

THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM

Open Access

Open Access

9

Exit Wounds of Feminist Theory

Sarah Cefai

The question of the 'future of feminism' calls on the reader to consider how feminism originates and then transforms. Academia is one such context for feminism's originary transformation. The future of feminism at stake in academic feminist knowledge is reason enough for the role of feminist theory to be hotly contested. The work presented in this chapter is the outcome of a longstanding enquiry into how the relationship between feminism and feeling shapes and is shaped by the institutionalisation of feminism in feminist theoretical knowledge. If the chapter has a working hypothesis, it's that the felt register of writing as a mode of feminist theory might complement the feminist poststructuralist theories that largely omitted the subject of feeling from their accounts of power, subjectivity and knowledge.

'Exit Wounds of Feminist Theory' asks how feminist theory, as affective and subjective zoning, creates the vulnerabilities of its bodies (of its writers, of its knowledges, its communities) and imperfectly defends them. Historically, writing has cultivated a 'heightened awareness of personal physical boundaries and a sense of those boundaries as the vessel of one's self' (Carson 1986, 44). If '[s]elves are crucial to writers' (1986, 41), the contemporary moment gives the obverse formulation more airplay; at stake in writing is the self and, by extension, the conventions that defend against non-sovereignty (dependency, that which threatens to overwhelm, the innervating outside). If '[w]hat is managed in an emotional experience is not an emotion but the self in the feeling that is being felt' (Denzin 1984, 50), writing is connected to feeling in the play between writing and the self. To go down into the silence and inarticulateness 'there in the deep structure' (hooks 1996, 49) is to travel down into the writing, to where what is at stake is felt, to the edging of a self, and feminist theory itself, into and out of existence. To this end, the exit wound offers an image of feminist thought that foregrounds the terms of recognition that seed feminist knowledge.

Julietta Singh describes ‘the body archive’ as an ‘assembly of history’s traces deposited in me’ (2018a, 29). Here, I plumb the body archive of feminist theory by assembling its ‘found exits.’ Foregrounding the elsewhere, the feminist scene of exile might offer a force for assembly, which Verónica Gago defines as the ‘*concrete place where words cannot be detached from the body*’ (2020, 161, emphasis in original). This image of feminist thought hopes to ‘engender “thinking” in thought’ (Deleuze 1994, 147), in feminist philosophy and politics, including the ways in which feminism is lived and understood as ‘a living thing’ (Wiegman 2010, 80). ‘In the end,’ writes Singh, ‘we are not bounded, contained subjects, but ones filled up with foreign feelings and vibes that linger and circulate in space, that enter us as we move through our lives. We likewise leave traces of ourselves and our own affective states (which are never really just our own) behind us when we go’ (2018a, 31). ‘Exit Wounds of Feminist Theory’ was written with these traces, in the flight from bruised intentions. Intention means not only (1) a thing intended, and (2) conceptions formed by directing the mind towards an object, but also (3) the healing process of a wound (OED 2020).

All the Way Down

Go all the way down. Sink below the turbulent waters. Get under those tangled currents. Go to where the water runs still. ‘That’s what Sara Ahmed does,’ he adds. Bar talk. That was years ago now, before I stepped into her exit wound. Feminist theory is full of exit wounds – stories of leaving and being left; feminist historical aftermaths; ‘feminism besides itself’ (Elam and Wiegman 1995).

Sure, academic departments are bigger than the legacy of particular individuals, but places and fields of study are spun out of individual stories. They are sedimented with fleshy memories – ‘atmospheres,’ as Ahmed herself put it (2008). Fields of knowledge and academic careers are enmeshed social realities. Consider this too as Ahmed’s point; where a culture is ‘built around (or to enable) abuse and harassment,’ the predicaments of individuals are entangled in that ‘institutional culture’ (2016). Individual legacies demonstrate what is possible, or necessary, in relations of power and knowledge. In other terms, there is a ‘crucial difference between a field’s discourse of the political and the operations of the political that constitute it’ (Wiegman 2012, 17).

By her own account, Ahmed resigned from her position to protest and remove herself from a culture of harassment. Her act of leaving ‘broke a seal’ in the concealment of academic power: ‘academics exercise power often by concealing that power’ (2016). Her unsealing of concealment was also an act of amplification: one exit wound amplifying the exit wounds of others. Sound waves gain amplitude in the body of an instrument, exchanging energies of their own accord. In the body of an institution, language is an instrument of power – a performative concealment. In the body of a language, the metaphor amplifies what cannot be indexically described or spoken. In the language of feminist theory, metaphors institute modes of relation as critical entities of transformation (they are ‘seal breaking’).

When Gloria Anzaldúa says, ‘I am my language’ (2007, 81), she says, language is *a skin of feeling*, broken and forged in the exit wounds of colonialism.

1,950 mile-long open wound / dividing a *pueblo*, a culture, / running down
the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh, / splits me splits me
/ *me raja me raja*

This is my home / this thin edge of / barbwire

But the skin of the earth is seamless ...

The US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World
grates against the first and bleeds

(2007, 24–25)

Written in the skin of feeling, the exit wounds of feminist theory run all the way down. Go all the way down with the concept. All the way down with feeling. Ruminant on ruination. What if feminism and feminist philosophy are made in exile, out of broken feeling?

‘It is because there is a direct connection between the forces and features of the earth and those that produce the body, it is because the earth is already directly inscribed contrapuntally in the body’, says Elizabeth Grosz, ‘that the body can sing the earth and all its features, which both mark these features as theirs to preserve and look after, but also mark their debt to and affinity with the earth and its particular qualities’ (2008, 49).¹ A molten interior is exposed on the earth’s surface in just a handful of places. In Hawaii, lava tubes bleed out into the ocean. The sun is inscribed contrapuntally in the earth. A liquid sun in an exit wound universe.

The ‘identification of female identity with a sort of planetary exile’ has been ‘a topos of feminist studies’, says Rosi Braidotti (1994, 21), since Virginia Woolf

wrote: 'As a woman I have no country, as a woman I want no country, as a woman my country is the whole world' (1938 [1978], 44, cited in Braidotti 1994, 21). The question of where, how and to whom we belong might reveal our place on the outside, where the 'very longing to belong embarrasses its taken for granted nature' (Probyn 1996, 9). We might be shamed in our 'knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging' (Probyn 1996, 8). Coupled with and felt out by structures of desire, belonging solicits our attention only to proliferate in unexpected ways and places, always marking the complex, contradictory, (extra) ordinary, intrinsic and enduring ways that we are compelled by others – by other worlds, by the interval of otherness within ourselves. Transformed by a desire, one set of terms for belonging gets sublimated or complicated by another. Desire can be relinquished, orchestrated, politicised. Equally, we usually hold fast to whatever attaches us, to our place in the world.

Judith Butler comments on the 'loyalty and aggression' that Luce Irigaray expresses towards those who taught her (Cheah et al. 1998, 19) [1]. It is through her conflict with/in the field of study that Irigaray opens up a radical practice of 'critical mimesis' [2]. As a woman, Butler says, Irigaray was 'explicitly excluded or explicitly demeaned' from within the philosophers' texts, but 'she would read them anyway' (19) [1]. So described, the closeness of Irigaray's reading can be understood in Gayatri Spivak's terms as the intimate act of translation, 'in the closest places of the self' (1993, 180). The planetary exile of feminist philosophy begins here, in the intimacy of reading from within a relation of power and its affective forces – adoration, aggression, 'eros' (Carson 1986). The mimetic concept of the feminine as a textual method of theorising sexual (in) difference is an intimate act of (dis)inheriting – phallocentrism is jettisoned from within that closest place [2]. We might conceive of the feminine thus as the exit wound of Western philosophy. Sexual difference is constructed out of the negations of Western epistemology; out of the fallout of its own sexual indifference [1+2].

We might say that:

- [1] exit wounds of feminist theory are the material, symbolic, psychic, affective, ecological, historical, and other *contextual circumstances* of feminist theory; and
- [2] exit wounds of feminist theory are the *concepts and affects* that feminist theory puts into the world.

Wounds in Exile

In the symbolic order of Western culture femininity is a wound (Cheah et al. 1998, 24). Moreover, Western theory is littered with wounds. They cluster especially in origin stories. Let's note, citing Donna Haraway, what Sigmund Freud saw as the 'three great historical wounds to the primary narcissism of the self-centred subject' (2008, 11).

1. The Copernican wound removed Earth itself, man's home world, from the centre of the cosmos, opening the cosmos to a universe of inhumane, nonteleological times and spaces. Science made that decentering cut.
2. The Darwinian wound put *Homo sapiens* firmly in the world of other critters, all trying to make an earthly living. Science inflicted that cruel cut too.
3. The Freudian wound posited an unconscious that undid the primacy of conscious processes, including the reason that comforted Man with his unique excellence. Science seems to hold that blade too.

To these, she adds the following.

4. The informatic or cyborgian wound that infolds organic and technological flesh, melding the Great Divide of nature and society, nonhuman and human.

This time it is the blades of critical immanent theory that make the cut. These 'wounds to self-certainty' (Haraway 2008, 12) are the necessary correlates to a subject who 'tries to hold panic at bay by the fantasy of human exceptionalism' (Haraway 2008, 11).

The ontology of human exceptionalism relays back to the gradual separation of the human from the natural world. As Joanna Zylińska reminds us, 'the tragic world view' that accompanies this separation is a compensatory philosophy that expresses man's inability to come to terms with the very finitude of life with which he is preoccupied. In Zylińska's example, human exceptionalism underpins the apocalyptic narrative of the Anthropocene, yielding a 'temporarily wounded yet ultimately redeemed Man, who can conquer time and space by rising above the geological mess he has created' (Zylińska 2018). The 'planetary relocation' promised by the Anthropocene's figure of the 'exit man' recycles the

tragic exceptionalism of colonialism. Man's Anthropocene is beset by the 'ontopathology' of the settler-colonial subject whose possessive ontology is predicated upon the very indifference to (dis)possession it prefigures (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, 15).

Rather than make this split subjectivity commensurate with women's liberation, the cut of feminist philosophy proposes an inverse relation between human exceptionalism and its own ontology of relating. 'Cutting is a feminist aesthetic proper to the project of female unbecoming', is how Jack Halberstam (2011, 135) put it. '[E]xiled from subjectivities founded on and through mastery', the itinerant feminist seeks out 'a radical dwelling in and with dehumanization through the narrative excesses and insufficiencies of the "good" human' (Singh 2018b, 4). That is, s/he undoes their subjectivation and what appears to be taken for granted in the present. 'I also like the pastoral of self-loss on behalf of a nonrepetition of the world as it presents itself', reflects Lauren Berlant (2009, 684). Feminist pedagogy encounters the question of what falls away over time; how the feminist subject is cut as both person and field of knowledge; how to track the differences made by feminist movement; how to register and harness the intensities and vibrations of feminisms that transport worlds.

Feminist theory made itself 'smart' by rejecting socially and biologically determinate narratives that not only oppress women (Wilson 2015, 30) but exemplify the stupidity and violence of an illusory 'unity, mastery, [and] self-transparency' (Braidotti 1994, 12). Feminism claims an alternate subjectivity, but what about the mastery of its discourse? How does feminist mastery relate to the negativity 'intrinsic (rather than antagonistic) to sociality and subjectivity' (Wilson 2015, 6)? Despite the self-referentiality of a feminism 'increasingly anxious about itself' (Elam and Wiegman 1995, 2), feminist theory seems to rarely admit its aggressive investments in 'the subject' (Huffer 2016). All-too-true tropes of 'female antagonism' and 'generational envy' (Ngai 2005) crowd out other stories. Paying 'more attention to the destructive and damaging aspects of politics that cannot be repurposed to good ends' (Wilson 2015, 6) calls on us to adjust the optimism of feminist theory to emergent modes on the periphery of the 'good' human. On the periphery, 'a text's contradictions, ruptures, and non-coherences could be more important to a reading than its apparent seamlessness' (Brinkema 2014, 42, discussing Roland Barthes). Excess is surely feminist philosophy's primal scene. Just look at how Haraway's more-than-feminist discourse rolls like a tumbleweed, picking up dust and critters, scrambling form and content, methodology and philosophy. Composed of images that are loaded with sensation, the feminist

cyborg conducts immaterial forces through the milieu of its allegory. The speculative, textual and technological figuration of the cyborg bears witness to the *still-unfolding event of feminist philosophy*.

The Intimacy of Feminist Epistemology

The history of the present of feminist theory reflects what might be called the 'sociology of feminist knowledge' or the 'epistemological turn' in feminist thinking. Problems of knowledge pivotal to the Second Wave – 'a monolithic social movement ... in fact made up of many tiny, unevenly connected groups' (McKinney 2020, 8) – were translated into theoretical problems with disciplinary prerogatives.

Feminist thought, social relations and affects entered the disciplines that in turn entered feminism. The articulation of the crisis of the legitimacy of feminism as a crisis of epistemic position is a manifestation of this translation. However, as Linda Zerilli notes (discussing Hannah Arendt), politics can't be reduced to 'the contest of better arguments' (2005, 3). Rather, politics come out of 'our deep sense of necessity in human affairs' (2005, 3). This necessity suggests more socially embedded and multiply indeterminate points of origin compared with, say, the utility of feminist concepts vis-à-vis the problems of jurisprudence. Insofar as social bonds also stem from an indeterminate necessity, feminist politics and sociality are symbiotic. This is why feminism can be described as 'a living thing' (Wiegman 2010, 80). So, while feminist concepts are in evidence according to the sociological facts that they help frame (such as violence against women), the necessity of feminist politics is also felt out 'in the images and figures that generate belief' (Zerilli 2005, 10). This can be a good thing, if we consider how the examples of 'feminist achievement, once plotted as a future destination' have produced 'disappointment in the emergency of a present of which it could never have conceived' (Wiegman 2010, 81).

'Translation,' urged Spivak, 'is the most intimate act of reading' (1993, 180). 'The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other – before memory – in the closet places of the self'. Feminist theory is an institutional culture of knowledge, social structure and language, lived with its own desire that, like all desires, 'evades us in the very act of propelling us forth' (Braidotti 1994, 14). The nomadic language of poststructuralist feminist philosophy can be experienced intimately as one's 'own way of being' (Braidotti 1994, 12). We find the intimacy

of feminist theory in the act of its translation if, as Spivak put it, we sometimes prefer 'to speak in it about intimate things' (4, 180). To speak in the language of feminist theory is to transgress from the trace of the other in the self, from the relation between desire and difference, from the ways in which language has been lived by others. From this trace, feminist theory provides a holding space for the intimacy of 'opening up the world that has been disclosed to us through language' (Zerilli 2005, 9).

In the course of an interview Elizabeth Povinelli relays her admission that she has 'kind of stubbornly refused to say how [her] work relates to feminism' (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012, 80). By way of an explanation, she says: 'when I think about what organizes, disorganizes and distributes power and difference then I am led to a set of more intractable issues, below a certain field of visibility as defined by identity categories. And these issues cut across liberal forms of intimacies, the market and politics'. Rather than view this position as manifesting the exhaustion of feminist concepts, we might think of it as an expression of *the necessity of feminist politics* – evidence of the way in which feminist concepts are not limited to the epistemological guidance of an established feminist theory or perspective (i.e., the application of feminist concepts *as* feminist concepts), but proper to the emergent character of the political (in Michel Foucault's terms, to the question of 'how to live otherwise'). The feminist concept belongs to a feminist theory that belongs to a feminist politics – a site of emergence, which means related to what is recognisably feminist but also not over-determined by it. In the USA and beyond, the pedagogical 'yearning for definitive theories of women's oppression and for prescriptivism in feminist theory' (Zerilli 2012, n.p.) is pegged to the promise of feminist knowledge despite the challenges of its institutionalisation. Feminism traffics the longing to belong but also conjunctural forces steadfast in their repurposing of whatever it is that feminism brings into the world.

An immanent view would tend to the varieties of feminist thought, including ones that aren't recognisably feminist as such; to feminist concepts that are antecedent, larval, not-yet-thought, '*incorporeals*, potentials, latencies' (Grosz 2011, 78). In an international or 'globalised' feminist classroom, this is an important pedagogical point. National, technological and cultural imperialisms traverse the classroom but do not extinguish the common ground felt out by students, that offers a different order of 'thought' from that which is openly deliberated. We might yet think of feminist concepts as felt out by a structure of feeling that

registers the 'constitutive differences within what we might call the force field of feminism' (Wiegman 2010, 84).

The interventions of twentieth-century feminists cannot be repeated: the inaugural critiques of sexual (in)difference, objectivity, the mind-body dualism and the specific yet broad spectrum interjections of feminist poststructuralism and intersectionality were crystalline. We learn so much of what we need to from this earlier moment, and yet there is still so much we need to learn. Feminist concepts aren't taxonomic according to the determinations of institutionalised knowledge, but must 'innovate' new meanings if they are in some way to speak to the present: 'you have to get it from the times rather than just from the text' (The Brooklyn Rail 2020). The task of translation is one of staying with this desire to learn from a historical moment without (re)producing its mastery.

Another way to phrase this is, insofar as feminist concepts place us in between languages, in the space-times of linguistic histories, and therefore in the political, they foreground 'the affective level as the resting point' of feminist theory. Braidotti interprets this as an abandonment of the 'triumphant cogito' in exchange for a 'trust in traces' (1994, 14). 'This is not idle fantasy', wrote Audre Lorde, 'but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me"' (1984, 37). Here, concepts make themselves known *as the condition of possibility for feeling*; the feminist concept is not primarily an interpretive back-formation, but an intuition that aligns feeling to a sensibility ('it feels *right*' / 'it *feels* right'). A feminist concept can be 'already felt' (Lorde 1984, 36). Following Trinh T. Minh-ha, we might say that feeling takes form in the language of feminist theory *intransitively*.

To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet), but to become, intransitively. Not when writing adopts established keynotes or policy, but when it traces for itself lines of evasion.

(1989, 18–19)

The immanent and social character of feminist worldbuilding is not sublimated by the dialectical terms of knowledge, of making a 'better argument' (Zerilli 2005). The metaphor, the theoretical text, the classroom debate are each made possible by and are sustaining of *feminist intransitive affect*. With Gago, we might reconceive the excess of feminist theory as *feminist potencia* – a 'desiring capacity' where desire is 'the force that drives what is perceived as possible, collectively and in each body' (2020, 3).

Your Contingent Foundations Are My Exit Wounds

Emotion has long been the terrain of feminist politics. Feminist consciousness raising hones in on the control that ‘phallist’ men exercise by determining the terms in which women interpret and therefore come to experience what gets felt as real through their own ‘refusal to experience women as persons’ (Frye 1983, 47). The patriarchal denigration of emotion produces and at the same time dismisses subjugated realities. Feminist theory also recognises emotion as a mobilising force within feminism and as a condition of possibility of feminist knowledge (e.g., Jaggar 1989; Spellman 1989). Simone de Beauvoir linked the hierarchical opposition between reason and emotion to sex (in the Anglo-American discourse, more often now ‘gender’); the ability of certain men to dominate relied upon the gendering of the universal powers of abstraction masculine/male. In turn, the ideological construct of woman was a means to ‘[s]hut [women] up’/‘[s]hut up [women]’ ‘in the sphere of the relative’ (1997 [1949], 652). That is, via that unstable nexus of sex and/or gender, attachment is emotionally and psychically differentiated: ‘The word *love* has by no means the same sense for both sexes’ (1997 [1949], 652). This differentiation has been a key concern for feminism all the way through feminist philosophy and psychoanalysis, from Nancy Chodorow to Lauren Berlant. It was Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* that ‘captured the early feminist imaginary’ through its expression of and resolution to women’s suffering (Zerilli 2012). As Zerilli synthesises, ‘Friedan’s feminist message was: Get out of the house and get a job. (Or, more precisely, Get a cleaning lady so that you can get out and get a job)’. Comparatively, Beauvoir was far more ambivalent, ‘deeply sceptical of any such pragmatic approach to the vicissitudes of feminine subjectivity’.

Such feminist reflections on emotional subjectivity, on ‘what feels right to me’ (Lorde 1984, 37), invoke the politics of experience. Emphasis on the psychic, ideological and discursive terms of experience – including the experience of the critic – has often overlooked the significance of feeling to how such terms take effect. For instance, while in many ways Joan Scott’s (1992) defence of post-structuralist feminism against ‘the evidence of “experience”’ (1992, 24) couldn’t be more pertinent to contemporary feminist debates, her critique of experience ‘conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent’ (1992, 25) was an insufficient means of locating feminist politics in the field of experience, i.e., the subsumption of discourse within the political. As a postgraduate student of gender studies, I wondered why, in

spite of such faithful readings of Foucault by Scott and her contemporaries, no one seemed very interested to observe feeling as ‘the truth of the self.’² Surely, the repeat experience of an asymmetrical emotion was a ‘truth effect’ of gender normatively conceived? Surely, what singularised ‘confession’ as a flashpoint in subjectivation was people’s capacity to emote in a relation of power, revealing in turn the investment of power in an emotion? Surely, any feminist theory of representation, subjectivity and power is impoverished by a lack of a theory of feeling? Wasn’t a feminist poststructuralist philosophy of subjectivity without a theory of feeling a contradiction in terms?³

Emotion might have been denigrated by those feminist theorists claiming rationality for women – the denigration of feeling ‘emotional’ at a certain moment might have made feminism ‘smart’, to use Wilson’s (2015) term. However, just because feeling made a ‘bad’ object choice for a feminist theorist doesn’t mean it doesn’t come to pass. What was decided in the poststructuralist feminist moment in particular was not only the substantive content of how questions of ‘autonomy, agency, and freedom’ would be linked to a certain theorisation of subjectivity and identity (Grosz 2011, 59), but how emotion would be subsumed within or subtracted out of this process. But there’s a catch. Given the very relationship between feminist theory’s core business of theorising autonomy, agency and freedom, and the *concept of feeling that exists in the world*, sentience could not be expunged completely from feminist theoretical discourse.

As the feminist academic subject becomes a zone for the lived intensities of the experiential, the authorial and other passionate placeholders for ‘the truth of the self’, as well as for a professionalised subject tasked with self-abnegation in the interests of ‘the work’, the more embarrassing, ‘ugly’ (Ngai 2005) and otherwise compromising affects are placed in feminist theory’s own ‘space-off’ – ‘the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible’ (de Lauretis 1987, 26). In the aftermath of feminism’s promise, intransitive feminist affect might become overwhelmingly negative and given to defensiveness. It is precisely the affective structure of defence that Jennifer Nash (2019) links to the felt experience of contemporary black feminism. Defensiveness is how black feminists ‘hold on’ to a political project while the terms of intersectionality are distorted by their visibility – ‘black feminist defensiveness [is] a political response to ongoing violence’ (2019, 3). For it is not just Martha Nussbaum’s feminism that promises ‘we can travel from being made by the world we seek to change to being able to change it’ (Wiegman 2010, 81). This promise is ubiquitous to an assumed feminist subject, there in the writing we make, there in the way that the ‘ethical

and the professional meet in the nervous system in raw-making and destabilizing ways' (Berlant 2009, 136).

Feminist thought emerged interstitially in the 'non-coincidence of woman (as masculinist representation) and women (as social, historical subjects)' (Zerilli 2012). As such, feminist subjectivity appears in the 'movement back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centred frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable' (de Lauretis 1987, 26). Feminist theory is located in that innervating difference from the outside, with one eye turned towards how feminist epistemology contours and gives expression to 'the gestural force that opens experience to its potential variation' (Manning 2016, 1), and the other to what might yet be invoked. Strictly speaking, of course, a feminist thought can't feel a thing. But if, like Grosz, we think of concepts as 'ontological conditions rather than moral ideals' (2011, 59), we might further open feminist theory to its own becoming. The expansion of a feminist present might be less a matter of valorising subjugated knowledges, and more one of inventing new ways to discern the transversal gestural force of the feminist concept. As well as thinking of *feeling as an ontological condition of feminism*, which is the revisionist history/history of the present of feminist theory concurrent with feminism's affective turn, we might also conceptualise *feminist theory as an ontological condition of feeling*. We might read and write for the way that concepts of feeling line the body that feels and the body that thinks in the space-off of feminist theory - in the closest places of the self.

After the Exit

Reading Beauvoir for the first time, Butler writes: 'social constraints upon gender compliance and deviation are so great that most people feel deeply wounded if they are told that they are not really manly or womanly, that they have failed to execute their manhood or womanhood properly' (1986, 41). The painfulness of misrecognition and the woundedness of being on the outside never stopped being the subject of Butler's discourse. Although she rarely herself tells us how it feels, her analysis galvanises a register of vulnerability. We find vulnerability too in Spivak's appeal to our humility, when she writes: 'Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text' (1993, 181). To what or whom does one surrender when one translates? To what or whom is one indebted? What

does one give? We might reformulate Foucault thus: what is this specific vulnerability that emerges from feminist theory and nowhere else?⁴

First I thought, being cut from the cloth of feminist theory made me vulnerable to the operations of the political that constitute the field. 'You need to get over your pain,' was the last I heard. I was cut, then cut off – from language, from a way of relating to a world. I didn't 'get over' the pain. We take our cuts with us. If you have been blacklisted, gather your outsides. First I thought, the exit wounds of feminist theory are nothing but bitterness and bruised aspirations. Only someone with recourse to the fantasy of self-mastery thinks that they can take their language with them when they leave.

Second I thought, feminist philosophy has no predetermined horizons or frontiers.⁵ If the very ground of feminist philosophy, like that of sexual difference, 'cannot appear in its own terms' (Grosz 1994, 209), a kernel of 'pure difference' must line feminist thought (1994, 208). Feminist philosophy is not the province of a masterful subjectivity. 'The only horizon that matters is our optimism for an idea' (Bernard Center for Research on Women 2011). Second I thought, the exit wound is a force for recalibration. A reminder of the feminist epistemological investment in the fact that 'we do not know what we're capable of until we experience the displacement of the limits that we've been made to believe and obey' (Gago 2020, 2). A reminder of how feminist thought is located in the body. 'The experience of thinking together is felt in the body as the potencia of an idea' (2020, 155). We have to be transformed by our experience of an idea for a 'particular affect to take on a political dimension' (2020, 164; also, Bernard Center for Research on Women 2011).

In the exit wounds of feminist theory you won't find your voice in the shelter of self-possession. Literacy shut off the 'open conduits' of the senses, the 'continuous interaction' linking you to the world (Carson 1986, 43). In the exit wounds of feminist theory, redirect your literacy to the outside, to sense and sensation. Stand in the doorway as long as you can, as you look for 'the possibility of a world that you can trust with your non-sovereignty, with your dependence on other people' (Bernard Center for Research on Women 2011). Look for openings in structures of feeling whose elements and rhythms contain 'specific kinds of sociality' not yet formally recognised (Williams 1977, 133).

I still think that feminist theory has its own subordinated, negative and excluded terms. The cut of the personal is a cut above the rest. The personal cuts the deepest.

The exit wound might be feminist theory's own limit-attitude.⁶ Consider Irigaray's 'lips', Butler's 'drag', Braidotti's 'nomad'.⁷ In the exit wounds of feminist

theory, move on from a dialectical and identificatory morality – beyond bifurcation. The feminist cyborg tracks her own space-off.

Forks in the road carry me backwards. You'll never catch up to the present; the world's moved on by the time you face forward. Find your future in the rear-view mirror. 'The extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure' (Berlant 2011, 10). '[N]o turning away is valid once and for all' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 96). In the exit wounds of feminist theory, feelings permeate and permutate. A thousand tiny feminist feelings, or none. The exit wound is the mess made by the object as it leaves the body. Broken attachments scatter into the headwind.

Feminist theory owes a debt of gratitude to all the expressive modes that get deducted from the equation of its origins. In the exit wounds of feminist theory, look for singing: more joy. Don't index truth to feeling *as if a feeling could be felt without its concept; as if there is no thought to feminist sensation*.

With the trace of the other, take a journey from a feminist thought made possible by feeling, to a feminist thought that feels. Go down in this writing to where its long arc of failure creeps, to its many troubled entrails. Claw back 'the fragment over any fantasy of future wholeness' (Halberstam 2011, 138). Find the stillness in 'the desire to change everything' (Gago 2020, 3). Go down to the feminist concept as 'wayward sibling,' 'provoked by art and sharing the same enticements for the emergence of innovation and invention' (Grosz 2008, 2). In the exit wounds of feminist theory, in the 'poetic, rhetorical, and world-creating capacity of language' (Zerilli 2005, 9), get out of your habits of perception and into the conditions of creation (Smith and Protevi 2008). Find your wild tongue. Once more with feeling, let all your exit routes catch up with you.

Postscript

It is 28 June 2021 and Lauren Berlant has died. This essay began in the early 2000s as a master's dissertation on feminism and feeling – and I didn't understand Lauren's work back then. In the time since, I have lived with their intimate thinking, growing incrementally closer to understanding what they were giving. Lauren leaves a gargantuan hole, an incomparable exit wound, an immeasurable loss. We will always be catching up to what they left behind. In this exit wound, in the horizon of their writing, of their power to transform us, we love and find love. Not all that is crystalline has come to pass.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Gregory Seigworth and Joanna Zylinska for being readers. I also want to express my gratitude to the colleagues who co-teach and the students who take with me the class in Contemporary Feminist Media Cultures in the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths.

References

- Ahmed, S. 2008. 'Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness.' *New Formations* 63: 121–137.
- Ahmed, S. 2016. 'Resignation is a Feminist Issue.' Blog post, 27 August. Available at: <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/08/27/resignation-is-a-feminist-issue/>.
- Anzaldúa, G. 2007. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd edn. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Beauvoir, S. 1997. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage.
- Berlant, L. 2009. 'Affect is the New Trauma' *Minnesota Review* 71/72: 131–136.
- Berlant, L. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Bernard Center for Research on Women. 2011. 'Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant' YouTube, 10 May. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIOeWTa_M0U.
- Braidotti, R. 1994. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brinkema, E. 2014. *The Forms of the Affects*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. 1986. 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*.' *Yale French Studies* 72: 35–49.
- Carson, A. 1986. *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cheah, P., E. Grosz, J. Butler and D. Cornell. 1998. 'The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell.' *Diacritics* 28(1): 19–42.
- De Lauretis, T. 1987. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Deleuze, G. 1994. *Difference and Repetition* Trans. P. Patton. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Denzin, N. K. 1984. *On Understanding Emotion*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Elam, D. and R. Wiegman (eds). 1995. *Feminism Beside Itself*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 1988. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman. Translated by A. Sheridan and others. London and New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 2002. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. London and New York: Routledge.
- Frye, M. 1983. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Gago, V. 2020. *Feminist International: How to Change Everything*. London and New York: Verso.
- Grosz, E. 2011. *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections of Life, Politics and Art*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Grosz, E. 2008. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grosz, E. 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Halberstam, J. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, J. D. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis and London, IN: University of Minnesota Press.
- hooks, b. 1996. 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness'. In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by A. Garry and M. Pearsall, 48–55. London and New York: Routledge.
- Huffer, L. 2016. 'Lipwork'. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 27(5): 93–105.
- Jaggar, A. M. 1989. 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology'. In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by A. Garry and M. Pearsall, 129–155. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, A. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Manning, E. 2016. *The Minor Gesture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Nash, J. C. 2019. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

- McKinney, C. 2020. *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Ngai, S. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Nicolacopoulos, T. and G. Vassilacopoulos. 2014. *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier: Manifesto for a White Australian Philosophy of Origins*. Melbourne, VA: Re. press.
- Povinelli, E. A. 2018. 'Horizons and Frontiers, Late Liberal Territoriality, and Toxic Habits.' *e-flux* 90(April). www.e-flux.com/journal/90/191186/horizons-and-frontiers-late-liberal-territoriality-and-toxic-habitats/.
- Povinelli, E. A. and K. T. DiFruscia. 2012. 'A Conversation with Elizabeth A. Povinelli.' *Trans-Scripts* 2: 76–90.
- Probyn, E. 1996. *Outside Belongings*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Scott, J. W. 1992. 'Experience.' In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by J. Butler and J. W. Scott, 22–40. New York and London: Routledge.
- Singh, J. 2018a. *No Archive Will Restore You*. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books.
- Singh, J. 2018b. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Smith, D. and J. Protevi. 2008. 'Gilles Deleuze.' In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), edited by E. N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University.
- Spellman, E. 1989. 'Anger and Insubordination.' In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by A. Garry and M. Pearsall, 263–273. London and New York: Routledge.
- Spivak, G. C. 1993. 'The Politics of Translation.' In *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 179–200. London and New York: Routledge.
- Terada, R. 2001. *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- The Brooklyn Rail. 2020. 'McKenzie Wark with John Capetta: New Social Environment #8.' YouTube, 26 March. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ex59SJJw6Bs.
- Trinh, T. M. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Wiegman, R. 2010. 'The Intimacy of Critique: Ruminations on Feminism as a Living Thing.' *Feminist Theory*, 11(1): 79–84.

- Wiegman, R. 2012. *Object Lessons*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Williams, R. 1977. 'Structures of Feeling'. In *Marxism and Literature*, 128-135. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, E. A. 2015. *Gut Feminism*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Wolf, V. 1938 [1978]. *Three Guineas*. London: Penguin.
- Zerilli, L. M. G. 2005. "We Feel our Freedom": Imagination and Judgement in the Thought of Hannah Arendt. *Political Theory* 20(10): 1-31.
- Zerilli, L. M. G. 2012. 'Feminist Theory without Solace: Simone de Beauvoir'. *Theory & Event* 15(2). <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/478360>.
- Zylinska, J. 2018. *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Open Access