LOSS

2

As this nicely acerbic quotation that follows suggests, I am certainly not the only critic of the Western feminist progress narratives explored in the previous chapter:

> When you make your reputation by suppressing those old feminist traditions of the collective, or when you abandon the politics of citation, as it was called, as you seek to deliver your own hand-stamped version of "strategies," or when you write feminist theory that politely overlooks its social application, just remember: The Party means you never have to say you're sorry. (*Signs* 2000)

Other accounts insist that descriptions of Western feminist theory as moving from singularity to difference, static uniformity to sophisticated proliferation, are over-simplified and take a tone of scepticism similar to my own in the last chapter. To introduce another example:

> "In the past," the implication is, there were the "theory wars" between Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, radi-

cal feminism, liberal feminism and so on. But "in the present," there is a body of developing "feminist theory"—a feminist social theory that has shed those earlier naiveties—and, in spite of a few remaining internal fractures, all right-thinking (non-essentialist) feminists adhere to this new sophisticated form. And implicitly, but sometimes also explicitly, people who do not agree or who advance considerably different ideas and ways of working are implied to be deficient in their scholarly and/or political credentials. (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

Where in progress narratives it is common to put scare quotes around terms associated with the 1970s, such as "radical feminism," "the patriarchy," and so forth, here the dynamic is reversed. What constitute past and present and the presumed relationship between them are challenged, as are the assumptions about what counts as feminist theory in the present. The above excerpt emphasizes the limits of such a progress narrative—I particularly like the ironic "in spite of a few remaining internal fractures"—and, importantly, the impact that such certainty about the past and present has on subjects of feminist theory. If, the text suggests, particular eras and schools of thought are understood to be essentialist in comparison with the "right-thinking" present, individual writers holding views other than those "right" ones are likely to be tarnished with the same brush. Essentialism becomes something that sticks ontologically as well as theoretically and historically, such that one might be, or think another to be, "an essentialist feminist." On the basis of arguments made in the previous chapter, I would also add that this characterization raises the spectre of essentialism as racism in particular, making the doubled accusation one feminists will want to transcend rather than embody.

Critiques of a Western feminist progress narrative from this perspective tend to underscore its mythic status, countering the conviction that feminist theory has become ever more multiple with correctives that emphasize instead the lost multiplicity of the past. For example, in its specific disciplinary context, the following extract stresses that the past was always already concerned with the sophisticated questions wrongly understood as the unique property of the present:

I should emphasize that this early work, contrary to some of the myths about the evolution of feminist criticism . . . was already concerned with the intersections of literary form and the structure of gender relations. (*Signs* 2000)

Importantly, such correctives stress that what has been left out of Western feminist progress narratives should be understood at the level of epistemology as well as in terms of object of inquiry. Thus "early work . . . was already concerned with the intersections of literary form" and gender, not just with what literary texts were being read in a more conventional critique of the male canon, say. While I am in considerable agreement with many of the questions loss narratives raise in relation to representations of the recent history of Western feminist theory as one of progressive evolution, the counter-claims of loss narratives create their own relentless historiography in turn. These narratives are not so much interested in a history of Western feminist theory as one *of multiplicity*, but as one that has abandoned multiplicity for increasingly singularity, leading to present myopia. Thus loss narratives both emphasize past complexity and reinflect celebrations of its advances, indicating instead that fêted theoretical trajectories have in fact contributed to feminist criticism's demise. Again in the context of literature, for example, we hear that:

> Indeed, there are reasons to consider a number of developments in the eighties and nineties a hazard to the vitality of feminist literary studies. (*Critical Inquiry* 1998)

In this respect, I am as sceptical of many of the central presumptions of the counter-claims of loss narratives as I am of progress narratives. These alternative shows of certainty do not disrupt the logic of progress narratives other than superficially: they retain the same history, revising its movement as one from multiplicity to singularity, openness to narrowness, and so on. And as we shall see, in so doing they too create their own favorite feminist demons to replace the vilified "radical feminist" whose stereotyping in progress narratives they are right to contest.

Western feminist progress and loss narratives are thus locked into a mutually reinforcing battle for meaning within a common storyline. While they each represent their own logic as singular and as running directly counter to the other, their use of similar markers and points of transition might better be read as a debate within the same terrain. Even in the few extracts engaged with in this chapter thus far, it is clear that we are dealing with a call and response mode in both narrative forms. In this sense, my own division of Western feminist storytelling into discrete narrative strands through the book is something of a misrepresentation. It gives a false impression of their independence, perhaps, and makes it difficult to

gain a flavour of the ways in which they circle round one another or intersect in context. For example, an author may make use of a progress narrative at one point in a text, only to introduce aspects of a loss narrative later on in the same article, without this disrupting their overall argument. Special issues of journals on a common theme may include pieces that endorse one or other narrative, but otherwise reinforce a third position. In teaching contexts we may—I know I certainly do—provide accounts of feminist theory that emphasis its progress, while cautioning students not to abandon past accounts as uniform. Look how diverse feminist theory has become, there are now so many "feminisms" we might say; yet let us be careful not to jettison feminist classics too soon, our foremothers have much to teach us. Importantly, these different inflections do not appear contradictory—if our foremothers have much to teach us, might there not be a question mark over the assumption of increased diversity?—precisely because they employ similar markers and operate with a similar temporality. It is the closeness of these narratives, their mutual imbrication, that allows for such slippage and performs the conditions necessary for return narratives to spin their own version of Western feminist storytelling, as I will explore in the next chapter.

In their "pure form," both progress and loss narratives refute the possibility of the other version, of course, and this lends to a consideration of them independently. Both inflect their rendition of Western feminist theory as common to all and precisely not one version of a story that might be differently inflected. Both present their own narrative as a truth tale that foregrounds complexity over singularity and that offers the best present and future for feminist theory. Both assume a reader who recognizes herself and her history in the narrative and who is both the subject of the tale told and thus also the subject of feminist theory. She may need some coaxing, but she will recognize herself in the narrative, or, if not, she will become its antiheroine, potentially locating herself outside feminism altogether. In other words, while the narrative forms do actively speak to one another and are intertwined, their mode is emphatically singular. While the presence of different narratives is of course acknowledged, these are consistently managed through a generational discourse that I examine in more depth later in the chapter.

Given their intimate appeal to a particular subject of feminist theory, it is not surprising that both progress and loss narratives are also powerful in affective terms. They both construct a heroine who inhabits a positive

affective state or a negative affective state in progress or loss narratives respectively. Both require emotional attachment to the tale told in order to remain its subject and continue to safeguard or transform feminist meaning in heroic mode. Both make use of prior, atextual attachments to feminism, assume that the reader wants to be a "good" feminist and not a "bad" one, and propose that there is only one way to be properly feminist in the current moment. Narratives of progress and loss in Western feminist storytelling presume an active reader, then, one who wants to contribute to the health rather than demise of feminism and who will tell a tale that allows her to occupy the present in ways she can be content with. These narrative appeals draw me in and spin me round, sometimes spit me out. My relationship to loss narratives, in particular, seems governed by profound ambivalence, as I indicate through this chapter. On the one hand, I feel pleased when loss narratives counter what I also perceive as misrepresentations of feminist theory written in the 1970s. I approve of the mission to rescue feminist theorists mischaracterized as essentialist and too casually dismissed on that basis. I know well the ease with which a progress narrative is taken up institutionally to mitigate against support for academic feminism in the present, how quickly celebrations turn. But on the other hand, as will become clear through this chapter, I am not the ideal subject of a Western feminist loss narrative, by any means. I am also interpolated as its antiheroine, an example of a generation of academic feminists who do not, cannot by virtue of age in fact, remember what has been lost. And this makes me cross, of course, because one prefers not to be demonized. That crossness in turn sets me up in opposition to my forced narrative exclusion, and that has its own curious, resistant pleasures too. My ambivalence in relation to loss narratives makes it impossible for me to occupy one affective state or the other, so instead I have to be content with trying to transform restlessness into reflexivity, to see if this failure might provide some useful reflections on feminist knowledge.

WHAT HAVE WE LOST?

Many of the general characteristics of Western feminist loss narratives can be traced in the following passage:

"Then and there," back in the 1970s, we saw ourselves, as many other feminists did, as "producers of feminist theory" which then informed and was changed by

> our practice as feminists; and we entered the academy . . . "to know and therefore to change the world." Over the period that has led to "now and here," it has been interesting to observe the gradual assimilation of academic feminism, and the entry into it of successive cohorts who "came to feminism" through the text rather than through political practice. One of the results of the passing of time and the perhaps necessary correlates of assimilation has been the rise of a distinct category of "feminist theory" and a distinctive professional category of "feminist theorists." What has supported this is a gradually decreasing awareness of the earlier feminist critique of theory as "ideas" produced through material practices cross-cut by the operations of power. (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

In this extract the 1970s is reclaimed as a site of energy and praxis, while the present is marked by its "assimilation" (a term used twice) and political memory loss. The loss narrative uses similar markers to the progress narrative, but highlights rather different aspects, framing them through opposing values. Rather than embodying sophistication, then, later periods of feminist theory are represented as co-opted, professionalized, and peopled by indistinguishable "successive cohorts" who lack a political practice to inform their feminist knowledge production. As in Western feminist progress narratives, it is generational inflections that allow the narrative to make sense. Where feminist subjects of the political past are naïve or exclusionary in progress narratives, in loss narratives it is feminist theoretical subjects of the present who fail in their feminist radicalism. Further, in loss narratives, generational rhetoric allows the narrator to remain distinct from the "feminist professional" of the co-opted present, even where she occupies the same institutional terrain.

In both this example from *Feminist Theory* and throughout loss narratives momentum is produced through binary comparisons and a consistent temporal frame. Similar oppositions work through the glosses, but where in progress narratives the relationship between terms such as practice and critique, activist and professional, or sameness and difference charted a positive development towards sophisticated present multiplicity, in loss narratives they chart the opposite. The move from practice to theory, for example, is a sign of contemporary myopia, and the move from activist to professional concerns marks a reduction rather than expansion of feminist possibilities in the present. In each case the first term is imbued with integrity and the latter with opportunism. In this respect, representing these relationships in hierarchical as well as temporal terms as prac-

tice→theory or world→text, as I also did in the last chapter, maps a downward trajectory within Western feminist theory, a loss of its potential rather than a celebration of its institutional or epistemological successes. This renarration of relations between binary terms is most explicit where they are not only reinflected as suggested, but are inverted, such that we move not from singularity to proliferation as suggested in progress narratives, but from proliferation to singularity, as suggested in the following example:

"Against two decades of an incredibly rich multiplicity of theorising, feminist theory is now increasingly becoming a singular entity" (in *Australian Feminist Studies* 1998)

As I flagged in the introduction to this chapter, the binary relation of multiplicity → singularity is the primary textual opposition through which loss narratives are expressed as laments. We move from richness to a singularity that poses as multiplicity, and these poses themselves constitute a sign of feminism's demise. This primary opposition governs a range of other oppositions that describe this lament and codes the nostalgia of loss narratives as ironically pivotal for hope. We must look back to have a future. In that we are clearly enjoined to identify with multiplicity over singularity, loss narratives also require identification with the past. The true subject of feminist theory remains the same as in the past, but that position is currently occupied by a pretender.

These textual oppositions are also governed by their temporality. Western feminist theory moves from an implicit or explicit 1970s richness to a 1990s narrowness, a chronology that charts the move from a concern with political transformation to a concern with professional advancement. In the example from *Feminist Theory* above, the lamentable present is arrived at through a euphemistic "passing of time"; in the example from *Australian Feminist Studies,* the barren 1990s and beyond is explicitly counterposed to a fertile 1970s and 1980s. In both cases "the passing of time" takes us from radical to mainstream, from vibrant to domestic feminist theory, such that its capacities can now be said to have become severely limited. A further example from *Australian Feminist Studies* underlines the point:

The feminist theory which in the 1970s and 1980s gained its energy from a marginal speaking position outside institutional, intellectual, and disciplinary power structures, has now generally become mainstream, orthodox, successful, and powerful. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2000)

In this excerpt similar radical weight is given to the 1970s and 1980s as precursors to the "orthodox" 1990s. Indeed, in loss narratives the 1980s is rarely directly engaged with, either sandwiched between the 1970s past and the present (1990s or 2000s, depending on time of writing) or identified with rather than against that earlier period. Institutionalization and the diminution of feminist theory more generally are thus consistently rendered as a recent problem.

Yet we know from our analysis of Western feminist progress narratives that there are real difficulties with glossing over the 1980s, given what this decade is deemed to include above all else. The euphemistic glossing over the 1980s, or its association with an earlier political integrity, references a profound ambivalence about the place the identity critiques that occupy that decade have in both progress and loss narratives. On the one hand, Western feminist loss narratives tell a story of feminism's demise, a downward trajectory from vibrancy to stasis. On the other, they must take care not to dismiss black feminist or lesbian critiques of essentialism, since this would only confirm the accusations of racism or heteronormativity made about the 1970s (or "earlier feminisms") in progress narratives. Such an error would resonate back and forth across loss narratives, calling past multiplicity into doubt and begging questions about the integrity of the current lament, as well as the subjects of nostalgia. Loss narratives' caution in relation to the "difference critiques" that both progress and loss narratives locate firmly in the 1980s is aptly expressed in the next extract:

> Universities have clearly offered opportunities to many students of Women's Studies and provided careers for academic feminists. They have also afforded spaces in which ever more sophisticated feminist thinking can be produced. But there has been a price to pay in terms of depoliticization and exclusion. . . . Issues are no longer as clear as they were once imagined to be and feminist work may have a tendency to become inward-looking. . . .
>
> Critiques of essentialism have brought contradictory possibilities. On the one hand, there have been positive gains from the recognition of difference whilst, on the other, loss of the imagined community of "sisterhood" has led to fragmentation and disrupted political cohesion. (*Feminist Review* 1999)

While "opportunities" and positive gains over time are here acknowledged, "the price" remains the same as in more condemnatory glosses, referencing "depoliticization and exclusion" alongside the political uncertainty

such critiques have wrought. The excerpt simultaneously asserts the importance of critiques of essentialism and laments a loss of cohesion, a potentially untenable contradiction enabled here by the framing of the "sisterhood" as always having been imagined. Further, it is "loss of the imagined community" that is grammatically active in causing "fragmentation," not the subjects of those "critiques of essentialism," or even the critiques themselves. I take both the ambivalence and the use of active and passive voices in the above passage as emblematic of the uncertainty of where to place identity critiques in the story of Western feminist theory's demise. It is a particularly good account of what is at stake in loss narratives. We know that the fantasy of "sisterhood" cannot be sustained, the extract seems to suggest, but perhaps this risk is inevitable for the maintenance of feminist imagination.

HOW DID WE COME TO LOSE WHAT HAS BEEN LOST?

As we can already begin to see, what is supposed to have happened in the 1980s is textually managed in two main ways in Western feminist loss narratives. It is glossed over and not mentioned, except implicitly, or it is retrospectively fused with the 1970s, represented as part of the political vibrancy the 1990s abandoned. In both extracts from *Australian Feminist Studies* introduced above, for example, the "two decades" of rich theorizing are contrasted to its current mainstream failures. The 1980s—that represents black, postcolonial, and/or lesbian critiques in both stories—is thus claimed for radicalism in loss narratives, where it is claimed for poststructuralist or postmodern politics in progress narratives. There are several intersecting ways in which any anxiety about temporality and politics is allayed in loss narratives. One central way is to indict increasingly abstract and obscure language use within feminist theory as constituting both *the sign* of a current lack of political engagement and as actively *creating* an elite culture of feminist theorists willing and able to share this language. The following example from *Signs* is a particularly strong version of this tendency:

> I am baffled at what I view as one of the disadvantages of having the feminist movement institutionalized in the academy—namely, its apparent need to adopt one of the worst characteristics of that institution, its separating, alienating, exclusive, and, to my mind, often ugly and off-putting language. (*Signs* 2000)

The "ugly and off-putting language" constitutes Exhibit A in the case against current feminist theory. This evidence can be assessed by everywoman. "Look at how (obviously) ugly and off-putting this language is"; "Yes," agrees the jury, "it most certainly is." Indeed, it is frequently the tone of feminist theory more generally that is the object of scorn (or, rather coyly, bafflement here) in loss narratives. Not only "separating," "alienating," and "ugly," theory in the present lacks the passion of early feminist knowledge production, a sad state of affairs that directly represents its lack of political commitment. The following extracts underline this point:

> Critical election, abjection, and obscurantism perform a disservice to the libertarian politics and pedagogies endorsed by many of those whose astute ideas play a justly prominent part in feminist thinking. (*Critical Inquiry* 1998)

> In place of cynicism, academic feminism ought to be considering ways to recapture at least some of the spirit of our earlier political action. (*Signs* 2000)

There is something interesting going on here concerning the relationship between language and politics, expression and action. In part, the rather uncontroversial assumption that language and politics have a direct relationship to one another is underwritten by a prior assumption, namely that we already know what politics is and that it is clear therefore what kind of language should be used in the production of a politicized feminist knowledge. But this insistence that ("ugly," "obscurantist") language constitutes *the* sign of the depoliticization of feminist theory is also one way in which loss narratives can ensure that it is academic feminism rather than identity politics that acts as catalyst for the turn away from feminist theory as activism. It is the increase in theoretical production and abstraction and not the critique of "woman" as the ground of knowledge and transformation that leads to the problems inherent in the apolitical present.

I am particularly struck by the emotional registers used to express this aspect of loss narratives. As we see above, the descriptions of and responses to loss of theoretical accessibility are not at all neutral. Not only are they "ugly" and so forth but they also express "cynicism" and "abjection" in a direct inversion of the positive registers claimed for the same theoretical moves in progress narratives. It is progress narratives that express lack of hope then, in truth, and loss narratives that express appropriate anger at the loss of "the spirit of our earlier political action." The affective appeal here asks its reader to consider if they too may have felt

"stupid" in reading theory they did not feel included in and offers the possibility of reframing exclusion as indignation and political acumen. Affectively, then, loss is transformed through textual displacement in ways that allow the subject of what has been lost to occupy the present despite her attachment to the past. Through a focus on off-putting abstraction, the "universality" critiqued so roundly in progress narratives is reclaimed in loss narratives not as exclusionary, but as the basis of a revitalized feminist theory accessible to all.[1]

It is but a short step from the identification of abstraction as sign of depoliticization to the identification of the academy itself, and more particularly academic feminism, as responsible for what has been lost in feminist theory. The move from an active, thriving feminism—including feminist knowledge production—to a myopic, singular "Feminist Theory" is thus also, and primarily, narrated in terms of a move from politics to institutionalization. As the extracts below emphasize, Western feminist loss narratives must work to insist that feminism's original interest in producing work that challenged the status quo has dwindled with its increasing location inside the "ivory tower," and with it the very purpose of feminist theory:

> For what was once the subversive, intellectual arm of a thriving grassroots movement has been institutionalized and professionalized, while the movement that launched our enterprise is far less activist, confident, or popular. (*Signs* 2000)

> Has this once dissident interdisciplinary body of theories and practices mutated into a corpse? What use is insubordination and defiance that has morphed into compliance and conformity? (*Feminist Theory* 2003)

Where feminist theory was once "dissident" and "subversive" due to its links with a grassroots feminist movement, now we are witnessing a "growing separation from ongoing social, cultural, and political developments" (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2000). Academic programmes that have institutionalized feminist knowledge production have prioritized university procedures and expectations. In doing so, what was previously the "intellectual arm" of the feminist movement has moved further and further away from its foundational aims. This is a hugely common theme that is probably familiar to many readers as the dominant account of what has happened in feminist theory, where this is a tragic tale. To give just a couple of additional examples then:

> These programs are far from the origins of women's studies, which was to use the academic arena to deepen our understanding of the problems women face and to encourage women to be activists. Maybe some women's studies programs do still see it that way, but I am not sure that the evolution of feminist theory has furthered these goals. (*Signs* 1996)

> Since its beginning, feminism was meant as a social movement, having political tasks and achievements. Feminism seems now to be more strictly connected to academic research and institutions. What does this mean? Is feminism becoming less political and more theoretical? (*European Journal of Women's Studies* 2003)

Both of the above excerpts are sure that these shifts have occurred, and both express this certainty in similar ways. Despite being separated by seven years and with different publication venues geographically speaking (the first speaks to an international, but predominantly U.S. audience, the second an international, but predominantly European audience), both glosses assume that the original goals of academic institutionalization of feminism were shared and that these goals have now been abandoned. As with the questions at the end of the prior example from *Feminist Theory*, the questions at the end of the second extract here do not represent real ambivalence, since feminism's new allegiance to institutions over "political tasks" has already been established in the previous sentences. And the acknowledgment that not all women's studies sites have changed position, while seeming to offer qualification, is not an endorsement of a multiplicity of differently political women's studies site, but instead only affirms that there is one clear way that feminist theory can be and remain political.

Central to the coherence of all of the above fragments are the familiar oppositions between activist and institutional locations, theory and practice. In Western feminist loss narratives, theory's efficacy is always to be judged outside of itself, in locations other than those where it was produced. Thus,

> The test [of feminism and other social movements or theories] must ultimately be their success in identifying the conditions of existence and of coming into being of less oppressive forms of social and intellectual community. (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

On one level, I think few academic feminist writers, myself included, would take issue with the belief that feminist theory assumes a political life

and meaning beyond the page or the academy. That there might be tests of feminist theory other than its institutional validation is not particularly contentious. What is particular to Western feminist loss narratives, however, is the certainty that this success can be measured along the lines of a theory/practice split that privileges the latter and sees the two as mutually exclusive.[2] It is an *a priori* opposition, one that lends weight to the earlier critique of abstract language as a major contributor to feminism's losses. A politics of theory thus always comes from its use and recognition "elsewhere," in other words; politics is always external to "the academy." These mutually exclusive terms are overlaid on a chronology that locates politics and feminist activism firmly in the past, and the present as devoid of community attachment or responsibility. In contrast, we are told,

> There is an older feminist approach that sees ideas as the shared social productions of epistemic communities and their gatekeepers and hierarchies, and not as the unique production of "great minds." In this more subversive vein of feminist thinking, what counts as "knowledge" is seen as a dominant discourse. . . . This older feminist analysis has resonant implications for the state and status of feminist theory. It questions how "the theorists" get created as well as how "(real) theory" is seen to be formulated and its knowledge-claims articulated. (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

This "older feminist analysis" interrogates the politics of institutional knowledge practices, is community focused, and is less self-interested than the work of contemporary feminist "theorists," those "great minds" supported by a system feminists were previously disinvested in. The use of inverted commas, as in so many progress and loss narratives, underscores the declared scepticism at the current state of feminist theory. These are emphatically not "great minds"; this is not feminist "knowledge"; these are not even perhaps feminist "theorists" at all. Interesting to me here too is the insistence on collaborative, politicized approaches as belonging to the past (twice represented as "older"), despite their linguistically active—"resonant"—ability to question what counts as "(real) theory" and how "knowledge-claims" are formulated in the present. This presumed move from collaboration to individual authorship within feminist production makes sense because it chimes with the overarching shift from multiplicity → singularity that governs loss narratives.

As Robyn Wiegman has argued in her excavations of what she terms

"apocalyptic feminism," the dystopian chronological view is always nostalgic, always seeking rectification of ills through a reinstitution of similarity (1999/2000; 2002; 2003). The capacities of past political critique can only be achieved by a reintroduction of its (identical) concerns, objects, and subjects. As I have been exploring thus far in this chapter, a dystopic approach is also always looking to displace its "bad feelings" onto other spaces and subjects, retaining the lament but divesting itself of mal-intent. Loss narratives resist an appreciation of any contests over the meaning of that key term "the political," either in the past or the present; deviation from these "older approaches" is always to be placed outside of the political rather than as an engagement with what the political might be (2004). Academic feminism is thus inauthentic, not-actually-feminism—"Theory," remember—rather than a feminism of a different, if disputed, kind. Yet in order for the lament of the loss narrative to make any sense, even within this rather narrow view of what constitutes politics, feminism must first be understood as over, as having had its day, and the imagination of the political that the loss narrative relies on must have been abandoned.[3]

As I suggested in the introduction, and as numerous other commentators have noted, nothing seems to be announced quite so consistently as the death of feminism (Ferrier 2003; McMahon 2005). As Mary Hawkesworth shows us, "Between 1989 and 2001 . . . a Lexis-Nexis search of English-language newspapers turned up eighty-six articles referring to the death of feminism and an additional seventy-four referring to the postfeminist era" (2004: 962–63). Indeed, statements such as

> Perhaps I am just mourning what I sense is the end of feminist activism, at least among that large group of feminists who now reside behind the walls of the university (*Signs* 2000)

are extremely common in loss narratives. As Hawkesworth further insists, the acceptance that such declarations are simply descriptive "erases the social justice activism of women around the globe while covering the traces of the erasure" (2004: 983), but knowing this does not seem to alter the certainty such announcements engender. One the one hand, and as I have already argued, it can be useful to debunk such assertions with reference to the growth of feminist movements globally, the temporally and spatially uneven international life of feminist projects, and the problems of thinking about activism and indeed knowledge in linear, rather

than cyclical terms, say. But a sole focus on what is left out of Western feminist loss narratives can only go so far. It misses the importance of that "feminist death" for the internal coherence of the Western feminist loss narrative. Loss narratives *require* the "death of feminism" in order to retain a static and familiar object to be lamented, in order to ensure at all costs that they do not encounter that object in the present, and in order to imagine a future in which that familiar feminism can be recovered by the same subjects as those who keen for its current internment. Where in progress narratives the temporality is forward looking and active, and the past stolid and inward looking, in loss narratives the temporal gaze moves both backwards and forwards, anticipating the return that is the focus of the next chapter. The present has to be evacuated of feminist political value (otherwise why the lament?), the past has to be that which has been lost, but also, and importantly, a good object worthy of being recovered (otherwise its loss might not be lament-worthy). And the subject of loss narratives must be mournful but hopeful, bitterness the property of those other (anti- or quasi-) feminists who would narrow feminism's prior utopian reach because of their own deluded critical attachments. The current problems central to the loss narrative will be resolved then, but—and always—not just yet:

> We look forward to 10 or 15 years' time, when feminist theory is as thoroughly informed and transformed by feminist principles and practices as is feminist work on epistemology, methodology and ethics. (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

The future, as the next chapter on return narratives further delineates, must belong to the subjects of the past if the loss narrative is to be resolved. Feelings of pain and abandonment that typify loss narratives must be reproduced in the present, to ensure that future (and no other) is the one validated. Lisa Adkins provides a critique of discourses that mourn the "passing of feminism" that is similar to my own and that locate this as problematically reproducing broader social stories of feminism as over (2004: 40–41). Yet Adkins also places those she critiques as "out of time," that is, anachronistic, because of their attachment to previous ways of doing things (both political and theoretical), which is the point that I depart from her analysis. Instead, I think of these backwards glances as central to what enables subjects of loss narratives to occupy a particular present, whose future must always be deferred.

OF CADRES AND CO-OPTATION

Thus far in this chapter I have been concerned with how loss narratives write the present of Western feminist theory in negative terms, and in particular what must come before in order to ensure that this present is a lamentable state of affairs. Anxieties about the place of identity critiques of essentialism are displaced or fused with characterizations of earlier decades as activist, creating the academy both as responsible for increased loss of feminist vision and as the origin of abstractions that constitute depoliticization's primary sign. Yet as my reading of some of the above extracts has already indicated, institutionalization is not represented simply as something that is externally imposed on academic feminists; it is something that shapes them, creates them, even mirrors their own apolitical investments. If the subject of loss narratives is to remain the subject of a past-to-come, is to remain innocent in other words, someone else must take the blame for feminist theory's intractable demise. We have seen in the section above that "the academy" is rendered as always already apolitical in Western feminist loss narratives, allowing for the displacement of conflict over the proper subject of feminism onto that site. Such a move constructs an entirely abstract vision of "the university," one unable to delineate any of its actual conflicts or institutional politics, let alone any geographical or hierarchical specificity in this regard.[4]

To return to an earlier extract from *Australian Feminist Studies*, loss narratives produce the conditions appropriate to the assertion that

> The feminist theory which in the 1970s and 1980s gained its energy from a marginal speaking position outside institutional, intellectual, and disciplinary power structures, has now generally become mainstream, orthodox, successful, and powerful. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2000)

Note once more that this displacement of the "becom[ing] mainstream" of feminist theory allows the 1970s and 1980s to be reunited, iterated as identical platforms for "marginal speaking position[s]" because of their shared footing *outside* the academy. Yet if "feminist theory" has "become mainstream . . . and powerful" then we might also wonder what has happened to its subjects. We know that the subject of the loss narrative looks on bewildered from the sidelines, of course, but what of the subject of this "orthodox . . . successful" feminist theory? How are her struggles to

survive within Western higher education contexts over this period represented? How, I wonder, are her own attempts to negotiate increased institutional demands on her time, increased demands for productivity represented most potently by the U.K.'s Research Assessment Exercise,[5] and increased job insecurity in the context of neoliberal rolling back of public funding for education dealt with in loss narratives?[6] With empathy and an attempt to keep feminist *theorists* themselves separate from the "feminist theory" that has become mainstream in the above extract? Indeed not.

Let us take a look at an indicative range of excerpts that inform us most explicitly who rather than what is to blame for the decline and fall of Western feminist theory:

> Particularly dispiriting to those of us old and confessional enough to admit that we once naively endorsed the slogan "sisterhood is powerful" is the fact that these days an almost unimaginable oxymoron spearheads many of these attacks—a highly vocal, articulate cadre of anti-feminist academic "feminists". (*Signs* 2000)

> Feminist theory currently lacks the kind of meta-theoretical thinking that so excited many of us in the early 1970s; and . . . an elite group of international feminists are creating travelling theory at a remove from the real world. (*Feminist Theory* 2001)

> In my view academic feminists don't seem sufficiently concerned about the problem of how to gain access to outlets which will give feminism a voice. We used to be concerned about such issues. We (those of us on the Left) analyzed media, and worried about how we could wrest control of the distribution of information away from those who controlled and profited by their ownership of the means of communication. (I am struck by how quaint this language now sounds.) (*Feminist Studies* 2001)

> Feminist scholars, perhaps not surprisingly, have been absorbed into the vanity-envy culture of higher education—the pursuit of careers, competitive individualism, star systems, and hierarchies of privilege. On balance, some of us have come to wonder, How [sic] much have feminists changed the academy, and how much has it changed us? (*Signs* 2000)

In the above passages, the slips between feminist theory and feminist theorist, with both constructed as increasingly co-opted, make clear precisely *who* has produced abstract, apolitical theory and gained from the pro-

fessionalization of academic feminism. Feminist theory "currently lacks" the theoretical tools and political will to continue its previous aims of knowledge and social transformation, to the extent that feminists theorists themselves have been transformed by personal desire for glory. The academic subjects who occupy the mainstream do not resist, they are "perhaps not surprisingly" unconcerned, preferring to accrue to themselves the benefits of "the vanity-envy culture of higher education," occupying elite, privileged positions and trading in the "star-systems" and "travelling theor[ies]" that benefit their careers. Such a view of academic feminists is not particularly new, of course. Mary Evans identified the myth of the "selfish academic" as essential to allow her equally mythic politicized sister to retain her position as "the true believer" almost thirty years ago (1982: 70). In these more recent accounts that form the loss narrative I am tracking here, however, the "true believer" has all but lost her cause. The "selfish academic" has, it seems, completed her task. A politicized language critiquing the ownership of "the means of communication" is now parenthetically "quaint." What remains is a by turns wistful and resentful memory of how things were before an international feminist elite used their considerable communication skills to bolster rather than challenge "competitive individualism."

Where in Western feminist progress narratives it was feminism and feminists of the 1970s that lacked political integrity, in loss narratives it is professional feminists of the "now and here" who bear primary responsibility for the demise of feminist activism. In the above glosses, the demonized feminist theorists are, of course, presented as "other" to the narrator, who is "dispirited" where she used to be "excited," "concerned" about rather than "absorbed into . . . vanity-envy culture," the object not subject of contemporary "attacks" on real feminist analysis. The elite are elsewhere, no doubt traveling around as well as creating "travelling theory," fully taken over by their priorities of reaching the top, not caring whose shoulders they leave footprints on. Any potential difficulty about the narrator being confused with the "selfish academic" who is the object of her ire—the narrator is likely to be an academic too in the journals I am analyzing, after all—is resolved by the use of *generation* to keep the different kinds of feminist theorists apart. Notice in the first extract from *Signs*, above, that we have two kinds of academic feminists, the antifeminist ones in scare quotes—"feminists"—and the "old" ones who "endorsed

the slogan "sisterhood is powerful," however "naively." The subjects of loss narratives, of political feminism, use "quaint . . . language" and remember the 1970s because they were there then, not only because they identify with the past, although this is also important. To return to part of an excerpt from *Feminist Theory* cited earlier in this chapter, academic feminists are thus separated from feminist praxis by their entry point into feminism:

> Over the period that has led to "now and here," it has been interesting to observe the gradual assimilation of academic feminism, and the entry into it of successive cohorts who "came to feminism" through the text rather than through political practice. One of the results of the passing of time and the perhaps necessary correlates of assimilation has been the rise of a distinct category of "feminist theory" and a distinctive professional category of "feminist theorists." (*Feminist Theory* 2000)

While there is nothing to prevent a feminist from a previous generation being changed by "vanity-envy culture," a young feminist is stuck in the present it seems.[7]

Not only does the present "articulate cadre" not engage in an appropriate political fashion, with appropriate objects and tools, but those who make up its ranks are often unfamiliar with the nature of political practice in the first place. "Cadre" is a resonant term here, I think, using its distinctly military resonance to indicate absolute separation and hostility between "feminist camps." "Cadre" is a term frequently used to refer to professional militia or a group of mercenaries; it conjures images of counter-insurgency, of the fight against a false enemy. Instead of a just war against the patriarchy this "articulate cadre" picks fights with the naïve (and implicitly defenceless) advocates of the sisterhood. No doubt a member of the "cadre" will as soon turn from and on her peers to vouchsafe her own competitive self-interest. Our antiheroine is not only misguided, then, she is duplicitous, using any advantage she accrues to increase her own power rather than for the greater feminist good. Like the postfeminist, the academic "quasi-feminist" or "professional feminist" will "[arrogate] the global terrain to [herself] without a clear basis of legitimation from local constituencies" (*Feminist Theory* 2002). The feminist professional is doubly to blame: she has no mandate, and she has harnessed feminist fragmentation for her own ends. Importantly, loss narratives often use the term "professional feminist"

to bring together gender mainstreamers and academic feminists as similarly problematic. Both have made careers from gender (in)equality, both are other to the real feminist political subject who longs for a pure activist past. The battle has already been won, and feminism lost; the only hope for its recovery is for a return to the optimism, energy, and transparency of the past and its subjects.

POLITICAL ATTACHMENTS

You may have noted already the intensity of my own response to Western feminist loss narratives thus far? Any attempt to map loss narratives from the sidelines on my own part has already begun to falter. The ambivalence towards and provoked by loss narratives that I flagged in the introduction to this chapter has by this point resolved itself into a righteous irritation, it seems. In the previous sections I ironically imagine "evidence" of poststructuralism's obscurantism deliberated on by a jury, and mock loss narrators' lack of empathy for their overworked "sisters." I should also say that I am really beginning to enjoy myself in this chapter, drawing out techniques of othering in loss narratives and running with possible textual resonances of the term "cadre." I feel at home in these kinds of critiques; I know exactly where I am. These moments might be taken to indicate my stakes in the terrain I seek to delineate, a kind of "sceptical echoing" that reminds my reader that I (and they) are likely to be participants in rather than mere observers of these discourses. In this respect I think these strong feelings are worthy of further investigation.

The "echoes" I have sketched thus far highlight the call and response nature of Western feminist storytelling: they literalize struggles over who can claim to be the subject of Western feminist theory. Thus, in response to the demonization of academic feminists as selfish and myopic, I am at pains to reference the political context of higher education in the U.K. that has blighted the professional lives of younger academics in particular. I highlight the lack of attention to the material conditions of university life in loss narratives, trumping its subjects' own call for attention to real politics in my own mind. I include a longer footnote than is usual for me on the nature of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Research and Excellence Framework (REF), should anyone not already be familiar with these blots on the U.K. academic landscape, and I would also want to

affirm here that its impact on the self-assurance and morale of a generation has indeed been devastating. Where, I want to know, are these confident, powerful, institutionally validated academic feminists, particularly when generationally defined by loss narratives? My initial response, then, is to want to provide a political history to academic feminism in the context of neoliberalism, as suggested, and in particular to shine the spotlight on its impact on my generation (and later) of academic feminists. We are, I want to insist in turn, surviving not thriving, an abandoned generation of wounded feminist souls. Wounded, yes, but also enraged, much like the heroines of loss narratives, in fact.

And now, having established the material basis for my own pain and marginality, I can really let rip, can give a fuller voice to those sceptical asides in equally generational terms. It is all well and good for those established professors to complain about younger feminists, I mutter to myself, for them to complain about the privileges of academic life my own generation has in fact never had access to. Much less a newer generation, who have to struggle for any jobs at all, let alone gender and women's studies jobs, much less transnationally where there may not be a place for academic feminism at all, or where academic jobs only emerge when professors retire or die, if then. It is bad enough, I continue, that we struggle with the legacies of a manifest audit culture our feminist foremothers in the academy did not protect us from. Meanwhile, while they take another funded period of research leave to work collaboratively on projects that will only further convince them of their own moral high-ground, a current "cadre" (we know how I feel about this term) of feminist academics has to bear not only their abandoned teaching loads but apparently also the responsibility for everything that has gone wrong with academic feminism. And another thing . . . is it only the 1990s that produced feminist stars in love with the sound of their own voices? Ever heard of Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan? And another . . . just because you don't find yourself part of a thriving political milieu any more, don't assume there isn't one. . . . Wow. Who knew my rant would feel so cathartic! You! You're the one who has let feminist theory down, not me! I'm the one who is displaced; you're the one with power!

As I suspect is clear, a desire to be the heroine not the antiheroine of feminist theory produces the momentum in both sets of narratives, as we project any lingering anxieties about critical truths we might otherwise

have to negotiate onto the other pretender. The generationalism I otherwise say that I resist seems to be working rather well for me here, in the struggle for political and intellectual relevance that characterizes both loss narratives and my own charged response. So in my rant above I am delighted to cast myself as the poor, neglected feminist academic rather than the Director of the Gender Institute at LSE, a role that would fit ill with my emotional outburst in which I imply it is other people who determine my teaching load. In the battle over who is the "real feminist theorist" we each pose as the more sidelined and put-upon, we each imagine ourselves marginal to the institutional contexts that provide us with authority to speak, write, muse, or rant, because feminist heroism can above all not be seen to derive from privilege. But is that all there is to be said about this contest for relevance? That it is simply not accurate and needs to be qualified or abandoned on the basis of the empirical evidence? I would say not, since such a position is as likely to authorize a scramble for empirical examples of marginality versus authority to settle the question of feminist institutionalization that I want to keep open. What I want to suggest instead is that my rant might reveal something interesting about the ways in which we inhabit the political grammar of Western feminist storytelling that this book analyzes. And further, it may indicate some of the ways in which a focus on affective entanglement may get us closer to that occupation than direct critique alone.

We might recall that my overarching commitment expressed in the introduction to this book was to theorize the taken for granted nature of Western feminist stories about the recent past that I believe we all participate in. While we may individually prefer a progress tale over a loss one or *vice versa*, this is usually because of the ways we are biographically or theoretically implicated in these narratives: unsurprisingly, we usually prefer the tales that present us in a favorable light over those that do not. But as I have been attempting to show so far in this book, Western feminist progress and loss narratives are in fact intimately linked. They divide the recent past up into the same periods, construct similar versions of theoretical and political developments, albeit differently inflected, and cast a past or present abstracted feminist subject as their antiheroine in order that the generationally overdetermined author of the narrative in question can remain its heroine. Within this context, the exchange of emotional registers allows the subject of each narrative to retain their "positive affect," either through a straightforward smugness or through a slightly more

circuitous enjoyment of an abjection appropriate to a heroic status that must deny its hierarchical designs. This is the nature of glee in this context, I think: a pleasure in negative affect that has the power to transform it into positive affect while obscuring that move.

Yet the same affective play that reinforces generational linearity and the separation of loss and progress narratives also disrupts that separation. The righteous anger expressed in loss narratives and my own response is always overstated, cannot be reconciled with that which it purports to describe; it is too absolute and cracks from its own posturing. It does not make sense to blame an entire generation for the demise of feminist politics, just as it does not makes sense to blame one for the demise of prior academic freedoms. The insistence that it is I, I who should be mournful, not them, pushes me into making claims I cannot sustain about my own institutional marginality, for example. If the mobilization of "generation" as narrative technique works to create a singular feminist subject who emerges triumphant (or miserable, which is the same thing here), then it also acts to obscure the complexity of the present and its competing subjects. That emotional excess points to the sheer affective labor required to secure these narratives as generational, the work needed to ward off "the other" in both narratives. In this respect, it also indicates the difficulties and frustrations of shared space rather than of clean transfers from the subject of one narrative to another. It expresses irritation at the persistence of the "other," who is always nudging up against the subject and cannot simply be dispensed with through a too-blunt generational rhetoric.

This dissonance between the appearance of narrative (what it appears to describe) and the work it can or cannot do is registered in loss narratives at the textual level, too. Just as the tension between generational rhetoric and the institutional contexts depicted cannot be sustained affectively, neither can it be sustained chronologically. The very mode through which "the other" is consigned to a different place and space confuses the subjects and objects it seeks to hold apart. In the loss narratives I have been reading above, the author of each excerpt is positioned as a commentator upon rather than participant in the academic feminism that is the object of critique. "Academic feminists" are always other people, while the narrator, since she cannot be the same as the reviled object of interrogation, has to place herself somewhere else. The past becomes this subject's true home, her critical claims rendered "quaint" in the present she cannot

be both a part of and distant from. Yet, to return to two of the excerpts I have already included, the requisite temporality of loss narratives breaks down, since the narrator most certainly *does* occupy space in the present. She is not in a different time or place, but inhabits the present space of writing as we read: she is our guide to the present she claims to have been forced to abandon.

> In my view academic feminists don't seem sufficiently concerned about the problem of how to gain access to outlets which will give feminism a voice. We used to be concerned about such issues. We (those of us on the Left) analyzed media, and worried about how we could wrest control of the distribution of information away from those who controlled and profited by their ownership of the means of communication. (I am struck by how quaint this language now sounds.) (*Feminist Studies* 2001)

> Feminist scholars, perhaps not surprisingly, have been absorbed into the vanity-envy culture of higher education—the pursuit of careers, competitive individualism, star systems, and hierarchies of privilege. On balance, some of us have come to wonder, How much have feminists changed the academy, and how much has it changed us? (*Signs* 2000)

As in my rant, the nature of space as shared and compromised is disavowed in the above excerpts, but nevertheless makes itself visible textually. To take the first extract: "academic feminists" are the object in the initial sentence, but a collective subject—"we" (academic feminists)—authors the second, rendering the relationship between subject and object uncertain. That "we" is rescued for the loss narrative by "the Left" in the third sentence, whose actions are all in the past tense; but the parenthetical present tense of the last sentence is again active, if wistful. The movements between tenses and grammatical subjects and objects in this extract exceed their formal chronological containment. The extract demonstrates uncertainty about the narrator's role as an academic feminist, as much as it expresses critique of those academic feminists she tries—unsuccessfully, in my view—to keep a distance from. The second extract also begins with the blaming of others—"feminist scholars"—for their self-interest and privilege, but the subsequent sentence complicates the initial certainty that the narrator (and the others she identifies with, the we who "come to wonder") is not one of those invested in the "hierarchies of privilege" critiqued. The passive framing of the second part of the first sentence, too, takes

blame away from the feminist scholars implicated, and the final question—"how much has it changed us?"—unites both ends of the fragment, underlining the possibility that the political and depoliticized may be one and the same subject of the extract. My readings of temporal breakdown here suggest that while generational difference is central to how loss narratives work, it fails as a technique because of the contradiction inherent in a writing subject so actively and ambivalently describing their time as past.

It is easier for narrators of feminist theory as loss to cast themselves as anachronistic, and for me to cast myself as institutionally voiceless, than to think through the ways in which academic feminist space is crowded with subjects telling stories that represent each other in motivated, power-imbued ways. The question of tone as I have been thinking it through so far might thus point back to academic institutions, not as depoliticized sites, but as politically charged spaces within which feminist claims to authority are enacted. My interest is not in whether or not spaces are complex—how could they be otherwise?—but in the narrative techniques through which that complexity is denied (more or less efficiently). A modest claim at this point, then, might be to suggest that a generational mode is one of the narrative techniques Western feminist theorists should be most wary of, since it brings together affect and temporality to imagine the subject free of the complicity others necessarily remain mired within. Subjects of progress and loss narratives insist on their absolute separation from one another, missing the ways in which they utilize and instantiate a common historiography, missing the ways in which that historiography grounds post-, quasi-, or antifeminist claims as well. Generational narrative claims thus place too much emphasis on the capacities of feminist subjects to safeguard as progressive the politics of the narratives they author. It is small wonder, then, that Western feminist progress and loss narratives pay scant attention to the amenability of their rhetoric, since we remain confined to defensive or assertive, rather than reflective, modes, as I hope I have begun to show.

DISCIPLINARY RUBRICS

As I have been arguing, generational discourse is mobilized to guard against the messiness of shared space that would problematize the sharp division between feminist politics and academic feminism characteristic of

Western feminist loss narratives. Yet appeals to generation alone break down when both heroine and antiheroine are academic feminists, when both occupy the institutional spaces understood as the primary site of feminism's demise. If the time of the subject of loss narratives is past, then what is she doing in the present of writing and teaching? How can she be both present and absent at the same time? Here I explore one common way that this tension between narrative and location is resolved, namely through its deflection onto *disciplinary* differences and allegiances. In this register, academic feminist space is divided by epistemological and methodological commitments, and these distinctions are woven into generational discourse to establish certain disciplinary approaches as more rigorous, but importantly also as more appropriate to feminist inquiry.[8] Thus, that which has been abandoned in Western feminist loss narratives is not only a political project or common ground of experience as women, but also the disciplinary basis of a transformative feminist knowledge project. And this loss is frequently presented as one of the reasons for the demise of academic feminism's capacities more generally. This intellectual historiography may strike many readers as odd, given the range of feminist work that has claimed interdisciplinarity as a more appropriate mode for feminist research than disciplinary entrenchment (see Lykke 2004b; Liinason and Holm 2006; Vasterling, Demény et al. 2006). But, as I explore below, if disciplinary claims and generational laments are to be linked in loss narratives, interdisciplinarity itself must be called into question as part of the reason for feminism's demise.

In my discussion of Western feminist progress narratives in the last chapter, I described how momentum is underpinned by binary comparison, where we move from singularity → multiplicity, sameness → difference and so on, and where this move is understood in positive terms. Those shifts are also represented by related moves such as experience → text, which often also have a more direct epistemological or methodological inflection of a shift from empirical inquiry → deconstruction, from what is known to what is critiqued. In loss narratives, as I have explored through this chapter so far, the movement charted is the same as in progress examples, but is negatively inflected. It is but a short step for the struggles for recognition in the Western feminist present to be represented as mutually exclusive disciplinary ones, where (disciplinary) social science rigour and certainty is contrasted to (interdisciplinary) humanities fluidity and

openness. To return to an extract discussed earlier, we can see how broad shifts in feminist theory are mapped onto these disciplinary ones:

> Since the mid-1980s, women's studies programs have been sites of frictions between faculty from the humanities, especially those invested in postmodernist critiques, and more empirically oriented feminists from the social sciences. (*Signs* 2000)

In this excerpt, friction is caused by these differences, but note too that the humanities here and elsewhere in loss narratives are closely associated with "postmodernist critiques," which are also to blame for a more general move from politics→institutionalization as we know. While "women's studies programs have been sites of friction" then, these are not equal contests between neutral disciplinary differences, but spaces in which the dominance of "postmodernist critique" over a more empirical orientation is enacted.

The following extract continues the familiar tack of locating the source of Western feminist political amnesia within the academy (the text here is part of a larger parody of this view). But, as above, citation of that amnesia as following disciplinary allegiance divides up the academy into good and bad locations:

1. The institutionalization of women's studies at some visible colleges and universities has made scholars forget the founding tenets of women's studies as they slavishly attempt to recreate it in the image of the traditional disciplines.
2. Where once feminist sociology was deeply engaged with issues that women confront on the job and in the economy, there is a retreat into the realm of discourse.
3. Students today "know how to deconstruct anything" but do not know about real relations historically and now between activist movements and feminist scholarship is too "internal to the academy." (*Feminist Theory* 2001)

There is a further irony in this extract, which is that those responsible for "the institutionalization of women's studies" are castigated for trying to insist on the field's disciplinary status, while "feminist sociology" emerges apparently politically (and disciplinarily) unscathed. We know too that the "slavish attempts" to mainstream academic feminism have been successful over feminist sociology's deep engagement by the fact that students "do not know about real relations." They can "deconstruct anything," but—and

indeed because of this—are unable to generate real insights about the social world. In loss narratives, then, discussions of disciplinary differences tell a story of how the social sciences and empirical inquiry have been forced from popularity by approaches that privilege text and context over world and experience. Through its association with poststructuralist approaches, this shift away from the social sciences and towards the interdisciplinary humanities is often named "the cultural turn," a turn to representation and abstraction over social meaning, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The social sciences are thus forever sidelined, with individual as well as institutional effects:

> The "cultural turn" still predominates in feminist scholarship—at least if my social scientist colleagues are justified in their complaints. (*Australian Feminist Studies* 2002)

Such transformations are described as leaving feminist social scientists isolated and marginal within the academy, and in this way the generational lament combines with disciplinary difference to establish certain feminists as the academic "other." The cultural turn is dominant, social science is marginal, and thus the tone of complaint that suffuses loss narratives is given further, this time institutional, validation.

But for the dissent not to appear the result of individual or collective sour grapes, more work is needed to justify this opposition between disciplinary boundaries and approaches. The call back to the social sciences is further legitimated by the assertion of a closed relationship between object and method of feminist inquiry. Thus the social world can only be understood through empirical inquiry, and "deconstruction" is represented as a method that belongs to the humanities alone. Interrogations of social meaning are thus self-evidently presented as accessible through one set of approaches more than any other, as the following extract makes plain:

> The project of reclaiming the social also involves rethinking the relations between the theoretical and the empirical. Much feminist attention goes into deconstructing the canon, explaining how the social is constituted within theory. . . . By and large this kind of feminist theory has had an arm's length relationship with empirical research. (*Feminist Theory* 2005)

The social, the empirical, and research are linked in this passage, forming an exclusive chain that belies the "by and large" that would indicate a more

open set of possibilities. "[T]his kind of feminist theory" circumnavigates the social, hovers around its edges, explaining its constitution, but is not itself a direct engagement with or transformation of the social sphere. Only through empirical research could attention to real people and real situations be reintroduced into feminist scholarship.

The category of experience thus belongs not only to a Western feminist theory now lost, but also explicitly to the social sciences. This claim works in several ways for loss narratives. First, it identifies certain theorists as continuing to do important feminist political work, even within the more generally demonized academy. This allows subjects of loss narratives to negotiate the otherwise problematic fact of their own location within the very site of that loss. Second, challenges to the view that experience can be directly accessed or politically mobilized as the ground zero of feminism can be represented as disciplinary challenges. In this way, differences of theoretical and political opinion can be overwritten and to some extent neutralized as disciplinary differences first and foremost. One can occupy a political high ground, but represent that as a question of approach rather than ontology. Third, if one endorses a loss narrative that sees the transformation of feminist inquiry as a bad thing, further claims for change can be made as disciplinary rather than only political claims, as in the following excerpt:

> 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)

And a statement such as this one—

> I believe that if feminist criticism is to continue to matter in the new century, it must be grounded in the real life experiences of human beings. (*Signs* 2000)

—thus becomes both a call for a restitution of experience as the ground of feminist criticism, but also, through the chains of association I have been tracing in this chapter thus far, a call for empirical inquiry over poststructuralist, humanities-based, or interdisciplinary inquiry, which are blamed for both the loss of feminist politics and for the marginalization of feminism within the academy itself.

What these stark distinctions between experience → text and social sciences → humanities in Western feminist loss narrative result in is not, then,

a call for a more inclusive interdisciplinarity across the social sciences and the humanities, as one might perhaps expect. This is because to do so would challenge the privileged status of experience and empirical inquiry so central to the development of loss narratives as a whole. More importantly, I think, interdisciplinarity is foreclosed because these disciplinary insistences work to ensure certain subjects and not others can remain part of academic feminism without losing their heroic political status. Instead, interdisciplinarity is fused with poststructuralist or postmodern academic feminist theory and approaches in order to constitute all these terms as interruptions to appropriate feminist engagement with the social world.

> Under its interdisciplinary umbrella, the feminist scholarly enterprise has made a significant impact on epistemologies and methodologies. But its intellectual validity has suffered from the intensity of constant theoretical fragmentation and, more particularly, from recent claims that it is both anti-intellectual and anachronistic. (*Feminist Theory* 2003)

In this excerpt interdisciplinarity is no longer a valid position because of its familiar association with "theoretical fragmentation." But here interdisciplinarity is also "anti-intellectual and anachronistic," a claim that only makes sense within the temporality of the Western feminist stories I have been tracing thus far. Interdisciplinarity is anachronistic because it interrupts concerns with the social world represented by "the cultural turn," and it is anti-intellectual insofar as it does not demonstrate a recognizable disciplinary theoretical history or methodological rigour.[9]

In their quest to retain an intellectual and political advantage, Western feminist loss narratives develop a political grammar that has a resonance beyond its immediate aims. Casting interdisciplinarity as "anti-intellectual and anachronistic" chimes disconcertingly with scientific discourses that would see any and all feminist inquiry as biased and, in an era of postfeminism, no longer necessary in a Western academic context. Interdisciplinary feminist inquiry is thus positioned rather worryingly in terms immediately recognizable to institutions that have always been ambivalent about the "rigour" of feminist work. This move is necessary, of course, to separate out subjects of loss narratives from the "feminist" academic subjects that carry the burden of theory's demise, but this collateral damage comes at a potentially very high cost and provides a particularly stark example of the amenability of these stories' political grammar.

Characterizing feminist contests over the nature of the social, political, and subjective as disciplinary differences allows loss narratives to chart the downward turn of Western feminist theory while remaining within its orbit. To condense this theme: empirical engagement with the social world, underpinned by experience as the basis for knowledge production (in both object and subject) has thus been displaced by interdisciplinary humanities approaches that prioritize postmodern deconstruction and culture as method and object respectively. In the process, what is lost is a feminist theory and politics with a disciplinary, materialist ground, as well as the clarity and integrity of its subjects. The result of this set of unfortunate developments is the loss of feminist theory's ability in the present to attend to the large questions of our day: social and economic justice, violence and conflict, and global transformations in power relations affecting people's daily lives. Yet loss narratives still struggle to negotiate the claims of exclusion leveled against them, particularly those arising from interrogations of "earlier feminist" racist or heterosexist exclusions. As we saw earlier in this chapter, displacement of these charges involves a range of techniques, including use of euphemism, the linking of the 1970s and 1980s as equally political, and primarily through locating "blame" for feminist theory's demise in the academy. Such a move can only go so far, though, as we have seen. It also requires the instantiation of absolute generational and disciplinary differences to make sense of which academic subjects one is able to endorse and which one can legitimately demonize.

In the last section of this chapter I want to come full circle by highlighting ways in which anxieties about the status of racially and sexually marked subjects and theories in loss narratives are mediated by overassociating the latter with contemporary academic ills, leaving the former ripe for reclamation in the return narratives that I chart in the next chapter. As I explored in relation to progress narratives, the place of lesbian feminism and the lesbian subject is already somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, it operates as critique of 1970s feminism's heterosexism; on the other, its own racism is exposed by 1980s black feminism. Whichever line is taken, lesbian feminism, like black feminism, is understood to give way to a more general poststructuralist turn to difference in the 1990s and beyond. In both progress and loss narratives, it is queer theory—in the

former, coupled with postcolonial theory, in the latter, out on a limb on its own—that displaces feminist theory and whose subjects emerge most clearly in the 1990s. For loss narratives, queer theory comes to represent, and its subjects to embody, the worst excesses of abstract postmodernism and poststructuralism, of myopic academic attachments, and of interdisciplinary humanities play over social scientific (or other pure disciplinary) seriousness. As one passage ironically suggests:

> 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, the queer theorist says with a sigh, is so indebted to sexual subordination that her masochism requires the repetition that masochism always loves. Every act of theoretical or activist engagement returns her to original sin: gender hierarchy, sexual oppression, material inequality. (*Feminist Theory* 2007)

Queer theory is pitted against feminism in both progress and loss narratives, as delineated here, through a series of oppositions that are by now very familiar: real challenges are counterposed to simulations of "political commitment"; sexual subordination contrasted with celebrations of "the feminine"; gender masochism displaced by "dressing up." Thus poststructuralism, queer theory, abstraction and antifeminism are chain-linked not only through their critique of feminism but through the assertion that what has happened is a *substitution* of queer for feminist concerns.[10]

The staging of oppositions between queer and feminist theory, and the tying of these to oppositions between postmodern or poststructuralist and materialist approaches, has broader implications for how sexuality is conceived of as an area of academic inquiry:

> While gender has been considered a structural phenomenon, implicitly at least, in past feminist debates on patriarchy and explicitly in recent materialist feminist analyses (e.g. Delphy, 1993; Ingraham, 1996), sexuality and heterosexuality are more rarely approached from this angle. . . . The rarity of such analyses reflects the displacement of the concept of social structure by postmodern scepticism and the recent sociological emphasis on the fluidity of the social (see Adkins, 2002). (*Feminist Theory* 2007)

In the above excerpt, gender equals structure, and sexuality is fused with "postmodern scepticism." This reading goes some way, I think, toward explaining the otherwise rather curious ways in which calls to reject "the cultural turn" are frequently phrased as calls to reject the dominance of sexual over economic needs. Further, and as indicated in previous discussions so far, not all aspects of the signifying chain need to be present in order to be discursively resonant. Take the following passage:

> Pitting "essentialists" against "anti-essentialists," these disputes usefully served to reveal hidden exclusionary premises of earlier theories, and they opened women's studies to many new voices. Even at their best, however, they tended to remain in the terrain of recognition, where subordination was construed as a problem of culture and dissociated from political economy. (*Signs* 2004)

The extract begins with the by now familiar muted acknowledgement of the importance of identity critiques, set against a supposedly parallel dissatisfaction with the limits of current epistemological options. Yet this gloss works at another level, too, identifying current problems as to do with the prioritization of the "cultural" over "political," which is also to say the sexual over the economic, suggested not just discursively but by the mention of "the terrain of recognition," the site theorized as that of sexual rights claims most notably by Nancy Fraser (1996; 1997; 2005). Thus, when Western feminist loss narratives call for disciplinary returns to empirical, material realities, they are also making calls for feminists to resist (queer) cultural seductions and return to a (heterosexualized) pragmatics. These moves are only possible, I want to argue, because of the ambivalent position of lesbian feminism in the first place.

As one might expect, Judith Butler is a key figure in this respect once again, representing and embodying both the success of a queer critique of feminism and the institutional privileging of culture over social life and experience. The following extract is typical in its weaving together of Butler, queer theory, postmodernism, and culture:

> 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)

In its emphasis on "play, masquerade, [and] carnival" (theorized rather differently in Butler than in loss narratives' representations of these con-

cepts, of course), queer theory is consistently characterized as "less serious" than approaches that are deemed to interrogate social and political structure directly. That these are disciplinary differences is underscored in the following account of an interview with Butler, in which deconstruction is characterized as anti-empirical:

> When pressed by [her interviewer, Butler] states that "*subversiveness is not something that can be gauged or calculated. In fact, what I mean by subversion are those effects that are incalculable*" (Butler, 1992: 84, emphasis added). In order to understand this striking anti-empiricism, we must take stock of the way in which Butler's theory of subversion is grounded in discourse. (*Feminist Review* 2000)

What is striking to me in turn about the above quotation is that Butler's response that we may not know what constitutes "subversiveness"—that it might not be quantitatively or directly available and that this nonknowing may not always be a dreadful thing—is immediately interpreted as "striking anti-empiricism" and rendered as the effect of a discursive approach. The possibility that such a position might lend itself to empirical inquiry (as it has for many feminist theorists) is precluded in loss narratives that see only opposition between discourse and empiricism. Indeed, it is likely to be because of her anticipation of what is a consistent conflation that results in Butler's initial resistance to elaborating on the nature of "subversiveness," an elaboration she is "pressed" for.

The overlaying of disciplinary difference onto Western feminist loss narratives serves two functions, then: it allows for social science to "own" materiality, leaving "culture" to the humanities, and discursively links "culture" with play (rather than politics) through its over-association with queer theory and its methods. As a result, and as I discuss further in the next chapter, the "cultural turn" becomes not only a prioritization of discourse and language over real politics, but also an epistemology and era saturated with sexual over other forms of intersubjective and social meaning. The designation of queer theory as less serious and as interested in play over politics and abstract understandings of subversion does some familiar straightforward work, of course. It separates past from present, political from textual, rigour from dabbling, disciplinary attention from interdisciplinary eclecticism and so on. And loss narratives thereby also find an appropriate subject to mark out as particularly antifeminist in this regard. But these characterizations also have a particular tone that is

significant for my analysis here. In the insistence on deconstruction as apolitical the "parodies" of Butler are stripped of their political content, reframed as mere play, and stripped of their history within a particular subcultural milieu. Instead, camp is reclaimed for a heteronormative discourse that trades in stereotypes of the shallow, decadent queer, interested only in "the arts" and interior design, vicious and self-serving (likely to turn, and easily turned), the very opposite of feminist solidarity. It is intriguingly effeminate (rather than feminist) despite Butler's key role in articulating queer concerns. And in generational terms, despite (or perhaps because of) its superficiality, queer theory is also actively seductive, turning young feminist heads away from material inequalities,[11] seducing those (not) old and wise enough to know better.