.

As with progress and loss narratives, return narratives reassure us that we can all share a single perspective of what we think has happened in Western feminist theory in the last few decades. But the tone of certainty is stronger in return narratives because of their role in bringing together different feminist subjects in the present. In the last chapter I suggested that academic feminist space is shared by subjects of both progress and loss narratives and that the tension between these is resolved in several ways: by creating authentic and inauthentic subjects of that space; or when this fails, by marking irreconcilable differences in generational and disciplinary, rather than strictly political, terms. Return narratives, in contrast, offer the opportunity for real synthesis. Subjects of both progress and loss narratives can both become subjects of return narratives if they concede a little ground. I was too stubborn, I see that now, says the former subject of a loss narrative; I was too concerned with critique and didn't listen to your warnings, says the former subject of a progress narrative. And in affective terms, the subject of loss can acknowledge the dangers of bitterness and nostalgia, while the subject of progress can concede to an excess of enthusiasm, inattentive to its own exclusions. Both loss and progress can thus be understood as right in principle if not in execution or care.

This reconciliation is facilitated both historigraphically and affectively, as the rest of this chapter will detail. In historiographic terms, the synthesis is enabled by a shared understanding of what has happened in previous decades in Western feminist theory. As the previous two chapters have explored, progress and loss narratives produce a common understanding of what the past contains, even as they value its markers differently. Return narratives can thus affirm a common present by affirming a shared past. Affect is key here because for this positive reinforcement to make sense, a desire to relinquish misery or enthusiasm for a common pragmatism must be generated in a return narrative's feminist subject. In addition, a return narrative resolves anxieties about who is more co-opted or political by asking its subjects to "take stock" and focus on justice over infighting.

This chapter maps in detail these return narratives in Western feminist

storytelling, highlighting central features of their construction and broader textual and political effects. As in the two previous chapters on progress and loss narratives, I foreground the techniques through which one strand of the story of Western feminist theory is told, secured, and rendered as self-evident rather than contested. Many of the themes developed in the previous two chapters recur and are extended here, namely the association of particular methods and disciplines with "the social" and "the textual," the pitting of the political and the subjective against one another, and the discursive management of sexuality and race.[1] As my introduction thus far already suggests, Western feminist return narratives tend to occur in later work than progress or loss narratives, and thus operate as a synthesis. As will be evident in this mapping, the vast majority of return narratives take place after 2000, when progress and loss narratives can both be understood to require amelioration, and when the ills of a postcultural turn can be framed as universally acknowledged. Yet this straightforward chronology is not entirely accurate, in two respects. First, as indicated in the last chapter on loss narratives, absolute differences between narrative forms and tones are not always easily identified. Thus loss narratives may contain an element of a desire for a return, and progress narratives may contain ambivalence that undercuts an otherwise positive account. Second, the call for a return within Western feminist theory may also be found earlier than 2000 even in its purest form, particularly outside of the journal set I am primarily concerned with. As early as 1996, for example, Teresa Ebert insists that feminist theory has substituted a "politics of representation for radical social transformation" (1996: 3) and suggests that we should return to earlier political certainties. Thus, although by the mid-2000s feminist calls for a return, along with those from other social theorists, have certainly consolidated the importance of a postcultural turn, Western feminist progress, loss, and return narratives should also be thought of as overlapping, rather than straightforwardly sequential, even while they rely on a common historiography.

IMMATERIAL INTERRUPTIONS

One of the central ways in which Western feminist stories of progress and loss are brought together in return narratives is through placing critiques of the 1970s as a temporary interruption to ongoing feminist engagement with the real world, as indicated in the following two extracts:

> Until the early 1980s the dominant perspectives within feminist theory derived from the social sciences and were generally informed by, or formulated in dialogue with, Marxism. It was these perspectives that were displaced by the cultural turn and subsequently brushed aside or dismissed as a source of past errors. (*Women's Studies International Forum* 2001)

> Compared to that of today, the feminist theory of that era had a breathtaking ambition and directness that reflected the worldwide explosion of revolutionary activism from which it drew its energies. We know, of course, that not all aspects of this theorizing have stood up well to subsequent scrutiny, but that is not the point I want to stress here. (*Signs* 2004)

We can read several features familiar from our experience of loss narratives in these excerpts. Both glosses frame a past feminist theory as actively engaged, responsive, and clear. What comes after is in contrast dismissive and reactive, focused on problems rather than solutions. We know from the temporality of both progress and loss narratives that what comes before "that era . . . [of] breathtaking ambition" that needs to be returned to ends at the close of the 1970s. And further, we also know that it is the critique of this "explosion of revolutionary activism" that is responsible for theory's loss of political purchase. As in loss narratives it is abstract critique, "the cultural turn" in the first extract, that is responsible for this dismissal and not identity critiques or their subjects. This certainty is undercut by ambivalence in both extracts, however. In the first, the "errors" are alluded to even as they are "displaced" (both by "the cultural turn" and by the historiography of a loss narrative); in the second, the problems identified by "subsequent scrutiny" are flagged even as they are deflected through the insistence on an alternative focus. What both excerpts share is a concern with returning to that more passionate set of perspectives, but in contrast to the apocalyptic tone of loss narratives, return narratives propose that we advance through a recuperation of what remains valuable. Importantly, "we know, of course, that not all aspects of this theorizing have stood up well," and thus a current return will need to be cleansed of the problems of its first incarnation.

What Western feminist theory has lost through the disturbance of cultural theory is more particular than a general enthusiasm or capacity for dialogue, however. It is a focus on *materiality* in its various forms, as both of the following extracts make plain:

> Institutional change . . . must be informed by the debates and theories that 30 years of women's and men's work on gender in the academy have produced but, at the same time, these theories and debates will need increasingly to familiarize themselves with the economic ideologies, the institutional and political struggles, and the very real social constraints and inequities once again facing women and men. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2000)

> Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every "thing"—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. . . .
>
> Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (*Signs* 2003)[2]

Here, once more, while the insights of the various turns may need to be validated, these approaches have nonetheless been accorded "too much power" institutionally. Importantly, as in the latter extract, "language" is frequently synonymous with postmodernism or poststructuralism in return narratives, ensuring its distance from "matter" by establishing an opposition between language and reality.[3] What *matters*—the economy, constraint, inequity, "things"—has been sidelined in favour of one turn or another. In the first extract above, the reluctant feminist theorist is given a catalogue of instructions for how to combine critique and effective intervention. These instructions work for advocates of both progress and loss narratives, since the latter are compelled to take "debates and theories" seriously, and the former to address "the very real constraints" they have surely forgotten. Indeed, the demise of the cultural turn is performative in many of the extracts I am concerned with, by which I mean that it is produced through the chiding of its advocates and an insistence that we are all on the same page. In the second example a feminist theorist who might disagree with the first statement is convincingly mocked for her attachment to the sequential fashions of the second sentence. By the end of the extract she must identify matter as separate from these turns in order to be a subject for whom matter does in fact matter. The future is clear, then: to retain the relevance of social and cultural theory, the focus needs to shift from words to things.

A change in emphasis, a mutual appreciation alone, will not enable

the necessary transformation, however. Poststructuralism has to be abandoned by its previous or current supporters if this is to happen. Again, affect plays an important role in this respect, as the aforementioned chiding of loss narratives' future subjects indicates. In both extracts above it is the *ineffectual* nature of cultural theory that is emphasized in contrast to the urgent tasks at hand. In the first excerpt the "very real social constraints . . . facing women and men" should serve as sufficient reason to abandon the frivolity of theory; we need to turn to more sober pursuits. Yet in case playful fluidity remains appealing to a critical renegade irrespective of its political failures, the second excerpt throws a bucket of cold water over cultural theory's dubious pleasures. Instead of subverting meaning, "language has been granted too much power," it has become dominant rather than subversive. Further, and perhaps worse, for those invested in creativity and play, it has become routine, rote, as indicated by the seemingly ridiculous proliferation of "turns" that underscores the "too much" of the extract's first statement. Attachment to cultural theory is thus represented as either frustrating or saturated with an ennui-producing predictability. We can be encouraged to turn away from culture, in other words, precisely because we had already started to grow tired of it.

Should these appeals or chidings not be persuasive, Western feminist return narratives employ a range of textual devices that will be familiar to readers from previous chapters to ensure that the abandonment of language for reality be a *return* to what comes before the interruption. Primary among these is the textual establishment of an absolute distinction between postmodernism and materiality, as suggested by the following extract:

> As Rosenau points out, materialist approaches are an anathema to many forms of postmodernism. Postmodernists of various persuasions (both the nihilist "sceptics" and the more moderate "affirmatives") reject those versions of modern social science that claim a materialist reality. This leads them to embrace idealist and relativist approaches to knowledge. (*Gender and Society* 1997)

Postmodernism is "idealist and relativist," while materialist approaches foreground the realities "modern social science" is equipped to identify and analyze.[4] "Modern social science," importantly, does not include any of its postmodern variants. As discussed more fully in the previous chapter, rendering postmodernism and materialism mutually exclusive relies

heavily on a reassertion of disciplinary as well as political boundaries. The interruption of feminist concerns with the social world postmodernism represents in this extract is thus also an interdisciplinary interruption of disciplinary rigour and proper objects. In the above excerpt and in the one that follows, postmodern or poststructuralist approaches are fully associated with the interdisciplinary humanities, and materialism with the disciplinary social sciences.[5] And indeed, in return narratives, the call is frequently to both:

> A materialist perspective is necessarily a sociologically informed one; hence, in reasserting the importance of the material and the social, I am also seeking to reclaim some fundamental sociological insights. (*Women's Studies International Forum* 2001)[6]

Thus the cultural turn can be said to be anachronistic in two senses: in terms of its interest in language over social reality and in terms of its methodologies, particularly deconstruction and textual analysis. In this sense, in return narratives, postmodern or poststructuralist interdisciplinarity emerges as evidence not only of critique (of disciplines and institutions) but also of lack (of rigour, training, or commitment). Woven into both modes are affective encouragements to leave behind that which one had already grown tired of in any case. In this respect return narratives are an invitation to inhabit several different kinds of knowledge: materialist, disciplinary, and experiential.

One might then suggest that return narratives' construction of the opposition between materialism and the cultural turn is less a question of temporal and hierarchical *relation*, and more the establishment of the two as incommensurable: one cannot be both poststructuralist and materialist. In this respect, the claims that return narratives can fuse the two "periods" are in fact textually unsustainable. Take this passage from *Feminist Review*, where the opposition between social reality and representation is directly critiqued, for example:

> We aim to reinvigorate materialist feminist debate . . . grounded in the socio-economic realities of women's lives. We do not intend to construct or support an opposition between the representational and the material. Instead we hope for a step beyond—a shift in focus towards the material but one nevertheless informed by insights and perspectives yielded by feminist work on representation. (*Feminist Review* 2000)

While on one level, this extract makes the case for combining "the representational and the material" rather than prioritizing one over the other, the terms themselves remain separate, discrete in more than their naming. True to the reflexive character of the return narrative, the passage emphasizes the importance of the "insights . . . yielded by feminist work on representation" but only insofar as they "reinvigorate materialist feminist debate."[7] Materialist feminism may indeed need to demonstrate new cognizance of its historical omissions; in contrast, however, poststructuralism offers insights, but is not itself the subject or object of "reinvigoration." Materialism is ever located in the future—is "one step beyond"—while representation defines the past, a past it is time to move on from, all the while one from which we have learned valuable lessons. The return narrative is predicated upon, indeed enacts, a temporality in which the cultural turn is, or must be, left behind. The narrative persuades through its eminently sensible pragmatism. Who could be churlish enough to disagree?

MATERIAL FEELINGS

The incommensurability of the cultural turn and materialism produced in return narratives retells the story of more than Western feminist theory. It also creates a vision of the changing history of a feminist political landscape and its subjects, as I have suggested in previous chapters. In return narratives there are two primary political motivations for a revised materialist approach that necessitate the abandonment of a focus on representation. The first is that cultural theory has failed to change, or in some accounts has actively contributed to, women's disenfranchisement. In this vein, the following passage from *Feminist Theory* is preceded by a recognizable gloss praising poststructuralism's emphasis on multiplicity, fluidity, and critique of essentialism, and continues with the following query:

> Yet if women as a group are still poorer, less in control of their bodies and sexualities, more susceptible to humiliating sexual violence and more subject to performing the lion's share of emotional and janitorial labour without . . . recognition or remuneration, it would seem that little we do to performatively resignify gender affects these conditions. (*Feminist Theory* 2003)

The failures of theory are evidenced by women's continued inequality, their experiences of violence and exploitation.[8] One might perhaps object that a

theory's efficacy cannot reasonably be judged by its transformative effects alone; on that basis, since "women as a group are still poorer," all theory to date might be understood as of no value. But here it is not all theory, but performative theory alone, with its obligatory nod to Judith Butler's work, which is judged to have fallen short of the transformative mark.

The second political motivation is rather different, expressed here in the extract from *Australian Feminist Studies* discussed previously, namely, that within feminism:

> Theories and debates will need increasingly to familiarize themselves with the economic ideologies, the institutional and political struggles, and the very real social constraints and inequities once again facing women and men. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2000)

In this excerpt "social constraint and inequities" make their reappearance in the present and are portrayed as resurgent rather than continuous. Playful or deconstructive cultural approaches may have been all very well while inequalities were ameliorated, the argument goes, but now that they are "once again facing women and men" more robust theories are sorely need. In both strands of political argument for a materialist return, theory and social conditions (or their transformation) are fused. In the first, performative theory has failed to achieve social transformation, implying that without the interruption of such theoretical approaches social conditions might perhaps have improved. In the second, the political interruption that cultural "theories and debates" represent can no longer be justified in the face of *re-emergent* inequalities. Either way, cultural theory now has scant political purchase. Holding particular theoretical approaches or methodologies responsible for continued or resurgent social inequality enables return narratives to justify the particular synthesis between subject, object, and mode of analysis that they insist upon. This gesture provides a political rationale for the suturing of material conditions, materialist analysis, and a materialist feminist subject as the basis of political viability. It is through such modes of political discourse that return narratives harness the doubled ennui introduced above, namely that "resignify[ing] gender" is both useless and, through that incapacity, tiresome rather than engaging.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the desire to be an appropriate feminist subject of politics that underwrites most feminist theory has considerable historiographic power in Western feminist storytelling. In

loss narratives this desire is staged as a contest for political authority; in return narratives this desire can be shared. This is, indeed, part of the considerable affective pull of return narratives: that they offer a way forward for all feminist theorists, as long as they are prepared to take the small step of finally relinquishing what has already become an unwanted critical and political burden. So while initially reliant on the recognition of inertia, return narratives offer the affective gift of relief once that that small step has been taken. This politically validated relief combines with the textual fusions of subject, object, and analysis—discussed above as technical and political necessities in return narratives—to produce a newly engaged feminist heroine. Unlike the subject of progress narratives, this positive heroine is not blinded to real-world inequalities by the pleasures of abstraction; unlike the subject of loss narratives, she is not nostalgic or hostile. Anyone can be the subject of a return narrative, provided they demonstrate the appropriate affect as well as commitment. This subject, like the narrative she authorizes, is democratic as well as pragmatic.

The framing of the subject of Western feminist return narratives as suffused with positivity is stronger still in the set of approaches where materialism is understood as emphasizing "living and non-living matter, rather than the perhaps more familiar definition of materialism as the social and economic relations between women and men" (Hird 2004: 231). In these, what we might call biomaterial perspectives, materialism and representation are similarly understood as inimical. As with return narratives that prioritize social materiality, biomaterialist approaches insist that *matter* has been actively sidelined as a result of recent cultural theoretical preoccupations and that it is this that needs reintegrating into feminist theory in order to move forward. Thus:

> [I want] to illustrate why notions such as matter, ontology and substance have come to be somewhat neglected in Anglo-American feminist work and, second, in the light of that illustration, to highlight what is at stake in the efforts of those who choose to "return" to these difficult issues. (*Economy and Society* 2002)

And to repeat part of the extract from *Signs* included above in a context of its biomaterial plea:

> Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (*Signs* 2003)

Such approaches emphasize the stuff of life in preference to its representation. Often in discussion with or as part of the sociology of science and technology, these approaches home in on life's multiplicity, irreducibility, and unpredictability.[9] In a feminist context, biomaterialist work draws substantially on Rosi Braidotti's explorations, particularly in her last two books, of a nonhuman(ist) ethics focused on transformation and transition over the static power structures reinforced in some versions of postmodern thought (2002; 2006). For Braidotti as for others, a focus on matter keeps alive the possibility that the body has a different temporality to social life, one that disrupts social formations and opens up transformative futures.[10] It is shared interest in Gilles Deleuze that links new materialists to theorists of affect, who explore meaning as it is lived at the bodily level, and in terms of the alternative model of circuits of investment and desire thus revealed (Buchanan and Colebrook 2000; Massumi 2002; Sedgwick 2003).

It is in the emphasis on circuits that we can identify some dissonance between these two uses of "materialism" in return narratives. As in the sociological call for a return to materialism, the biomaterialist call knows the importance of acknowledging that it has learned its difference lessons properly, all the while insisting that it is transformed by, rather than bound to, cultural theory. But its proposition for the future is not to return to prior approaches with a new epistemological and ontological stance, but to suture different theoretical strands in new form. In this respect a biomaterialist approach, true to its biotechnological allegiances, proposes a nonlinear methodology that transforms the past rather than relinquishing or returning to it. Let me give a recent example of the language typical of this approach:

> The new generation of feminist epistemologists *assesses* rather than construes (new) paradoxes. Third-wave feminist epistemologists do not work according to a framework of diversity thinking nor does their move beyond the postmodern entail a return to modernist identity politics or equality projects. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2008)

A fusion of sorts is being proposed in biomaterialist accounts, one that expects paradoxes rather than seeking to resolve these. As in the extract from *Economy and Society* above, then, biomaterialist approaches propose a "return" that is placed explicitly or implicitly in inverted commas. It is a

"return" that emphasizes *transposition*, in Braidotti's words (2006), a splicing or recombining over temporal or intellectual recuperation. In this respect, biomaterialist invocations do not prioritize one set of disciplinary methodologies over another, but seek to combine these in a range of new ways. The movement of this form of return is more emphatically forward-looking, then, and might also be considered less hostile to cultural theoretical approaches than the social or sociologically informed returns discussed thus far. Indeed, Braidotti's own biomaterialist sympathies tend to be articulated in terms of an appreciation of poststructuralism rather than its demonization (e.g., 2000).

Yet this epistemological openness belies the historiographic and affective momentum that these biomaterialist return narratives otherwise inaugurate. As with the socially inflected return narratives, biomaterialist approaches appear to value the cultural theory approaches they learn from but do ultimately frame them as anachronistic, unlike the sexual difference theories brought forward into a reinvigorated present. The primary mechanism through which this is achieved is textual affirmation. As the above excerpt from *Australian Feminist Studies* suggests, the emphasis in what is often also termed "new materialist" thinking is on enthusiasm and capacity over the constraint and power identified with both Marxist/socialist and poststructuralist feminisms. In this respect, materiality and representation remain temporally opposed despite the rhetoric of splicing, firmly associating positive affect with the former and negative affect with the latter. As with the aligning of passion and politics in return narratives that privilege a social materialism—"its breathtaking ambition and directness" (*Signs* 2004)—bio- or new materialist accounts prioritize the passion of theory and practice that the linguistic or cultural turn is understood to have lost. Thus, and in this vein:

> In order for feminists to develop a fuller account of agency, I argue that the negative paradigm of subjectification needs to be supplemented by a more *generative* theoretical framework. (*Feminist Theory* 2003)

This extract demonstrates both the central desire in biomaterialism to focus on life over death, capacity over structure, and asks for a shift from the epistemological to the ontological within social and feminist theory. As I argue elsewhere, biomaterialist narratives thus tend to pick over "the bones" of a poststructuralism imaginatively laid out on a cold slab, consol-

idating our sense that its time has passed, in contrast to a wholesale reclamation of sexual difference or biotechnology as the fleshy substance of transposition (Hemmings 2009). Through an emphasis on embodied agency over abstract power relations, the above excerpt links both aspects of new materialist narrative, since agency might be defined as the capacities of subjects to negotiate, engage, resist, or remain in excess of the social circumstances in which they find themselves. In the process, the cultural turn is historiographically rendered as sterile instead of generative, as the opposite of creativity and transformation. This is a particularly interesting aspect of return narratives, in my view. While loss narratives are at pains to highlight the inappropriate playfulness of cultural approaches in contrast to a serious emphasis on oppression, return narratives insist that even this "play" is mythic, masking a routine investment in power as constraining and transformation as foreclosed.

When combined, these socially inflected and biomaterial returns pull the rug from under the feet of poststructuralist advocates, who are variously apolitical and overly concerned with power-structures; over-concerned with the pleasures of interpretation, and yet predictable rather than creative. Despite clear differences, the dual approaches of Western feminist return narratives allow the affective arc described to be one that moves from incapacity to proactive ability, from frustration to generation. In this respect, both materialist accounts utilize similar affects of neglect and disenchantment to secure a theoretical teleology in which the abandoned is cast as the abandoner. Wounded but brave, feminist materialists of both strands can thus emerge triumphant to greet the new dawn. As we know from previous chapters, poststructuralism first has to be stripped of the desired object—this time feeling and creativity, as well as political judgment—in order that these can be found anew in the present. And this has particular impact on what Western feminist theory can think it has inherited and what it imagines it must find now or in the future.[11]

INVOKING MATERIALITY

If the argument needed to be made that we are in a theoretical time and place post the cultural turn, one might reasonably expect to see Western feminist return narratives engage with approaches deemed to typify past obsessions with representation over the current moment of materiality.

Even in narrative glosses one could expect to see direct reference or cursory engagement with concepts. But, as suggested above, the importance of materiality is textually asserted as much to *effect* the move away from poststructuralism and postmodernism as to describe it. The performative nature of return narratives is compelling precisely because it both assumes we all agree that cultural obsessions have gone too far and elicits that agreement in the present of reading. In part, return narratives work, as indicated above, through a series of affective mobilizations designed to prompt an appropriate feminist attitude in the reader: to remain attached to cultural theory is to be left behind, to be both apolitical and uncreative. But if this common position is not argued for, and alternative approaches engaged even in order to be dismissed, how is it secured? How do Western feminist theorists come to concur about what is needed for a rich feminist future? Or to put the question another way, how is it that despite the varied positions that feminists take on questions of representation and materiality, we can accept that they are opposed concepts and approaches? Why are the affective pulls I have described thus far in this chapter successful?

In this section, I begin to focus more particularly on the political grammar of Western feminist return narratives, on the textual techniques through which claims for a material return are made. Specifically, I emphasize ways in which the reader is both persuaded of the need to respond to the call to the material and is made active in constituting its opposite—the cultural turn—as already over. Paradoxically, perhaps, the first technique I want to discuss here is absence. As indicated in my mapping of progress and loss narratives thus far, citation is key in securing a particular historical and theoretical trajectory for Western feminist theory. In return narratives citation remains a central historiographic technique, and as in progress narratives, lack of citation is often more significant than what is included. If we recall, in progress narratives citation lack enables the instantiation of poststructuralist or postmodern approaches as inaugurating attention to multiplicity in Western feminist theory. In these stories the 1970s is rarely directly cited (as a decade or through its theorists), and while the 1980s is more often referenced it frequently functions as a catch-all for early critiques of essentialism, to be surpassed by a more sophisticated—and always later—set of approaches. Similarly, loss narratives tend to indict poststructuralist or postmodern theories as representative of feminist mainstreaming within the academy, rather than as a body of work in their

own right. Where key concepts or authors (primarily Butler) are directly cited this is in order to reproduce the sense of a downward trajectory for Western feminist theory. Similarly, the 1970s remains vague, bolstering its status as a mythic era we have abandoned, rather than a decade containing diverse approaches. Return narratives continue in this vein, but take lack of citation to a new level, in most cases entirely removing citation from the frame.

If we cast an eye back over the excerpts included in the chapter thus far, no examples (general or particular) are given in order to make the claim that the cultural turn was inattentive to questions of social and economic inequality or prioritized subjectivation over material possibility. Citations are not needed, indeed, to convince us that the tense I have just used here, the past tense, is appropriate. The cultural turn is over (though often still powerful), and the return to materiality is current (though still marginal). There are two exceptions in the extracts I have introduced thus far, ones that do include some direct referencing, and these are:

> Until the early 1980s the dominant perspectives within feminist theory derived from the social sciences and were generally informed by, or formulated in dialogue with, Marxism. It was these perspectives that were displaced by the cultural turn and subsequently brushed aside or dismissed as a source of past errors. (*Women's Studies International Forum* 2001)

> As Rosenau points out, materialist approaches are an anathema to many forms of postmodernism. Postmodernists of various persuasions (both the nihilist "sceptics" and the more moderate "affirmatives") reject those versions of modern social science that claim a materialist reality. This leads them to embrace idealist and relativist approaches to knowledge. (*Gender and Society* 1997)

The first references a decade, the 1980s, as a way of ensuring that the materialist perspectives returned to will remain Marxist-informed ones. As discussed when I first highlighted the extract, this general periodization is directly contrasted to "the cultural turn," squeezing identity politics out of the picture without having to discuss this omission further. The second extract is unusual in that it directly references a theorist—Rosenau—potentially leaving open the possibility of dissent, in that we may not agree with Rosenau, or we may not like this particular interpretation of her work. But note that the reference is to a secondary commentator rather than to the objects of critique, "postmodernists of various persuasions,"

themselves. In this context, the reference to Rosenau provides a deflected authority to the subsequent assertions about "nihilist 'sceptics' and the more moderate 'affirmatives' and what they are said to reject and embrace. The need to reference other critics at all is interesting here, since it is so rare, and may be a reflection of the date of the extract—(1997)—when we are not yet self-evidently in the moment of the postcultural turn even for return narratives.

The otherwise striking lack of even general citation in return narratives is, I believe, a reflection of their need, and power, to unite the opposed progress and loss narratives of Western feminist theory. As delineated in the first two chapters of the book, progress and loss narratives have a similar authorial tone that brooks no argument, but they do, nevertheless, have different presumed audiences, different heroines and *bêtes noires*. If, as I have been suggesting, return narratives allow these political and theoretical accounts to coexist, indeed require this coexistence, then their differences must all-the-time be both allowed for and deflected. We know, then, from previous chapters, that while the trajectory of Western feminist theory is contested in terms of politics, value, and affect, its decade markers are not. We share what has happened, irrespective of what we think about it, and thus a common history can be appealed to in order to produce its proper feminist subject in the present. The general story of a return resonates across progress and loss contingents, then, but only if it remains *absolutely general*. To begin to specify that history would be to raise the spectre of significant rather than superficial interpretative differences. How much more, then, the danger of introducing reference to particular theorists, the meaning of whose work is most certainly not shared or whose representative status is contested? Circumventing the dangers of direct citation, then, common agreement is produced through the dulcet tones of pragmatism. Each side is appealed to and is required to concede some ground: yes, advances were made; yes, important things were lost. What is retained is the common historiography. In effect, then, the absence of direct citation in return narratives is precisely what allows a more elusive citation practice to permeate the glosses. What is cited is that common historiography, and its citation—precise in its vagueness—both references and produces reflective agreement.

If Western feminist subjects of return narratives occupy a place in the present with a shared history we can agree we need to relinquish, then it is no surprise that the dominant tone of these narratives is one of im-

patience. Let us not look back at the past too closely, return narratives insist, since we can agree there were problems on both sides. But let us instead turn to the tasks at hand, ones that crowd in on the present, and take action now to secure a better future. The present is a time of material concern, then, but this concern must always be presented as emergent, as a forever new development that requires attention. Thus, despite return narratives spanning at least a decade as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, their call to recover materiality is consistently phrased as revelatory and entirely of the moment. The two following extracts are typical of this mode:

> Our starting point is a co-incidence of ideas, a moment when feminist theorists are rethinking gender and identity in the context of the "social" and/or the "material." (*Feminist Theory* 2005)

> To many, despite this new attention to materiality, feminist theory has moved farther away from the economic, and related issues of justice, than ever before. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2002)

So strong is this commitment to materialist approaches being absolutely current that even the second extract, which situates this call in relation to a broader "attention," must reaffirm its continued neglect. While return narratives frequently frame this emergent interest as already happening, then, the "event" of the call to a material return is confined to the present and can never be resolved. Materiality must thus be represented as crucial, as needing immediate attention and recuperation, but as—oddly enough—not having a recent history in its own right. Even the fact of feminist theory's sustained call for attention to materiality cannot alter our failure truly to grasp its nature. Materiality has been consistently absent from feminist debate (despite its continuous presence), and now is the time to begin to return to it:

> This is an urgent research problem. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2000)

> I am excited by the prospect of new materialist debates and new materialist praxis in the years to come—debates and praxis with many hard tasks awaiting them in the real world. (*Feminist Review* 2000)

Here material returns are framed as an urgent problem in the present that can only be addressed in the future. While materialist attention is a current preoccupation, then, its time is also deferred, its resolution longed for but

always absent. In temporal terms what is striking is that these repeated calls are made as if from a moment of unique insight, a controversial reading of the historical record, and certainly not one that references the myriad similar calls from colleagues within the last decade in any meaningful way. Thus, notwithstanding what I would describe as the persistent, repetitive, perhaps even *mundane*, call to return to the material in Western feminist return narratives, each individual call is positioned as a problem of the present, a new concern: one under-recognized by feminist theory to date and requiring earnest attention now.

How do we make sense of this repeated call to the "elusive material" in Western feminist storytelling? Certainly one effect of its repetition is to make of materiality a trope, a concept invoked, still to be embraced or fully mobilized, in short paradoxically immaterial: a floating signifier, perhaps, or more generously a metaphor. In this context, an otherwise open comment on "precisely the unsettling and unsettled nature of matter" (*Economy and Society* 2002) seems to reaffirm rather than challenge its abstraction. But to point to this paradox of materiality's lack of substance is perhaps to miss the importance of its rhetorical invocation to how Western feminist return narratives work. To return to the opposition between representation and materiality: as discussed above, this opposition situates a contemporary feminist subject as already beyond the cultural turn, yet still needing to repudiate its continued dominance in the moment of "becoming materialist." In this respect, return narratives have to replay precisely this scene of opposition in order to produce the (new) materialist feminist subject in the moment of reading. Ironically, then, the continued power of the cultural turn must be affirmed even as it is undone. The material turn is always to be advocated for, but never achieved, since its necessity remains predicated on its absence.

This need for postmodernism and poststructuralism to continue to be imaginatively dominant in return narratives suggests another important aspect of their temporality. If cultural theory is still the demon to be exorcised from the scene of Western feminist theory, the ideal subject of a material return can still be positioned as marginal in the narrative present. As discussed at some length in relation to loss narratives in the last chapter, the subject of Western feminist theory consistently construes herself as marginal in order to retain feminist authority. Thus considerable time and effort must be spent in constructing materialist approaches as

current yet deferred, anachronistic yet pertinent, in order that the subject of these approaches can be figured as appropriately heroic yet undervalued in the present. The following excerpts are typical of the tone of return narratives in this respect:

> The questions I pose reflect my bias for a kind of feminist criticism that has become unfashionable in the academy. (*Signs* 2000)

> Debate about how feminists should understand and deploy "the material" also brings back into view these often-neglected and unresolved questions of class and power. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2002)

> [I want] to illustrate why notions such as matter, ontology and substance have come to be somewhat neglected in Anglo-American feminist work and, second, in the light of that illustration, to highlight what is at stake in the efforts of those who choose to "return" to these difficult issues. (*Economy and Society* 2002)

The proposed theoretical approach is "unfashionable," "neglected," and "difficult," and those who undertake the task heroic, in that they have the courage to return to what remains sidelined within feminist theory. These brave few dare to be marginal, prioritizing "difficult issues" and "unresolved questions" over academic fashion. Note here that "neglect" is an important term in underscoring poststructuralist and postmodern approaches as interruption. We know that it is this set of approaches without them needing to be named because of the emphasis on "ontology" and "matter" or "the material," but also because of the persistent iteration of those positions as peripheral, of course. The repeated understanding of materialist feminism and feminists as abandoned does more than constitute a center and a margin, although this is an important discursive feature. It also affirms that position as morally and politically superior within a feminist archive brimful of the attempt to hierarchize or relativize harms and identities.[12] As indicated in the previous chapter, no one wants to own centrality in Western feminist theory, and the reiteration of materiality as neglected provides further reader investment in abandoning representation for common sense.

This emphasis on bravery in the face of neglect cannot result in the subject of Western feminist return narratives being placed at the center of feminist theory, however, because this would result in the loss of the marginal position. This is one reason why the moment of materialism's

return must be endlessly deferred, despite its urgency. As I detail below, however, the insistence on harm as the basis of subjective authority in return narratives resurfaces in the choice of appropriate objects for materialist analysis. The call to return to the material is one that implies a mirroring of subject and object of analysis, and the centering of the latter as the *raison d'être* of an ethico-political Western feminist theory. If this call is to be persuasive, it needs to have an object in the world, a someone or something that is more marginal than the neglected Western feminist theorist. Casting the return to what is neglected as heroic has implications for other subjects in our material scene, too. While I have argued that this interpellation unites Western feminist progress and loss narratives in the present, it can only do so if the call is heeded. The antagonist who refuses to see sense is thus often rendered as dangerous rather than simply misguided, as taking inappropriate objects for, as well as theoretical approaches to, analysis. The affective aspect of return narratives' political grammar—the pull to occupy a feminist subject position resonant with positive affect—is always intersubjective, because there always needs to be someone who is dominant, someone who is actively and inappropriately producing the conditions of material neglect. Thus, if we consider Martha Nussbaum's diatribe against Judith Butler in the late 1990s, Butler's cultural attachments are not simply deemed politically inappropriate, but further framed as actively preventing the spread of global social justice (1999).[13] Invariably, then, some inequalities emerge as more in need of material attention than others.

MATERIAL FANTASIES

Thus far, I have been looking at ways in which the case for a feminist return to materiality has been made, focusing on how the delayed urgency of return narratives secures a materiality/culture split in order to bring together progress and loss narratives to share a vision of what needs to happen now in Western feminist theory. Further, I have been arguing that this vision of the future mobilizes affective investments to represent itself as both necessary and shared. In the rest of this chapter, I explore the narrative consolidation of the material return by focusing on related oppositions that the relationship between materiality and culture produces and relies on. In the last chapter, I highlighted the association of materiality with the social sciences and culture with the humanities and this

division's reliance on a theorization of sexuality as insubstantial "play." This complex of associations is further consolidated in these Western feminist return narratives, where the invocation to leave behind the overblown abstractions of cultural theory is often also one to relinquish queer play for feminist seriousness and the interdisciplinary humanities for disciplinary rigour. I extend that analysis here, highlighting how sexuality can only become understood in material terms in return narratives when figured in terms of harm rather than pleasure. In this respect, and as I begin to explore below, return narratives set up an antagonism between sexuality as "merely cultural" (in Butler's words), and sexuality as "culture bound." Only in the latter context is sexuality marked as worthy of material attention.[14] These opposed meanings of "culture" in Western feminist theory also have implications for how return narratives position "race." If sexuality is ambivalently positioned as between different meanings of culture, racial inequalities are always understood as material and worthy of attention. To phrase this otherwise, we might say that culture sticks to sexuality—and particularly queer theory—as the "opposite" of feminism, while materiality sticks to race.[15] But particularly when understood in transnational terms, as I elaborate below, the analysis of particular harm and "non-Western cultures" can become (con)fused, leading to intellectual and political dead-ends within Western feminist storytelling.

If we recall, many of the extracts discussed in previous sections of this chapter situate material returns as precipitated by the ongoing inequalities that feminism needs urgently to address. Because "women as a group are still poorer . . . [and] more subject to performing the lion's share of emotional and janitorial labour" (*Feminist Theory* 2003), because of "the very real social constraints and inequities once again facing women and men . . ." (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2000), feminist theorists must return to considerations of "unresolved questions of class and power" (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2002), with a concomitant renewal of attention to materialist "debates and praxis . . . in the real world" (*Feminist Review* 2000). The attention to materiality is essential if feminist theory is to be attentive to "economic, and related issues of justice" (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2002) and is to remain relevant and in tune with conditions of social inequality that are nationally and internationally pervasive. Yet, again as delineated throughout this chapter so far, the call to material attention is not enough; something has to be left behind, namely the cultural turn that has proved inadequate to the task of analyzing, let alone transforming, the social world.

Just as the disciplinary oppositions explored in the last two chapters are key to maintaining the separation between theories of representation and that social world that needs urgent attention, so too is the over-association of sexuality with cultural theory, both in terms of theoretical frameworks and the perceived nature of sexual injustice. These epistemological and political strands come together most explicitly in the characterization of queer theory as the quintessential opposite of a material return. A materialist feminism may thus be assumed directly to challenge

> the recent dominance of Judith Butler and queer theory within anglophone feminist thinking (*Feminist Review* 2000)

such that the move back to what is, and was, most politically pertinent in feminist theory is co-extensive with relinquishing the frivolities of a queer approach as anathema to a materialist approach. As one commentator astutely notes:

> In some versions of the story, this struggle solidifies into a battle between warring camps, where sexuality, queerness, performativity, and aesthetic play line up on one side of the divide against gender, feminism, narrative, and moral norms on the other. (*Differences* 2001)

Even in glosses such as this last one, where the problem of a queer/feminist opposition is illuminated, it is seen as resulting from ontological and epistemological differences that precede the antagonism. In my reading, these juxtapositions are central to the shared historiography necessary for a reader to "see sense" in her own right.

Here is a reminder of two of the examples I introduced towards the end of the last chapter—one ironic, one "straight"—both of which serve to emphasize queer theory's *active* superficiality in relation to feminist materialism:

> You know the scenarios: queer theory, feminism typically laments, faces the left's exhaustion at the real challenge of revolutionary change by throwing a party. It invites and cultivates gender dissidence; dresses up individualism to simulate political commitment; celebrates the feminine through drag; and always leaves time at the end of the night for some gay-male-only canonical fun. (*Feminist Theory* 2007)

Butler, like a number of postmodernists, particularly valorizes these, often "less serious" spaces—of play, masquerade, carnival—because it is here that cultural

constructions become visible as such and therefore open to challenge. (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

From a materialist feminist perspective, then, and in a language typical of that emphasis on individualized pleasure over political commitment,

Queer theory might be able to produce interesting cakes, but it uses the same ingredients every time. (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

It is not only cultural theory in general that Western feminist return narratives invite their reader to relinquish, then. It is a cultural theory suffused with queer pleasures rather than feminist commitments. In this last extract in particular, the assumption that we have already started to grow tired of using the "same ingredients every time" allows the casting aside of queer theory to feel like part of a feminist theoretical maturity.

This fundamental association of queer theory with frivolity is achieved in several ways in the broader literature too. First, queer theory (quite often in the person of Butler) is routinely critiqued for being inattentive to issues of social transformation (Seidman 1996; McNay 1999; Nussbaum 1999) or for conflating cultural and social transformation (Hennessy 1993; Fraser 1997). In work on the biomaterialist creativities of affect, as we have seen, queer theory might alternatively be blamed for being too focused on structural constraint and not focused enough on the capacities of feeling. The substance of the critique remains similar, however: that queer theory's individualistic and overdetermined play reproduces, rather than challenges, the status quo (particularly Massumi 2002; Sedgwick 2003; Hsieh 2008). We need more not less feeling in order to do the right thing. Second, feminist and queer theory are consistently counterposed, usually with an emphasis on the former's untrendy focus on oppression and the latter's seductive emphasis on individual "performance" (Martin 1994; Weed and Schor 1997; Jackson 2007). Third, and I will return to this part of the argument below, queer theory is situated as a uniquely Western concern (in terms of both subject and analytic object), while feminist new materialist approaches are deemed more mobile. In all three modes of association, Western feminist materialist approaches occupy an ethico-political high ground independent from queer concerns, while refusing a dominant position for themselves within the literature, a framing consistent with the journal accounts I have been examining thus far.

Queer preoccupations are not only framed as frivolous, however, but

also as culpable, as suggested by the attacks on Butler I have included in this and in the previous chapter. If queer theory distracts feminist attention away from real politics, its aims and approaches are not merely a lesser alternative, but a constitutive reason for the loss of feminist theoretical and political rigour. Queer theory actively leads both feminism and feminists astray, as suggested at the close of the last chapter, and more directly substitutes for feminist concerns. To be a queer theorist—and people who recognize themselves in such a designation will also know this anecdotally—is thus often to be cast as necessarily inattentive to broader social and political concerns. In the return narratives of Western feminist theory, a focus on sexuality through cultural theory (with queer theory as exemplary of this relationship) is not only inappropriate for feminist theory as politics, but it can also be *the cause* of the turn away from politics, the exemplar of the narcissistic concerns of the superficial over the fundamental, the Western over the global.[16] For Melissa Deem, these slippages mean that a critical focus on sexuality can be understood, implicitly or explicitly, as directly mitigating against the radical promise of political democracy feminism represents (2003). In terms of Western feminist storytelling, the problems feminism faces with respect to the urgent need to return to neglected material realities concern both the critique of sexuality's dominance and a move to disentangle oneself from its (apparently fatal) seductions. In Western feminist return narratives, queer theory is an anachronistic interruption, then; we must move on from it if we are to regain feminist disciplinary respect and political credibility.

Yet even though a queer "emphasis on . . . erotic pleasure and play" (Hennessy 1993: 965) is consistently opposed to the constraints of materiality, or to real pleasure with the capacity to transform the social, this should not be taken to suggest that sexuality only ever appears as frivolous culture in return narratives. It is, after all, a particular kind of thinking about sexuality—as pleasure, individuality, and fluidity—that is marked as problematic and exemplified by the excesses of queer theory. To return to the point I flagged in the introduction to this section, the place of sexuality in relation to culture is more ambivalent than my discussion of queer theory in this section might suggest. An emphasis on sexuality is given an opportunity to redeem itself, to figure itself anew as "sexual politics," if, and only if, the object of analysis is transformed from sexual play to sexual constraint. To offset the characterization of sexuality studies as "merely

cultural," in other words, we must take instances of sexuality as "culture bound" in order to demonstrate our commitment to a material return. To return to an extract mentioned earlier, we are given some indication as to how sexuality might be reframed as an appropriate object of materialist feminist analysis:

> Yet if women as a group are still poorer, less in control of their bodies and sexualities, more susceptible to humiliating sexual violence and more subject to performing the lion's share of emotional and janitorial labour without . . . recognition or remuneration, it would seem that little we do to performatively resignify gender affects these conditions. (*Feminist Theory* 2003)

Here "performative resignification" is set against women's ongoing inequality in ways familiar for a return narrative, but the primary tension is between particular objects of analysis—loss of control of sexuality, sexual violence—and the mismatched performative approach that we know is associated with queer approaches to sexuality. Queer theory, then, is inadequate to the task of analyzing and transforming inequality generally, and, indeed, also to the task of understanding sexuality itself as anything other than Western play. Importantly for Western feminist return narratives, sexuality can be considered an appropriate area of concern only when it is detached from the cultural turn it is said to typify and reattached to framings of sexuality as tied to the worst examples of patriarchal cultural norms and practices. Given its dubious role as that which hinders appropriate development of a renewed materialist feminism, sexuality counts as evidence of material inequality only in its most violent forms, only when it is most clearly constrained, most clearly straightforward evidence of social inequality: the "humiliating sexual violence" of the excerpt is emblematic here. Thus, when we come across a passage such as this one from *Feminist Theory*—

> A feminist politics must needs identify possibilities of intervention to effect social transformation, but an effective politics is one which recognizes the tightness of the constraints which bind women into the social circumstances in which they find themselves (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

—we understand that for sexuality to make the transition from frivolity to "effective politics" in return narratives, that "tightness" is everything.

The mutually exclusive relationship between cultural theory and the

material turn in Western feminist return narratives squeezes sexuality into one genre or another. From an affective viewpoint, the concern with heteronorms makes queer transgression a fantasy with no lasting value. If framed in queer terms, it can only be read as pleasure seeking and unconcerned with broader sexual constraint, a somewhat paradoxical representation of the theoretical development that gave us the social and political critiques of heteronormativity. If framed in materialist terms, sexuality can only be represented as fully controlled or violently enforced. Sexuality as an object of inquiry can thus only be pleasure or violence, freedom or constraint, and never both (or neither). My sense is that this opposition between cultural play and cultural binding in understanding sexuality is dominant in how we think about sexuality and one of the broader pernicious effects of the political grammar of return narratives. Two domains where this tension plays out very clearly come to mind: global sexual rights and sexual trafficking of women. The field of sexual rights was initially framed as a concern for women's sexual and reproductive rights in relation to control of fertility and disease (Corrêa and Petchesky 1994) and has more recently been broadened to include global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual or transgender (LGBT) rights (Petchesky 2000; Miller and Vance 2004). Yet despite this inclusion, there is little attention to the overlaps between the "separate" arenas; the former tends to remain the preserve of feminists and the latter of LGBT activists, in ways that resonate with the return narratives I have been tracking here. LGBT rights are thus for recognition or freedom to sexual expression; reproductive rights concern survival or freedom from coercion. That they may overlap, and not only when homophobia is at its most violent, is rarely acknowledged in the literature.[17] The problem is not simply mutual exclusion with regard to opposed concerns, however; it is a problem of how these concerns are understood as of a radically different order from the start.

Debates about how to theorize or intervene in international sex trafficking of women are similarly polarized. Women who are trafficked for sex are largely held up as the epitome of victimization, in ways that make their own labour struggles, for example, difficult to conceptualize or engage with adequately. In this regard, Rutvica Andrijasevic writes persuasively about the erasure of trafficked sex workers from debates about citizenship (2003), Julia O'Connell Davidson about the lack of attention to "demand" for women trafficked for sex (2006a), and Almas Sayeed about the problematic

adoption of anti-trafficking agendas as part of international U.S. control (2006). Yet, in my view rather oddly, the presence of agency within trafficking domains is also often theorized as straightforward evidence of freedom from constraint, as if the one mitigated against the presence of the other. In both rights and trafficking debates, it seems to me that the available languages for thinking about global sexual meaning, the ways in which power operates in complex ways and through multiplication rather than simplification of discourses, remain impoverished. They tend, implicitly or explicitly, to take us back to the debates between Fraser and Butler I began this chapter with, where recognition or redistribution are modes attached to static identity positions. Or they ask us to adjudicate between pleasures and harms in ways that always assume we know in advance which practices and identities go with which, and further assume that a given practice could not be both.[18] Most often, too, "sexual freedom" and "sexual harm" are interpreted through a Western/non-Western binary, where the introduction of the former involves a geographical or conceptual transformation in line with norms of Western sexual liberation.

As we have seen, the exclusive relationship between the cultural and material turns leaves sexuality stranded, forced to be one or the other thing: pleasure or violence, freedom or constraint. But it is not simply that sexuality as an object of inquiry is polarized; so too are its theorists. To choose, or be understood to choose, pleasure/freedom over violence/constraint, also locates the sexual *theorist* as Western or Westernized. In return narratives, unless sexuality is theorized as violence/constraint, it figures as the opposite of "globality," as a limited concern with sexual identity, either in terms of its pleasures and transgressive capacities or in terms of the need for political recognition. One of the effects of this is to assume that the growth of sexual movements globally and their use of "Western" terminology to describe sexual subjectivity—lesbian, gay, bisexual, but also homophobia, closeting, and so forth—are irredeemably "Westernized" and simple impositions (Boyce 2006; Hemmings 2007b). Oddly enough, while such understandings valorize non-Western knowledges and sites, they tend to do so in ahistorical ways that ignore flows of meaning through, for example, colonialism, which means that both the "Western" and "non-Western" inform one another in complex ways. As Judith Butler has recently explored, understanding the sexual constraints of "pre-modern others" in opposition to the sexual freedoms of Western

subjects turns acceptance of sexual freedom into a litmus test for citizenship for "global others," particularly Muslim others (2008b).[19]

In many cases, Western feminist return narratives make this spatial distinction explicit, contrasting the ineffective myopia of (Western) cultural approaches with the importance of social theory's global capacities:

> I believe it is our responsibility as social theorists to demystify a "fluidity" that has been produced at the expense of so many people in the US and throughout the world. When we settle for merely celebrating prevailing social conditions, we miss an opportunity to work on developing authentic forms of political resistance. (*Feminist Review* 2000)

A theoretical and political focus on fluidity is here cast as familiarly complicit with, or even productive of, social inequalities to the point that it can only be understood as celebrating the status quo. In my analysis, too, this excerpt only makes sense when we know that this celebration of "prevailing social conditions" and embrace of "fluidity" refers to queer theory as emblematic of cultural theory more generally. It is marginal Western sexual subjects more than any other who are framed as invested in deconstructing identity (fluidity) and transgressing social norms—particularly of gender—from within those norms. Thus, in return narratives, parody slips into praise. Instead, "authentic . . . political resistance" can be located both via those excluded in the United States and "throughout the world," marking "fluidity" as absolutely "local" (and limited even in that respect) and materiality (coded in the extract via "social conditions" and "authentic . . . resistance") as global. Somewhat ironically, if sexuality can only be imagined as an appropriate object in Western feminist return narratives when it appears as abjection, political transformation relies more than ever on a history of progress in which constraining conditions will be replaced by the very pleasures return narratives otherwise demonize. In this respect, the message of return narratives might more properly be that queer sexual play is inappropriate only all the while there are "others" who cannot enjoy its privileges.

MATERIAL CONCLUSIONS

Western feminist return narratives consistently harness the overarching opposition between representation and materiality to these spatial opposi-

tions, highlighting ways in which their political grammar feeds into the temporality of Western modernity that has been so widely critiqued. "The West" is the domain of poststructuralism and postmodernism, "the world" the domain of the material. Thus:

> The focus on representation has led to a relative neglect of socio-economic concerns. The recognition of the complexity of global issues (sadly, not reflected in this issue) means there is much work for feminists to do. We are left with the question of what new kinds of alliance might be possible in a post-unitary feminist landscape. (*Feminist Review* 1999)

> One of the problems with the whole anti-essentialist movement now is that it tends to eradicate commonalities among women. I just recently spent a month in India and I do feel that despite cultural and geographic and economic differences I have more in common with a lot of the women in India than I do with a lot of the men in my own country. (*European Journal of Women's Studies* 2002)

The first extract above reiterates the tension between "representation" and neglected "socio-economic concerns," locating the need for a return to "alliance" over "post-unitary" approaches in the "recognition of the complexity of global issues." While perhaps there is scope for deconstruction in contexts of privilege, both extracts imply, an emphasis on "commonalities among women" remains essential for global solidarity and the capacity to transform social relations. The "anti-essentialist movement" (though what this might be remains obscure) is all very well, but not in the face of those complex global issues or as a way of bridging differences with Indian women. That this renewed commitment to shared feminist aims will be "much work"—a phrase recalling one discussed earlier warning eager materialists of the "many hard tasks awaiting them in the real world" (*Feminist Review* 2000)—should come as no surprise, given the bond between materiality and oppression established in return narratives. But in locating the greatest necessity for a Western theoretical and political "return" to materiality in "the global," in finding the worst examples of that oppression "elsewhere," a temporal as well as spatial dynamic between "the West" and "the rest" is enacted. We return to a Western past, by geographically turning to another present (Wiegman 1999/2000: 118). Thus Western feminist return narratives have a double movement in this context. The return is both to a Western theoretical moment before the interruptions of poststructuralism, on the one hand, and to a space of greater (usually

patriarchal and cultural) oppression, on the other. It is the turn to "the global" that necessitates this responsible Western feminist theoretical turn, bringing the Western past and the non-Western present together as ideal companions.

The Western feminist desire for "global others" to carry the burden of displaced anxiety about the nature of the political has a long history of critique, of course. Thus Kapur notes wryly that the investment in the "Third World Woman" as particularly oppressed ignores that same subject's individual and political desires: she needs to be rescued or fed, she never needs sex or intimacy (2001). Nirmal Puwar similarly challenges the fetishization necessary for Western feminist theory to imagine that rescuing "others" will deliver it from its own travails: "The future is seen to lie with the refugee or the subaltern woman who act as crystal balls to the theoretical future. In these visions: For whom are we expecting teleological deliverance? Whose fantasies are projected in this telos?" (2005: 18). Importantly, critics of "the Western feminist gaze" focus on the role of representation, not as opposed to material conditions of global inequality, but as central in establishing and maintaining global power relations. For theorists such as Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Chandra Mohanty (2003 [1988]), most famously, racialized and gendered representation is a formative mode of Western "othering" and key to how Western subjects become themselves in the world. For Spivak, in particular, Western subjects imagine themselves "free" through imagining others as needing liberation (social, economic, or sexual): through representation, and not in advance of the same (1999a).

For Western feminist return narratives to juxtapose the "real" of the global with "the abstraction" of the cultural turn is thus, perversely indeed, to erase postcolonial critiques of representation as one of the primary means through which global inequalities and fantasies of the "culture-bound" are perpetuated (Trinh 1989; Suleri 1992; Chow 1994; Ang 2001). In particular, while arguing for the importance of prioritizing material accounts of economic and global justice, return narratives leapfrog back and forth across literature focusing on the legacies of colonialism in Western feminist theory. As Antoinette Burton notes, those who insist that feminist theory move beyond the cultural turn frequently "rehabilitate 'the social' . . . without significant reference to either the fact of colonialism or the historical impact of decolonization on the social sciences from the

1960s onwards" (2001: 64). In casting cultural approaches to meaning as an interruption to concerns with the social world, return narratives evacuate Western feminist theory of its history of critical race work in order to claim an ethical high ground in the present. In the process, postcolonial subjects (of critique) are transformed into postcolonial objects (of importance), with direct implications for who is able to occupy the subject position of Western feminist.

The vilification of the cultural turn in return narratives, with little attention to its political history, allows a vision of "the lost political" to be lamented and recuperated through a specific temporality. As I hope I have shown, a repeated rhetorical insistence that anti-essentialist lessons have been learned (and thus no longer need to be attended to) enables Western feminist theory's lost material object to be reintroduced as material harm within "the global," with little attention to the legacy of either colonialism or its critiques. The separation of poststructuralism and postmodernism from feminism in these return narratives produces an "innocent" feminist emphasis on global social justice without any attention to the racialized fantasies that underpin this temporal and spatial relation. As I have argued throughout this chapter, much of the textual work necessary to this displacement is achieved by positioning "sexuality" ambivalently in relation to two opposed understandings of "culture"; thus, the cultural turn can be abandoned willingly in favour of more laudable endeavours to free others of their cultural bindings. If Western feminist theorists do not want to be accused of being "merely cultural," then they most certainly do not want to be accused of being "merely Western." In agreeing that we have had enough cultural theory, then, we enact a common historiography whose sexual and racial pivots we might otherwise not wish to be called upon to endorse. When we say "yes" to a Western feminist call to return to "the material" we should be aware what else we might be saying "yes" to.