The Limits of Feminism

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

_______________________________
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Abstract

The Limits of Feminism

What is it about feminism that invites so many different opinions on what ‘counts’ and what doesn’t? People from vastly different cultural situations variously categorise feminist practices as extreme, radical, reactionary, unbalanced, co-opted, revolutionary, elite, exclusive, progressive, passé, and hysterical. The desire of both feminists and anti-feminists to control feminism emerges as the limiting of what feminism is, whom it is for, and where it is going. The urge to limit feminism seems, in some cases, to overtake the urge to spread the word and celebrate feminism’s successes. And it is not just anti-feminists who attempt to limit feminism – even feminists spend an inordinate amount of time defining certain practices out of the feminist spectrum. In this thesis, I document and analyse the way we limit feminism – its participants, meaning, practices, language, history, and future. I explore the reasons why we need to contain feminism in this way, looking in particular at those who have an investment in keeping feminism comfortably small. I invite back into the realm of feminism a wide range of activities and theories we generally invalidate as feminism, including the words of several ‘unofficial’ feminists I interviewed for this project. In essence, this project goes towards the rethinking of the term ‘feminism’ by examining the widely differing and often contradictory definitions of ‘what counts.’
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Introduction

I discovered the book as I wrote it, so that instead of imposing on my material the kind of unity that makes you believe that the author knew it all along...I've tried to keep that process of discovery intact.

– Joanna Russ

Imagine the journey up to and including this thesis as a spiral instead of a straight line. It is not even a vertical spiral in three dimensions – a helix – because that might imply that I would be moving up towards some kind of religious epiphany or down towards an archaeological ‘truth.’ Let’s make it a flat spiral, two-dimensional. Look at the journey in terms of spiralling outwards to a sense of proportion, outwards to make connections with others in the world; and inwards into arbitrary boundaries, introspection, immediacy and intimate relationships. A feminist journey tends to happen in this pendulous, sometimes-erratic side-to-side movement rather than as a triumphant gallop down a one-way street with a great Las Vegas-style neon sign over the door of a building, flashing repeatedly: ‘Feminism,’ ‘Feminism,’ ‘Feminism.’ The journey spirals back on itself – it is a looping of revelations, delights, and despondencies. The feminism in it survives through the critical, the hysterical, and those moments of earth-shattering banality.

I wish to show here some of the ‘artefacts’ of this journey. These artefacts have some accompanying analytical commentary: I have used the artefacts as ways into some of the important points I need to make from the outset. I want to ask my readers to allow the artefacts also to act as theory by themselves. While I do not always agree with the sentiments/analyses expressed in these artefacts, I certainly acknowledge their validity as theory about life and power. That the artefacts act as theory is an important

1 Russ, Joanna. What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class and the Future of Feminism. New York: St Martin’s, 1998. Xiv.

2 Similarly, Stanley and Wise use the idea of a spiral to describe feminist consciousness: “We prefer to think of the processes of consciousness in terms of a circle or spiral – there are no beginnings and no ends, merely a continual flow.” Stanley, Liz and Sue Wise. Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983. 120. My discussion of consciousness later in this chapter features many of Stanley and Wise’s arguments.
point because, as you will see, it is the idea of including within feminism people, practices and ideas outside the usual realm of feminism that this thesis explores. Of course, the very fact that I have selected some pieces and rejected others constitutes an analysis. However, the selection is not about me ‘proving’ a theory distinct from the artefacts themselves. Rather, it is about me showing peripheral and contradictory theories I have produced and accepted in the past. These theories build a picture around what I want to say in this thesis. It is also about exhibiting the kind of conscious reflection on the interaction between my own life, my everyday experiences, my history, and the theory I present in this thesis.

**Artefacts**

I wrote this poem when I was five years old, and my mother recorded it for me. Over the years, the piece of paper has been lost, but I still remember what it looked like. On one side was my infant scrawl – “Days go slow…” – trailing off into an inkblot. Obviously writing it out was too time-consuming for me. However, my mum thought it was important enough to preserve, so she wrote it out for me on the other side:

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Days go slow when you’re little, you know
At school a day takes a year to go
But when I’m at home, the day goes so fast
That I wish that a day would last and last.
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Perhaps this was my first inkling that all would not be well in a world of arbitrary constructions such as the measurement of time. In my five year old mind, time was like jelly – something unstable and inconsistent. And I wasn’t always happy about that. Words, descriptions, and understandings that make up our social reality operate on similar terms: they frequently seem stable but actually fluctuate from context to context. Take the word ‘we,’ for instance. It seems clear enough. And yet the meaning of ‘we’ varies, not just with each situation, but with the words spoken immediately around the word. ‘We’ could be referring to the speaker and listener(s); the speaker and
certain other specific people; the speaker and his/her cultural/political/ethnic/sexual
group; or even the entirety of the human race.

But even more importantly, the ambiguity of the term ‘we’ has political
consequences. As Mary Daly puts it:

Sometimes, since the ambiguity about whether to use we or they [when talking about
women] is not clearly resolvable, there are difficult choices. Since pronouns are
profoundly personal and political, they carry powerful messages.3

In writing this thesis, I often encountered the problem of whether to use ‘we’ and/or
‘they.’ At times, I wanted to identify with a particular group, such as the women in my
circle of friends and family, or academic feminists, or feminist activists, or women in
general. However, to do so was not always strategically wise. My specific identity
moves across all of those groups, so I could (in theory) legitimately identify with all or
any of them; but at various times, to use ‘we’ or ‘they’ to describe those separate
groups would simply cause confusion or even a sense of hierarchy and division.
Therefore, I have had to be extremely cautious about saying ‘we’ and ‘they.’ I have had
to work hard to avoid creating the illusion that I am or am not, for example, a feminist
activist; or that I can reflect ‘objectively’ upon activism as an academic; or that I can
look on feminist activism with admiration, puzzlement or disdain as a woman outside
the circle of feminists. My own complicity with certain forms of feminism, my critical
stance, and my current circumstances all contribute to the decision to use ‘we’ or
‘they,’ and even then I’m not sure I always get it right. Hirsch and Keller struggle with
the same issue in their book Conflicts in Feminism:

…multiplication is no escape from reification…without claiming to speak for all
feminists, we have chosen to use a pronoun many feminists have discarded as
exclusionary, at worst, or confusing, at best…we have come to a shifting and
fluctuating “we” which we try to use carefully, referring at times specifically to the two
of us, at other times more generally to a proximal and permeable group of feminists for
whom we felt, at least provisionally and in specific circumstances, we could speak.4

Whilst difficult, the use of the term ‘we’ is, as Hirsch and Keller point out, “preferable to the only other available option – a passive voice that elides agency from the endeavor of thinking and writing.” In other words, identity and location are worth fighting for. However, my main point in this discussion is that terms and concepts that seem self-evident, unambiguous and constant often turn on us when we least expect it. Evidence of such struggles, and critical discussion of these struggles, are common throughout this thesis.

This piece was written at eleven years old.

I wonder what stupid people think about. Most stupid people think they’re smart. Narelle quote ‘fools think that we are clever; but a wise man knows we are fools.’ I know what that is meaning, I understand it (beleave [sic] it or not!)

Eleven years old, and I was starting to notice more subtle boundaries than the arbitrary ones of infancy – like the boundaries between myself and the other kids at school. They were white like me; they were middle class like me. But the other kids had what appeared to me more banal interests: fashion, collecting stickers and soaps. Although I didn’t have a name for it yet, I considered myself an intellectual. I sat for hours writing, describing my people and my country, building up and reinforcing the boundary lines. For a while there I rode high on my sense of superiority. It was probably high school that battered me down, for that was when the boundaries changed and it became

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3 Hirsch and Keller. 3.
obvious that there was more to superiority than intellectualism. But my eleven year old comments and quotation illustrate a profound point about the divisions between concepts such as intellectual and ‘philistine’; scholarly and ‘mainstream’; academic and ‘uneducated.’ Essentially, the point is this: the wise man may know he is a fool, but he often fails to account for the wisdom of ‘fools.’

At the same time, I was starting to understand and recognise some systems of inequity in the wider world, and I chose to reject these:

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Things I hate –
People that think fashion is the most important thing in the world.
Little kids that build cubby houses with trees, etc.
Male chauvenists [sic]
Over-priviliged [sic] people
Fake-artists

Things I like –
Storms
Charitable people
Babies
Wind in trees
Night Time
Forests
It is interesting that my recognition of inequities did not extend to those between ‘wise’ people and ‘fools.’ In feminist theory, at least, I see another version of this division as one of the most powerful obstacles to a broader demographic of women reading feminist theory. The version of the division I refer to is that between academic feminists (the ‘wise’) and non-academic feminists (the ‘fools’). The obstacle constituted by this division is that of scholarly conventions, something I address at length in Chapter 4 and 5. Obviously, I now have an intense interest in examining the boundaries between, and systems of inequity that operate through, the conception of certain women as ‘wise’ to oppression and feminist thought, and others as not. This thesis itself is intended not only as an exploration of such issues, but as an attempt to revise the boundaries by creating a piece of work that can be accessible to non-academic women.

Some may ask, in light of these goals, why it is I wish to write a scholarly thesis for a degree. I understand that doing so whilst aiming to create an inclusive, accessible text may seem like a contradictory project. But it is important to remember that I am not aiming to disparage academic work or suggesting we do away with scholarly feminist writing or careers; the only time I come remotely near either is in Chapter 4, wherein I offer some gentle criticisms of conventions within feminist scholarship that may alienate non-academic readers. Rather, my task is to show that various kinds of written and practical work, including conventional scholarly writing, as well as less traditional ways of producing feminist theory, count as feminist theory. I won’t go so far as to say that my use of this text towards a PhD is beside the point, but I would certainly assert that it can be reconciled with my political goals.
In fact, it is one of these goals to show that it is indeed possible to write accessibly for academic purposes – as well as to show that it is possible to write considered feminist theory for a wider public audience. I understand that not all women will find this book accessible in the way that a book like *Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus* is, or a *That’s Life!* magazine is. I recognise that there is a variety of reading abilities amongst Western women, not to mention the factors of interest and time. But hopefully interested non-academic readers will be able to at least browse at this thesis, choose to read sections they consider relevant, and engage with it on an intellectual and emotional level, even if they do not wish to read it from cover to cover.

Art from the years between 1986 and 1990 (my early teens):

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7 *That’s Life!* Magazine. Australia: Pacific Publications.
I think that drawings like these are an obvious, if unconscious, reference to being female in Western society. The first drawing shows a conceptualisation of ‘woman’ as cultural: created and influenced by factors such as time, history, nature, sexuality, religion, fertility, power, and the material. Strangely, though, I also feel that it refers to the specificity of being an individual woman with personal experiences and knowledge to bring to and resist culture. There are symbols of optimism as well as foreboding in the picture, and although I have no way of knowing what I meant when I drew it, I now interpret it as a statement about the power of the personal to effect change. The second drawing seems more complex to me. It gives me a sense of women’s oppression; their martyrdom; their ultimate essential femininity. The dollar note lying beside the man on the couch calls up thoughts of economic oppression and even prostitution. But again there is a real feeling of specificity: this is a real, living woman, and that is a real man sitting like a thundercloud, guarding the household money.

These drawings give me an in-road to discuss my attitude towards the binary opposition between abstract structures of power and personally embodied oppression and resistance. I find Daly’s comment that:
...even feminists... are unable to name their oppressor, referring instead to vague ‘forces,’ ‘roles,’ ‘stereotypes,’ ‘constraints,’ ‘attitudes,’ ‘influences.’ This list could go on. The point is that no agent is named – only abstractions8 useful here as a way of reflecting on relationships between men and women, women and culture. Colleagues in the academy have previously taken me to task for talking about ‘men’ and ‘women’; anti-feminists and feminists, instead of patriarchy and feminism. But abstract concepts, structures and systems do not always allow for adequate explanations, and they can, in fact, draw attention away from oppression and feminist resistance as lived experiences. Similarly, some have expressed distaste for my use of terms such as ‘real life’ and the ‘real world’ when discussing feminist theory and activism – particularly without highlighting these terms using inverted commas or similar. However, I argue that there are such things as real life and the real world in comparison with the occasionally dogmatic, often scholarly, and sometimes bizarre world of organised feminism. In addition, my aim is to create a theory which connects with the real world in the sense that I will expose the relationship between the feminism as a ‘product’ of academia and activism, and the lived experiences of writing and practicing feminism.

This is an excerpt from the journal we were asked to keep in the Feminist Thought unit I did in 1996, the second year of my undergraduate degree:

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Daly. 29.
I turned to look at a house and saw straight through a window, into a mirror, into my face, hair, shoulders. For an instant it went through me like a shudder, and I now understand the coldness, the thrill: as though sucked into some separate dimension, I was part of another household and another life. I was someone else’s daughter, someone else’s sister and someone else’s lover, free of these legacies, handed in on a separate census form. My own census form is sitting on the table in front of me, but even as I fill it in, things are changing: there are truths which refrain from self-evidence.

My attention to the personal and ways of doing personal experience is not a hearkening back to the Enlightenment ideal of individual autonomy. I do not believe that we exist in a vacuum; rather, I insist on constant attention to the way we construct ourselves within, and are constructed by, cultural patterns and structures such as language, the media, capitalism, systems of moral values, religion, patriarchal oppression, and so on. The danger of structural accounts of the self, however, is that one can begin to envisage cultural structures as monolithic, faceless powerhouses that exist outside ourselves. I do not subscribe to the idea that we are somehow programmed by these ‘influences’ to be obedient subjects who perpetuate oppressive cultural states with very little dissent. As Stanley and Wise put it, structures “are constructed from within interactions and events – they do not exist outside of these to be ‘released’ within them.” I prefer a concept of agency, in which we (as groups and individually) act out or act upon these systemic forms of oppression in variously compliant, complacent, subversive and revolutionary ways.

The self-as-agent allows for a conception of feminism that I feel better suits contemporary Western oppression and resistance than the idea that women must overthrow crushing oppression by means of a revolution. Because sometimes, this revolutionary mentality makes historical struggles seem so much simpler than contemporary ones. At least back then oppression was obvious:

I can be Virginia Woolf’s grand-daughter or great grand-daughter and wander the streets of Perth as though they were the old alleys of London. I can look for the men’s university and compare it with the women’s university; go to the library and try to find the terrible, essential discrepancy which is behind poverty, inequality and oppression; see the grey winter streets overcome with sunshine and cherry blossoms. I can be and do, but my journey would ultimately come to a dismal end at a park bench in the Supreme Court Gardens or Forrest Place. For, even as I searched, the recollection would come to me that those great struggles have come to an end: I can go to any university without a letter of introduction and walk on the grass; I can find glorious books that explain women’s poverty without trying to rationalize it.

I look up through the leaves of overhanging trees in these gardens and endeavour to ascertain whether or not the sun is shining, thinking on my own good fortune at being born in such a sweet decade of enlightenment...the 70s – the liberated 70s. And as I’m peering and thinking, a man in a wig and cloak descends the stairs of the Supreme Court, and I’m reminded of the newsreader predicting that the women of W.A. will live in fear because the judges’ ‘bias against women.’ The ABC called it sexism, but Mr Packer thought the word too strong. Just thinking of television sends a host of images flying towards me like angels avenging apathy: story after story of the bad mother, losing 10kg in 13 weeks, miniskirts are back in, beauty, beauty, beauty. My heart is pounding.

In Forrest Place, I rise from the park bench and walk the clean-swept pavement. Everywhere in glass cages the mannequins watch me with sharp nipples and gaunt bodies...I don’t know whether they scorn me or plead with me. Either way, I’m unreasonably upset and I stop in the middle of the mall, even though it’s not the done thing, and I have to watch a dotty old woman in her dressing gown and a girl with pink hair to get any comfort. I look up at the sky and see that the sun isn’t shining, and there are no cherry blossoms: it is not yet spring.

Oppression is not always so obvious now as it was in Virginia Woolf’s day – it often takes more subtle forms. It lives inside relationships, workplaces, families, sex discrimination acts, and statements of equal opportunity. In addition to the usual reviling of historical forms of oppression, I think we sometimes almost mourn the ease with which we could identify women’s oppression. It is so slippery these days that many instances of discrimination are doomed to be threshed out in the courts because sexist behaviour can be pinned on other motivations. A sexist employer, for instance, could easily claim that ‘he’ offered a woman her job back after taking maternity leave but that she didn’t want the time commitment required at that job level – so she was offered a lower level job for less money. This behaviour, with its apparently ‘just’ fiscal motivation, is condoned within a cultural-economic structure that does not support women’s combination of forging a career track with childbearing.

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Similarly, it’s easy to attribute moments of everyday feminist resistance to other motivations, or to write them off as not-feminism because they did not start out with feminist intentions. It is intriguing that, even back when I wrote those journal entries, it was the small, piecemeal resistances and subversions that kept me going – the dotty old woman in her dressing gown, for instance. At some point, someone would usher her back to the nursing home, but the very fact of her escape was exhilarating – that she might have the freedom to wander in her pyjamas without being burned as a witch. In these pieces, I can see myself edging towards being able to name little resistances as ‘feminism.’ This thesis is a larger-scale reclaiming of personal, everyday, unofficial resistance as feminism.

The next artefact is a poem, written some years back, on seeing a painting by a female relative who was a victim of child sex abuse.

in your art
serpents twist obscenely and stretch
up to the sky
pursuing chubby oblivious birds
in your mind
the hunt is good
the serpent grasps and shakes
the bird between bursting teeth
it squawks through the wrench, then is quiet
the fear of the bird
is nameless
formless
endless
the feathers are irrevocably stained

when you were eleven
you watched as a man cut the head off a snake
it wriggled and thrashed as though it still lived
you knew then
serpents don’t die

it’s your birthday
it might be your second or your fortieth
it might be in your room or in a dream
it doesn’t matter
the serpent stalked and twisted then
coming after you
and it does now
inside you
it is my fortieth birthday
and it feels like my second
when I was little, at school,
we had a kind teacher who said
paint what you feel
I painted twisting serpents

Take this as an example of my desire to look out towards other women for feminist information, and for feedback on my own feminism. Importantly, the poem also shows recognition of a non-academic woman’s ability to comment and theorise on feminist issues. I saw the picture this woman had painted and I understood exactly what its feminist protest was – I recognised the darkening sky and the faceless serpent. Perhaps the recognition of unofficial feminism is not so much a realization that non-academic women theorise feminism and oppression, as the crumbling of long-held boundaries we reinforce. The reasons why we reinforce those boundaries are many and varied. In my case, it was self defence. My cleverness, my school-smarts were, after all, the things I clung to, protected and coveted. Letting go of the boundaries between intellectual and everyday feminism meant letting go of an oddly cherished anxiety, and seeing that knowledge could be shared – competition was not inevitable.

I now read the poem as a struggle: the switch from “you” to “I” in the last verse is kind of a folding in on itself of the intersubjectivity. The boundary seems to reassert itself, as though there is simply no way to accept feminist theorising that doesn’t at some point centre itself back in me (that is, academia). Similarly, the next piece (1993) expresses a deep and abiding obedience to the boundaries between the academic and the non-academic. My comments on the way we adapt our language to different audiences seem rather detached and strangely indifferent to the effects of such practices on reinforcing the boundaries between varying intellects (or levels of education, or levels of feminist consciousness). However, there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction. Perhaps it is the final, somewhat piteous, lines of the following that show an unhappiness with the way we tailor words, ideas and genre to specific ‘mentalities’ –
even if this unhappiness has selfish motives. This thesis reflects similar dissatisfaction, taken somewhat further: I openly discuss the idea that there are levels of consciousness (with feminist consciousness generally touted as the best level), and look at ways in which we can ‘level’ the conventional perception of consciousness.

Adapting.
Like chameleons, we adapt the way we speak. If situations were colours, our words would blend and change tone – our inflection, voice, the words, the colloquialisms and the ideas. For some people, in some places, I swear, I complain, I deepen my voice, add a sarcastic, gloomy tone. In other situations I speak cynically and righteously, the words are passionate and in accordance, my voice is loud and clear, the ideas are violent and strain and heave at the bounds of my mind and the limitations of words, my eyes and hands speak their own, silent words. It’s all a part of trying to be myself. Sometimes I feel like I can only be myself with a few people.

The final two pieces were written around 1997/1998. The first was something I wrote for me, intended for my own meditation, never to be seen by anyone else, least of all another academic. The second piece is a reflection on a group work exercise required in one of my honours units, written shortly before I submitted a very scholarly thesis called “Partial Sisterhood: Optimism and Ethics for a Feminist Collective.” Although written with different intentions and on entirely different topics, both pieces bring me neatly towards a discussion of consciously connecting feminism and everyday life. This discussion includes the way we (as feminists) tend to erase what we regard as the imperfections and weaknesses that colonise everyday life when we produce
feminism in the forms of writing and activism – but read the artefacts themselves before we proceed.

Piece 1:
When I worked at the newsagency, I had to tear up the leftover Playboys and Penthouses at the end of each month. I would see pictures of beautiful women as I went: Sophie, 23 ‘I like to take control, I enjoy giving massage – using oils...’ Sure, Sophie. The pictures are undeniably, if culturally, erotic. Simultaneously, they are irritating, disgusting, artistic, humiliating. Once, a man bought one, explaining that he’d written an article published in it that month. He did have to explain. I was judging all the men that bought them, watching their faces, putting them ostentatiously in paper bags like they used to put tampons in paper bags at the supermarket. As if it’s something to feel as shameful about as our bleeding.
Whole Asian families would flick through soft porn magazines – tourist families from the Hilton. Japanese salarymen would laugh and comment in their terribly sexist language (their characters for wife mean ‘inside the house’; the characters for husband mean ‘master’). Once, a couple of Japanese girls asked for Playgirl. I was sorry to say we didn’t have it. Revenge? Double standards? Inversion?
It was satisfying to tear up those magazines each month.
I don’t care what people say about using porn for your sex life. I can’t accept it. I agree: porn is the theory, rape is the practice. But my feelings on it aren’t even that rational.
I once, when Cleo was a real woman’s magazine, we convinced my friend’s mum to buy one for us. We wanted to see a penis. Imagine our disappointment when all we got was a bum.

Piece 2:
‘But do you think that this Other was already there, or is it a construction of the dominant?’ [a fellow student] asked when, during work on our group project, I was declaiming on my pet topic of specific otherness.
Good question. One that forces me to re-evaluate everything I’ve held dear for the last three years (poststructuralism...deconstruction...neo-Freudianism). I don’t think I can definitively answer the question, but I can circle it, and play with it. Where was I coming from with this ‘specific otherness?’ Irigaray and Kristeva, of course – that’s where I’m always coming from. But Kristeva might shudder to see the way I twist her abject for my own purposes. It’s more the Irigaray that I’m calling on: her own particular brand of deconstructive-socialist-psychoanalytic-radical feminism. The little touches of ambiguous essentialism, and the rays of hope: there can be something more than this masculine language; that we can engage with Derrida, Marx, Freud, Lacan in a deliciously mischievous way; that we can articulate our difference. For some time now I’ve noticed that there is something left when we dissipate (capital-T) Truth. I was resistant to the idea: it is much easier, after all, to take the weight off my own shoulders and blame it all on society, the mode of production, patriarchy, colonialism. The material I’ve read, however, and the ideas that proliferate as a result of this reading, urge me towards a greater accountability. I’m reminded of the inexhaustive and unique nature of personal experience. I recall that there are parts of me that have escaped the system – how? The overwhelming contradictions of oppressed existence make up one answer to that question: something’s gotta give. But isn’t there something else? Something that escapes ideologies without any particular political impetus or rationale? An underside of otherness. In my paper for this unit, I wrote:
Did we make them Other...or did they exist even before we started categorizing? If we cannot name these Others, or even consciously imagine them, they must pre-exist our will and, therefore, escape our controlling relegation to the realm of Other.
It sounds a bit essentialistic, doesn’t it?
But you’ve got to understand: there’s only so much theorizing a feminist can take. At least Irigaray asks us to do something with what we’ve got. I’m even inclined to think her ideas might work if we could just stop arguing about whether or not they constitute essentialism. The critics have covered every angle: yes – she is essentialistic; no – she is not essentialistic in any familiar way. I’d like to know who disguised himself as a god and told us that ambiguity is wicked. I mean, we need to stay progressive about this: there’s no point hiding in patriarchal definitions of feminine and masculine, or in urging the human spirit to overcome. But where would women be without specificity? Subsumed, as usual, into sameness. And where would we all be without human agency? I don’t know, but I bet we wouldn’t be using toothbrushes to clean the drain, running through the CBD on a treasure hunt devised by two schoolgirls, asking for a free cup of water in McDonald’s. We wouldn’t be manipulating the base – mutating patriarchy and consumer capitalism – as we do every single day. We talked about the longing for politics in our last class – for solutions to the problems that drag us down over and over, even if they don’t work, or even if they could never be put into practice. It’s necessary to find a creative space in the paralytic nihilism of my heroes’ theories (Derrida, Althusser, Lacan). I need to ground myself somewhere – in ethics and in optimism. Otherwise this whole university degree – this whole exercise – means nothing.

However, it is not, as I seem to suggest in the above, theory or academia that is devoid of politics (in fact, these are shot through with politics in profound and complicated ways). Rather, it is the connection between our feminist theory (and/or our feminist activism) and the lived, daily reality of our personal experience that may lack politicisation. Where I long for politics is in the gap between my written work and myself the feminist writer; my activism and myself the feminist activist; my feminist ideals and what I do every day. The first piece, whether intended this way or not, is an honest writing of my own life as feminist theory. There is a consciousness in the way I write: I used the words “real women,” feeling guiltily defiant (I might be accused of the ‘crime’ of essentialism). Resentfully, I made explanations for this essentialism and my anger. I asked questions I did not have answers to. There are references to both systemic and personal forms of oppression and resistance. In short, this piece explored the everyday as theory and activism – not just as the grounds for theory and activism.

The second piece explores in a more abstract way the need to find connections between feminism and the self. At the time, I was talking and thinking a lot about something I had named “specific otherness.” Now I think about it, specific otherness was simply agency – the idea that there is something in all of us (natural or not) that
enables us to resist bigger structures, like societal norms. I think after years of training in post-structuralist thought, which eroded for me the idea of anything natural in humans by claiming humanity/masculinity/femininity to be nothing but culturally determined (or, at least, that was how I understood it), I needed a more positive alternative. I didn’t feel like post-structuralist thought was entirely right for me. I felt like I had a soul.

I think the most important thing about this piece is that I seemed to make a connection between the ideas of agency, ethics and optimism. I’m not sure how the connection worked back then, but I can certainly form a connection between these concepts now. In the context of a feminist work, this connection is: women exhibit agency in their use and performance of cultural/political systems; it is ethically urgent that we give attention to such agency; and such agency (and the attention to such agency) leads to optimism because it allows us to observe, accept and admire the spread of feminism – even to those women we tend to imagine it hasn’t reached.

Optimism is a very important, and a very underrated, facet of feminism. The best way to achieve this optimism – the knowledge of the growing presence in feminism in the most intimate spaces of our daily lives – is through the exploration of how we do feminism. I am not just talking about what we do in the name of feminism. I am talking about the specifics of how we do feminism, and in particular how we integrate and reconcile feminism with everyday existence. Therefore, my call in this thesis is for a greater awareness of, and critical reflection on, the links between feminism as an ideology and our embodied, everyday enactments of feminism.

As a result, this thesis is written using three core principles:
1. We (in Western culture) limit feminism. We limit its participants, its meaning, its practices, its language, its history, and its future.

2. We all collude in limiting feminism – feminists, antifeminists, non-feminists. We have various investments in controlling feminism.

3. Greater awareness of the limits we impose is desirable because an awareness of the limits is the first step towards ‘de-limiting’ feminism.

These principles are not, of course, the final word on the matter. Rather, they form the starting point for this project. The next step is to elaborate on what kinds of limits I’m talking about. For the sake of sense, I’ve split my discussion of the limits of feminism into three main areas: academic feminism; feminist activism; and intergenerational conflict amongst feminists.

It was my experiences with feminism that led me to identify these limits. I knew, when I felt embarrassed, not proud, to give my highly awarded honours dissertation to my aunt and my brother-in-law to read, explaining that “it’s got a lot of jargon in it,” and “it’s a bit dry,” that something was awry. I had an inkling of this attitude occasionally throughout my university career. I loathed feeling ignorant when everyone seemed to be using the words that the lecturers used; I wrote down countless words in the margins of my lecture notes, promising myself to look them up in the dictionary when I got home. The problem is that my one and only beloved dictionary was published in 1942. A lot of the words I needed to look up weren’t even thought of until feminist theory and postmodernism came into vogue. I’m still not perfectly clear on what a ‘diaspora’ is – and this is not good for my academic self-assurance when many of my colleagues are doing dissertations with ‘diaspora’ in the title.

I guess I will have to make the effort to find out what a diaspora is one day. It annoys me, though, that I cannot have a conversation, let alone make an intellectual

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12 I discuss the decision to work mainly with Western feminism in the “Ethical Considerations” section of this chapter.
contribution, without having to pretend that I understand these words, and feeling pressure to use them myself. For me, the language issue is heavily involved with the limits issue. When my aunt has to wade through her own niece’s work with a dictionary at her elbow; when my brother-in-law puts aside my work in frustrated disgust, there’s a ‘no entry’ sign at work. However, inaccessible jargon is nowhere near the sum total of this project. I daily witness other ways of limiting feminism. Whenever I don’t do activism to a certain standard; whenever I read or hear something like ‘heterosexuality is irreconcilable with feminism,’ or ‘without an analysis of race, your work isn’t really feminism.’ Whenever I see writers dismissing obviously feminist acts through history as part of some other revolutionary movement or, in other words, ‘not really feminism;’ whenever I see young women scoff at radical resistance to oppression; whenever I hear big-name feminists sneering at new, different, or ‘third-wave’ approaches to feminism and sexism – these are the moments when I wonder why we draw such hard lines around what feminism is and isn’t. This thesis is an attempt to show how we can begin to break down some of the boundaries we have established between scholarly and popular writing, canonical and non-authoritative feminist voices, ‘pure’ and ‘compromised’ feminist politics, contingent and absolute historical feminism and, finally, second- and third-wave feminism.

So, this is the essence of my project: the identification of the limits of feminism, and an exploration of why we constantly demarcate and reinforce these boundaries. The positive side of this project is the attempt to uncover some of the practices we erase from feminism. We tend to look at feminism as a set of official activities (collective organizing, academic work, etc.). I want to explore unofficial feminism as feminism. I include a great variety of ‘outside’ practices within the bounds of feminism. From everyday choices, arguments and observations, to conversation, work matters, personal relationships and parenting. Misha Schubert refers to:
...the ingenious styles of activism that young women have brought to the movement to integrate their activism in their daily lives; to use every conversation, every social choice, every decision about how they interact with people and live their lives to make political statements...  

But it is not just young women who create feminist ways of life. I consider that the oppression of women of all ages can happen anywhere, and as a result, their feminism is everywhere. Feminism can be as grand and life changing as the decision to work with assault survivors, or it can be as minor and forgettable as a passing joke. All considerations of personal sacrifice, quantifiable labour and effectiveness aside, both of these practices count as feminism.

Some Practical Matters

Definitions of Terms

“Feminism”

At this point, I will define some of the terms I work with in this thesis, beginning with the word ‘feminism.’ This term is very difficult to define without incurring the disapproval of some group or another. The comfortable way to look at it is to equate it with equal opportunity. However, the idea of equal opportunity certainly doesn’t cover everything I have to say about feminism. Because, to some degree (although not absolutely), women have achieved equal opportunity. Universities can no longer keep women out of their grounds, or even out of certain courses. All jobs are (technically) open to all applicants, regardless of their sex. There is no reason why an employer can (legally) pay a woman less than s/he pays a man. Yet, life isn’t quite this neat. Note my use of the words ‘technically’ and ‘legally.’ Certain university courses are top-heavy with women, and men dominate others. Some employers simply would not give a particular job to a woman. And employers are still paying women, in

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general, significantly less than they pay men. Furthermore, certain jobs, courses, life choices, are just not palatable to men or to women. How can we call opportunity equal when we are still much more comfortable with/being male mechanics and female nannies? And more often than not, when there are exceptions, like the ‘househusband,’ everyone makes a big fuss and says how wonderful he is, and we see the case as extraordinary, despite our so-called ‘equal’ opportunities. In addition, there is the monstrous proliferation of sexy images of women, the industries that make money by feeding women’s insecurities about their appearances, the statistics on rape and assault. Equal opportunity doesn’t cover women’s desire to walk alone and feel safe; to feel okay about our weight, wrinkles, breast size, and so on.

The other big misconception people hold about the term ‘feminism’ is that it is about putting women before men in every situation. This is the ‘unequal opportunity,’ or ‘reverse sexism’ mindset, and it is what people mean when they say, “I’m not a feminist because I believe in equal opportunity.” Reverse sexism is another comfortable way to look at feminism, because it makes feminism the bad guy(!) of social justice movements. When people talk about feminism in this way, they are saying that feminism does to men what patriarchy does to women. It is the second of the two wrongs that don’t make a right. Often, people are happy to pin the blame for reverse sexism on small pockets of society. They will say, “It’s the few radical ones who spoil it for everyone else.” The ‘really militant’ feminists (read: lesbians, protesters, etc.) are the ‘trouble with feminism.’ They give feminism a bad name. As Joanna Russ puts it:

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Is it surprising that some of us try to draw a hard-and-fast distinction between Blameless Me, who couldn’t possibly bring down such treatment on myself (because I don’t deserve it) and Terrible Her, who does deserve it? We haven’t gone too far; she has. We aren’t crazy; she is. We aren’t angry or bad or out of control; she is. We don’t hate men (the sin of sins); she does. Don’t punish us; punish her.16

Feminism as reverse sexism means that feminism is much more about men than it is about women: hating men, destroying men, fighting men, triumphing over men.

My idea of feminism is not about a gender-nihilistic equality, nor is it about men. Rather, feminism is a vision to work towards as much as it is a knowledge that we are fighting against oppression. I define feminism as: resistance to the suffering of women – the suffering women endure because they are women. It is as basic as that. I certainly don’t endorse the suffering of men, but I think that feminism is about resisting the sexism that happens to women. It is not about making women’s lives as good as, or better than, men’s lives. It need not be about comparing ourselves with men at all. It is simply about making women’s lives better for women. By extension, a ‘feminist’ is a woman who participates somehow in resisting the suffering of women.

A definition like this may cause problems right at the outset for at least some readers. As Chris Beasley says in her book What is Feminism, Anyway?: “any brief, neat account of feminism is likely to be disputed.”17 It is true that the variety of work and activity included within the framework of feminism is enormous – seemingly boundless. However, this variety doesn’t mean we should give up on the task of defining feminism in the way Beasley describes:

…feminists are inclined – frequently deliberately – not to define what they mean by feminism, sensing dangers such as internal policing of both the field and of feminists by those who might like to determine what is to be included (or not), as well as the potential danger of constricting the unstable vitality of its meanings.18

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16 Russ. 85.
18 Beasley. Xii.
However, Beasley goes on to remind us that defining feminism can be: “a more modest task…a ‘clarifying device.’”\(^{19}\) Rather than giving up, it is important that we do attempt to define the terms we wish to talk about, providing we define these consciously.

Because defining a term, like writing a history of an event, is a rather sneakily subjective matter. Writing a history, for instance, says a lot about the historian – mainly about where the historian is coming from, and where s/he wants to go. To elaborate: when one writes a history, one chooses, consciously, unconsciously, strategically, or practically, to include or emphasize certain facts and omit or play down others. Despite its presentation of an apparently objective picture of an event, the history is just a version of that event. The history thus becomes a purposeful text. It shows a specific view of an event, often for the purpose of describing a series of events in a comprehensible way. In the same way, defining a term requires the definer to include and omit certain facets of the term, even if these facets are openly discussed and put aside. The definition becomes a strategic and workable definition. This is not a good or a bad thing – it is a just a normal part of defining a term. What would be the point of defining something if we didn’t need to use that definition for a specific purpose?

Beasley herself, for example, defines feminism focusing on its fluidity and its fragmented nature – whilst taking pains to identify feminism’s common features, including the critique of misogyny and male superiority.\(^{20}\) Her purpose is to discuss the very act of defining feminism, paying attention to the great variety of work within the term, and exploring the concept of feminism’s boundaries. Therefore, Beasley’s definition is a workable one for her purposes: she needs a definition that both supplies boundaries for feminism and allows for an exploration of the great variety of work that falls within its scope. In *Talking Back*,\(^{21}\) bell hooks’ definition of feminism is similarly

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\(^{19}\) Beasley. Xiv.

\(^{20}\) Beasley. 4.

workable for her purpose. Her purpose is to explore how feminists talk back to domination – particularly the domination of black women, but with consideration of other differences such as class. Therefore, hooks’ definition of feminism is strongly inclusive and geared towards shared aims:

Unlike many feminist comrades, I believe women and men must share a common understanding – a basic knowledge of what feminism is – if it is ever to be a powerful, mass-based political movement… I suggest that defining feminism as “a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression” would enable us to have a common political goal. We would then have a basis on which to build solidarity.22

These diverse definitions of feminism show how workability is a vital feature of any definition of a term like feminism.

From amongst the great variety of ethos, forms, politics and expressions of feminism, then, I draw a definition to use in this thesis: resistance to the suffering of women. What I need from this definition (the workability) is something simple that will strike a chord with the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ feminists for and about whom this thesis is written. I acknowledge, then, but strategically sideline, definitions of feminism that do not allow the inclusive framework of feminism I wish to explore. Therefore, those definitions (implicit or otherwise) which emphasize the boundary between rigorously scholarly feminist theory and less developed feminist theory23; definitions that insist upon an ever-present consideration of cultural differences24; definitions that claim feminism’s indefinability25 – these and other definitions will inform my work, and form the background of my discussion. However, I foreground a definition that allows me to search for a broadly accessible feminism. Therefore I use my definition of feminism as resistance to the suffering of women – a definition that enables me to envision feminism in a creative and inclusive way.

22 hooks. 23.
24 For example, hooks, bell. Talking Back: Thinking Feminist; Thinking Black. Boston: South End, 1989; and Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but Some of us are Brave : Black Women’s Studies. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982.
I should also make the point here that although I use ‘resistance to the suffering of women’ as my definition of feminism, at certain moments in this thesis what the term ‘feminism’ describes will vary. Sometimes I use the term to describe the enormous spectrum of activity that comes under the definition ‘resistance to the suffering of women.’ But – and this is important – at other times I say ‘feminism’ when I mean a rather more constricted set of activities. The latter deployment refers to a limited feminism. Generally, these are the activities broadly accepted as feminism: namely, scholarly feminist theory, canonical feminist works and organised feminist activism. Likewise, when I say ‘feminists’ I often refer to feminist academics, researchers and activists, and feminist media personalities or ‘celebrities’ – despite the fact that the definition I am using potentially refers to many more women (and even men) who resist the suffering of women. The context in which I use the term will make it clear. However, it is worth making a point about this doubling up of meaning, because it highlights the idealism of my definition of feminism. In other words, ideally the term ‘feminism’ would encompass a much wider range of practices that resist the suffering of women than it actually does. Clarifying this point makes an even stronger case for workability as a function of any definition: my definition also acts as a political goal.

“Consciousness”

Another term I use and explore in this thesis is ‘consciousness.’ This term is used in a variety of ways, but I am mainly referring to its common use within feminism to describe a feminist awareness and understanding of sexism and oppression. Stanley and Wise identify a three-stage model of consciousness within feminist thought: “false consciousness, consciousness-raising and feminist consciousness.”26 It is common

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26 Stanley and Wise. *Breaking Out Again*. 120.
practice within feminism to make claims about ‘false consciousness.’

False consciousness is the idea that we (as women) wrongly imagine ourselves liberated, or that we accept sexism and oppression because we understand it to be natural. We may even believe oppression to be directed at individuals, without our sex having any bearing on our treatment (that is, sex is ‘not an issue’ in an individual woman’s oppression). Consciousness raising is perceived as the process by which a woman’s ‘eyes are opened’ to sexism and misogyny, and may take place within group discussions or other forms of education (e.g. Women’s Studies courses). Feminist consciousness supposed to be the arrival at “a more objective state of consciousness.”

I reject such a model of stages of consciousness. As Stanley and Wise remind us, “‘reality’ is [not] the same for everybody.” And if feminist consciousness is reality; if it is the ability to perceive the one true essence of the social world, then what happens when women’s realities do not match? Which woman has the true feminist consciousness? The very idea of it is an easy way out for feminists to explain why some women refuse to embrace feminism. I have never yet met a woman who does not perceive sex-based discrimination in her life or the lives of other women. Their reactions to this injustice may differ. Some women react with complacency, others with indignation, and others still attempt to rationalize misogyny. But women in general do have “critical” or ‘feminist’ consciousness – the awareness that women (not always, but often) suffer because we are women. The idea of levels of consciousness (for instance, the concept of ‘raising’ consciousness) also reinforces the hierarchy of knowledge I criticize in this project by suggesting that certain women have better or

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28 Stanley and Wise. Breaking Out Again. 121.


30 hooks. 23.
loftier ways of thinking about sexism and feminism than others. Stanley and Wise write that:

> It denies the validity of people’s own interpretations and understandings. If these don’t match the interpretations of revolutionaries then they are false. ‘If you agree with me you are right, if you disagree then you’re wrong,’ is implied but not openly stated.31

It is easy to equate the lower levels with ignorance and naivety, and to equate the higher levels with wisdom, awareness and experience.

A fellow PhD candidate I met at a conference was exploring the possibility that certain women could be more ‘conscious’ than feminists tend to give them credit for.32 After reading existing contemporary research on young people and sexuality, Bryony Hoskins wondered if she would find young people as naïve, disempowered and uncritical about sexual practice as the research described. Instead, she discovered that her subjects engaged actively in analytical discussions of the power relations between men and women in sexual relationships. Furthermore, the young women took some control of the research by talking about other aspects of their sexual experience. Hoskins writes, “Gender may be highly significant in explaining relationships, but what I am asking is, is it exclusively important?”33 She goes on to say that, “women’s own stories of past or present relationships should not be reduced in academic accounts to gendered and heteronormative patterns.”34 In other words, the hallmarks of feminist consciousness (that is, the ability to attribute behaviour and attitudes to structural and abstract concepts) cannot always account for the full implications of lived experience. Nor do these always effectively represent the state of a woman’s consciousness.

The conceptualisation of consciousness “as a ‘process’ at the same time that it is seen as a ‘state’”35 might be a more productive basis for theories of feminist

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33 Hoskins. N. pag.
34 Hoskins. N. pag.
consciousness. This conceptualisation makes connections between actual events and situations, and ‘consciousness’ as a unique36 and constantly renewing operation by which women learn about and make sense of these. In fact, its links with personal experience mean that such a conceptualisation often gets left out of ‘developed’ feminist theory altogether. bell hooks makes the point that we only rarely include evidence of the development of consciousness in feminist theory – to the detriment of our readers.37 The reason we leave these parts out is that we don’t think they really count as feminist theory – we see work in which we develop consciousness as part of the journey to feminism, or as a very rough draft of our more advanced feminism. But these works are vital. Firstly, they are vital because they can provide a more complete picture of what feminism really looks like – its struggle, its internal contradictions and its emotion. And they are vital because, as less polished or scholarly forms of feminist theory, they might resonate with non-academic or activist women, allowing us to make links across the feminist divide.

“Representation”

The final term I wish to define before I begin is ‘representation.’38 One of my core assumptions in the writing of this thesis is that there are a number of ways of looking at and describing certain phenomena. What I discuss in this thesis is not so much feminism itself as the representation of feminism. I want to examine the way we express what feminism is, and how our depictions of feminism influence others. I aim to pick away at some of the monolithic representations of feminism. By ‘monolithic,’ I mean depictions that rely on the vision of feminism as a single block of activities, or a type of behaviour, or one particular ideal, instead of as a great squirming multiplicity of

36 Stanley and Wise. Breaking Out Again. 133.
37 Hooks. 31.
discussions, ideas and practices. In short, I do not subscribe (as should be evident by now) to the notion that there is a single Truth of feminism, or how to do feminism, or ‘feminists,’ or even ‘oppression.’

Rather, I believe that there is only a multiplicity of interpretations of these things. Representation is what happens when we describe our individual interpretations of things such as feminism. These descriptions might be direct or peripheral, resulting in overt or implied representations. When certain representations gain currency and popularity amongst certain groups, then they tend to carry more weight as ‘Truth.’ It is these ‘Truths’ of feminism – these commonly deployed representations of feminism – that interest me in this thesis. And it is these ‘Truths’ that I will critically examine here, exploring the ways such representations gain currency, who benefits from particular representations of feminism, and the wider effects of limited representations of feminism on women in general.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethics, as a necessary consideration in any politics, is about being fair, and in feminism, it is specifically about being fair to women – all women. This includes the women we would not normally think of as being interested in feminism, women who take an active dislike to feminism, women who rejoice in the name ‘feminist,’ and, finally, myself. In this project, I aim to be fair to all these women. I am fair to ‘unofficial’ feminists by making my feminism as readable and understandable to them as possible, and by recognising such women as feminist theorists and activists. I am fair to anti-feminists by exploring the reasons for their antipathy to feminism without being patronising, invoking notions of false consciousness, or imagining these women to be absent from my reading audience. I am fair to self-professed feminists by adding to their/our conversation in a way that is thoughtful, considers many arguments, and, despite my attempt to renunciate scholarly conventions, refuses to ‘dumb it down.’ And
I am fair to myself by allowing myself to identify with more than one of these groups at a time (because sometimes I don’t fit the ‘official’ feminist mould, and sometimes I do), and by writing about a topic that lends itself to optimism.

The ethics I use as guidelines for my work come from the knowledge feminists have shared with me. Where I was once very resistant to the idea of sharing feminist knowledge, the women I know outside of academia and activism have always been willing to share. Previously, when I spoke to these ‘unofficial’ feminists about feminism, I felt as though I was educating them, rather than having a conversation. One of the moments that turned me around was when an aunt made the comment that men have an astounding amount of privilege compared with women, and that the most startling thing of all about this is that they (men) “are so oblivious to that fact.” This remark indicates a deep philosophical awareness of the respective positions of men and women, as well as the integration of feminist thought in the broader community of women. She was describing what I later found discussed in a scholarly piece of feminist theory: “the ‘alienation of advantage,’ the entrenched processes of cognitive distance through which the privileged in society fail to recognise their unfair advantages.”39 I feel now that, in fairness, my own knowledge – along with that of other academics – should be as available to unofficial feminists as they make theirs to me. I base my ethics, then, in the potential for a mutual education40 between ‘official’ feminists and ‘unofficial’ feminists (and myself, wherever I fit in that dyad). In essence, the ethics I draw from my relationships with ‘unofficial’ feminists are an ethics of the everyday: ethics in the common sense understanding of the term. Kind of a


moral obligation to the women who helped get me where I am. I want to go towards the repayment of a debt.

The best way to explain the ethics I’m referring to here is to say that there is nothing ethical about postponing the sharing of knowledge, and change, for the sake of prestige, accolades or one-upwomanship. Women have a rich history of sharing knowledge through long telephone conversations, gossip, heart-to-hearts, and coffee chats. Knowledge is not a commodity when we’re away from the official workplace; it’s something in abundance to slop around then offer as seconds and thirds. It’s something to give with love, like food, and then to reheat and give with love again. It occurs to me as I write this that a more graceful way to express my gratitude for this shared knowledge would be to do everything I’m saying but without all the fuss.

However, I’m of the opinion that we need to make a fuss over theories that are in their babyhood – and the theory that ‘outside’ women have much to offer feminism is definitely still in need of development. At the moment, such a theory could go in two directions: in the direction of honest respect and acceptance; or in the direction Silliman and Bhattacharjee warn against:

…acknowledging such materials [the work of ‘unofficial’ feminists] should not mean that ‘real’ scholars in the academy must encourage lesser forms of intellectual activity in other locations, as this can only lead to a patronizing relationship...[rather there must be] the recognition that intellectual activity in the academy is impoverished by the narrow definitions that constrain it.41

Until an ethical approach of honesty and respect is a widespread thing, then, writers who use this approach are going to have to draw attention to the fact.

Location, Multiculturalism and Difference

Perhaps the other important ethical issue I need to elaborate involves my representation of difference in this thesis. It is probably already obvious that I have opted to locate my research mainly in the Western body of activity and theoretical

works of feminism. In other words, I generally draw on feminism that circulates throughout the Western world – mainly that of Australian, British, Western European, New Zealander, Canadian and North American feminists. While I feel that some of what I am saying about the over-categorising of feminism in Western culture is applicable to Third and Second world countries,\(^4^2\) I also know that feminism can operate quite differently in such countries. Feminist activism and theory can fulfil different needs in other parts of the world. Women’s oppression can take different, often more devastating forms. I am acutely aware that this project entails some criticism of conventional ways of defining of feminist practice – criticism that might be both inappropriate and misappropriated in other cultures.\(^4^3\) I choose, therefore, to locate this work in the feminist practices and goals I am most familiar with, and in the setting of patriarchy I am most familiar with.

Cultural and ethnic difference does, however, play a large part in my project, and the use of theory by such theorists as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Ien Ang and Trinh Minh-ha evidences this.\(^4^4\) I am particularly interested in how these women describe the submersion of the ‘different’ voices in feminist theory. So, it’s not so much that I ignore issues of difference (in fact, differences – particularly differences of education and opinion – constitute a key focus in my work), as it is that I work with issues of difference within the context of Western feminism. I don’t see difference as a disabling issue for feminism; rather, I believe it is quite possible to write and mobilise responsibly about/around difference within feminism. My attitude towards difference can be partly elaborated by looking at Donna


\(^4^3\) Andrea Pető defends the scholarly work of ‘theory stars’ criticised in the work of Stanley and Wise when she looks at the role of such theory in Eastern European countries in “The Empress in a New-Old Dress.” *Feminist Theory* 2 (2001): 89-93.

\(^4^4\) See Bibliography for complete citations of these authors’ works.
Haraway’s work on situated knowledge.\textsuperscript{45} Situated knowledge is about speaking from a place that is known. In other words, it’s about awareness of your own space/place in the social world, and speaking from that place. Critical analysis of my own situation means that I can avoid a patronising relationship of ‘objective distance’ from the group I am studying (this is the mentality that claims: ‘as an outsider, I can see your behaviour objectively, and therefore I know more about you than you do yourself’).

Acknowledging my own position of privilege or subordination in relation to others allows me to form “partial” connections with outside groups.\textsuperscript{46}

Elizabeth Enslin takes Haraway’s theory into a situation of non-Western feminism. Her essay “Beyond Writing: Feminist Practice and the Limitations of Ethnography”\textsuperscript{47} is about her work in Nepal as an anthropologist. The fact that she has married into a Nepali family who have a history of activism in their local area complicates her position as a researcher. Enslin lives and works, therefore, with expectations from varied sources, which tend to pull her in opposite directions. For instance, she has an obligation to her U.S. University to produce scholarly anthropological research – her institution expects an observer role. But her new family expects her to join in with their local activism (her new family publicly advocate women’s rights and have set up literacy programs) – her family expects a participant role. In fact, her husband’s niece wrote a letter to Enslin in which she confronted her with these words:

\begin{quote}
I want to say that you came to Nepal for two years, you wrote a book about the women’s movement, you did a PhD. But your work seems like nothing. Your book has no importance. After all, what is writing? You looked, you saw, you wrote a book. But that book won’t do anything if not accompanied by work, by practice. Right?\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{46} Haraway. 590.


\textsuperscript{48} Enslin. 537.
With a niece and possibly other family members making those kinds of demands, her own concerns about imposing Western feminist values on local women, as well as a university that might withdraw funding at any moment, Enslin realised she would have to find a way of dealing ethically with different ‘investors.’

Enslin describes how she takes part in local activism toward women’s literacy, and monitors her work carefully to decide when she should step back. I can express what Enslin describes as an ethical way to do research in this one word: accountability. Enslin proposes that we stay accountable to all those who have an investment in us. She goes on to say that the best way to do this is to base our research in physically, academically, and emotionally local relationships (that is, we ought not write from afar). Enslin’s ideal researcher is the woman who lives, writes, works and acts (or doesn’t act – depending on which is appropriate) among the women she wants to assist. Enslin believes that such a researcher is necessarily accountable to the people she researches because she must literally answer to the women for whom she acts and speaks. And she must answer to herself as well – because she’s a part of the community where her research takes place. In other words, it’s not necessary to give up researching, writing and reading in relationship with an institution in order to be ethical; it’s more a matter of choosing a responsible way to research. But there is a word of warning: the style of a work, says Enslin, is not always telling. Sometimes we need to pick up on the gaps between whom we write a work for and whom we write a work about, so that we can see the real relationship the researcher has with those who invest (financially or emotionally) in her.

My own work does involve speaking about women different from myself. Although the women I write about are generally Western women, I discuss non-academic feminists, women who choose not to identify as feminists, women who do not participate in organised feminist activism, and even anti-feminists. I, however, am a
self-professed feminist with an academic background. I have taught, presented, and been published within academic contexts, and I am working towards a postgraduate degree. I have read a lot of scholarly feminist theory and I have taken part in organised activism. But I argue that I can *partially* connect myself with these women who are, in certain ways, different from me. I have formed these connections by working with such women on this project, discussing feminist theory and activism, representations of feminism and feminists, and the issues surrounding the identity of ‘a feminist.’ Moreover, the project has been a point of connection in that I have negotiated my use of the interviews with these women.49 I have also worked within the existing connections I have with these women (those of family and friendship), thus following Enslin’s ideal of doing feminist work within local communities. I do not believe that it is *always* necessary to ground one’s work in the local (in fact, this dictum might be used as a way of escaping responsibility for assisting with broader feminist projects), but I certainly appreciate the connection it has allowed me with women different from myself for this project.

**Methods**  

**Interviews**

In order to form a tangible body of knowledge from ‘unofficial’ feminists, to which I might refer in my own work, I interviewed four women I know. Traditionally, the power dynamics of interviewing as a research method have been highly

49 See the next section on “Methods” for more information.
questionable. Interviewing has the potential to be inaccurate and misleading, not to mention downright oppressive in process or outcome. On the other hand, interviewing can be mutually rewarding and enlightening, and ethically sound. The point is that the technique of interviewing is a precarious one and, as such, the researcher must make the decision to interview based on suitability to her research, and including reflection and discussion on the politics of interviewing.

Because a more complex involvement with the participant is likely to occur during open-ended interviewing (such as I used) than in close-ended interviewing, the interviewer must minimize the betrayal inevitable in an “inherently manipulative” process. Betrayal may come into play if the interviewer is not entirely open about her research topic, or if she deceives the interviewee as to her use of the interview material. Or, on a more subtle level, betrayal occurs when the interviewer does not cross-check her analysis of the interview with the participant. Some would even go so far as to say that a researcher betrays her participants when she does not gear the research towards their needs; when she does not reciprocate during the interview process, or when she fails to honour the minds of women by presuming to interpret their words for them. Another form of betrayal is the interviewee’s sometime interest in withholding certain information from, or lying to please, the interviewer. She may have secrets she will never tell anyone; she may not feel she knows the interviewer well enough to divulge certain personal information or, conversely, she may feel she knows the interviewer too well. Family members (and I did interview family members), for instance, often have

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an investment in keeping particular feelings or experiences from each other – they must, after all, continue to have a relationship after the interview is over.

All of these problems fall into areas of feminist debate on ethical research, representation and subject-object distinctions. One key benefit of open-ended interviewing is that it can dispense with the idea of the researcher as god – omniscient and objective, but invisible. Instead, the researcher can be present in the text as self-reflexive and reciprocative asker of questions, thus disrupting old subject-object hierarchies. Interviewing (particularly open-ended interviewing) can also create a more inclusive style of research by being open to the unexpected, and allowing the expression of difference during interviews. Too often, the urge to create theory that can be applied universally leads researchers to resist or recuperate descriptions of difference, and ignore accounts of reality that don’t fit into the research framework. Allowing participants to speak without the restraint of structured questions can open the interviewer’s eyes to new possibilities that will expand, rather than disprove, her research.

I treat the words of my interviewees as words of authorities on feminism: that is, I give my interviewees’ ideas and language the same weight as any other theorist’s ideas and language. The interviews took place over the course of this project, and were tape-recorded open-ended conversations. I asked the interviewees broad questions such as, “What do you think feminism is?” and “Why do you think some women refuse to identify as feminists?” The interviewees then took as long or as short a time as they chose to answer the questions. We often went off on tangents, discussing issues that arose during the conversations, and sharing anecdotes. The recordings are quite

55 Having said this, I am aware that these women’s words are not widely available within the academic community in the way other feminists’ theories are – indeed, they may never be. I am not claiming that these women’s theories are indistinguishable from such published works; rather I am explaining that I use the interview transcripts in a similar way to my use of published feminist theory. See the section on “Scholarly Contexts” in Chapter 4 for more on the differences between published and unpublished works.
splendid texts in their own right, filled with toddler babble, dogs barking, phones ringing, kid’s videos and the thousand other interruptions that make up daily life. I believe that my choice to interview unofficial feminists I know means that I was necessarily accountable to these women for the sake of my existing and future relationships with them. Therefore, I chose to work through the sections of interviews I used in this thesis with the interviewees in order to use their words fairly. If the interviewee felt I was taking her ‘out of context,’ we negotiated clearer ways for us both to say what we wished to say. Throughout this thesis, I refrain from treating the feminist theory of these women as raw data: in other words, I do not analyse or compare their words, attempt to treat a laughably small group as a demographic, or pitifully dismiss their ideas as false consciousness. Rather, I draw on their words to support my own ideas, or to show different (often surprising) sides to a given issue.

One of the questions that some readers will no doubt ask when reading the theory of these interviewees is: how is this information valid feminist theory? Joan Scott, in her essay “The Evidence of Experience,”\textsuperscript{56} provides an interesting discussion of ‘experience’ as a basis for understanding. This discussion strikes me as closely related to the question of whether or not my interviewees’ experience-based theory is valid feminist theory. Where Scott claims that, “The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the working of this system and of its historicity; instead, it reproduces its terms,” I would ask if Scott has accounted for the individual’s\textit{interpretation} of his/her experience in the project. Scott’s concern that using experience (or experience-based theory) allows for no frame of reference, or understanding of wider patterns and structures, seems to me to elide the possibility that those who have the experience are able to historicise and contextualise their experiences. In other

words, Scott’s essay seems to suggest that, without the superior knowledge of an ‘interpreter’ (that is, a sociologist or a historian), experience must needs stand alone, in need of a framework. I contend that my interviewees often do provide that framework, discussing their experiences in relation to others’ understandings of feminism, stereotypes, the history of gender difference, international inequities, and so on.

In addition, the problem of claiming validity for my interviewees’ words as feminist theory might raise the question: does it provide an original or considered perspective on its topic? Sometimes the answer will be yes, but sometimes the answer will be no. As I discuss in more detail in the next section of this chapter, the usual set of criteria for writing theory is not the set I use in this thesis. Nor do I always deploy the theory of others in a conventional way. The way I work with my interviewees’ theory is as complicated as the way I work with conventional feminist theory. Sometimes the interviewees’ theory will raise interesting and important questions, but at other times it will reiterate theory that has been circulating in academic circles for some years. In the latter case, my very point in including the interviewee’s theory may be to show how ‘unofficial’ feminists are capable of arriving at the same knowledge as ‘official’ feminists, despite their lack of background in scholarly theory. Sometimes the interviewees’ theory makes points that have been made some time ago and ‘disproved’ by more contemporary work. At other times, their theory makes claims that are considered damaging to more commonly accepted feminist goals (for example, interviewees might make use of stereotypes feminists have identified as false or even dangerous). When I include the theory of interviewees that feminists may consider shoddy or invalid, I often do so with the purpose of re-opening what may be considered a ‘case closed’ area of feminist research, for further consideration.57

57 An example of this kind of discussion of an interviewee’s words can be found in Chapter 3 in the piece on manipulation as a feminist tactic.
What I am saying here is that I neither critique nor valorise my interviewees’ theory in a blanket way throughout the thesis. As is the case with the ‘official’ theory I have referenced, I variously use the interviewees’ theory to support points I make, to provide points of departure from viewpoints conventional to scholarly feminist theory, and, even, from time to time, to illustrate or give examples of arguments that conflict with my own.

Style

I use an unconventional style of scholarly writing in my thesis, mainly to demonstrate the possibility of embracing ‘other ways’ of writing feminist theory. I attempt to use everyday language and terms to create my argument. I use the kind of grammatical conventions we might find in speech rather than writing, such as contractions (‘I’ve’ instead of ‘I have’) and emphasis (italicized words, so that readers can hear what I’m saying as well as see it). I try to avoid the overuse of academic jargon as much as I can. I use my own fiction to extend and clarify my analysis, as well as to make my writing interesting. Where I wish to do an extended analysis of another theorist’s work, I often use a conversation format to show how my ideas interact with the words of that theorist, and this adds some liveliness and warmth to an engagement with another theorist’s work that might otherwise appear dry and difficult.

Writing these conversations was an extremely complex task, and needs some discussion of its own. It was, in general, difficult to create a balance between respect and critique; between merely valorising the theorist’s work, or dissolving into a circular argument. One of the things about the conversations that made it worth the effort, however, is that they give the theorist concerned a kind of right of reply. Where one or two quotations taken from a theorist and presented in a static way or out of context might sabotage the complexity of her or his argument, the conversations generally use a number of quotations on the topic and, therefore, provide a good picture of what the
theorist really wants to say about the topic. One disadvantage, however, is that the theorists’ ‘replies’ cannot genuinely take into account my own questions or difficulties with the theorists’ ideas. As a result, the technique puts me in some danger of representing the theorists as stubbornly adhering to their own ideas – a representation I have done my best to avoid. It would be wise to remember that all theory is part of a broader ongoing conversation, and other theorists have the right of genuine reply as soon as my work becomes a public document.

The main reason I use these unconventional forms of writing scholarly theory is, put simply, accessibility. This thesis is about the way people draw boundaries around what feminism is, effectively limiting certain people’s access to feminism. Moreover, I am being critical of the way these boundaries work. Therefore, it is vital to my political rationale for the thesis (in order to avoid hypocrisy and making a critical gaffe) that I write as accessibly as possible.

Key Sources

The following is a breakdown of the theorists whose work and ideas I draw on throughout this thesis.

Interviewees or ‘Unofficial’ Feminists

Interviewees for this project include two of my sisters, Narelle Wasley and Kim Borin, and two friends, Kerry Allan and Belinda Rapps. Apart from saying that these women come from a variety of professions and personal situations; that they range in age from 24 years to 42 years old; that they are white Australians of the middle or working classes; and that they have no formal background in organised feminist practices or scholarly theory, it would be absurd to undertake a discussion of demographical details here. After all, I am not trying to claim that these women ‘represent’ the views of a particular group of women, such as non-feminists, or ‘unofficial’ feminists, or non-academic feminists, or young women. Nor do we require
demographic information about the feminist theorists and activists we commonly discuss in feminist theory. In fact, these women would prefer to keep various details of their lives private. Therefore, I will not make these women research objects or case studies by revealing their personal details to my readership.

All interviewees drew heavily on their personal experiences as women, as well as sharing their ideas about abstract concepts such as sexism and feminism. In the same way that reading a book by a feminist writer gives me information about that writer’s feminist position, the interviews provided me with a detailed understanding of what these women think about feminism. Quite simply, I chose to interview these particular women because I knew that they were of a ‘feminist persuasion’ (either because I know them very well or because they told me so), and because they were willing and available to be interviewed. My goal was to gather a small bank of theory from women who have no formal or conventional connections with feminism so that I could include in my work theory from outside the feminist canon without drawing exclusively on internet sites and other popular cultural forms such as songs and novels (and I do also make use of such texts in sourcing feminist theory). In addition, I have drawn on a cheaply-produced documentary aired some years ago during the centenary of women’s suffrage in Australia (1999), in which street interviews with women on the topic of what it means for women to have the vote prompted some valuable information about feminism in the daily lives of women. I group these sources loosely under the title of ‘unofficial’ feminist theory.

*Michel de Certeau*

The theory of Certeau on the politics of everyday life also provided me with a basis for constructing my own ideas on everyday feminism. Certeau was a pioneer in

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this area of theory. He describes how daily activities, such as watching television, can constitute political resistance. Such activities involve individuals using their own uncontrollable powers of interpretation. So, while the television producers intend a particular meaning for their audience, this meaning is not necessarily the one their audience takes from the show. Rather, people frequently twist the elements of a text into what they want it to mean – something that may be quite different from the intended interpretation. We can read this manipulation of ‘the system’ as political when the things we manipulate are things that are supposed to manipulate us. So, when we take control of something that was intended to control us (such as advertising, as a tool of consumer capitalism), we are resisting our own management.

Certeau identifies two different forms of resistance, which he calls strategy and tactics.60 Broadly speaking, strategy involves forms of resistance which become an accepted part of culture (or as counter-culture); whilst tactics constitute resistances that remain irreconcilable with both culture and counter-culture. Certeau’s work provides useful categories for my project: it is possible to see the more ‘official’ forms of feminism (such as organised activism and academic feminist theory) as strategies, and the everyday patchwork of feminist activity I discuss in this thesis as tactics.61 I discuss this distinction in more detail in Chapter 3. The important point here is that Certeau makes a case for conscious reflection on tactical resistance: he identifies a gap in cultural theory on resistance and calls for research into the everyday. While Certeau does not apply his ideas to feminism, feminism’s tradition of concern with personal experience means that Certeau’s ideas certainly lend themselves to a feminist analysis.

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60 Certeau. Xix.
61 Please note that I do not generally distinguish in this thesis between the terms “tactics” and “strategy” in the way Certeau does. I tend to use the terms interchangeably unless explicitly discussing Certeau’s work.
Janice G. Raymond

Raymond’s book *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection*\(^6^2\) was, for me, a model text on how to reclaim and resurrect historical and international activities that have been written out of feminism. Raymond focuses on friendships between women (both lesbian and platonic) from times gone by and from cultures other than the West. Raymond does something quite revolutionary in the current historiographical\(^6^3\) climate. She celebrates these friendships as relevant to, and as part of the history of, feminism. She does not, as is the fashion, attribute the empowerment women have sourced in female friendships to other causes – religious fanaticism, communist revolution, liberal social movements, etc. In this thesis, I use Janice Raymond’s confident reclaiming as encouragement to name historical acts of feminism as feminism, and examine the push to analyse and contextualise feminism’s history out of existence. I also found inspiration in Raymond’s accounts of female friendship for a number of my ficto-critical pieces. The final part of her book is a wonderful explanation of an approach to feminism that involves both materialism (realism) and idealism (vision).\(^6^4\) Raymond’s realist/idealist position assisted me to make clear my perspective on optimism as a vital part of feminism.

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise

Stanley and Wise’s book *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*,\(^6^5\) as well as Liz Stanley’s *Feminist Praxis*,\(^6^6\) and a more recent essay by both authors, “But the Empress has no Clothes!”\(^6^7\) showed me that I was not

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\(^6^3\) Historiography concerns ways of writing history, and includes the study of the history of writing history.
\(^6^4\) Raymond. 208-10.
alone in my concern over the exclusivity of some forms of feminist work. Stanley and Wise wrote respectfully about working class women’s ideas and theory as early as 1983. While my suggestions for dealing with this problem are different from those of Stanley and Wise, they certainly brought the issue of feminist ‘snobbery’ to the attention of the academic world. I do not agree with the idea that elitist – particularly contemporary – feminist theory is somehow ‘less feminist’ for its elitism, but I absolutely concur that such feminism can function to exclude certain women from learning about issues that might be of interest to them.

Other important sources

Other sources, such as Ann Oakley and writers from the compilation *Women’s Words*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, inform my methods. All of these writers critique the conventional ways researchers use interviewing as a method of data collection. Work by Mary Daly and Luce Irigaray on ideas of playing with language also inform my writing style. The work of journalists such as Elizabeth Wurtzel, Susan Faludi and Virginia Trioli showed me how women have integrated established literary disciplines like journalism, feminist theory and popular writing to produce interesting and thoughtful feminist works. Various feminist historians, and historiographical writers, such as Marlene LeGates, Susan Magarey, and Gordon,

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68 This was in the original edition of *Breaking Out*. Readers should note that the Stanley and Wise often discussed ‘unofficial’ feminism in class terms (i.e. working class women).
69 Stanley and Wise do not identify any specific feminist theorists as elitist. Rather, their discussion (particularly in “The Empress Has No Clothes!”) centres on trends towards esoteric and exclusive styles in feminist theory since the 1980s.
Buhle and Dye,79 contribute to my discussion of ‘over-contextualizing’ historical feminism in a way that writes the revolutionary activities of women into oblivion. Some of these writers contribute directly to my work, while others contribute in a more circumspect way, informing my ideas, examples, and writing style.

**Chapter Synopses**

In Chapter 1, “Boxing Feminism,” I discuss the how, who, why and when of ‘boxing’ feminism (that is, deciding what is and is not feminism) and, in doing so, establish some of this necessary background to the discussion that makes up this thesis. I begin to unpick the reasons why it is necessary to cordon off feminism in this way and who stands to gain by privileging particular kinds of feminism over others. Above all, this chapter introduces in a detailed way the concept that limiting, or ‘boxing,’ feminism is actually a problem. It is a problem because it reduces access: when we box feminism, we put up no entry signs that keep certain women among us outside vital discussions and practices of resisting the suffering of women.

Part 1 of this thesis, Feminist Activism, consists of two chapters. Chapter 2, “What Counts as Feminist Activism?,” is a discussion of the practices we regard as legitimate feminist activism and why. I break down the criteria for feminist activism into four categories: Collective, Public, Sustained and Radical, and provide features and examples for each of these categories. I also examine the contradictions and double standards inherent in using such categories as criteria for feminist activism. This chapter has two main purposes: to provide examples of what counts as feminist activism, and to explain how building these boundaries both serves and subverts feminist goals. I look more widely at feminist practices in Chapter 3, “A Day in the Feminist Life.” This chapter includes information on Certeau’s politics of the everyday

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and a discussion of how the everyday can function as feminist activism. I provide concrete examples of everyday feminist activism in the format of a personal diary (a ficto-critical piece), combining discussion of theories of feminist activism with descriptions of everyday activism.

In Part 2 of the thesis, Feminist Theory, there are also two chapters. Chapter 4, “What Counts as Feminist Theory?,” is a discussion of what we regard as feminist theory and why, focusing particularly on the issue of scholarly conventions. It includes an in-depth discussion of how scholarly styles and contexts affect accessibility. The main focus of this chapter is on the metalanguage of social theory: that is, how academics perpetuate the requirement for scholarly feminist works, and the treatment of unofficial feminist voices as ‘raw data’ in the academic arena. This chapter is a transition into the discussion of everyday feminist theory in the following chapter. Chapter 5, “Seven Deadly Sins,” explores a number of ‘unscholarly’ practices to discuss how ‘sins’ of feminist theorising (stylistic and ethical no-no’s) can in fact contribute vitally to the canonical body of feminist theory. In this chapter, I introduce forms of theory that are accessible and ‘out-there.’ In particular, I discuss feminist theory that makes use of popular genre, suspect concepts, outdated methodologies, humour, and instructional styles.

Part 3 of this thesis, Problems of ‘Intergenerational’ Feminism, contains one chapter. In Chapter 6, “Which Wave am I Surfing?,” I look at some of the ways in which feminists limit feminism using the concepts of ‘waves,’ generations and ‘the backlash,’ as well as the problems that arise because of such categorization. By mocking up a diatribe on third-wave feminism from the point of view of ‘second-waver,’ and vice versa, I explore how we limit generations of feminism. To clarify, I parody the persona of the second-wave feminist all young feminists (supposedly) ‘love to hate’ – the stereotypically extreme ‘radical’ feminist. I also illustrate stereotyped
ideas of the ‘post-feminist’ who claims that feminism is redundant in an equal society, and the postmodern feminist (the theorising feminist who draws on Foucauldian and Derridean ideas of fragmented identity and power as relative and associative rather than conferred). Rather than merely describe the ways we box the generations, I act them out in this way because I think it makes my point clearer. As readers, you will probably recognise these parodies, and (hopefully) consider how the perceptions therein have hardened into stereotypes that drive a deep wedge between younger and older feminists. I then examine the way we delineate the backlash against feminism, highlighting a couple of situations in which feminism is mistaken for a backlash against feminism, and explaining the significance of such misreadings for any discussion of the backlash. Finally, I discuss ways to break the habit of this clear-cut delineation of generations of, and the backlash against, feminism.

**Moving on**

What I want to do about the limiting of feminism is explore the problem, because awareness of a problem is always the first part of working through it. While I talk about it, however, I will be trialling my own solution to the problem. Of course, there cannot be one final solution to a problem like the limiting of feminism. The issue itself is so variable that it precludes a single solution. Boundaries around feminism/not-feminism vary from group to group and person to person; they vary according to place, time, the content of the feminism being produced and read, what the feminism is for, and even with the moods of the speakers and listeners. So my solution is not a general bandaid to the limiting of feminism – it won’t necessarily translate into a good solution for a similar problem in another culture, or even in another specific situation in my own culture. But it is, nevertheless, a solution. My solution is to talk about the problem of limiting feminism *accessibly*, by minimising my use of highly abstract or jargonised language, by using fiction and personal experience as ways of expressing my ideas, and
(importantly) by drawing heavily on conversations I’ve had with women outside organised feminism, as well as drawing on my reading of more conventional feminist theory.

My purpose in exploring the limiting of feminism in these ways is to show two things. Firstly, I wish to make the general statement that feminism comes in many forms. The variety of manifestations of patriarchal oppression require a variety of feminist responses – from grand, public, group acts of protest to small, private, individual moments of piecemeal resistance. Suggesting that feminism is limited to the former kind of resistance attempts to control and curtail both what feminism is and who feminists are. Secondly, my purpose is to move from general statements about limiting feminism, to specifics in the variety of manifestations of feminism. I do so partly by presenting instances of ‘unofficial’ feminist theory and practices, and partly by attempting to produce this thesis as a scholarly, yet accessible, work. By using my own work as an example of unconventional feminist theory, I show two things: that thoughtful, original and scholarly feminist theory can be accessible to more than the anticipated academic audience, and that feminism can be accountable to the women it focuses on.

The thesis is, therefore, a political as well as an intellectual task, and I want to ensure that my readers understand that, although it is possible to write accessible intellectual theory, it can certainly be more difficult than simply being accessible, or simply using scholarly conventions. At times, the political/intellectual fissure creates almost irreconcilable conflict. I know that this thesis is, in many places, nowhere near as accessible as I would like it to be. The scholarly demands of the degree have often curtailed the creative flow that seemed to lend itself to a more accessible style, and I have had to return to a more sedentary, possibly denser kind of theory. Without wanting to make this a disclaimer, I suppose I am admitting here that some sacrifice of
politics is intermittently necessary in a task like this, as well as some sacrifice of scholarliness. However, I do wonder if this happens for other writers more often than we suppose, and suggest that we extend the discussion about feminist epistemology, writing and practice to include such obscured struggles.

**Uh-oh! I’ve been had!**

There is one point I must make now that is very important to a discussion of the boundaries of feminism. It is that the boundaries I make use of in this thesis are arbitrary boundaries. The way I have carved out clear categories of feminism is a rhetorical device – I do so for the sake of coherence and to sort out my own ideas. I know that this is so because the writing process was difficult and convoluted. Sorting feminism into its ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ varieties, then sorting examples within these two realms into further categories was often a confusing task. I made many false starts and did a lot of revising. Several times, I shuffled examples around because they seemed to fit better in another category. I even re-use that widely contested division between feminist practice and theory,\(^80\) although I am the first to acknowledge the difficulties I had in separating the two at times (the question, ‘Where does ideology end and ideological practice begin?’, rears its head repeatedly).

Similarly, I struggled with the contradictions inherent in describing ‘conventional,’ ‘traditional,’ ‘official’ or ‘limited’ feminist practices. How can feminism, as a radical social justice movement, ever be conventional? Is feminism entrenched enough as an academic discipline or a social practice to have traditions? Can something so subversive have a level we can nominate ‘official’? And can the limits that feminism explode for women in turn create limits? Certeau’s distinction between strategies (official feminism), which are able to “produce, tabulate and impose” spaces in culture, and tactics (unofficial feminism), which can “only use,

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manipulate and divert these spaces”⁸¹ is a useful one here. There are, in other words, different “modalities”⁸² of resistance. A similarly worrying problem is the distinction between official and unofficial feminists. I do not believe that any one woman is always or never an official or unofficial feminist: these categories are not static, and nor are women’s purposes, desires or strategies. Language can be very oppressive at times. And yet I needed to find a way to describe practices that have become well-known, accepted or common to the degree that these now constitute a widely deployed representation of the sum-total of feminist practice and feminist theory. I am, therefore, obliged to use terms that occasionally confound me and my purposes.

I suggest that, as a reader, you should not take these terms and categories too seriously. They are here to aid understanding. I accept that there is a lot I lose by using such categories. I lose a broader, more accurate picture of the confusing mixture of failures and deviations that get us locked out of the clubroom of ‘official’ feminism. I lose the chance to show how feminism, as a living idea, is constantly on the move, and we cannot pin it down into categories, no matter how many of these categories we devise. Perhaps most importantly, I lose the opportunity to break down the deeply entrenched binary oppositions between terms such as ‘official’ and ‘unofficial,’ practice and theory, ‘conventional’ and ‘unconventional,’ despite the fact that I take some pains to break down certain other binaries (for example, public/private in Chapter 2 and abstract/experience in Chapter 4). However, I believe that it is necessary to use some of these categories in order to meaningfully explore some of the other boundaries that have become reified within academia, activist discourse and feminist ideology.

Some readers might find the fact that I use boundaries to discuss the dismantling of boundaries a little too ironical for them to take my argument seriously. I consider it a good laugh, and a clever trick on the part of language. It actually reminds

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⁸¹ Certeau. 30.
⁸² Certeau. 29.
us that, just as reinforcing the boundaries of ‘real’ feminism is a farce, breaking them down is an equally difficult, uncontrollable business. By looking past the limits, to ‘what else’ constitutes feminism, rhetorical and linguistic practices have actually forced me to establish new boundaries between the ‘other’ things that count. This deconstruction-reconstruction process also reminds us that we are not always dealing with easily divisible genre or practices when we attempt such projects. We are often dealing with the abstractions of ‘language,’ ‘practice’ and ‘thought’ and, as such, must be prepared for something that resembles a vast, shifting clump of sea grass. Ideas flow through each other, tangle and split, break free and collide, resulting in a mass of movement. My boundaries are more like buoy-lines: superficial divisions that allow the submarine, submerged, subversive ideas to continue their interactive ebb and flow beneath the surface. To me, the limits of feminism that we usually recognize and call on are bigger, harder, more destructive than the generally wily, conscious, slippery boundaries I utilize in this thesis. Haraway said it beautifully:

In the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making a partial, real connection. Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference.  

Who would have thought it was possible to get playful with ancient, entrenched, and continuing differences?

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Chapter 1

Boxing Feminism

We put women into ‘feminism’ and ‘non-feminism’
and within those boxes there are hundreds of boxes.
— Kerry Allan, 2001

In this chapter, I present a general introduction to the idea that we ‘box’ or draw lines around chunks of work and activity that count as feminism. This chapter acts as a background to the rest of the thesis, including a broad discussion of the who, how and why in the urge to control feminism, as well as an introduction to the writing technique (ficto-criticism combined with conventional criticism) I will make use of in subsequent chapters. This is a fast-moving chapter, as is consistent with my excitement about the subject, and because its aim is to take readers into the overall discussion with energy. “Boxing Feminism” is both a ‘setting the scene’ of some of the ways in which we limit feminism, and a way of familiarizing my readers with my perspectives – political, theoretical, and emotional – on this topic.

How long have I been doing feminism? How long have I been making progress through the lesser fortunes of women? How many centuries, millennia? And I still encounter opposition every way I turn. The opposition has been the one thing that has stayed the same: the only constant in feminist history.

You might say I’m wrong to write my feminist life this way. I’ll be wandering back and forth between my ages, persona, and memories, you see. It will piss some historians off: they’ll tell me I only have a right to my own moment in time, and anyway, what am I doing remembering all this? What claim have I got to all this knowledge? Most women only get little bits and pieces of this knowledge, and have to struggle along with their fragments. I’m taking it all.

And it will piss some of the scientists off, too. They’ll say it’s not linear, not calculable. They might say words like ‘anomaly’ and ‘freak.’ Fortunately, I’ve been around long enough to know the avenues. No one can ever dissect me (although they want to) again. For god’s sake! I remember when they had the nerve to lock me up for

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1 Allan, Kerry. Personal interview. 1 October 2001.
Wasley 55

... crying over all the contradictions I live with. They administered, electrocuted, incised, and excised. But I haven’t been around for all this time for nothing; I know how to regenerate the parts of my body they damned and removed.

It may seem to the scientist and the historian in all of us that I’m merging history, criticism and fiction in a very irresponsible way. I assume the bodies, names and actions of women who died long before I ever lived, and sometimes in places I have never even visited. I acknowledge that my right to integrate all the contexts and to take on the voices of other women through international history is precarious at best. But what I’m trying to do is actually to be responsible – in an alternative way to the usual – to as many women as possible; to account for the women who did feminism before me, as well as beside me. I’m trying to say that it’s more responsible to acknowledge the movement of feminism through time and space than to close off such movement. I’m tracing a genealogy – my own genealogy as a feminist. I’m not being blind to context; rather, I’m making the choice to place these historical and global acts in the context of the spread of feminism. This tactic can then act as a foundation to talk about this spread of feminism into the daily lives of women who are living today in the Western world.

Because the point I want to make is that feminism has a movement of its own. When I say movement, I mean actual motion. It spreads and integrates into women’s lives in a way that is unacceptable to the Western desire to control, delineate and document social movements like feminism. Feminism is untidy and there is no way to restrain it: it’s about ideas2; it’s not something women can go out and get a degree in, or engage in at work in a women’s health clinic, then leave at work when they go home to the kids. Perhaps it is the very untidiness of feminism to which many people object.

2 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
It gets so mixed up in real life. As long as feminism is safe in the women’s collectives, brought out and aired once a year at the Reclaim the Night march, then it’s all right. As long as it’s in the universities, captured on paper in written tasks like “Do a feminist reading of Moby Dick,” then it’s all right. Doing a ‘feminist reading’ implies that we would be looking at Moby Dick in a distinct and unusual way – a way that steps back from real life, but allows us to return to a somehow ‘normal’ interpretation when we’ve finished the assignment. But the fact is that we cannot confine feminism to a style of analysis in this way. It is present in ‘normal’ interpretations. It is present in every objection a woman makes to her status as a second-class citizen, whether implicit or explicit. Because feminism is intangible (it cannot be contained in feminist textbooks or street demonstrations), and because it is so much a part of daily life, it is impossible to draw lines around the edges and say, “there is Feminism.” This is threatening or difficult for people who stand to lose from feminism’s widespread success and they try, therefore, to enclose feminism in sets of rules, stereotypes and clichés.

**Non-feminists Boxing Feminism**

Let me tell what I mean when I talk about resistance to the messy movement of feminism. However, I should first point out that the term ‘non-feminist’ is not interchangeable with ‘anti-feminist.’ People don’t identify as feminists for a variety of reasons, whereas anti-feminists show an active antipathy to feminism. Sometimes non-feminists do feminism, but don’t associate their activities with more traditional feminist practices. Sometimes they simply don’t have the time or the background to name their activities at all. Some of the ways anti-feminists and non-feminists box feminism, however, intersect and replicate. This manifests in the “I am not a feminist” syndrome. Non-feminists might accept the goals and principles of feminism as their own, but they do not accept the accompanying stereotypes. Anti-feminists do not generally condone

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3 I explore some of these reasons in Chapters 2, 5 and 6.
the goals, principles, or stereotypes of feminism. However, the effect is often the same: the use and re-use of images that represent feminists as hysterical, dogmatic, extremist, irate and altogether abhorrent beings.

Sometimes, when I think of all the obstacles anti-feminists have put in the way of feminism, all I can hear are the names. *Shrew, slut, scarlet women, witch,* it was. Mary Daly picks up on a lot of the old names: *hag, fury, harpy, crone.*\(^4\) Then later, in more genteel times: *bluestocking, spinster, hysterical, old maid, loose woman.* Virginia Woolf thought about the names too:

> Z, most humane, most modest of men, taking up some book by Rebecca West and reading a passage in it, exclaimed, “The arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!” The exclamation, to me so surprising – for why was Miss West an arrant feminist for making a possibly true if uncomplimentary statement about the other sex? – was not merely a cry of wounded vanity; it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself.\(^5\)

Each name carries a category, a picture of a woman, maybe muttering over a cauldron, or plotting a violent castrative revolution. The name-calling is nothing to the destructive power of the stereotypes. To demand what you deserve and need was to be a shrew: a nagging, uncontrollable, aggressive whiner. To be lower class and stand up to someone of the upper class was to be an insolent slut. Women who liked cats, were outspoken or promiscuous, or who even had epilepsy or a squint, were witches and hags, and more often than not gaoled, tortured and put to death.\(^6\)

*The things we had to do to avoid the names!* *What is it exactly that was so disgraceful about women that we deserved the names? I don’t know, but I know what I did to stay nameless.* I had to think of my body as a kind of ugly, messy reversal of male anatomy. *Something to be shorn, scented, and compressed.* The things I put my body

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through...I remember singeing and powdering my hair until it fell out and I had to wear a wig. I have scented my genitals with stinging perfumes and caused all manner of rashes and infections. I wanted the names that men approved: lady, maiden, mother. Even now, I still put on lipstick at times (although I hear it’s about imitating aroused female genitals). I have engaged in all manner of piercing and plucking and hot wax treatments – and none in the name of an honest sexual deviation. The corsets! Once, before a church picnic, I had the girl lace me so tight that a rib snapped when I stumbled over a rock later in the day. Once or twice in my long life, I have been allowed to let my naturally rounded fleshiness be itself. But mostly, I’ve been made to bind up and whittle down the comfortable plumpness that is necessary to protect a growing foetus.

But even breaking down the names to their accompanying stereotypes doesn’t quite capture the fact of general and acceptable disparagement of women who did feminist things – a disparagement that continues today. Many women still live in terror that someone might apply the names to us if we make feminist demands. Now, we have to put up with man-basher, lemon, frigid, militant, feminazi. Narelle Wasley says:

I’ve actually had this argument...that I don’t want to be a nag. I said “I don’t want to be a shrew. If you would do these things, I wouldn’t have to say them to you all the time. And it makes me feel like a nagging shrew. And the trouble is that you are just not listening to me.”...That’s when I get angry. When I feel like I’m not being listened to. 8

I still hear, over and over in this very day and age, young women using the word ‘feminist’ like they are saying ‘nag,’ ‘shrew,’ ‘frigid,’ ‘unfeminine,’ ‘man-hater.’ “I’m not one of those feminists,” I heard a young woman say quite recently, “I still like the guys to do most things.” 9 I wonder if she knows how she conjures the image of a lady

8 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
reclining languidly on a *chaise lounge* while her stalwart husband scurries around alternately painting the house and cleaning the toilets.

I opened the paper one morning not long ago to see an article called “Paying the Price of Feminism.”\textsuperscript{10} It’s hard to work out if the author, Pam Casellas, is anti-feminist or non-feminist or something else altogether. But she certainly knows how to represent feminists as teeth-gnashing dictators. She discusses a report by researcher Jill Kirby that makes claims about high numbers of women who wish to stay at home rather than return to the workforce after having children. The “conservative” centre\textsuperscript{11} that commissioned the report “challenges governments to recognize the reality of women’s choices and to adjust social, welfare and employment policies ‘to respond to 21\textsuperscript{st} century reality, rather than egalitarian dogma.’”\textsuperscript{12} That actually sounds pretty good, not to mention radical, especially if you look at it alongside some of the feminist work that has emerged on the differing needs of women and men, or revaluing and (god forbid) *remunerating* work that women are more likely to choose. But Casellas calls it “a line of thought which might cause the most ardent feminist to burst a blood vessel” – which basically says that ardent feminists adhere to “egalitarian dogma.” Maybe I am looking in the wrong books, but I have never found a feminist who suggests that *all* women should be in the workforce. No matter what feminists say, non-feminists continue to box us. I told a male friend that I was studying feminism and he said, “Oh, I heard a good joke the other day. There was this lesbian, right...”

\textsuperscript{11} The British Centre for Policy Studies.
\textsuperscript{12} Casellas. 4.
Feminism and the Laws of Femininity

While non- and anti-feminists resisted and still resist the spread of feminist thought by deriding things that are feminism, attaching mean stereotypes to feminism, thinking up derogatory terms for feminists, and watching with pleasure when women accept those terms, they also curtail feminism’s success by naming some feminism as ‘not feminism.’ Certain feminist practices are sentimentalized or pathologized. Emotions and actions that hint at a feminist sensibility, or offer the potential for feminist practice, mutate suddenly into the Laws of Femininity. Solidarity gets transformed into sentimental (not powerful) sisterhood\textsuperscript{13} or sickening condescension (‘the girls’), and films about friendship between women are disparagingly called ‘chick flicks.’ That we manage to like other women is almost unbelievable, given our training. When we are fond of each other, and listen to each other’s ideas, it’s not always according to the Law of Feminine Sentimentality. Mostly, it’s with respect and discernment. What luck that there were some women – feminist pioneers\textsuperscript{14} – who fitted so badly, so falsely, into the stereotypes that they knew, in their own hearts, that the stereotypes were wrong. What wonderful luck that these women were willing to share, not only love, but knowledge, with other women.

Argument and disagreement becomes female competition for the attention of men. This is the Law of Feminine Rivalry, and it’s a tough one to combat, perhaps because it’s really enacted as well as mistakenly identified. The Lawmakers strip dissent, differing opinions and criticism of the dignified intellectual status they achieve when men do them. Instead, we’re bitching, gossiping, cat fighting, “Meow! Ffft!” say some men, getting all aroused, waiting for us to strip down to our bikinis and hop into a paddle-pool filled with mud. This Law is changing like the grinding turn of a great

\textsuperscript{13} Morgan, Robin, ed. 	extit{Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement}. New York: Random, 1970.

\textsuperscript{14} For example, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Astell, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Virginia Woolf, Edna St Vincent Millay, and so on.
stone wheel. It’s *that* hard to clear away all the stereotypes we’re supposed to apply to each other – images of rivals and bitches. It’s *that* hard to be friends and sisters and workmates, and to argue out of genuine disagreement – not for the approval of men.

Anger and frustration manifests as the Law of Feminine Hysteria.

*In the late 1800s, Dr Freud noticed that many women were going mad – literally mad, as in mad as hell at the world. I was one of them. I growled at everyone who came near me; I shrieked with ire every time someone asked me what was wrong. I was carried off to a psychoanalyst, who asked me questions about sex. He told me that I was repressed, that I wanted to make a sexual conquest out of my father. I recall being genuinely surprised into calmness for a moment. “No,” I told him. “I hate my father. He touched me indecently when I was a child.” “Ah.” The doctor smiled contentedly. “You will find that your memory serves you incorrectly. You only wanted him to touch you indecently.”*¹⁵ I started shrieking again.

Don’t they understand that there is enough social and cultural abuse for us to be pissed off about that they always don’t need to dig into our psyches to find neuroses? Pathologizing is a habit. The Lawmakers characterise lesbian love and sex as psychologically abnormal and, more often than not, linked to childhood trauma. Even worse, the Lawmakers recuperate lesbianism under the Law of Feminine Hypersexuality. It becomes a sign of women’s rapacious sexual appetites. And most revolting of all, the thing that makes me sick in my heart, lesbian sex is so subversive

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¹⁵ One reading of Sigmund Freud’s “Seduction Theory” claims that he developed a theory about young women’s hysteria as related to sexual advances and abuse from (usually) older male relatives, and that this theory was received so badly by his contemporaries that he rethought it and came up with the idea that young women fantasized such “seduction.” Masson, Jeffrey. *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory.* Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin, 1985.
of patriarchy that it must be reclaimed, and exhibited in pornography for the erotic
titillation of men.

Then there is the Law of Feminine Maternalism. Enjoying maternity – that
immense feeling of power and activity that the capacity for childbirth gives women – is
anything but empowering, according to the stereotypes. That we enjoy motherhood is
merely a consequence of our natural inclination towards care and maternal love, and
our incompetence to participate in anything that remotely resembles a public life.
Sentimentally speaking, we are natural mothers, born to serve our children (that is, our
sons). Our mother love is unreasonable (we’re blind to our children’s flaws), but
honourable. Anatomically speaking, we are passive receptacles for sperm and
incubators for embryos – utterly unfulfilled, and more than likely disturbed, if we are
unable or do not wish to have babies. Never mind the alternative visions of the uterus
actively growing the foetus; the amniotic sac and cervix protecting, and the placenta
feeding, the foetus. Never mind the conflicting emotions and thoughts we have about
motherhood: the annoyance, the resentment, and the impatience, tainting the love with
guilt.16

Nothing we could ever do was our own – the Lawmakers reclaimed everything
as (at best) ‘natural’ femininity or (at worst) psychosis. Everything worked according to
the Laws. The Lawmakers manipulated all of our actions for the satisfaction and
amusement of non- and anti-feminists. That we managed to resist male power
sometimes – how can we explain that? For occasionally, we disregarded the way many
men and women wished to understand feminists. Solidarity among women and
resistance to male domination certainly caused havoc when we did them for ourselves.
However, more and more women started to see through their God-given inferiority.

16 Susan Maushart is just one author who describes the conflicts of motherhood in her book The Mask of
Motherhood: How Mothering Changes Everything and Why We Pretend it Doesn’t. Sydney: Random,
1997.
Feminism was on the move, spreading like a plague or a perfume.

**Feminists Boxing Feminism**

However, the unruly movement of feminism into the daily lives and psyches of women, particularly since the powerful dissemination of feminist messages during the second wave, is unacceptable to many feminists, too. The reasons vary: some feminists draw boundaries around what is feminism in the name of maintaining feminism’s radical edge. Other feminists seem to believe that concern with the personal and everyday areas of women’s lives (concern that might stretch the boundaries of feminism somewhat) belongs in the early stages of feminist consciousness, and that feminism should since have come of age as serious theory. Perhaps some feminists are taking care not to put their academic careers in jeopardy by expressing interest in unfashionable or outdated ideas (which then become discounted as ‘real’ feminism); or by writing in a way that is not quite scholarly enough. For many feminists it is none of these and all of these – many don’t explicitly address the issue of what is/is not feminism, or draw overt lines around feminism in their own work. But the lines are still there, implicit and assumed. It’s a pastime of most contemporary feminists to mark out their territory. This is one feminist’s comment that marks out where ‘true’ feminism begins and ends:

> Women who teach, research, and publish about women, but who are not involved in any way in making radical social and political change, women who are not involved in making the lives of living, breathing women more viable…If lifting oppression is not a priority to you then it’s problematic whether you are part of the actual feminist movement.

The woman who said this is implying that teaching and writing about the oppression of women are not sufficient criteria by themselves for a woman to call her work

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‘feminism.’ There must be some kind of clear activist component to her work. Then there is this from my conversation with a feminist who works neither in the fields of academic nor activist feminism:

…[people] see you as a ‘big feminist.’ Big woman, big feminist woman. You know, you’re doing this feminist studies and thesis, all the rest of it…20

The term she coins for me – “big feminist” – implies that the scholarly work I engage in makes me a somehow more ‘official’ feminist than her. My work is the “big,” authorised and valid form of feminism, whilst other kinds of feminism are ‘smaller’ and less significant. Everyone has a way to box feminism. Street interviews with women from the Australian documentary The Centenary of Women’s Suffrage21 produced comments like this, often repeated (though in different terms): “Women are the same as men,” “I think there’s equity now,” and “We’re just like men.” These women express an idea of feminism that claims, putting aside biological differences, men and women are both human, and as such, should have equal rights (just as Pam Casellas characterized feminists by their “egalitarian dogma”).22 Can you see where these women are drawing the lines? Essentially, one of the limits that women commonly place on ‘what is feminism’ is the belief that men and women are equal and should therefore receive the same treatment. An alternative line drawn by other feminists, however, implies that this perception is false. Germaine Greer says, “[u]npopular feminists ‘fight’ for liberation; popular feminists work for equality.”23 For Greer, feminism is something very specific – the struggle for an expression and acceptance of collective female power – not simply the fight for equality. Opinions vary amongst feminists, but the result is almost inevitably the boxing of feminism: this is feminism; that is not.

20 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
21 The Centenary of Women’s Suffrage.
22 Casellas. 4.
Historical Boxing

That feminism has been boxed and bordered has a history all of its own – a conscious history, so to speak, because feminists have often thought and written explicitly about what feminism is(n’t). It is some years now since feminists started to do this: it’s being going on, perhaps, since the word was coined.24 The practice took off in the 1960s, but it was in the early 1980s (a transition point between what we call second- and third-wave feminism) that I think the boxing got really big. Two very interesting things happened as a result of the increasing influence of feminism in the academy and in the outside world. Those two things were crucial to the direction feminism would take. Let me explain.

Pauline B. Bart describes how she:

…started teaching courses on women in 1969 because of my commitment to the ideas and practice of the women’s liberation movement…Not only did we give students credit for participating in activist organizations, but sometimes I required a paper based on participant research in an activist organization. Women’s studies without activism was like the ocean without salt.25

However, the integration of this practical work with feminist study had a lifespan. In the 1980s, things began to shift. Bart was one of the course coordinators of Women’s Studies and feminist theory units who could no longer realistically require students to engage in activism – mainly because studying women’s studies didn’t necessarily involve believing in a feminist ethos anymore. Bart says, “[W]omen’s studies used to be the academic arm of the women’s movement. Now it is the women’s arm of the academic movement.”26 Students can study Women’s Studies as an academic interest, and not a passionate political act. The evidence of this shift today is the striking number

24 Which was around the 1870s – see footnote 41.
26 Bart. 257.
of Women’s Studies courses that are changing their names to ‘Gender Studies.’ What was, and is, happening is a broad scale institutionalisation of feminism. In the 80s, this was amazing and somewhat horrifying for many feminists: they had to realize for the first time that feminism’s radicalness could be up for sale; that feminism could be ‘co-opted’; in short, that feminism could actually be less than perfect. “With institutionalization,” says Bart, “came rewards. Upward mobility for teachers of gender was concomitant with foundation and university funding becoming available.” But the rewards, for Bart, do not outweigh the pacification of feminism: without activism, many feminists found it hard to believe in the transformative power of the basics of their teaching and their students’ learning. Bart has “wept with anger and despair” over the fact that direct political activity is no longer seen as a necessary component of feminism.

The departure of activism from feminist teaching was one of the first ways in which many feminists began to see feminist theory and feminist practice as separate. Despite certain efforts to break down the distinction between theory and practice in feminism, the two have never been comfortably married since. Today, feminists tend to represent feminism in these dualistic terms even when we discuss the instability of such a binary opposition. Some feminists even represent theory and practice as antithetical things that a feminist can only combine with great reflexive effort. It is, of course, an illusion to represent feminist action without theory (any feminist activist must be predicated on some theory of the position of women in society, and some theory of how her activism might help, or why would the activist be doing it?), just as it is demeaning to feminist writers to suppose that their theory is not boundary-pushing, active political

28 Bart. 258.
29 Bart. 259.
work. However, when we say ‘feminist practice’ we tend to think of women collectively painting banners and demonstrating for the pro-choice movement or equal pay. And when we say ‘feminist theory,’ it conjures the picture of a pile of books, or an earnest-faced woman tapping at a computer keyboard. What I’m trying to say here is that the early 80s was characterized by something that hadn’t really happened in a big way in feminism before: a “new theoretical awareness”\(^\text{31}\) that led to the marking out or taxonomising of kinds of feminism.

The second thing that happened in the early 80s was the growing sense that some feminists were privileging certain kinds of feminism over others. This privileging was couched in terms such as the ‘danger’ of untheorised practice,\(^\text{32}\) and the ‘redundancy’ of theory without practice (or the compromised nature of highly academic theory).\(^\text{33}\) Ann Froines argues that it is not “morally superior to be an activist or morally suspect to be an academic,”\(^\text{34}\) but the truth is that prestige became attached to feminist theory, and integrity to feminist practice at this time. Underlying this tension was the implication that some of us – not any one group; it depended on who was talking – were not really doing feminism (or not doing it properly, which usually comes down to the same thing). Immediately on the tail of the idea of ‘proper’ feminism was the dissatisfaction some of us started to feel with the way feminists were creating hierarchies of feminism. The result of this kind of boxing, said feminists like Liz Stanley and Sue Wise,\(^\text{35}\) was to carve out elite forms of feminism that left the small, quiet, personal life-changing ideas of daily feminism out in the cold. Stanley and Wise

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pointed out that to be a feminist in this era, meant working, studying – doing a job in feminist practice or theory. A 24-7 ideology of feminism was not enough: you had to meet more stringent demands before you could call yourself a feminist.36

Little has changed on this question since the 80s.37 The work Stanley and Wise started on the elitism of feminism heralded a vast field of work in feminist theory on ‘difference politics.’38 Difference politics accounts for women who are different from the dominant social or cultural group of feminists. The kinds of differences that qualify for study are race, class, sexuality, generation and occasionally disability. This work is important and not to be sneered at. Many feminists (including white, middle class feminists) now admit that their experiences of being women are frequently characterized by a greater level of privilege than those of other women. There has been a nudging and poking that has made room for ‘different’ feminists to get a word in. However, difference politics left behind the women who didn’t qualify as feminists. Stanley and Wise got “fed up with being told” they weren’t “proper feminist[s]”39 and wrote their book, *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*. Fortunately, *they* were clued up enough with the changes happening in feminism to see through that kind of boundary making, and know that their feminism *was* feminism. On the other hand, there were and are many women who listened too carefully to the talk that made them feel inadequate as feminists. They took to heart the boxing of ‘feminism’ and ‘not-feminism.’

*Contemporary Boxing*

In drawing up unambiguous categories of feminism/not feminism, feminists say a couple of things about feminism which aren’t particularly useful: firstly, they suggest that there are certain practices which count as feminism and others which do not,

36 Stanley and Wise. 3-4.
37 Little has changed in this specific discussion; however, the issue has been raised elsewhere in feminist theory (specifically in the context of theory on second- and third-wave differences).
38 For a more detailed discussion of difference theory, including key theorists, see Chapter 4.
regardless of individual specificities in the ways, places and living people amongst whom we carry out such practices. The problem with this point is that, again, feminists are imagining feminism as a kind of static bloc of knowledge and methods, instead of a moving, growing mass of ideas and practices. The second problem of delineating boundaries around feminism/not-feminism is that accepting strict criteria for feminist work makes it necessary to exclude a great many other kinds of feminist work from analysis. In other words, in their effort to demarcate certain practices as ‘feminist,’ feminists actually leave out a major part of the feminist story: the part that covers the practices that might have arisen as part of the spreading motion, or movement, of feminism that I keep talking about. These feminists (and I discuss specific examples all throughout this thesis) miss or ignore feminism that might have come up in work that has a different purpose. Just as the careless toss of vegetable scraps into the compost might produce a pumpkin vine in the middle of a carefully tended flowerbed, a work that starts out in the field of philosophy or biology might end up with feminism wound all the way through it. Or a day that starts with a routine interview down at the Department of Social Security might end up as a full-fledged battle for childcare rights. Or a conversation that starts with a simple request for assistance from a wife to a husband might end up as a deeply passionate and political debate over the sexual division of labour in the household.

The lines evident in many feminists’ practices and writing – lines imagined around a chunk of work called feminism – cut feminism off from the rest of reality and vice versa. These are the lines I’m interested in for this thesis: the ones drawn between institutionalised, formal feminism and daily, spontaneous feminism. Between feminism as we name it as a movement or discipline because it is organised and theorised, and feminism as it exists in the personal, everyday lives of women. Between capital-F Feminism and small-f feminism. A notion central to my argument is that many women,
including feminists, are not willing to call the small-f feminism ‘feminism’ at all. For various reasons, feminists draw lines between their own feminism and everything else, which becomes quite firmly not-feminism. Shulamit Reinharz, for instance, claims that: “feminism is not open to everything…we are constantly on the look-out for what we perceive to be nonfeminist consciousness.”40 The key word is “perceive.” What the constant boxing of feminism misses is that one woman’s feminism is another woman’s failure of feminism.

The other day I saw a beautiful girl walking in the street. She had her head up to the world, a sexy shirt stretched across her breasts. Then a man stepped out at her from the side of a building, holding his grotesque penis out of the open fly of his trousers. He was grinning. “You wanna suck on this?” he asked vilely. She stopped short, shocked for a moment, then exclaimed, “Fuck off!” And strode away.

Once, she would have slunk away from such a confrontation, terrified and bewildered. Her bewilderment lasted only an instant before she saw though the power dynamics (or something) and snapped her angry reply.

I’ve discussed this incident, which happened to someone I know, with other feminists. Some of them said this wasn’t female strength – just individual assertiveness and the unshockableness of postmodern city dwellers. Perhaps they believe that feminism would only have been to engage in a martial arts beating or explain to him at length that she wasn’t going to play in his game of sexual power. But I ask, since when have women been assertive or unshockable? It was only twenty or thirty years ago that we had to train women in skills like these. It wasn’t that long ago that I learnt those things myself. Maybe that attitude won’t keep her mind and body safe in an

environment of still-overwhelming contradictions and men’s criminal desire to regain control. At least she’s got a chance of protecting herself throughout her lifetime. Look at the turning of the generations and at how the organised efforts have become everyday occurrences! But one woman’s feminism is another woman’s failure of feminism.

Contemporary Boxing of Historical Feminism

Feminists are even willing to sift back through history, naming things as feminism or not-feminism, in the name of historical accuracy. They claim that, since the word ‘feminism’ wasn’t around back then,41 it is unfair to those historical women to call them ‘feminists,’ and it ignores other factors that might have been in play around the time that such women did their so-called feminist activities.42 More unfair, I say, to name those actions as not-feminism. Doing so belittles historical female resistance as merely part of broader struggles, and it denies contemporary women the pleasure of claiming themselves a feminist history. When we talk about the history of feminism as a movement, we might do better to include the resistant activities of historical women, paying finite attention to the political, spiritual or other movements that may (or may not) have influenced or encouraged such women. These histories can be positive and productive if they identify alliances and frictions between feminism and other movements, rather than persistently writing feminist activities off as being merely a part of these movements. In this way, feminist historians might investigate the way both individual and collective resistance by historical women can provide a sense of progress and solidarity for contemporary feminists.

42 A detailed discussion of feminist historiography can be found in Chapter 3.
The Effects of Boxing Feminism: the ‘No Entry’ Sign

I see this picture in my mind. It’s exaggerated, but it will give you an idea of the effect of boxing feminism.

There’s an outsized crate, sealed and fortified, and around it stand a bunch of women with their arms folded, like bouncers. The crate is stamped with the word FEMINISM. There are other stamps, too: fragile; caution: not to be taken; keep out of reach of almost everyone; this way up; to be opened by authorised personnel only. Other women stand around watching, suitably impressed. None of them looks inclined to go near it, even if the bouncers would let them.

In other words, to relentlessly box feminism means that a great number of women come to feel that feminism doesn’t belong to them, and also that they want no part of a feminism that has such strict rules. The picture is, of course, parodic, and even a bit facetious. It is even possible to argue that boxing feminism is a way of making feminism manageable for women who do not have the time or interest in feminism: that boxing keeps feminism alive by allowing a certain group of women to protect and champion it. In addition, some women may need the security of a limited feminism that does not extend too broadly beyond, for example, activism or academia. Indeed, I address some of the more very valid reasons for boxing feminism in the individual chapters on theory, activism and the generational debate; but my argument in this thesis is mainly that we have more to lose by protecting and limiting feminism than we have to gain. In fact, a picture of feminism that suits me better brings to mind old filmic images of The Blob\textsuperscript{43} – a huge mass of unstoppable and uncontrollable goo, oozing into our lives, swallowing some, drowning others – and taking them perhaps on to

something wonderful (the Great Beyond; the unknown) – getting some people’s feet
dirty and making still others look desperately around themselves for higher ground.
Perhaps it seems like a malevolent image, but take the evil intent away and it’s an
optimistic way of describing the movement of feminism. But the boxing and official
 stamping of things ‘feminism’ and ‘not-feminism’ is the picture we are more likely to
 recognize and understand.

There’s a lot of talk about ‘the backlash’ against feminism\(^4\) – a phenomenon
blamed for the rejection of feminism. Another image:

\textit{Some feminists are in a small, proud, and sometimes frightened huddle. Occasionally
 one of them will try to take a step out of the circle. But the surrounding men and women
 are ready to lash at them with long whips when any of them moves.}

This image is quite accurate in some contexts – in some middle-Eastern and third world
countries, for instance, or even in various moments throughout history. But for a
contemporary Western context, feminists sometimes cling to the backlash image in a
way I find suspiciously comfortable. Instead of looking within the huddle for some –
any – reasons for backlash responses to feminism, feminists look outwards and blame
the ‘anti-feminists.’ All imagery aside, one comment feminists often make about the
backlash is that women do not so much reject the goals of feminism as the name
‘feminist.’\(^5\) One woman writes:

\begin{quote}
I used to hate the word feminist and wouldn’t have described myself as one, preferring
the terms ‘equalist’ or ‘humanist,’ although in theory my beliefs were all pretty much
\end{quote}

\(^4\) Susan Faludi brought the term “backlash” into prominence with her bestseller, \textit{Backlash: The
\(^5\) A discussion of this issue can be found in Robyn Rowland, ed. \textit{Women Who Do and Women Who
Don’t Join the Women’s Movement}. Melbourne: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984. See also Lisa Maria
addition, Naomi Wolf discusses the necessity of dealing with women’s distaste for the word ‘feminist’ in
\textit{Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and how it will Change the 21st Century}. New York: Random,
1993. 60.
in line with what I thought of as feminism...I guess I didn't want the stigma that I thought would go along with it.\textsuperscript{46}

When feminists ask ourselves questions about why women reject the name, the answers are often about unpleasant associations with the word: associations I’ve already identified, expressed in terms like ‘man-basher’ and ‘feminazi.’ Feminists often complain that they constantly hear women say “I’m not a feminist, but...”\textsuperscript{47} The sentence often goes on with, “I believe in equal rights,” “I want better pay for my work,” “I demand respect from men.” The complaint is that these women are unwilling to identify as feminists because of the bad connotations of the word. My theory is that the sentence finishes silently like this: “I’m not a feminist, but I do feminism.” In other words, these women don’t reject feminism or feminist ideals so much as they confess (or boast) that they don’t work within the boundaries of feminism.

I’ve actually heard some go so far as to suggest that we ditch the word ‘feminist’ and start anew, as a remedy to feminism’s bad rap! bell hooks, for instance, suggests that we say, “I advocate feminism,” rather than “I am a feminist” in order to alleviate women’s apprehension of the label.\textsuperscript{48} Or perhaps we could replace the word ‘feminism’ with something less abrasive – humanism, or egalitarianism. However, to think women will accept a new term simply because it is not the word ‘feminism’ is tantamount to calling women dupes of the system. It’s saying that women can’t see past negative stereotypes and sex-pectations. The whole argument that women are afraid of people seeing them as feminists, however, doesn’t hold water. It is no longer the case that all, or most, Western women hide their independence and willingness to resist oppression. In fact, many women are quite prepared to brave the stereotypes, but honestly believe that they are not feminists. And this is because ‘feminist’ has come to


\textsuperscript{47} Weiss, Penny. “‘I’m not a feminist, but...’: Myths and Realities of Feminism.” Penny A. Weiss, ed. \textit{Conversations with Feminism: Political Theory and Practice}. Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.

mean a very specific set of women – namely, activists and academics working in explicitly feminist fields. Those who talk about women’s unwillingness to identify with the word ‘feminist’ need to pay attention, in other words, to the question of whether women are actually rejecting feminism, or whether there is a component of such women being excluded from feminism. Is the current perception of the word ‘feminist’ simply a mistake on the part of non-feminist women, or are feminists colluding in the myth?

This is not to say that feminists have everything to gain and nothing to lose from closely guarding feminism in this way. These feminists feel the pinch of boxing feminism, too. One of my own flirtations with organised feminism took the form of activism. I took on the role of university women’s officer during my undergraduate degree. It was one of the hardest and most demoralizing years of my life. I contended with a lack of support from the majority of students, a decided antipathy from the university’s student union, and conflicts of feminist agendas. But worst of all, I think, was the feeling of terrible loneliness when I found myself doing the women’s room clean-up by myself, or trying to get a fundraiser for the women’s department organised and ending up running at a loss. Hardly anyone was interested. I had a network of about three women who helped, but they weren’t the kind of people who turn up to regular meetings. I haven’t been near a women’s department since that year. But the point is that, in my case, taking part in ‘official’ feminism caused me slowly to stop acknowledging that feminism happens in daily life. I started to feel that I alone was doing feminism – and everyone else was rejecting it. Official feminists can sometimes feel that the public face of feminism is the only face of feminism. This feeling can be incredibly disheartening if your work is lonely, and incredibly alienating if you’re made to feel that you’re not doing ‘enough.’

A more secure and long-term relationship I’ve had with official feminism has
been my work with feminist theory. However, one problem with the guarding of feminist theory that has become apparent to me when speaking to women outside of feminist academia is that these women have a very lucid knowledge of feminist issues. This fact indicates to me that the guarding of feminist theory is neither useful nor ethical. In addition, I’ve felt impatience towards academic jargon. I’ve witnessed the annoyance and exasperation of a close relative when he tried to read my honours thesis and encountered a sea of terms that gave me good marks, but failed to further the feminist cause. I’ve felt my eyes glaze over with boredom more than once when reading overly dry feminist theory. I’ve been, and still get, tangled up and frustrated with my own attempts to write feminist theory because every way I turned there is yet another abstract quandary giving rise to yet another set of impracticable rules.

“Feminists must remember to...”; “Feminists must constantly take into account...” In other words, feminists working in the academy may forget that there is, in fact, more to feminist theory than particular writing styles, research methodologies or theoretical issues.

The effect of putting feminism into the boxes of feminism and not-feminism is to make all feminism seem off-limits for many women. The fact that non-academic and non-activist women I know are highly aware of sexism, and the daily strategies we use to fight it, indicates to me that the official word on feminism fails to give these women credit for social and philosophical awareness. Rather, feminism often functions on the perception that most women grope blindly in a system that derides and disadvantages them, complacent with their own pseudo-liberation and tricked by ‘the backlash’ into hating feminism. That story doesn’t ring true for me nor, I suspect, for a lot of the ‘blind’ women. “Stand in any local shop anywhere,” Stanley and Wise suggest, “and listen to ‘falsely conscious’ women knowing and talking about the fact that they live in
a man’s world, and that they’re badly done to.” 49 So what’s going on? Why won’t ‘official’ feminists account for ‘unofficial’ feminism?

**Conclusion: ‘De-limiting’ Feminism**

There’s a lot to lose from prodding at the boundaries. Let’s talk pragmatically first: in a world where feminism can be a job, making it available to many more women is to be downwardly mobile. Women can work as feminists in the academy, or public service, or (occasionally) as activists – and if they own feminism exclusively, they become indispensable to an economy that encourages specialisation. So the idea that feminism is a ‘field,’ instead of an ideology, allows feminists to find work, get an income, and work in a ‘field’ they’re interested in. Moreover, feminism is one hell of a journey. Feminism often emerges from a bunch of arduous lessons women take – life lessons as well as academic lessons. It’s easy to feel precious about one’s feminist journey. We live in a culture that encourages competition. We hoard knowledge for personal gain: knowledge is a kind of currency, particularly in the academy. Even an institution like a university can produce academics who are reluctant to share their knowledge.

It seems that the capitalist urge to compete has intruded successfully on even the most politically radical sites in society. If ‘feminist,’ as I said before, can almost become a job title, then it stands to reason that even feminist knowledge is now a valuable commodity. For an academic or an activist – hard feminist workers – to share feminist knowledge is the equivalent of a miner who, after years of prospecting, discovers the mother lode and promptly heads back to town to tell everyone where he found it. Perhaps some of my readers will find this point of view a tad cynical – as though I am accusing feminists of being careerist and mercenary in motivation. In fact, I do not believe this at all. Rather, I believe that knowledge-as-commodity is a concept

49 Stanley and Wise. *Breaking Out.* 120.
not often acknowledged, even in radical social theory. Attaining a certain level of expertise in academic production, coupled with extensive knowledge of other work done in the field, can provide someone with specialised skills that make them highly employable. These facts deserve greater attention than they currently receive, as they form a background of boxing feminism – an unconscious but inescapable reflection of contemporary Western socio-economics.

I don’t necessarily feel that feminism-as-commodity is a bad thing. It is important – vital – that we represent feminist views in the workplace, and academic institutions are a workplace that men really have dominated throughout history. However, I do feel that guarding feminism, even when done unconsciously, is an ethical consideration to which feminists tend to close their eyes. There are complicating factors, after all, in the boxing of feminism. For instance, the fact that the presence of researching, teaching feminists allows male academics to get on with their own work, without that pesky obligation to take women into account, is rarely discussed. Perhaps my readers have seen, as I have, male lecturers ‘get a feminist in’ to cover the part of the lecture series that deals with women? When I approached a senior academic in my school, fresh from an undergraduate degree in literature, and said, “I’m interested in working with feminist theory –” he barely let me get the words out before ushering me firmly down the hall to the Women’s Studies department! These kinds of things happen because we box feminism.

So, we cannot take lightly women’s career advancement and female population of the workplace as reasons for boxing feminism. Women have struggled through all the centuries of Western civilisation to become independent and to be able to choose their careers. In order to write fiction or poetry (or theory, I would add), a woman needs “five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door,” wrote Virginia Woolf in
1929.\textsuperscript{50} I by no means belittle that necessity: it \textit{has} been a long-term struggle to get female voices and bodies into the halls of universities, medical schools, banks and business. I’m aware of these facts with some personal alarm: it was a senior academic in my \textit{own} school who ushered me away from the English department; it is these very words, perhaps not ‘scholarly’ enough, that will gain me (or not) the coveted PhD. These factors make for compelling and pragmatic reasons to contain feminism within certain discourses, disciplines and organizations. The use of Virginia’s lock on the door seems to have changed. I want to know who it is keeping out now.

There are also certain theoretically pressing reasons for the way ‘official’ feminists patrol the borders of feminism/not-feminism. I will discuss here a historiographical one. The naming as ‘not feminism’ of historical acts of feminism that I described earlier is often bound up with the scholarly aversion to what could be called ‘inaccuracy.’ There is a concern that the women involved in historical forms of feminism might not have seen their own strength as feminism, even if the word had been around back then. Feminist historians fear that calling women’s resistance ‘feminism’ might somehow muddy up history with our own contemporary needs and concerns. This fear causes historians to assert, for instance, that improvements to education, justice, and equity in general, even when instigated by women’s activism, were not “the result of feminist agitation,” and that we can, rather, thank “reform” for any positive changes in the position of women.\textsuperscript{51} In this way of writing feminist history, feminism doesn’t get much credit at all for the pressure women put on those in power to transform their social status.

I agree that some caution is necessary when naming historical actions as feminism, as well as an awareness of the place and time in which those actions took place. But female strength and defiance in the face of punishment, hatred and ridicule

\textsuperscript{50} Woolf. 113.
\textsuperscript{51} LeGates. 214.
is, as far as I’m concerned, feminism. The point historians often take up is that these women may have had something quite different from female liberation in mind when they did their thing. Well, we’re quite happy to call the push for the vote a major part of ‘first-wave feminism’ without any knowledge of what was going on in the heads of the suffragettes. We don’t know what their personal agendas were, and we can only ever come within yards of knowing anyone’s personal agenda. A number of first wave feminists disliked the suffragist push, pointing out that it funnelled the inferior position of women into one thing: the need for the vote. Getting the vote, some argue, led to a general lull in the feminist noise. Kate Millett called the suffrage campaign “the red herring of the revolution – a wasteful drain on the energy of seventy years”:

The suffrage campaign reminds one of nothing so much as a flat tire encountered early on a long journey – a flat which takes so much time, labor, and expense to repair that the journey is dejectedly abandoned.

Others associate suffrage campaigns with the desire to “double the family vote” for the temperance and reform movements. In short, the true agendas of individuals and groups are not always above suspicion, and they are hardly ever open to public scrutiny. All we can work with are the facts we have to hand, and our own agendas. The facts I have about the suffrage campaign are: it took a lot of work and difficulty and fighting against misogynists to get the vote, and it resulted in winning women at least an official recognition as citizens, and permitting women a political voice. My agenda is to describe the spreading of feminism through time and space without imposing arbitrary limits on what can be called feminism. Therefore, I name the political struggle of the suffragettes ‘feminism,’ and take pride in having a history.

Non-feminist historians have used just this strategy. What might look like an objective description of various struggles in a historical period (including women’s

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52 For example, Teresa Billington-Grieg stated, “The suffragette who is content with the home as it is, built on the subjection of women, is not a true rebel.” The Militant Suffragette Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry. London: Frank Palmer, n.d. 159-60.


54 LeGates. 230.
struggles) is simply another way of looking at history: a way that tells men’s history.

Jill Matthews reminds us that:

> Men’s histories have been presented as universally human. The frameworks, concepts and priorities of these ‘universal’ histories reflect male interests, concerns and experiences.55

Women’s struggles have always been, for non-feminist historians, contingent to the struggles of humankind in general (or what is tellingly referred to as ‘mankind’). Naturally, these historians are going to tell the story that way – when they are men, it’s in their own interests to do so. Having a history and being able to describe and call on that history is a powerful thing. And yet we effectively and consistently elide the fact that non-feminist historians have agendas, just as the feminist ones do. Male theorists, historians, scientists and activists have always been very successful at appearing not to have an agenda other than human freedom and progress – hence the representation of male history and endeavour as ‘human.’ Feminists, on the other hand, are never above suspicion because they emphatically and obviously do have the agenda of feminist political change.

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to provide a taste of what is to come in the rest of this thesis. I have broadly discussed the concept of limiting (or ‘boxing’) feminism and how this manifests amongst both non-feminists and feminists. I have also introduced some of the reasons why we attempt to control feminism. In this concluding section, I have started to analyse specifically why feminists attempt to control feminism, including practical reasons, as well as theoretical positions associated with feminism that tend toward the boxing of feminism. Essentially, I aim in this thesis to unpick in more detail the boxing of feminism. I hope to unbox it wherever possible. Most importantly, however, I draw some examples of ‘not-feminism’ back into a feminist discussion. As mentioned in the Introduction, I use my ‘strategic definition’ of

feminism as resistance to the suffering of women as the criterion against which I select these ‘unofficial’ feminist practices in order to explore what it looks like to break down some of the boundaries.

Let me finish by doing just this – by bringing a piece of unofficial theory into feminism. This is a snippet from a conversation with an unofficial feminist:

[My feminist priority is that] I’m never treated differently because I’m a woman – in respect...You know, the fact that...I have on occasion been given less respect because I’m a woman – from students, and some misogynistic-type bloody teachers...And that’s when feminism becomes an issue for me. Because I feel like I can pretty much get anything I need to get...as a person. Myself; who I am. I’m not saying that’s the same for all women by a longshot, but as long as I’m treated with respect and cared for and treated equally and with a lot of love and that kind of thing, I feel like my needs as a feminist are being met.56

I account for this speech by calling it feminism. Some would say this feminism does not show an awareness of the conditions of women as a group, even though it features words that talk about women collectively (“not the same for all women;” “because I’m a woman”). Some would say it’s not particularly radical, even though it contains demands for respect and expressions of anger (“misogynistic-type bloody teachers”) when that respect doesn’t happen. But even without those recuperative wisps of official feminism, I call it feminism. It is about a woman’s resistance to the suffering she undergoes because she is a woman. No feminism is perfect—someone, somewhere, will always find something they don’t like about a particular feminist act or word. So why are we spending this inordinate amount of time trying to make a perfect feminism? Perfection is not realistic. The word I prefer to use to describe where feminism moves and how it moves today in my own country, in my own time, is ‘almost.’

After all this time, carrying all this knowledge, it is almost impossible to hurt me for my sex. I am almost at home with my body. I almost accept that there are more differences than just sex difference. I will almost engage in mutual friendships with

56 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
other women. *I can almost laugh at all the history and continuing pain.*
Part 1

Feminist Activism

Definitions of Terms

Feminism: resistance to the suffering of women.

Activism: activities undertaken for a political cause.

Feminist activism: activities undertaken to resist women’s suffering.

How to be a Feminist Activist

In this part of my thesis, I talk about the things that count as feminist activism and those that do not. I describe some of the ‘other’ things that I believe count as feminist activism under the definition I use above. In order to do so, I draw a distinction between the things we generally understand ‘feminist activism’ to mean and those we don’t. Semantically, I tend to distinguish between ‘conventional’ feminist activism and the other things that count by using descriptors in a conscious way (for example, ‘official,’ or ‘proper’ feminist activism). It is not a distinction I wish to perpetuate. Rather, I would like to interrogate the distinction, and find a way to describe all of these practices as part of a continuum. My use of the distinction is mainly for sense, and not in any way an attempt to privilege or ridicule the things we tend to see as ‘official’ feminist activism. My position is one of respect for all kinds of feminist activism. I aim for a rethinking and a renaming of certain practices – not a rejection or a reversal of the current hierarchy.

When we say ‘feminist activism,’ we generally mean activities such as demonstrating for women’s rights, protests for equal opportunity legislation, work in policy offices, and organising to get more women into non-traditional areas (mathematics, engineering, heavy industry, etc.). We also think of things like volunteer
or paid work within women’s refuges or abortion clinics, making a public stand for ‘women’s rights,’ being part of a feminist collective, working in non-government organizations to promote women’s advancement, writing letters, zines, and producing pamphlets opposing practices that violate women’s bodily integrity (rape, clitoridectomy, etc.), or producing feminist newspapers. Some people assume that feminist activism involves more extreme and even eccentric or malicious practices, such as becoming a lesbian (even if you don’t want to!), burning one’s bra, refraining from shaving one’s body hair, living in an all-female community, agitating to put in place legislation that ‘discriminates against men,’ publicly denouncing motherhood and homemaking, and a host of other predictable stereotypes of ‘feminist’ behaviours.¹

Personally, I thoroughly support many of the radical and daring things women have done to publicise feminism or make a political point. I see these kinds of public political acts as vital – not just to the public face of the feminist cause – but also to women who do this kind of activism, and to women who, for various reasons, do not. The last thing I want to do is diminish the importance, vision and heroism of these acts. I am not out to detract from these activities in the least; rather, what I’m trying to say is that feminist activism doesn’t stop there.

There are quieter feminist practices that I think count as feminist activism – practices that involve living according to one’s feminist ideals in day-to-day life. It’s just not the refusal to play the game that makes for feminist activism. It is also an awareness that we can, and willingness to, negotiate the game; the awareness that it’s possible to manipulate the sex rules we are meant to obey, and make the world a bit more habitable for ourselves. This is a kind of feminist activism that includes the little revolutions of daily life. Keep in mind my definition of feminist activism: *activities*

¹ These behaviours are, in fact, often inaccurately reported. Bra-burning is an urban legend, as I explain in Chapter 3. Joanna Russ discusses her own early misconceptions about feminist separatism in *What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class and the Future of Feminism*. New York: St Martin’s, 1998. 84-5.
undertaken to resist the suffering of women. These activities can be grand or little, public or private, fleeting or long-term; they can take place in the world or in our homes. In 1881, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote that she was “fonder of freedom than anything else…I like to have my own unaided will in all my surroundings – in dress, diet, hours, behaviour, speech, and thought.”² Whenever we do something to counter the suffering we put up with because we are women, we participate in feminist activism. It might be something as small as counselling a girlfriend on how to deal with a troublesome spouse, or complaining about treatment you consider patronising or bewildering, or helping your sister feel good about her weight. It might turn into something more consequential or long-term, like a battle with a financial institute over refusing you a loan because you might get pregnant, or a comment to the boss about the lewd jokes a male colleague has been emailing you. These activities might never get beyond an expressed intention to ‘keep your eye on’ a situation that makes you uncomfortable – they might not need to get beyond this kind of feminist monitoring. But they are still practices that maintain your safety and reduce your suffering as a woman.

In Chapter 2, I will explain using examples exactly what is required of women who wish to call themselves feminist activists. In Chapter 3, I will explore other kinds of feminist activism we engage in, and the implications of opening up the definition of feminist activism to include non-traditional practices. In order to illustrate how daily and banal feminist activism can be, I use the style of a personal diary for Chapter 3. I argue that it’s both possible and desirable to take a more inclusive approach to feminist activism, particularly in light of my main goal, which is to encourage all women willingly to take ownership of feminism. Limiting the term ‘feminist activism’ to accepted forms of feminist behaviour is a neat way of excluding millions of women,

who practice feminism in quieter ways, from feminism. It is also a good way to elicit this kind of apologist statement from women – even from those who are doing what many would consider ‘proper’ feminist activism:

Our group [a consciousness raising group on sexuality] may seem tame, therapeutic, and almost regressive in light of the political change that is needed, but this basic work is always useful and can form the basis for action.3

This part of my thesis is both a call to rework the standing definition of feminist activism and a starting point for women to identify the practices in our everyday lives that do in fact count as feminist activism.

Chapter 2

What Counts as Feminist Activism?

Some people think that feminists spend all their time
not shaving under their arms. But really that takes no time at all.
— Judy Horacek, 1998

In this chapter, I discuss the tendency we have to limit an idea of feminist activism to practices that are collective, public, sustained and radical. I explore some of the reasoning and history behind these four criteria for feminist activism. I use fiction and conversations to explain fully what each of these criteria look like when we conceptualise feminist activism. In the discussion of each criterion, I make specific points about the contradictions inherent in using such criteria for a definition of feminist activism. I conclude with a general discussion of why limiting the definition of feminist activism is a problem for feminism, explaining how such a definition excludes certain women from identifying their practices as ‘feminist activism.’

When I started thinking about how to describe feminist activism, I wrote down all the images and words that came to my mind. I added some words and images used by my interviewees to describe their ideas of feminist activism. Roughly edited and reduced, my list looked like this:

…anger and emotion – rejection of idealised ‘reason’ – evidenced by rejection of theory; drama and heroics; drumming up support for a politics – PR, media; making it a majority concern; collectivity – drawing on feminine traditions of sharing, groups, talking, communication, equality; united we stand divided we fall; feminism as by, for and about women; power in numbers; publicising/publishing; “lesbian…mechanic…out protesting”2; goal-oriented/ends-oriented; major goals, not little revolutions; mobilizing anger and emotion of women makes it a ‘real’ political effort for the women involved and from a PR perspective – not fleeting or ‘hysterical’; conquering the sense of isolation especially thru consciousness raising groups; 24-7 – not a contingency plan; a developed politics; legitimacy; need for ‘stars’ and charismatic leaders; feminism as a journey or process; ‘feminist’ as an identity; quantity and quality; marginal knowledge; subversive; not co-opted…

For the sake of writing about these things in a comprehensible way, I’ve broken the list down into four areas: collective, public, sustained and radical:

**Collective:** drawing on feminine traditions of sharing, groups, talking, communication, equality; united we stand divided we fall; feminism as by, for and about women; power in numbers; conquering the sense of isolation especially through consciousness raising groups…

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2 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
**Public:** drama and heroics; drumming up support for a politics – PR, media; making it a majority concern; publishing; need for ‘stars’ and charismatic leaders…

**Sustained:** goal-oriented/ends-oriented; major goals, not little revolutions; mobilizing anger and emotion of women makes it a ‘real’ political effort for the women involved and from a PR perspective – not fleeting or ‘hysterical’; 24-7 – not a contingency plan; a ‘developed’ politics; legitimacy; feminism as a journey or process; ‘feminist’ as an identity; quantity and quality…

**Radical:** anger and emotion – rejection of idealised ‘reason’ – evidenced by rejection of theory; “lesbian…mechanic…out protesting”; marginal knowledge; subversive; not co-opted…

Let’s be clear: I am categorically not claiming that these kinds of actions are the be-all and end-all of feminist activism; on the contrary, I think there is a lot more to feminist activism. But we don’t generally understand the quiet, private, and perhaps even routine resistances we practice as ‘feminist activism.’ In fact, to make a case for naming these things ‘activism’ will immediately open up the whole second-wave/third-wave can of worms in which second-wave feminists are associated with the forms of activism described above, and third-wavers are associated with a more individual, self-serving style of feminism. Of course, it would be unrealistic to try to sidestep the generation issue, and I fully expect some readers to interpret this chapter mainly through the lens of generational difference. Indeed, in Chapter 6, I myself discuss the feminist ‘waves’ framework. However, right now, I will explore representations of activism as they are formulated by feminists and non-feminists of all generations – with only minimal reference to issues of second- and third-wave differences. Therefore, I ask readers instead to seek out and question more general feminist representational practices – specifically, the practice of relying on notions of collective, public, sustained and radical to define feminist activism.

*Why These Criteria Should Count as Feminist Activism*

Collective, public, sustained and radical acts of women’s resistance are all vital to feminism. Women often find that such acts are the main source of their passion for
feminism. The sacrifice, power, integrity, and even the drama and poetic beauty of such activism attracts attention and reaches out to women in all kinds of different social niches. Such acts contribute to major policy changes. Such acts get the job done – the miserable, thankless, painful, hidden jobs – when no one else wants to do the job. Such acts lend legitimacy to feminism as a social justice movement, whether this is fair or not. Critics might question the motive, theoretical grounding, or utility of work done by feminist activists, but no one will question their passion. Feminist activism constantly creates and recreates a new way of looking at the world, which involves a refusal to cooperate with the systematic suffering of women, attention to the suffering of women as a group (and willingness to publicly acknowledge this), deliberate subversion of institutionalised sexism, and the invention of strategies for moulding a new, better system.

Conflicts of the Criteria

Perhaps the most interesting thing about these four criteria for activism is how they intersect and collide with each other. Kim Borin explains that:

[A feminist activist does feminism] more actively than how I do. Like, I just argue a point if it comes to my attention in a situation. Whereas you’re writing a thesis and really putting it out there as much as you can. You’re almost trying to change society’s perception of it…I guess I am as well, but you’re doing it more actively.

…I think what you’re doing is activism…The fact that you’re writing a thesis, and I don’t know if you’ve written articles, or…And you get people so often talking about it and into it…Being active is doing more than just arguing or having conversations about it.3

In Borin’s explanation, ‘real’ feminist activism seems to require a concept of public exposure. She repeats the ideas of “putting it out there” and “getting people talking about it.” However, to add to the confusion, as feminists we tend to make a fuss about the hidden and thankless tasks of activism, as though we can directly relate the lack of exposure that accompanies heroism and sacrifice to feminist activism. Another confusing framework for defining feminist activism is that of ‘collective versus

individual.’ We extol the virtues of cooperative feminist activism in the same breath
that we use comparative terms to describe it. We make claims about how others’
activities are more or less active, activist, or feminist, than our own, based on the level
of commitment, starry exposure or covert drudgery.

That these seemingly paradoxical concepts are used as definitive terms for
feminist activism illustrates the difficulty of sustaining the boundaries of activism. In
fact, the contradictions I pointed out in the preceding paragraph just scratch the surface
of the problematic way both feminists and non-feminists define ‘feminist activism.’

With this confusion in mind, please consider the four categories of collective, public,
sustained and radical merely arbitrary descriptors I use to make my work on feminist
activism intelligible. I certainly consider them thus myself. The categories constantly
cross over and clash, in life and in my theorising. I hope to show in the following pages
that the conflict, contradictions and confusion encountered when we discuss feminist
activism are not necessarily the grounds for a wholesale rejection of any definition of
feminist activism. Rather, I constitute these difficulties as something positive –
something that might actually allow us to conceive of the term ‘feminist activism’ in a
more productive way than is common.

Collective Counts

I recall a time when I felt utterly alone in all the questions I had. Nothing made
any sense. I could not understand why I had no money and no dignity – why I lacked
respect as surely as I lacked my own property. People spoke to me as through a murky
fog. Their words came muffled and I could hardly see their faces. The men all blurred
into one man – impenetrable, stern, contemptuous, paternal.

During that time, I met a group of women who wanted to talk with me about the
questions I had. What a revelation – some of our questions were the same! The hard
isolation started to thaw. We named the problem that someone had once said, “Had no name.”
We talked relentlessly and even developed some theories to explain the injustice. Sometimes we argued, and sometimes we got jealous, but several of our number spoke of female misogyny and how it serves the patriarchy. We all understood such words by now, so we took the hint and put our differences aside. There was no time for anything but consensus: we had work to do. Some of the women had really big ideas: communal living, women’s centres, crisis refuges, and more. Ideas by, for and about women. These things took organization, time, money, and numbers.

What skills we were able to share! I learnt to fix my car, to fight off an attack, and to verbalize my anger. I taught other women to grow vegetables and design banners and posters. How we laughed and how we enjoyed each other. I had done those things before, but they had always seemed like work. Now my life was fun, vital, and meaningful. The other women appreciated me for my contributions. They encouraged me in my learning. I felt myself metamorphosing as though from an apparition into a reality, from a wood-and-strings Pinocchio into flesh and blood.

Like a race memory, like ‘Woman’ was a category I might wear with patriotic pride, I felt the words of women vibrating through me with their rich history during storytelling sessions. These were real stories of survival and change – not the stories of housekeeping magazines, which only taught us how to keep our husbands. Sometimes I wished we had elders there with us, as though we were nuns, for instance, with a mother superior. In a convent, “[y]ou had older women who were mentors. You did not have to invent everything as you went along. With feminism, none of the structure is there.” But it felt okay – comforting – just having the network of women around me. I felt safe, perhaps for the first time since I knew I was a girl.

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Foundations of Collectivism in Feminist Activism

Collectivism, in feminist activism, manifests in groups of women doing feminism together: consciousness raising groups, book clubs, lesbian groups, campaign groups, International Women’s Day breakfasts, rallies, storytelling groups, Reclaim the Night Marches, women’s refuge groups, and so on. What lies behind collectivism in feminist activism is the idea of power in numbers: ‘united we stand, divided we fall.’ Indeed, numbers is one of the major things that women have going for us in the feminist movement: after all, we do make up at least 50% of the world population. The most obvious referent for the power-in-numbers mentality is that of war – the idea of amassing an enormous army in order to win a battle or revolution. We often speak of feminism as a ‘revolution’ and, tellingly, the words of feminism are often war-related: struggle, fight, oppression, battle, etc.6 Thus the representation of the way the human race has effected change is a history of numbers – not a series of little revolutions or minimal changes, spanning hundreds of years – but dramatic uprisings (overthrowing governments, colonizing new lands, resisting oppression), accompanied by significant ‘manpower,’ and often over relatively short periods of time. It is logical to assume that we are to bring about the feminist revolution in the same way. The concept of The Revolution erupts repeatedly throughout discussion of feminist activism, and I discuss this monolithic representation of change in more detail at the end of this chapter.

The other idea, often tacit, behind women’s collectivism, invokes the theory of female community. Female community draws on notions (both real and, I’m sure, sometimes imagined) of specifically ‘female’ traditions, such as prehistoric gatherer roles (that is, groups of women working together to gather and prepare food), storytelling and oral history, localized homemaking communities of women, shared

6 I discuss more metaphors of war – this time in feminist theory – in Chapter 4.
tasks like communal childcare and, of course, women’s ‘skill’ as communicators.\(^7\)

Whilst some might counter that this representation of collectivism posits a mythical essence of femaleness, theorists like Elshtain celebrate instead of problematising this essentialism, explaining that:

> Rather than denying women the meaning their traditional world provided, even under conditions of male domination, feminists should move to challenge a society that downgrades female-created and -sustained values.\(^8\)

Furthermore, women often seem to prefer the premise of egalitarian, non-hierarchical feminist collectivism, to the structures we are used to seeing in groups run by men (church committees, parliament, etc). Feminists often reject the notions of transcendent authority and individual glory, preferring to work collectively in a way that “gives value to each woman, allowing her a voice, yet making all members collectively responsible for action.”\(^9\) Thus some feminists consider that collective models sit well both with women and with feminism.

**Conundrums of Feminist ‘Community’\(^10\)**

There is much in feminist activism that works when we do it collectively. As Brownmiller puts it:

> …when such a coming-together [that is, second-wave feminist activism] takes place, when the vision is clear and the sisterhood is powerful, mountains are moved and the human landscape is changed forever.\(^11\)

However, it is increasingly rare that such ‘coming-togethers’ occur, and this can be at least partly explained by the mythical and idealist status of female community as a manifestation of feminist collectivism. Weiss reminds us that communities “can have

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\(^10\) There is frequent slippage between the ideas of collectivism and feminist community in feminist writings on the topic. In this section, I use the term ‘community’ to describe a manifestation of collectivism.

troubling origins and devastating consequences,” and describes, as an instance of problematic origins, society’s division into communities (for example, gay communities and Black communities) as a result of the exclusion by the dominant group.12 “Such forces as sexism and homophobia,” says Weiss, “…not only often create distinct communities…but also establish relations that pervade and structure all communities.”13 The basis of the family as an origin of an idealized community is also a difficult one: after all, the family is not always a safe place in which values of intellectual freedom and empowerment are encouraged.14 In fact, the family can be one of the most oppressive and conservative models for connecting with others, wherein certain members of the family ‘community’ fail to protect others from violence and abuse, or (consciously or unconsciously) curtail their potential.

One of Weiss’ “devastating consequences” of collectivism includes the condemnation of individual difference and ‘unfeminist’ choices. Feminists recount situations in which certain women have been excluded from collectives or alienated in group situations because they have demonstrated dissent in the face of the stringent expectations of other feminists in the group/collective.15 Rita Mae Brown recalls her time in the Furies Collective, in which everything was shared and time alone was considered suspicious: “Charlotte Bunch and I were forever suspect because we spent so much time at our desks.”16 Daphne Patai describes similar suspicion or “ideological policing” in more recent times:

I have seen…examples of intolerance among my students – eyes rolled to ceiling in exaggerated disapproval of a classmate’s reference to her “boyfriend”; heated criticisms by young women in sturdy boots and pants of the “conventional” apparel of

other women in the class; an urgent need to ferret out examples of latent unfeminist tendencies.\textsuperscript{17}

These instances undermine the idea that ‘female’ qualities such as supportive nurturance and sharing lend themselves to a ‘natural’ collectivism among women and/or feminists. Yet another difficult moment in the conceptualization of community as ideal is evident in the reactionary politics of non-feminist communitarians.\textsuperscript{18} Weiss identifies tendencies among communitarian politics that:

\begin{quote}
…define women out of certain communities, downplay the negative effects of women’s domestication, exclude women in conceptions and calculations of the “common” good, refuse to address sexual differentiation and inequality as obstacles to personal and political bonds, and advocate patriarchal principles, values and structures to guide their communities.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Superficially similar ideals, then, cannot always form a basis for positive alliances between political groups such as feminists and communitarians – and feminists need therefore to be aware of regressive goals associated with the supposedly progressive ideal of community.

Perhaps experiences and analyses like these augured the dismantling of the ideal of female/feminist community as the ‘problem’ of differences between women arose at the end of the second wave.\textsuperscript{20} These experiences pointed to the pressure within collectivism to conform (whether to patriarchal or feminist norms) and gave rise to the suggestion that collectivism was an unsuitable model under which feminists, with all their racial, political, sexual and other differences, might unite. The reality check of difference splintered the ‘sisterhood.’ In fact, familial metaphors such as sisterhood have become increasingly problematic for feminists. Lugones notes that:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{18} Communitarianism is a (usually) conservative movement mainly located in the US to reclaim the lost sense of community and family in an isolated and urbanised postmodern era. See Weiss. “Feminism and Communitarianism.”
\textsuperscript{19} Weiss. “Feminism and Communitarianism.” 161.
\textsuperscript{20} I discuss the effects of the notion of differences among women on feminist theory in Chapter 4.
\end{quote}
...sisterhood is an odd model for white/Anglo-American women to adopt... [because]
the white/Anglo-American family has not been known... as an extended kinship
network of support but as a troubled and unstable relation among a few individuals.\textsuperscript{21}

Lugones goes on to recommend the model of friendship as a more appropriate basis for
female community because it allows for a greater plurality and working with
differences instead of attempting to erase these. Lugones explains:

\begin{quote}
Because I think a commitment to perceptual changes is central to the possibility of
bonding across differences and the commitment is part of friendship, I think that
friendship is a good concept to start the radical theoretical and practical reconstruction of
the relations among women.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Whatever the solution, the point is that this “radical theoretical and practical
reconstruction of the relations among women” has become necessary. Collectivism
finds itself fraught with difficulties. However, feminists such as Leila Rupp claim that
collectivism makes “it possible for feminists to maintain their commitment in the
hostile environment.”\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps claims like these rest on the fact that many feminists
see the alternative to collectivism as self-interested individualism, upon which there is
no viable way to base effective feminist activism.

\textit{The Maligning of Individualism}

Women who practice or have practiced collective feminist activism tend to view
those who don’t with dismay, suggesting that the lack of collective work has lead to a
loss of impetus or identity for feminism. Susan Brownmiller claims that the trend away
from organised, “united” feminism is indicative of a “waning”\textsuperscript{24} and unhealthy feminist
movement.\textsuperscript{25} Anne Summers sees the need to write a letter to younger women who do
not practice collective activism to encourage these women to “reach out for the torch”

\textsuperscript{21} Lugones, Maria C. in collaboration with Pat Alake Rosezelle. “Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist
\textsuperscript{22} Lugones. 141.
\textsuperscript{23} Rupp, Leila J. “The Women’s Community in the National Women’s Party, 1945 to the 1960s.” \textit{Signs}
\textsuperscript{24} Brownmiller. 328.
\textsuperscript{25} This backlash manifests strongly in second-wave feminists’ critiques of third-wave feminism. Chapter
6 contains more on this generational conflict.
of feminism, which has not yet been “passed.”26 And Audre Lorde says: “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression.”27 These are just a few of the warnings against the dangers of abandoning collective forms of feminism, and many implied vilifications of individual forms of feminist activism as pointless, naïve and unsafe. Nor are these confined to the supposedly motherly chidings of second-wave feminists.

Whilst the younger feminists from the Wench Radio Collective are in general more open to individualist forms of activism, some of the members privilege collective over individual activism: “I especially admire people who struggle against a systemic oppression that they do not personally experience,”28 says one. “A general activist skill I strive for is commitment…to projects and collective organizations,”29 says another, implying that collectivism is something to be achieved, as opposed to individual activism, which simply ‘happens.’

There is no one definition of individualist feminism itself, but feminists generally use the term to refer to individual women making personal and private changes to their lives. Kramarae and Treichler associate individualism with an “isolated, competitive individual which would mitigate against women coalescing together.”30 ‘DIY’ (Do-it-Yourself) feminists,31 on the other hand, disavow the need to improve the collective lives of women in order to be a feminist, and contend that living their own lives as feminists is sufficient. Some members of the Wench Collective, whilst obviously in a feminist collective and taking group feminist action in the form of presenting feminist material on radio, describe feminist activism in individualist terms.

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29 The Wench Collective. 71.
“My activism is about...justice and compassion in the way I treat people immediately around me,”32 “Even day to day survival can be a form of resistance,”33 and “Activism is about struggling everyday to carve out a safe space for yourself,”34 claim these feminists. However, individualist feminism is not always associated with the lofty principles of compassion, justice and safety. In fact, some feminists consider individual forms of activism selfish or based on a self-interested liberal model of individuality.35 The question of moral integrity often hangs over individualist feminists’ heads – a question about whether these women have forgotten the broader scale of women’s oppression, particularly in non-Western nations. In short, this question acts as a reminder that there is a lot of activism that still needs to be done.

Another of the main complaints feminists have made about individualist feminism is that it pays no heed to structural inequality, and therefore cannot go towards genuinely improving women’s lot. This perception suggests that improving one’s life through personal (feminist) choices ignores sexist structures that (a) put women in the position where they must make certain choices (for example, stay at home parenting or daycare) and (b) withhold from some women the freedom to make even these restricted choices. Sandra Friedan suggests that resistance to collective feminism is not just caused by, but can even result in, unawareness of structural sexism:

The recognition of large social structures is rarely achieved in the individual instance: one woman, examining only her own life, can scarcely know that her arguments with prevailing values are echoed in other households. Rather, such recognition occurs as a function of sharing experiences and perceptions...36

In making this complaint, feminists invoke the old standby of false versus raised or

32 The Wench Collective. 69.
33 The Wench Collective. 70.
34 The Wench Collective. 70.
35 Jean Bethke Elshtain, for example. (See: “Feminism, Family and Community.”)
critical consciousness.\textsuperscript{37} Chilla Bulbeck, discussing the feminism of her students in an introductory gender studies course, implies that individualist feminism is an intellectual stepping-stone towards a more genuine feminist understanding:

While she [the student] noted the effects of socialization in survey 1 (through schooling and religion), by survey 2 she discussed the limitations on women’s options because of ‘gender judgment and training,’ for example, the belief that women leave work ‘to have babies.’ \textit{She had still not produced an understanding} of patterned social inequalities based on gender, class, and ethnicity.\textsuperscript{38} [My emphasis]

Discussing feminist issues using the framework of individual choice is something that comes \textit{before} an awareness of “patterned social inequalities.” Jan Clausen also finds the individualist feminism often associated with the younger generation disturbing and inadequate: “it has also been discomfiting to encounter a younger generation of feminists who have come to feminism in a university setting and have had little or no exposure to the realities of attempting to join other people to effect social change.”\textsuperscript{39}

Bulbeck’s and Clausen’s assessments of individualist feminists suggest that these women don’t yet ‘get’\textsuperscript{40} what it is in gender inequality that allows it to get repeated from generation to generation, sometimes with hardly any change at all. On the other hand, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise object to the primacy of purely structural explanations:

These enable people to hide in collectivisms, in the sense that they can avoid taking responsibility for their own lives and actions. The ‘revolution’ they envisage is a revolution of structures – economies, polities. These are seen as lying outside of everyday life, in the sense that they are conceptualized as self-perpetuating and so outside of ordinary human agency.\textsuperscript{41}

Stanley and Wise’s comment points out a fact that is often missed in the tension between collective and individualist activism: namely, that community and individualism are not just related, but intertwined. Understanding their relationship can

\textsuperscript{37} See the Introduction to this thesis for a full explanation of false consciousness.
\textsuperscript{40} For more discussion of the ‘false consciousness’ of younger feminists, and how to remedy this, see the Women’s Studies List File Collection’s page on “Teaching Students to ‘Get It.’” \textit{Women’s Studies List File Collection}. 26 May 2005. <http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/getit.html>
allow us to prevent some of the exclusion that occurs as a result of rigidly opposing these terms.

*Beyond the ‘Collective vs. Individual’ Framework*

Penny Weiss, taking the term ‘commitment’ as a synonym for collective activism, reminds us that we “need not accept individualism and commitment as an either/or proposition.” It need not be collective vs. individual forms of activism; structural vs. personal understandings of inequality; or macro- vs. micro-politics. As I have started to show, the very presence of these binary oppositions in perceptions of activism works to prevent certain women from identifying themselves or others as feminist activists. However, if we begin to find more flexible, less baggage-laden terms, such as ‘support’ and ‘solidarity,’ to frame discussions of feminist activism, we can discover ways to overcome the mindset that collective and individual practices count or do not count as feminist activism. Activism in general, whether collective or individual, can be seen as an expression of solidarity with other feminists; a show of support for feminist goals. One way to begin using a more flexible framework is to look at the potential of the slogan ‘the personal is political’ to shift some of the boundaries around feminist activism.

‘The personal is political’ is a feminist adage that feminists still teach (although rather more critically and contextually) in Women’s Studies courses today. Interestingly, when we say the personal is political, we are generally referring only to women’s oppression. We hardly ever imagine that the personal is political when it comes to feminist resistance. So, we can easily identify a husband’s laziness when it comes to doing the housework as a moment of political oppression based on ideas of male/female socialization, societal patterns of who does the housework, and theories of women’s unpaid labour. However, we have more trouble identifying the wife’s refusal

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42 Weiss. 17.
to do her husband’s share of housework, or explaining to him that she does the
equivalent of his paid work in childrearing, as a form of feminist activism. We are more
likely to require a campaign of education on gender differentials in paid and unpaid
work before we call it ‘feminist activism.’

However, it is more useful (and, I would argue, more realistic) to acknowledge
that, while sexism is widespread, repetitive and institutionalized – that is, structural and
patterned – it can and does manifest in personal, trivial and surprising ways. And,
therefore, personal, trivial and surprising ways of resisting do, in the end, count in the
fight against structural and patterned political oppression. This logic requires us
continually to widen our perception of activism to include new, unusual, and even
unsuccessful forms of resistance. Essentially, I am suggesting that ‘individualism’ is a
kind of myth. We are individuals, but not hermits, and we are created and continually
influenced by larger patterns of sexism and resistance. Individualist feminist activism
is, more often than not, about doing what we have learned from feminist communities
in our lives. By the same token, collectivism is another myth: we are individuals within
collectives or communities, bringing our own widely disparate experiences and motives
to any collective practices we might engage in. Nor do we stop doing feminism when
we leave the collective’s headquarters and go home. That individualism and
collectivism are myths does not make them any less real for feminist activism. But the
trick is to accept feminist and activist validity for both.

Public Counts

Feminist Publicity

Fatima Mechtab, of the Wench Collective, describes activism as:

Taking my personal beliefs into a public forum and acting out my wishes for change
through speech or physical action (e.g., by marching). Being seen and heard among
others who share a similar ideology.43

43 The Wench Collective. 69.
Whilst we may have to account for a cultural difference that makes public feminist activism more necessary in Mechtab’s case, it is important to note that her view is not an isolated one, even in the Western world. In fact, being “seen and heard” is a mainstay of feminist activism and has been for many years. Public activism of the kind Mechtab describes has the vital roles of bringing feminism into the world, reminding politicians and others in positions of power that feminism is a real presence, and spreading feminist messages to a broader audience. Public activism also has a certain impressive quality that witnesses must respect: it demonstrates the commitment, passion and power of women committed to feminist ideology.

The negative side of a representation of feminist activism as necessarily public is that it can create the sense that women who don’t do feminism publicly aren’t really doing feminism. Kerreen Reiger’s article on the activities of mothers’ groups in Australia provides an example of this exclusion. Whilst many feminists might consider such groups ‘non-feminist’ or even reactionary and conformist, Reiger tells us that the:

…activists in this mothers’ movement seemingly did not see themselves as anti-feminist, but rather as following other goals and rectifying the dominant feminist emphasis on achievement in the public sphere.45 [My emphasis]

Clearly, certain women perceive feminist activism as something that necessitates a public declaration or demonstration of one’s feminism. My concern is that when public activity is a criterion for feminist activism, then more private feminist practices are left out in the cold (or, in this case, ‘left in’ private spaces). The perception of distinct public and private spheres has long been of importance to feminists.46 In discussions of these spheres, however, the unstable distinction between the two, as well as the

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44 Mechtab is a member of the Wench Radio Collective in Canada, but her words may well be legitimately based on the experiences associated with a non-Canadian ethnic background.
problematic valorisation of public over private or vice versa, are recurring themes. In other words, just as the distinction between public and private spheres is never simple or clear-cut, the boundary between public and private activism needs closer interrogation than feminists generally give it.

Public activism itself does not always have ideal results:

A: It’s a women’s lib demonstration we’re going to. Try to get some good shots of the crowd, especially if they look angry, and one or two close ups of the speakers.
B: What’s the angle?
A: Ah, y’know, the usual. Country going to rack and ruin, women abandoning their family lives, and so on.
B: Right. What’s the protest about?
B: A big protest like this, over one billboard?
A: Naw, it’s about women’s bodies, you know, women as sex objects and all. The billboard is just the news focus.
B: Bet ya there’s no sex objects at this thing!
A: Earnest types, the lot of them. You should see some of the leaders.
B: I thought they weren’t supposed to have leaders. Anti-hierarchy, and all that.
A: Well, every revolution’s got to have its stars. How else do you inspire the rabble? Look at Communism. In every two-bit hovel of a commune, there’s some bugger with a bit of charisma making the rousing speeches and running the show. More often than not, it’s the leaders that get the publicity.
B: Yeah, bad publicity, mostly.

A: No such thing as bad publicity, mate. If you can just get your face in the papers, and the words ‘Women’s Lib’ or ‘Feminism,’ then you’re a happening thing. You’re current; you’re going places, even if not everybody likes it. And, what’s more, you get women thinking. And that’s what started them going in the first place. You can be sure that every time we put these birds in the news, some woman clicks to it and says, ‘yeah, that makes sense.’

B: You’re right there. There was this woman I heard about. Happy as Larry, she seemed, looking after the house, taking care of the kids. All the while, she’s hiding that book in her closet – that one by Germaine Greer. Reading it while hubby was at work.48 I’ll wager she wouldn’t have had a clue the book existed if it wasn’t for the media creating all that hoo-hah over it.

A: Take a left here – it’s that building on the right.

B: Ay, there’s no one there.

A: We must have missed the damn thing. Gawd, the boss’ll have us strung up.

B: There must be something left to take a snap of.

A: Nah, not unless we stage something.

B: Let’s burn a book or something. Burn a “Victoria’s Secret” catalogue.

A: I’ve got it! Let’s burn a brassiere, mate.

B: What?

A: You know, an instrument of woman’s oppression and all that.

B: I get ya. Right-ho.

In fact, the story goes that, in 1968, a number of women turned up to protest at the Miss America Pageant. A couple of them “tossed some padded brassieres in a

A journalist seized on the image, erroneously reporting the feminist burning of bras. Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women*, claims that she can find “scant evidence” of bra-burnings in the name of feminism. Lemisch and Weisstein add that:

> Subsequent to the development of this nomenclature ['bra-burner'], some public bra-burnings may have occurred, in imitation of the term. If so, they were at best very infrequent.

This story illustrates what is possibly the major downside to public activism: that is, media representatives who distort representations of feminism, stage stunts, and stereotype feminists. Of course, there is also the fact that certain feminists (such as Camille Paglia) tend to make outrageous statements in the name of feminism – statements that are not representative of most feminists’ views. However, what is ‘outrageous’ and what is a truly feminist belief are relative terms, and it is best not to dwell too much on the feminists who make claims for feminism that go against one’s own principles (and of course I include myself within the group of feminists who might be considered outrageous or truly feminist by different readers). Indeed, I am not in the least interested in making a case for the ‘negative’ results of public activism here.

Rather, I wish to examine the usefulness of ‘public’ as a criterion for feminist activism, and consider reasons why it might be constructive to broaden this conception of feminist activism.

**Inner Conflicts of Public Activism**

I will start with a brief account of the complicated distinction between the public and private spheres and how this has been dealt with in feminism. Historically, the public sphere was taken to mean the world of economics, politics and law (the man’s world of work), while the private sphere meant the domestic (the woman’s world of children and the home). These separate spheres were constructed as the natural order and hence men were seen as the ‘natural’ decision makers and legal actors, and women as the ‘natural’ caregivers of the home and children. However, as I have argued in previous papers, the binary division of the public and private spheres is a social construction that is precluded by the experiences of women who work outside the home, and who have also recently been engaged in public activism. Women have traditionally been confined to the private sphere, and have therefore been forced to take action in the public sphere to address issues related to the private sphere. This has created an inherent conflict between the two spheres, and has also contributed to the distortion of the meaning of feminism.

Footnotes:


50 Faludi. 99.


52 See Bibliography for a full citation of some of Paglia’s work.
of the home). Firstly and most obviously, these spheres are not stable entities. Marxist\textsuperscript{53} and, later, Foucauldian\textsuperscript{54} understandings of economics, politics, sexuality, law and the domestic have informed us that these are intertwined: local, national and global economics affect and are affected by supposedly domestic concerns such as the sexual division of labour, unpaid labour and undeclared paid labour; politics (the negotiation of power) happens everywhere, including within the home; what happens at home can become publicly political; law gives us ‘permission’ to carry out certain ‘private’ activities; and what we do in the domestic sphere is also subject to the law. However, specifically feminist analyses of the spheres, such as that by Iris Marion Young\textsuperscript{55} and Susan Baker and Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes,\textsuperscript{56} suggest that women do not just traditionally belong in the private sphere (and men in the public sphere), but that marginalised groups such as women, Blacks, homosexuals, etc. actually constitute the private sphere – they are the private sphere, and thus cannot be free of it.

Which brings me to a more recent question in feminist history: should women actually want to be free of the private sphere? What is so wonderful about the public sphere, and so degrading about the private sphere, that feminists should strive for one and renounce the other? The valorisation of the public sphere as ‘the place to be’ for women was most common in early (first-wave) feminist thought, but Betty Friedan was even encouraging women to get out of the kitchen and to find more “meaningful work” in 1981.\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, women were giving the public sphere primacy as the zone in which they might make truly effective changes. Janice Raymond describes the way such traditional idealism assesses the political value of an action:

The criteria for political weight and worth, as defined by men, often amount to the criteria for manhood – dramatic self- and group assertion, daring deeds, and open and rebellious confrontation with the state. What is granted the status of ‘political’ is frequently measured by the old manly heroic ethic.  

Around the same time that Betty Friedan was suggesting that women exit the private sphere, a reversal of that sentiment became evident in the work of feminists such as Jean Bethke Elshtain. Elshtain depicts a private sphere that is a location of “the deepest and most resonant ties,” suggesting that the denigration of the domestic/the private is yet another way of devaluing women and their traditional activities. The implication is that the conventional formulation of an esteemed public and devalued private sphere needs to be interrogated within feminist thought.

In fact, feminists often attempt to disrupt and reject ‘masculine’ structures, relying on this resistance to define their feminist ideologies. For instance, certain French feminist writers disrupt ‘masculine’ ways of using language, and Sandra Harding and others have produced work on ‘standpoint epistemology’ (or experience-based knowledge) which questions traditional, masculine-identified empirical or ‘objective’ approaches to research. In addition to disrupting ‘masculine’ theory forms, many feminists reject ‘masculine’ ways of running organizations that value individualism and hierarchy (as discussed earlier), and work on the principle of a theory/practice divide. For such women, the very idea of unreflectively valorising the public over the private sphere, or using what we might regard as a ‘masculine’ framework to generate feminist activism, must be distasteful to say the least.

Certain feminists’ elevation to celebrity status (in the worlds of both theory and activism) creates a similar conflict of interests for feminism when feminist activists (or theorists) locate themselves in the ‘masculine’ realm of the public. Stanley and Wise criticise the elevation and adulation of “theory stars”\(^\text{64}\) in their article “But the Empress has No Clothes!”; however, Andrea Petö argues that these theory stars actually hold an important place in emerging feminist theory and practice in Eastern European countries such as the former Yugoslavia.\(^\text{65}\) Jennifer Wicke also discusses the problematic nature of feminist celebrity, making such points as:

The danger of [Catharine] MacKinnon’s position, and it is astonishingly dangerous, is that it is celebrity worship disguised as a purgative hatred of celebrity culture.\(^\text{66}\)

Feminist activism shares just this kind of relationship with the public sphere, criticizing it whilst using it; straining against it whilst clamouring to fill it with feminist presence. However, feminists consistently deflect the problematic fact that they are using ‘masculine’ structures to produce and perform feminist messages, and fail to talk about the irony of enforcing this criterion for feminist activism.

*Reclaiming Both Public and Private Activism for Feminism*

In light of this ‘double standard’, it is fitting that the next question to ask about public feminist activism is: is the use of traditional or ‘masculine’ strategies for the purpose of making feminism a majority concern actually a problem? I would say it’s certainly not a problem; on the contrary, it is practical, realistic and effective. As I have shown, the ‘public’ criterion for feminist activism does not always fit with feminist ideals the way feminists want it to. When deploying a conventional conceptualisation of feminist activism, there is no way to resolve this issue: we must continue to do feminist activism publicly, and put aside the fact that we are making use of ‘masculine’

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frameworks to do feminism, no matter how uneasy this makes us. However, if we are willing to reflect on this contradiction, then I think we can accept the notion that public feminist activism is “meeting the world on its own turf,” but not meeting the world “on its own terms.”

Reflecting on the contradictions of public feminist activism should not lead to the rejection of public forms of activism; rather it should foster fruitful discussion on the functions and effects of restrictive criteria in conceptualizing feminist activism.

After all, the idea that feminist activism must be public before it is ‘real’ feminist activism excludes those women who do not have the opportunity, motivation or urge to do feminist activism publicly. I suggest that we commit more study time to exploring private practices as feminist activism. This concept will have its own contradictions, but if we have learnt nothing else from the discussion of collective and public feminist activism in the preceding pages, then we’ve learnt that contradictions are a part of feminism and don’t warrant new hierarchies, rejections and exclusions. Moreover, if we accept that finding a way to say or do something about women’s oppression (or resistance to that oppression) – even privately – is a valid form of feminist activism; if we accept that non-public feminist activism is a legitimate and useful form of feminist activism, then we are breaking down structures that protect ‘real’ feminist activism from less traditional forms. This ‘unboxing’ in and of itself constitutes a radical move that is more in-line with some of the most famous and significant feminist ideals. In Chapter 3, I give examples and engage in a deeper discussion of private practices as feminist activism.

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Sustained Counts

Clarifying ‘Sustained’

Before launching into a discussion of the feminist activism criterion I have called ‘sustained,’ I need to explain a little about why I chose this particular word to describe certain ways of doing feminist activism. ‘Collective,’ ‘public’ and ‘radical’ were easy to dig out of my original list, but I had more trouble putting a name to the activities that make up ‘sustained’ feminist activism. Many practices floated around the concept of a limited perception of feminist activism before I could identify what it was that linked them all: effort, organization, commitment, goals, time, quantity, quantifiability, development, journey, process, and so on. We tend to envisage all of these things as vital to genuine feminist activism. Ruthann Lee mentions “commitment” as something she strives for in her activism, whilst Rylee Crawford claims that activism “involves sacrifice and determination.” These feminists understand feminist activism as a sustained effort. Little, natural, fleeting resistances, undeveloped contingency actions – none of these make sense in such a conception of feminist activism, just as none of these fits under the heading of ‘sustained.’ Feminist activism does, however, survive and persist – and even revitalize – through these transitory moments.

‘Feminist’ as an Identity

To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir: one is not born, but rather becomes, a feminist. Participation in sustained feminist activism settles a woman into the identity of ‘feminist.’ It becomes as solid as an occupation: one can say, “I am a feminist” as surely as one can say “I am a carpenter” – provided one serves the apprenticeship and does the required work. As a carpenter proves her/his vocation with a resume of work

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68 The Wench Collective. 71.
69 The Wench Collective. 70.
experience and skills, a woman can prove her feminism by providing evidence of her extensive activist work. Sustained feminist activism works out as a solidification of an ideology, experiences and even training, into an identity. Identity politics (or basing one’s politics on the identity as a woman, Black, lesbian, feminist, etc.) is a bugbear of feminism as a movement that has often questioned notions of natural or given identities and subjective formation. So the difficulty that I confront in this discussion of sustained feminist activism is that of identity – how we formulate a feminist activist identity, maintain it, and protect it. In doing so, I also reflect on the fragility of identity and identity politics within activism.

One strong feminist metaphor that to this day has currency with many feminists is the “click moment.” This is supposed to be the moment when a woman ‘clicks’ to feminism because of some particularly oppressive situation in her life. The click metaphor is an important one for analysing feminist conceptions of identity formation. However, the feminist activist needs to go a step further from the click moment to a developed habit of activism. The formation of a feminist activist identity is where sustained feminist practices come into play. There are other types of feminist practice – sporadic, uncertain, new, occasional and conditional forms of feminist activism – that many feminists consider do not count as feminism at all (but which I argue should count). These things are usually considered part of the process of becoming an activist; by the time one is doing sustained, ‘real’ feminist activism, one is allowed to don the title (or graduate’s mortarboard, or witch’s cloak) of feminist activist.

The trouble with assuming that feminist identity is formed like this is that it doesn’t allow for that spiralling motion of feminist consciousness I described in the

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71 I also discuss feminist identity (in terms of identifying as a feminist theorist) in Chapter 4.
72 For example, Lynn Crosbie, ed. Click: Becoming Feminists. Toronto: MacFarlane, Walter & Ross, 1997.
Introduction to this thesis. Again, the rhetoric of false/feminist consciousness rears its head: one arrives at a consciousness of the need for action, and one sustains and feeds this consciousness through organised activism. Nor does this conception of feminist identity allow for the kind of in-and-out movement that accompanies any kind of political identification. It is possible, after all, to *do* feminism without *being* a feminist — it isn’t always necessary, honest, or even useful to settle into the identity of ‘feminist’ in order to do feminism. Does a racist necessarily speak, breathe and eat racism before we can name his/her actions as racist? Does s/he necessarily make a sustained effort towards racism to qualify for the term, joining the Ku Klux Klan, maintaining a white supremacist website, and getting a swastika tattoo? Of course not. In the same way, a woman need not join a collective, start a feminist book co-operative, or write hundreds of letters of complaint about sexist advertising, before we can call what she does ‘feminism.’ And yet we persist in expecting the kind of commitment to activism from women that allows (and occasionally forces) them to ‘be’ feminists.

*I wonder whether click moments and sustained feminist activism constitute effective ways to formulate feminist identity. This is not a new problem: Patai and Koertge devote an entire chapter of their book *Professing Feminism* to the discussion of the problems of identity politics.*

And Ien Ang says:

> Feminism must stop conceiving of itself as a nation, a ‘natural’ political destination for all women...it will have to develop a self-conscious politics of partiality, and imagine itself as a *limited* political home, which does not absorb difference within a pre-given and pre-defined space.

Although Ang’s comment is made in the context of a discussion of “white/Western

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feminism” and multicultural difference, her words describe the way in which feminism (“politics”) can be the central or meeting point for women. For me, feminist urges constitute feminist activism, rather than only a measurable, developed, ends-oriented spell of activity. Cathryn Bailey concedes that one factor for consideration when determining whether or not an act is ‘resistant’ is the doer’s “intention.” Diana Fuss also talks about it being “politics which grounds affinity” rather than vice versa – in other words, one can make a connection with other feminists that does not rely on shared history or experience (or, in this case, sustained feminist activism), but rather on the more general desire for the well-being of women that feminism is about. And just in case it’s not clear, I’m not implying in any way that it’s wrong to call oneself a feminist; on the contrary, it is very okay. I want to suggest that it’s pointless to label other women as ‘not feminist’ simply because they don’t meet criteria like sustained feminist activism, or take on a permanent identity as feminists.

So, if the woman who does sustained feminist activism has arrived and gained citizenship in Ang’s nation of feminism, how do we conceptualize the ‘tourists’ – those who visit and depart, those who may stay indefinitely but never attempt to claim permanent residency, and those who slip by customs, carrying all kinds of dodgy contraband into this illusory feminist nation? To identify women as feminists because they meet certain expectations (like sustained feminist activism) is to exclude these other women from identifying as feminists – and this is something that happens all the time. Says Belinda Rapps: “I don’t go out and make myself out to be a feminist; I just believe that I can do just as much as men.” She does feminism, but she does not necessarily settle into the identity of ‘feminist.’ Women who do not identify as feminists, Rapps goes on, “might feel that they agree with feminism, that they are a

77 Bailey. 149.
79 Rapps, Belinda. Personal interview. 7 August 2003.
feminist, but they just don’t know how to show it, and bring it out into the world. I mean they might really want to... But I think we need to acknowledge the possibility that women who do not know how to put their feminism out into the world, regardless of whether they want to or not, may not feel entitled to identify as feminists because they do not fit the criteria. Only when we accept that there are many different ways in which feminist identity comes about – and that this identity itself can be a delicate and transitory thing – can we free up some space for non-identity-politics-based activism within feminism.

**Radical Counts**

*A History and Semantics of Radicalism*

Just to be clear from the first moment, this section is not a discussion of ‘radical feminism’ *per se*. In fact, Rowland and Klein point out that radical feminism is “marginalized” by contemporary feminism, a point which is quite distinct from my argument that radicalism has currency as a criterion for feminist activism. I discuss representations of radical feminism as a ‘type’ of feminism in Chapter 6. In this section, I explore the meanings and tensions of radicalism *within* feminism. In her *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Humm claims that “second wave feminism first used radical to mean a more revolutionary social theory than the theories of the New Left out of which it had grown”; and Kathie Sarachild describes radical as being “interested in getting to the roots of the problems in society.” As you can see, radicalism itself is at least partly separate from the set of practices and theories associated with radical feminism. We tend to locate the very origins of feminism (and I’m talking about the

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80 Rapps, Belinda. Personal interview. 7 August 2003.
feminist waves here: first-wave, second-wave, etc) in other radical political movements. Rebecca Ellis reminds us that many first-wave feminists were “involved in revolutionary struggles like the Russian revolution” and suggests that “other radical mass movements such as the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement” inspired second-wave feminism.\textsuperscript{84} Whether or not you agree that feminism can be traced to these co-existent revolutions, most histories of feminism make these connections with other radical movements. In other words, we commonly ground feminism in radicalism: we give feminism the historical context of radical political activity and thought. It’s no wonder that radicalism is a defining criterion of feminist activism, when we conceive of feminism itself as a movement born in, and built on, radicalism.

The problem is knowing exactly what defines a movement or practice as radical. As Cathryn Bailey explains:

What counts as resistance [or radicalism] is, to some extent, a relative matter. For example, in a traditionally heterosexually oriented club, a woman’s appearance in a very short skirt, high heels, and dramatic makeup might be easy to dismiss as patriarchy-implicated. In the context of a lesbian bar where the prevailing aesthetic is quite different, such a woman’s presence might have a different meaning. It is reasonable in the second context to consider this woman’s costume to be a sign of resistance.\textsuperscript{85}

In general, we take ‘radical’ to mean anything that disturbs the status quo. The dictionary meaning of ‘radical’ is “of or from or going to or being the root, inherent, essential, fundamental, primary, thorough.”\textsuperscript{86} In other words, the origins of the word have to do with grassroots: radical changes are changes to the very foundations of a thing. But what exactly does ‘radical’ mean when we use the term to talk about a radical act? The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought comes closer, defining

\textsuperscript{85} Bailey. 148-9.
radicalism as a “tendency to press political views and actions towards an extreme.”

A combination of these dictionary and lay-definitions does well as a descriptor of what we generally mean when we say the word radical, and enables me to claim that, in common parlance, radicalism describes an extreme view or act that goes toward changing the very root of life/society/politics as we know it.

I associate this definition of radicalism with a refusal to compromise with the current sexisms of ‘the system.’ Kathleen Barry evaluates radicalism in feminism in this way:

It is a fact of social/political movements that radicalism does not sustain a movement. For a movement to endure, its broad base and widespread influence must be assured. But radicalism is essential for the life of a movement, as it will bring to it the most uncompromising critique which assures us that the movement will not devolve to simple reform – that is, patchwork on an exploitative, corrupt and ruthless power structure.

Barry sets radicalism up in opposition to reform – an opposition that has been widely used in feminism. Reform, in this view, is simply a readjustment of the existing reality to accommodate a few feminist demands. Barry represents reform as a compromise of feminist goals, and worse – as a half-baked kind of feminism: a “patchwork.” By extension, radicalism is more developed, and somehow ‘purer.’ In her discussion of ‘upward mobility’ (that is, a compromised feminism), Janice Raymond unpicks this opposition:

...many women...succumb to the politics of victimism by regarding failure in the man’s world, or downward mobility, as the only ‘pure’ feminist politics. Such women mistake worldliness for assimilation to the world.

Yet, we constantly find feminists claiming that: “its own institutionalization has made women’s studies less transformative and radical...to avoid co-option requires constant

90 Raymond. 183.
vigilance;” discussing the “establishment’s” attempt to make feminism into “lifestyle and personal aggrandizement, devoid of political impact;” and even warning that:

Within this institutionalization, though, lies a danger. Foremost among the problems is the likelihood that the original conceptions of culture studies [for instance, the feminist foundations of women’s studies] will lose their oppositional edge, become distorted, be absorbed, and die the subtle death that institutions can casually impose on dissent.

These claims give radicalism currency as the driving force in feminist politics (not just a driving force – which I would not dispute – but the driving force).

The Importance of Radicalism

Notable radical acts (rejections of ‘the system’) for feminists include: the disavowal of elite theory and intellectualism; feminist mischief with language (for instance, Mary Daly’s reclaiming of words like ‘hag’ and ‘crone’ for positive feminist use); the choice to create separate women’s communities (known as ‘radical separatism’); and the rejection of the Western enlightenment ideal of ‘reason,’ often evidenced by feminist theorising through art, emotional and fictive writing, and so on. The idea behind such radical feminist acts is that the oppression of women is at the root of all traditional structures in Western society: institutions, cultural values, the law, language, sciences and the economy. These radical acts disrupt the very foundations of sexism by turning existing structures on their heads. Putting aside discussion of the individual value of particular radical acts and perspectives (including the fact that such radical ideas and acts within feminism have awesome innovative power in the worlds of theory and activism), radicalism achieves two additional interesting outcomes for feminist activism. One is the very practical outcome of publicity (radicalism draws

attention); the other is inspiration. Radical acts carry with them a kind of dramatic beauty that can hardly fail to stir the imaginations of women.

However, limiting feminist activism exclusively to radical practices can awaken in women a sense of inadequacy (which may even emerge as a superiority complex). The expectation that every feminist, regardless of her situation, hammers constantly at the walls of patriarchy is both demoralizing and unfair. Sometimes, a woman’s most inspiring feminist moments are far from radical. In fact, the most enriching experiences I’ve had with feminism have been decidedly non-radical: the private booze-ups with my friends, the intimate talks with my female relatives, the mischievous joy of personally and privately resisting sex rules, and the pleasure of kicking misogynist butt in my own life. Obviously, this is not the case for all feminists. 96 However, I think that to say that a feminism which negotiates the system – feminism that sometimes seems strangely complicit with the system – is not really feminism, does nothing for the movement. All feminism is complicit with the system at some level. In the end, we have to settle for this life, this language, and these people, no matter how much we baulk inwardly that ‘settling for.’ And, god forbid, some of us even learn to enjoy our negotiation of the system, and manage to like living here.

Disrupting Radicalism: Non-radical Feminism

Here, I wish to examine the way one particular form of non-radical feminism – ‘girlpower’ 97 – fits into the wider framework of what feminism is/isn’t. I will explore this idea in the form of a fabricated conversation with Catherine Driscoll, a feminist theorist who has studied the Spice Girls. 98

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96 Of course, these kinds of activities are only recently even available to women.
Conversation with Catherine Driscoll

Me: You’re studying girlpower as a form of feminist resistance? Are you trying to tell me you think the Spice Girls are a good thing?99

Catherine: Whether or not the Spice Girls are good, for girls or as music, is not a question that interests me here, except insofar as I want to know why this is an issue. Why do the Spice Girls need to be good for girls?100

Me: Well, because they spout all that stuff about girlpower. Women have doubts about whether it’s legitimate feminism or just marketing.

Catherine: You mean, can anything feminist be so prominently popular (even for a short time)?; can feminism be a mass-produced, globally distributed product?; and, can merchanised relations to girls be authentic?101

Me: Yes. I would have assumed that girlpower is totally co-opted – feminism so diluted it isn’t even feminism anymore.

Catherine: I want to address girl culture as a form of feminism as popular culture.102

Me: But some feminists say that feminism, once it’s popular, is no longer feminism. That feminism loses its radical edge and becomes co-opted as soon as it appears in a widespread medium like pop music.

Catherine: Yes. Some feminists see the Spice Girls as domesticating and subverting feminism, reducing it to a collection of empty slogans and a conventionally sexualized image. Ginger Spice recognizes that ‘a lot of people think [Girl Power] is just cheese,’ but argues that the principle is bigger than their reputation: ‘if we can give anyone a bit of motivation, make any girl just sit up and go, ‘I’m strong,’ then that beats any number...
one or meeting any star."103 As Susan Douglas says: "When adolescent girls flock to a
group, they are telling us plenty about how they experience the transition to
womanhood in a society in which boys are still very much on top…So while it’s easy
as pie to hold a group like the Spice Girls in contempt, we should be wary when music
embraced by preteen girls is ridiculed…The Spice Girls tell them that feminism is
necessary and fun. Hey, when I was 10 we had ‘I wanna be Bobby’s Girl.’ Crass
commercial calculation and all, the Spice Girls are a decided improvement."104

Me: So you see the Spice Girls as an opportunity to start talking about how feminism
manifests in girls who have less access to the more conventional forms of feminism,
including radical activism? Maybe some feminists are expecting too much in the way
of agency from certain groups of women?

Catherine: A reliance on claims to agency is a problematic foundation for feminist
politics. When agency is evaluated according to resistance it is inevitable that the
agency of some people or groups – the ones with least access to modes of cultural
production, for example – will seem less independent and less individual than others.105

My conversation with Driscoll highlights one of the reasons why it is counter-
productive to feminist goals to stake out feminist activism in a way that excludes non-
traditional forms of resistance. I would prefer that this part of my argument not be
mistaken for a discussion about intergenerational differences in styles of feminist
activism, despite the reference to a postmodern concept like ‘girlpower.’ As I’ve said,
the discussion on generations comes later in my thesis (Chapter 6). Rather, this
conversation is about ways that non-radical feminism disrupts the idea that feminist
activism is necessarily radical, and how dependent such an idea is on the assumption

105 Driscoll. 188.
that all women have access to opportunities (and the inclination) to act radically. I am not suggesting that we take girlpower out of its context as a contemporary phenomenon. Rather, I am using girlpower as an example to look more broadly at the effect such non-radical feminism has on women who understand feminist activism as something that must be radical, including older women. In other words, it is quite possible to draw parallels between girlpower and other marginalized forms of feminism. In this way, we can reflect on how we constitute feminist activism and the implications for women of various backgrounds, personalities, and feminist persuasions.

**Conclusion: the Limits of Feminist Activism**

Collective, public, sustained and radical as the only criteria for feminist activism fail to describe feminist activism adequately because adhering to such criteria means, firstly, that we must overlook their contradictions and, secondly, that we disregard (whether strategically or unintentionally) a whole host of activities that deserve acknowledgement as feminist activism. I have shown how the first of these two outcomes works in the preceding sections. When we break the criteria down into their contextual and semantic bases, it’s plain to see how terms like radical and public are altogether ill fitting. If public activities (traditionally done by men only) are the ones that we, as a society, value, then it is possible to see the attempt to push feminism publicly as *settling for* the current system of values. Radicalism, on the other hand, aims to *upset* and reconstruct the current system of values by making grassroots changes. Another example: sustained feminist activism implies a developed politics that can stand up to both critique and the passage of time. However, it is possible to see developed politics as co-opted and institutionalized – in other words, non-radical. Janice Raymond explores an instance of this conflict, explaining how, “women’s reactionary attitude towards thinking and theory has developed an anti-intellectualism
that values practice without theory.”\(^{106}\) Raymond continues:

However, any female or feminist action that lacks the complexity of thought often becomes rhetorical. Rhetorical action, like rhetorical words, is devoid of depth. Often, it may be a clever and colorful rhetoric whose power derives from its ability to assail our sensibilities rather than to arouse our thought. It is a kind of rhetoric that rushes at us with something like ‘Words are the absolute in horseshit.’\(^{107}\)

This is just one facet of radical feminist activism that doesn’t gel with the idea of sustained feminist activism. Finally, it is yet another interesting confusion of feminist goals and activist principles that the things many people consider ‘more activist’ (i.e. donning the traditionally male role of the ruthless corporate bigwig to break through the glass ceiling) can lead to results we consider ‘less feminist’ (i.e. careerism and individual gain). It is clear that the development and maintenance of the boundary lines between ‘real’ feminist activism and other, less conventional forms of feminist activism, doesn’t actually work for a number of women. The apparently seamless boundary of ‘real’ feminist activism is, in fact, fraught with inner conflict and double standards.

As for the second problem with limiting feminist activism (that is, ignoring and excluding the ‘other’ acts that I believe count as feminist activism), Narelle Wasley explains it in this statement:

I think [women’s reluctance to identify as feminists has] partly got to do with the whole radical feminist culture creating this distance between the average woman, the mainstream woman, between Jill Smith, and themselves. And they put themselves on this elitist kind of thing, and said, you know, unless you’re like this, you’re not a feminist. And women sort of think, well, I’m not that. I’m not a lesbian; I’m not a mechanic, or I’m not out protesting, and all that kind of thing, well, I can’t be a feminist. And they don’t think, well, I’m married, I’m living with someone who goes to work and comes home and cooks dinner, and I go to work, and we’re not married but we’ve got three kids, you know, and they go in childcare sometimes…and I mow the lawn. You know. Oh! Yeah, I’m a feminist – they don’t think that.\(^{108}\)

Wasley describes here the effect of limiting feminism by setting up stringent criteria for what counts as feminist activism: women lose faith in their own ability to do feminism.

\(^{106}\) Raymond. 216.
\(^{107}\) Raymond. 216.
\(^{108}\) Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
This limiting reduces women’s willingness to identify as feminists and feminist activists. If we accept that two main contemporary feminist goals are to (a) reach as many women as possible with the information that it is not okay to suffer for being a woman, and to (b) show understanding, respect and compassion where differences between women are concerned, then it becomes clear that by limiting what counts as feminist activism, we fail to achieve either of these goals. Firstly, limiting feminism creates the sense that a large number of women don’t cut the mustard as feminists and secondly, it fails to account for differences that might curtail a woman’s access to the standard or ‘legitimate’ feminist practices. Belinda Rapps reminds us that:

[There are] introverts and extroverts…[embracing a feminist identity depends on] your sense of wellbeing, and where you are in life, and your husband…it can scare people if you do say ‘I’m a feminist’…they might not be into conflict…They might feel that they agree with feminism, that they are a feminist, but they just don’t know how to show it, and bring it out into the world.109

Rapps associates the reluctance of certain women to identify as feminists with personality differences – something that we don’t like to talk about in feminist difference theory. However, this constitutes a valid and (I believe) convincing explanation for women’s hesitation when it comes to assuming the tightly-delineated identity of feminist activist.

The explanation of personality is just one obstacle to participating in feminist activism. Others include: lack of access to information about feminist activism; dependence on others for deciding or influencing the activities one takes part in; and lack of time. These obstacles (and I am sure there are others) may be related to cultural/ethnic background, age, class, family, economics, and social environment. Again, the fragile nature of identity is the issue: many women feel they cannot or do not want to take on an identity that rests on such tight guidelines and ‘high’ standards. Cathryn Bailey refers to the necessity of “external criteria” for defining practices as

feminist or not:

…otherwise, the fact that I believe myself to be waving in greeting would determine that that is what I would be doing even if my arm were actually anesthetized and hanging by my side.\textsuperscript{110}

These external criteria leave little room for a feminist activist identity that doesn’t conform, and so there is no way for women to identify comfortably as feminist activists on the grounds of individual, private, contingent or conservative forms of resistance.

Conceptualising the Revolution

Limiting feminist activism to ‘conventional’ forms of activism suggests that one person’s resistance cannot make a difference because women’s oppression is a mass oppression: only total overthrow of ‘the patriarchy’ will liberate women. In other words, any discussion of how feminist activism is being represented is necessarily also a discussion of how we understand ‘revolution.’ The conception feminists and non-feminists often deploy (if unconsciously) of The Revolution is that of a real and concrete, if slow-coming, or even undesirable, moment in time. Stanley and Wise claim that:

Personal change, small piecemeal change in everyday life, such analyses [that is, structural analyses] tell us, are irrelevant and useless. These are not the revolution. And they are worse than useless, because involvement in them distracts us from real revolutionary activities.\textsuperscript{111}

The ‘real revolutionary activities’ are the planned, massed, grand and heroic ones. I argue that this concept of The Revolution is not particularly useful. Firstly, it has been shown to be inaccurate: I think if The Revolution was going to happen, it probably would have happened by now, and sexism would have been completely eradicated.

Secondly, it dismisses the efficacy of smaller, slower, less totalistic changes, including feminist reform. As it stands, the concept of mass Revolution informs and influences the way we represent feminist activism. Therefore, if we could revise that lofty concept of The Revolution as a series of mini-revolutions, we might be on our way to

\textsuperscript{110} Bailey. 149.
\textsuperscript{111} Stanley and Wise. Breaking Out. 77.
developing a more flexible and inclusive definition of feminist activism.

What do we want from The Revolution? Revolutions are about change. Change happens in a number of different ways, including activism, individual decisions, discussion, reforms and legislation, reading and writing, and as cultural response to major events (such as natural disasters, holocausts, epidemics and wars). Most transformations to deeply embedded cultural ideologies (such as patriarchy, Christianity, rationalist philosophy, or homophobia, for example) happen slowly, with periods of strong activity and rapid change interspersed throughout snail’s-pace change over extended periods of time. As well as the ‘forward’ movement we tend to attribute to change, it is characterized by temporary returns to the original state, obstacles and setbacks. All of this means that it is possible to revise our totalistic tendencies when we conceptualize feminist change and The Revolution. Feminists might look toward the ‘immediate’ – intimate relationships, connections, conversation, the everyday – as well as at global, national and cultural structures of oppression. Afshan Ali says:

My activism is about justice, not just on the grand, lofty level of revolution, but about justice and compassion in the way I treat people immediately around me.\textsuperscript{112}

Afshan shows us that it is possible to deploy concepts like revolution, justice and activism in ways that do not draw on Revolution-speak: ways that resonate with events and people in our immediate lives.

Once we are looking at, and thinking about, change in a different way, then the path has cleared somewhat for an alternative understanding of activism – an understanding of activism as a process or, in Anne Orwin’s terms, a “continuum.”\textsuperscript{113}

Marlene LeGates describes process thus:

\textsuperscript{112} The Wench Collective. 69.
\textsuperscript{113} Orwin, Anne S. in Bart, et al. 265.
Ultimately, what makes activism worthwhile is not the chance of success but the process of struggle. It is the self-determination individuals achieve over their own lives and the supportive culture they create in league with other women or with men in a common fight.\textsuperscript{114}

Whilst I would not agree that the chance of success is an unimportant part of the struggle (really, it depends on how you imagine success – as making a real difference in a small way, or the complete overthrow of an oppressive patriarchy), I agree with what LeGates says about the process of struggle. The term ‘process’ suggests an ongoingness, a dailiness, that connects well with my ideas on feminist practice. The word ‘struggle’ does not, however, say exactly what I want it to say, as it implies something negative – a fight, a sense of being gagged and bound, a prolonged suffering. A process of activism is not necessarily a struggle, after all. Orwin’s continuum might be a more positive formulation of activism:

If the concept of activism is confined to the political arena, we exclude those who take action in other ways. But if activism means we do something, as opposed to thinking about it, then teachers of women’s studies are, by definition, activists … I see teaching as part of a continuum of activism that encompasses both political struggle and the smaller gestures that derive from acting on one’s beliefs.\textsuperscript{115}

While Orwin’s discussion is about including teaching in a concept of activism, the principle applies to my argument here: a continuum of activism allows for those acts of resistance that are neither collective nor public, sustained nor radical, as well as those that are. When we talk about feminist activism, as when we talk about any form of feminism, we must remain aware of our tendency to delineate an ‘is’ and an ‘is not’ of feminist practice. That tendency can do women more harm than good – in short, in our haste to disrupt the status quo, we should avoid unwitting complicity in the creation of a new one. In hopes of illustrating the points I have made in this chapter, I next move onto an exploration of some alternative practices of feminist activism.


\textsuperscript{115} Bart, et al. 265.
Chapter 3

A Day in the Feminist Life

*But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.*

— George Eliot, 1874

In this chapter I use the format of a personal diary to explore some of the ‘other’ activities I believe count as feminist activism. This chronicle exemplifies the organic spread of feminism into everyday life that I described earlier in this thesis. I present practices ranging from ordinary, daily routines to world-changing events in history – both of which, for various reasons, we tend to write off as ‘not-feminism.’ Interspersed throughout these practices are conversations with theorists and further analyses of the effects of a limited definition of feminist activism. This chapter stands as a way forward from the last chapter’s critique of a limited ‘feminist activism,’ as well as a testament to the uncontrollable multiplicity of behaviours, skills, activities and occurrences that figure as feminist activism in a more inclusive definition of the term.

The Everyday

What did I do that counts as feminism today? I lay like an unresponsive log in bed after being up with my daughter in the night, while my husband kissed me goodbye and left for work. I breastfed my toddler, even though people have started to ask me when I plan to wean. I encouraged my mum to phone her partner after they’d had a tiff and ask him a couple of practical housekeeping questions she needed to know the answer to, just to show him that her life goes on even when they fight. I abandoned the housework in favour of writing some of my thesis on the accessibility of feminism. I told another mum from playgroup not to beat herself up because her baby burnt herself on the oven door, and discussed the fact that we as mothers feel guilt constantly, even when we are aware of the whole idea of mother-guilt. I congratulated another friend on her unplanned pregnancy and tried to buoy her up, despite the fact that it messes up her

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1 This chapter takes its title from a webpage on *Thinkbomb: Against Feminist Sexism*, 10 November 2003. <http://www.users.bigpond.com/sarcasmo/femolife.html> The author of this site uses the title to show the dominance of dogmatic feminist ideology, whereas I appropriate it for a more positive use.

plans, knowing that she won’t consider termination. I solved a couple of computer
problems for members of the women’s volunteer organisation for which I tend the
website. And all of this before 11am!

These things are feminist activism. I could partially recuperate them into
official feminist activism by casting my activities as ‘rejecting oppressive gender
roles,’ ‘consciousness-raising,’ ‘therapeutic feminist counselling,’ ‘educating women in
new technologies,’ and so on. Only partially, because my activities were a bit too
individual, one-on-one, private and spontaneous to truly fit the feminist activism
mould. 3 But I do not want to recuperate them anyway. Trying to pass them off as ‘real’
feminist activism does not ring true for most of the things I did this morning. Instead,
what I’m claiming is that these acts count as feminism in their own right, even if they
do break some of the feminist activism rules. They count as feminism because they
involve resistance to women’s suffering (via an often haphazard and incomplete
mixture of screwing with roles and expectations, respecting and supporting other
women, strategising and problem solving, and radical practices). As I said in the
previous chapter, official feminist activism requires that activities be public, collective,
sustained and radical; however, I will now argue that individual, transient and
compromised feminist activities also count as feminist activism. Individual acts include
those things we do in private: solitary practices; internal decisions; unannounced or
undeclared rejections of sexism and misogyny; and one-on-one instances of support
and sharing information. Transient acts include those practices that are temporary,
spontaneous, immediate, incomplete or interrupted. Compromised acts include activism
that can be recuperated or appears institutionalised; unoriginal or non-radical practices;
activities that appear reliant on, or contingent to, other political campaigns; and

3 For examples of feminists’ who do include such forms of feminist practice within feminism, see the
authors in Kathy Bail’s (ed.) DIY Feminism. St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996; and The
69-74.
anything else that we write off as ‘suspect’ and ‘questionable’ because it leads to comfort or improved habitability rather than the Revolution.

The implication of including individual, transient and compromised acts in feminist activism is that feminist activism suddenly becomes possible in everyday practice. I find Michel de Certeau’s work *The Practice of Everyday Life*[^4], in which he looks at everyday practice as potentially political, useful in thinking about feminism as everyday practice.[^5] As Gordon, et al. commented in 1976: “a relationship between ideology [such as social theory, women’s magazines, parenting guides, etc] and social practices…may not always exist.”[^6] Certeau argues that where there is such a rupture between the official word on social practice, and social practice itself, then this practice becomes potentially subversive: the “relations of procedures to the fields of force in which they act must therefore lead to a polemological analysis of culture.”[^7] In short, everyday practices are worthy of closer attention than they are usually given in most fields of social theory. Although feminist writers have also discussed everyday practice as political (and requiring analysis), I’ve found that their emphasis is generally on things that happen to women, rather than things that women do in response to these. Dorothy Smith, for instance, claims that a feminist sociological aim is to “explicate the actual social processes and practices organizing people’s everyday experience.”[^8] Smith’s focus is on the way women ‘do’ the socially normative in their everyday experience. But Certeau writes that his:

> …goal will be achieved if everyday practices, ‘ways of operating’ or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity, and if a body of

[^5]: Intriguingly, I can find very little work in which Certeau’s theory has been utilised for feminist studies.
[^7]: Certeau. Xvii.
theoretical questions, methods, categories, and perspectives, by penetrating this obscurity, make it possible to articulate them.\(^9\)

Certeau generated a discussion of everyday practices that brought these practices forward as important and significant activities in people’s social and political lives, rather than merely ‘the stuff we do’ when we get home from a day out doing political activism.

Certeau’s categories of “strategies” and “tactics”\(^{10}\) allow us to differentiate between the forms of resistance through which we have cleared a space in culture for a marginalised voice, and resistance as that ‘stuff we do’ in privacy or on the spur of the moment. In other words, there are particular forms of feminist activism we can designate as strategies and others we could describe as tactics. This distinction is not normally made in theory about feminist activism. Nor should it be one that is reified, allowing us to conceive of an ultimate and impassable divergence between organised and everyday feminist activism. I argue for a way of looking at and describing feminism that makes room for the discussion of feminist tactics that is mostly absent in feminist theory at present. At the end of this chapter, I will use an example of everyday activism I have described in the ‘diary’ below to further explain the difference between strategy and tactics, but I must reiterate that the difference should not be a way to reinforce a hierarchy of activism.

Such a hierarchy of feminist activism relegates what we do in private to the realm of that which makes us become political. Personal resistance, everyday feminist activism, does not on its own (in such a limited framework) make us political. I contend that personal resistance is, in fact, political – and not only political, but a form of feminist activism that is vital to the progress of feminism in general. This kind of feminist activism makes feminism as a practice achievable for most women, thereby

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\(^9\) Certeau. Xi.  
\(^{10}\) Certeau. Xix, passim.
supporting the slow seeping of feminism into the cultural consciousness. In this chapter, I give examples of everyday feminist activism, practiced by women I have interviewed, by women whose work I have read, and by myself. My discussion of everyday feminist activism manifests as a kind of monologue – sometimes a musing, sometimes bordering on a rant. I use fiction and fact, snippets of conversations (real and imagined), quotations and stories. I have used the generic convention of a daily diary or journal in an effort to come as close as possible to representing a notion of ‘practice’ while using a written form. In doing so, I do away with the luxury of clear sections and subheadings; however, I have sorted my chronicle roughly into the three categories of ‘what else’ counts as feminist activism: the individual; the transient; and the compromised.

**Days in the Life**

**Tuesday**

Been thinking about doing feminist things on my own. Late phone call to Michel de Certeau.

*Me:* A lot of people would say that reclaiming personal activities as political hearkens back to the Enlightenment ideal of a rational, self-determining individual – an ideal which ignores social context. One feminist scholar, for instance, says that individual feminism is not really feminism because it is “indifferent to structural and social barriers to equality.” Another says that “(political) analysis takes place through consciousness raising,” implying that analysis without consciousness raising is not political.

*Micikel:* This area of theory is not a return to individuality because it shows that a

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11 Fabricated conversation, using excerpts from de Certeau.
relation (always social) determines this study’s terms, and not the reverse, and that each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact.14

Me: So, your ideas of uncontrolled human operations are not so much about suggesting that individuals bring an asocial, somehow ‘pure’ form of agency to interpreting and acting on cultural structures. Rather, you are invoking the unpredictability of the way these people interpret and act, both within and despite such cultural structures.

Michel: Moreover, the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of action and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles.15

I suppose what Certeau is saying is that there is something beyond the binary opposition of the individualist and constructivist understandings of personhood or subjectivity. It reminds me of a feminist perspective on systemic versus individual politics expressed by Janice Raymond. She says that a:

…purely political definition of the word feminist that accents oppression, struggle, conflict and resistance is circumscribed and limited. It is as absurd as the Marxist interpretation of the person primarily as worker.16

Wednesday

Sometimes I can’t stay silent. I sent this email to an independent media review television program today:

“Hi,

I don’t know if you guys are interested in hearing about blatantly objectification of women and implicit paedophilia in the media, but this week’s Danny Katz feature article in the West Australian Magazine17 has me fuming. Katz discusses being attracted to the “innocence” of the “young, nubile” little things (women who host

14 Certeau. Xi.
15 Certeau. Xi.
children’s television shows), and claims to want to “fertilize” the Little Mermaid’s “caviar”. In particular, Katz refers to Hi5’s Kathleen as a “hot-n-horny, wicked temptress of male desire.” He talks about being physically restrained from climbing on stage when she was singing (from doing what? molesting her?) and closes by claiming that, however sexy, she comes across as “the littlest bit thick.”

I know that Katz is writing humorously (sort of), but there is something sickening about the way he describes himself slavering over young women in this way – moreover, these are young women working in the field of child entertainment. It annoys me, as a feminist, that he feels he has the right to describe female child entertainers in this patronising and lewd vein, even concluding with the superior-sounding criticism of Kathleen’s intelligence.

Perhaps this is not something that there are overt guidelines for in print journalism, but I really feel that the inappropriateness and sexism of Danny Katz’s comments should be brought to the attention of editors and the audience in general. Please feel free to reply with any questions or comments.

Sasha”

Perhaps this email was pointless. I’d be surprised if I got a reply. I’d be surprised if it changed anything. But perhaps the point of it is also about me doing it; a feminist doing something – as a protest (heeded or not), and as a release of feminist intellectual and emotional energy.

Thursday

I’ve been spending a few days trying to feel better about the caesarean section. It’s nearly a year now since it happened. Maybe the anniversary triggered these feelings. Every day now, I have beaten myself up about it. Perhaps I should have stopped working earlier, and I could have kept my blood pressure under control. Perhaps I was too easily persuaded when I was in hospital, in labour, unable to walk
because of the epidural, with nothing going as I’d planned it. Maybe I should have been more serious about it when I went into labour. It was as if it wasn’t real. I didn’t even tell my husband to come in – I told him to go back to bed. They had to phone him and tell him to come in because I was having the baby. I wanted to ask him to bring the gym ball in, but I thought he’d stress out over trying to get it into the car, and anyway I was strapped to monitors and couldn’t get off the bed to use it. I wanted to walk around to progress my labour, but they had me lying totally still so they could monitor the baby’s vital signs. I wanted mainly midwives, but the doctor was there the whole time, and the midwives came and went. What the hell was I doing? I realized my plans had all been in my head, and I had just assumed it would work out how I wanted it.

These feelings were eating away at me. I couldn’t get past this. I was terribly, cruelly disappointed in myself for letting the empowered experience I wanted out of childbirth slip away. And the worst thing was the way people would look at me when I mentioned my sorrow over it. “Natural childbirth is no picnic,” they’d often tell me. Or, “You and the baby are healthy, and that’s all that counts.” 18 So why don’t I feel healthy?

I went to the hospital today. Explained what I wanted to the receptionist. She was nice about it, although she must have thought it was weird. She sent me down to maternity, and I told the midwife I wanted to find out why I’d needed the caesarean, then started to cry. She was calm and curious. She took me into the empty nursery and got my records out. After looking at the records, she looked at me. “Didn’t anyone explain why you’d needed an emergency C-section?” she asked me. “We try to get around to talk to the C-section deliveries, but it’s hard when we’re busy.” I told her no-one had really explained it. She explained that my baby had been a brow presentation.

“It’s almost impossible to deliver a baby presenting its brow. It’s the widest and hardest

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part of the head – it’s almost as bad as a breech presentation. That’s why you needed a caesarean. The blood pressure made it urgent, but your baby’s position was the real reason.”

I watched her almost uncomprehendingly. Maybe she could have said anything to me and I would have felt better. I just needed to hear a reason. Tears were still streaming, but they were partly the feeling of reprieve – not so much guilt. “There’s no reason why you can’t have a normal delivery next time,” the midwife added. Relief lapped at my ankles.

I walked out of there. I was alone. I only told my husband and my mum that I’d gone to talk to the midwife, that I’d taken my guilt and grief and squeezed it, wrung it out, hung it out to dry. I couldn’t quite explain how the grief had been living with me like another person, like a shadow or a conjoined twin. I was glad to lay her to rest.

Friday

Living at the bottom of the treacle well right now – just the baby and me. Need to cocoon myself for a few days after the heart-rending of Thursday. I want to be alone. I like the solitariness of this quiet power. Sometimes, I don’t even argue the point when I hear something sexist. I just think my resistance. What a concept – thinking resistance! I think the very notion would make a lot of feminists wince. It probably sounds fearful, timid, and even as if I’m fooling myself. But I like it. In a strange way, it’s a radical thing to do. To not necessarily spread the word. Some of my oppressions are internal, and that’s how I’d like to deal with them. I don’t deny that there is an interaction between my consciousness and a wider social environment, between the way I let the little hatreds and unfairnesses settle in my mind and the way those hatreds and unfairnesses operate out there. But I do deny that the only way to deal with what
has sunk into me is with an audience. This is not reality TV. This is not *Ricki Lake*.\textsuperscript{19} I am entitled to some privacy.

Misogyny is not always enforced in a public way, so public resistance is not always appropriate. We might change the fact that women are still paid considerably less than men for their work by lobbying, public awareness campaigns, changes to laws and bringing more just attitudes towards work and child-rearing into employer-employee relations. But what amendments or public demonstrations can alter a phone call from a husband to his wife, late home, demanding to know where she (or his dinner) is? Unless the situation is specifically not about gender politics – which is possible, if unlikely – the wife is recognizably breaking a sex-rule by staying out late and her husband is obviously being oppressive by commanding her presence and work. But no prime minister, government authority, boycott, or public demonstration can change either fact. The only people who can change that situation are the husband and wife themselves. They are doomed to argue it out together, as difficult as that may be (usually more difficult than changing a law). Neither is there any law against a man telling his female lover, mother, daughter or sister that she is fat and needs to lose weight (although it should be illegal). There can only be her personal, individual resistance: telling him to fuck off; asserting her right to be happy in whatever body shape she is; thinking her resentment, her anger and her self-love. Finding personal answers to the seemingly trivial dominations and expectations going on in a woman’s daily life puts power in the hands of individual women. The saying, ‘United we stand; divided we fall’ is profoundly crippling. Unity is great when you can get it – brilliant therapy for the isolation that feeling like a second-class citizen can produce. But one woman’s resistance to sex-rules can be just as worthwhile, effective and inspiring (if only to herself).

If I can sort through these thoughts of being a bad mother, I can give my daughter the chance to live with a role model of motherhood that is loving and strong, active and valiant. I don’t need to start with an epiphany about the domination of women as a group – it is enough for me to say: I will not accept that I am a bad mother because I place my child into day care and go to work. I do not have to say, I will not accept that women are bad mothers if they place their children into day care and go to work. It is not the case that “[f]eminism begins with the recognition that all women, because of their gender, suffer injustice and with the refusal to accept that situation.”20 The kind of personal struggles and silent rebellions that take place in private do not necessarily forget about wider social sex-rules. As far as I’m concerned, the fact that I even think the concept ‘I am not a bad mother’ means that I am wriggling about in, and messing up, the same sticky web of social expectations that we’re all tangled up in – no woman or man lives in a social vacuum, after all. Experience and knowledge happen all the time outside of what women are supposed to think about ourselves. My own experience and resistance to sex-rules have their origins in both the teachings of strong women, and my own self – the self that questions and disrupts everything we are taught from the moment of conception. Even if I do not verbalize my resentment or anger; even if I don’t apply my situation to other women; even if I don’t go and join a support group, doesn’t mean that I naively or unthinkingly accept the negative label of ‘bad mother.’

To my mind, not-going-public with resistance indicates a number of things. Firstly, women are busy. We are trying to cope with the too many tasks thrust on us in these enlightened modern times. We work, we clean, we raise children, we comfort and soothe, we work as volunteers, we maintain friendships, and we are executive managers.
of the most complex organization in the world: the household. The result of increased women’s rights has been the doubling of women’s workloads. How the misogynists must have laughed when they saw us get the right to work in the labour market, and noticed that we didn’t get any rights not-to-work at home. And how women must have kicked (and must still kick) themselves when they realized that no matter how liberated a household, men do not get pregnant for nine months, give birth, and breastfeed, creating a definite period of time in which our babies actually need their mothers – regardless of the fact that motherhood is unpaid and unrecognised as work.

Not all or even many women have the time or the energy to make our struggles with sex-rules public. Most women need simply to make these struggles manageable for ourselves, and a struggle that takes place in private, while not always easy to bear, can at least be manageable. Being a feminist under public scrutiny is much more complex and exhausting than being a feminist in the privacy of everyday life.

Belinda tells me she wants to raise Georgia to know in her heart that she can do what she wants:

I’ll bring my child up that way, and if she wants to do anything she can do it, as far as I’m concerned – it’s what she wants. If she wants to go drive trucks, she can drive trucks...It’s just something that’s so common now. There’s not allowed to be that anti-feminism anymore...

She doesn’t need to make a fuss about raising her daughter to believe in equal opportunity. She expects it for herself and for Georgia. Maybe our daughters will avoid this crippling struggle against guilt. Maybe they will see the choice to return to work after having a child as a fiscal or professional one, rather than one fraught with feelings about what will become of the child? Kim says that feminism improves the skills and confidence of women in each generation. She thinks that many women in our mother’s

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21 Joseph H. Pleck notes that “even in studies suggesting that husbands of employed wives do statistically more [housework], the increase is small in absolute magnitude and employed wives continue to do the bulk of the family work.” Research into the Interweaves of Job and Family. Eds. Helen Z. Lopata and Joseph H. Pleck. Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1983. 39.
generation *speak* feminism but do not act it out. I asked her if that was hypocritical or just survival:

Maybe a little bit hypocritical, but I don’t think they know how to act any other way. It’s not a conscious thought that they think, ‘I’m going to act submissive.’ I just think it’s happened for so long, and they’ve seen their mothers do it…Mum’s mum would have done it a lot and mum feels as though she’s a feminist because she’s improved upon her mum, and we feel like we’ve improved upon our mum, and probably our little girls…are going to think that of us as well. And they’ll even look at us and probably say we’re hypocritical. It’s just something that happens over time.23

I’d dearly love to end the long legacy of mother-guilt at *me*. I think my daughter will do better without it.

*Sunday*

Sent out emails looking for Victoria again today. Every so often, I send out a few emails to her abandoned addresses, hoping to find her again.

There was this girl I knew, Victoria, in the women’s collective during my undergraduate degree. She was the coolest chick I ever knew. She was cuddly, with a gorgeous face and clothes that smelt like fruitcake and roll-your-own ciggies. She had a great big hairy bear of a dog. Victoria was adorable – loving and encouraging – but tender to the point where she was often in emotional pain. She was so damn prickly if you got your politics wrong! She hated half-arsed, flaky politics, and she alienated the women in the collective to the point where there were few left to help when I took over as Women’s Officer. Victoria taught me a bit about the unexpected joy of fighting my own battles.

When I left the ‘collective,’ I was able to value doing feminism alone properly. It was a huge relief to just do my own daily resistance and make my own silent decisions for a while. Even now, typing this, I am silent and solitary. I have no idea whether it will ever get beyond a few examiners. But I still know it is worth doing.

I will keep trying to find Victoria. I hope she is okay.

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Monday

I went and saw my sister, and asked her about her feminist priorities. She said:

I’m not saying that’s the same for all women by a long shot, but as long as I’m treated with respect and cared for and treated equally and with a lot of love and that kind of thing, I feel like my needs as a feminist are being met. And also being listened to. That my opinion is valued. You know, and the fact that my husband says things to me like ‘you make me think about things. I can argue things better at work; I can come out with quick things…with your influence.’ And that makes me think, ‘wow, I’ve had an impact on a man.’

I couldn’t be with a man who didn’t totally respect me and care about me. And I can’t understand women who are…And I can’t understand my friends who love their husbands, who are wonderful men, but who are more focused on their own needs – these men – than they are on their wives’ needs. And who will strive for and attain their own goals, whilst their wives are sitting there going, ‘Well, I’m not getting my needs met. I’m not getting what I want to do – he’s been doing what he wants to do for a long time, and now it’s my turn, but it’s not happening.’ And I just sit there and think, well that sucks. I couldn’t be with that…Some of them want to do courses and things. But no, they’ve got to stay home and watch the kids ‘cause the husband’s out playing basketball. You know, that kind of thing. And I could never be like that. And if I was like that, I’d be miserable.

“Do you consider those women feminists?” I asked.

I think they are, but in different ways from me. Like I said, my feminist needs being met have to do with care and respect; their feminist needs might have more to do with having their opinions valued or…

The variety of priorities is an interesting point, and may go a way towards explaining the difference in forms of activism various women undertake. I don’t mean to suggest that issues such as the brutal and legal oppression of women in other countries, legislation that disadvantages women here in Australia, and levels of sexual assault against women are not important feminist priorities, or that it is okay not to care about those things. But I do think it is okay not to mobilise about those things. Factors such as lack of time, difficult conditions within a job or a relationship, illness, caring for others, limited education, poor access to information about women’s rights issues – all of these, or simply the need to comfort oneself – contribute to a shift in ‘feminist priorities’ from a focus on the collective suffering of women, to a feminist ideology that is based on the immediate (the self, relationships, family and personal economics). It might not be the best feminist activism in the world; it might not be the loftiest or
most altruistic, but it is still feminist activism.

*Tuesday*

Was overdue for a pap smear, so I went and had one today. I read Germaine Greer\(^24\) a couple of years ago and felt like a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders to see what she said about pap smears – that the incidence of cervical cancer has not decreased or become more treatable since the pap smear became a regular medical procedure for women. Yay, I thought – no more pap smears! Or at least, not regular ones. But since then I’ve read other information and medical studies that contradict what Greer said. Now I think I will get the procedure done regularly, obediently, although I hate it. I hate the whole experience of vulnerability and discomfort, but I will suffer it because I want to be healthy, and I want more children.

When I went for the pap smear I had before conceiving my daughter, the doctor said casually “you will have a little bleeding.” No big deal, I thought. I’ve always bled before. “Oh, wait,” she said as I went to sit up. She hastily crammed some paper towels beneath me and I saw the blood. Pouring, not dripping. “Jesus!” I said. “Why is there so much blood?” “It’s because I used the brush.”

The brush? The *brush*? I had mental images of the wire brushes my husband uses to clean rust off metal. “Oh!” I said. I never questioned her about that, and it bothers me. When I’m due for another one, I will ask the doctor about it.

*Wednesday*

I’ve been reading feminist history today. What an inspiration! The writer includes many beautiful, proud moments in her history of feminism, although she doesn’t always allow them to be feminism. “If this was feminism,” she says doubtfully about the Canadian women of the Great Depression, “it remained on the level of the

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individual and lacked reference to women as an oppressed social group.\textsuperscript{25} But we need to remember that, as Janice Raymond says, “one important measure of feminist political power must be defined by how women are able to change the quality of life for themselves and other women.”\textsuperscript{26} Take this woman,\textsuperscript{27} for example:

I’ve helped outside with anything I lay my hands on, and have milked up to six cows when the good man was away or busy. I get help with washing and other housework when he is not busy. And I can leave him to do a baking of bread and take care of six children when I go anywhere.\textsuperscript{28}

Such women:

…faced down relief workers, boycotted businesses, or found ingenious ways ‘to make do.’ Since women were paid less than men and thus preferred by some employers, many became the breadwinners for their families.\textsuperscript{29}

Even if these women were merely responding to the Depression “with the same determination and inventiveness that people have always summoned in hard times,”\textsuperscript{30} why cannot we, with the benefit of hindsight, name these things ‘feminism?’ It seems too easy – almost suspiciously easy – to dismiss the feminist tendencies women displayed throughout history.

Janice Raymond, talking about women’s relationships, says that:

…history and culture of female friendship are replete with obstacles to Gyn/affection. And those obstacles must be named for what they are. In the genealogy of this book, however, they are not the final word about female friendship.\textsuperscript{31}

Just as the history of women is replete with obstacles to feminism, \textit{writing} the history of women is replete with obstacles to using the word ‘feminism.’ Obstacles like LeGates’ description above (describing feminist acts as unremarkable, or as garden variety ‘determination and inventiveness’). But these obstacles are not the final word about feminist history, either. How is it productive to deny that women’s resistant

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} LeGates. 295.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Raymond. 142.
\item \textsuperscript{27} This quotation is from a woman facing the 1930s Depression in Canada.
\item \textsuperscript{28} A “Canadian farm woman.” Qtd. in LeGates. 295.
\item \textsuperscript{29} LeGates. 295.
\item \textsuperscript{30} LeGates. 295.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Raymond. 147.
\end{itemize}
activities fit within the boundaries of feminism? Who are we to claim it wasn’t feminism, and who do we serve by saying so? Spender says:

It is disturbing to recognise that what we today have in common with women of the past is our experience of being silenced and interrupted; our experience of becoming a member of society in which women have no visible past, no heritage, our experience of existing in a void.\(^3\)

However, it is not just the lack of visible heritage, but also the lack of a *history of our resistance* that disables and孤立ates us. Surely there is some way to find a balance between historical accuracy and representing feminism throughout history. The two are equally important and need not be mutually exclusive.

*Thursday*

Mums’ Group at 11am. Tanya wanted to know about my thesis. I told her about accessibility, and women who are unwilling to associate themselves with feminism. She said she is a feminist. I started to explain the boundaries thing – the categorising of feminism and how it excludes certain practices from being named as feminism. She told me how she won’t let men fuss over her. Then baby Arianna fell on her face and it took a good ten minutes to settle her down again.

We went over our birth experiences again. Now the kids are nearly one, I guess we’re all thinking about it. When I commiserated with one of them over her stitched perineum, she tried the old, “See, you’re not missing out on anything!” line. “Yes, I am,” I retorted. “You don’t understand!” She apologised immediately and one of the other women stuck up for me, saying that she would feel the same as me if she hadn’t had a vaginal birth.

Sara is worrying about her career. She spent nearly ten years working her way up in that company and now they tell her that if she doesn’t come back fulltime, they can’t give her the same job level. So she has to make a choice – put her little boy into day care and see him only two hours a day, or give up her career. She’s pissed off. “I

told my supervisor that I don’t see why I should be penalised for having a baby,” she fumed. She’s trying to work something out with her supervisor and she’s going to let us know what happens.

Friday

Bookstore. Outraged that they’d placed feminist texts in the ‘Self Help’ section! Complained to the clerk, telling him that they have a section for ‘Philosophy’ and another for ‘Politics,’ so why is feminist writing under ‘Self Help?’ He looked at me blankly. Fumed all the way home, thinking of more and more reasons why that is just wrong. Okay, I can see how they might place feminism in the Self Help section, but why then isn’t the philosophical work of male theorists there too? Why is theory about women therapy and theory about people (read: men) philosophy? In the words of Catherine of Siena: “ingrates, boors and hirelings...fools, worthy of a thousand deaths!”

Saturday

On the way to dinner last night, Cassie and I sat in the backseat to give the men more legroom, but really to catch up for a few moments. Cassie was complaining to me about the lack of decent celebrants in Perth. She had been to a wedding and was disappointed with the celebrant’s style. “You or I could do it a thousand times better,” she said. “I think we should start a company of talented female celebrants,” I agreed. “We’d have to suppress our personal views a little,” she mused. “It wouldn’t do to start a ceremony with ‘We are gathered here today to celebrate the patriarchal institution of marriage...’”

“What are you two laughing at back there?” her partner asked a few minutes later, but we couldn’t even catch our breath to explain the joke.

Sunday

33 LeGates. 42-5. Catherine of Siena is actually referring to certain important religious men – not the management of a suburban bookstore. However, the frustration is similar.
Mum has asked me to fill in at her work tomorrow. I’ve said yes, although I hate the work – sales. My only colleagues are a couple of middle-aged men. They have a pornographic calendar hanging up in the kitchen that gives me the horrors every time I go in there. In December, I got sick of it and tried to turn it around so it faced the wall – to give them the idea. Mick walked in as I was trying unsuccessfully to pin it back up, with the gorgeous, shaved Jayde facing the wall.

“Oh! Are you right?” he asked in amazement.

I went hot and cold, even though I’ve faced down misogyny many a time before that.

“I’m trying to turn it around,” I declared a little breathlessly. “It offends me.”

“Oh, does it?” he said, blank surprise in his face. “Take it down,” he said generously after a pause, but then he added, “It’s only got a few days to run anyway.”

I handed it to him silently and went back to my desk upstairs. I felt puzzled and dissatisfied as I went. Okay, he’d taken the offending thing down, but on what terms? It had occurred to him that he could remove it with little inconvenience, as it was nearly the New Year. And he’d never asked why it offended me. Did he think I was prim, or religious? He’d already proven to me that he didn’t have a clue about feminism. He didn’t even know what feminism was when I’d tried to explain my research to him.

Oh well, I suppose I got what I wanted, and that made my own life a little easier when I went into the kitchen after that. I guess it doesn’t matter this time that I didn’t fully gain the point.

Monday

Bettina Aptheker writes that the:

…the dailiness of women’s lives structures a different way of knowing and a different way of thinking. The process that comes from this way of knowing has to be at the center of a women’s politics, and it has to be at the center of a women’s scholarship... The point is to integrate ideas about love and healing, about balance and connection, about beauty and growing, into our everyday ways of being. We have to believe in the value of our own experiences and in the value of our ways of knowing, our ways of doing things.
We have to wrap ourselves in these ways of knowing, to enact daily ceremonies of life.34

Tuesday

Had a discussion with Barry today. He talked about Peter wanting his new girlfriend to have dinner on the table when he got home, and I said “I think that Peter’s living in the dark ages,” or “I think Peter’s got something to learn about being in a relationship” – something like that. And Barry said, “Well, yeah, it’s a bit of give and take.” I let that go for a moment, but then it occurred to me that he was probably reiterating exactly Peter’s sexist point, so I said, “Well, like, I said before, Peter’s living in the past, and his ideas on women are a bit archaic.” Now, when I said that, I was also talking about Barry’s ideas on women. Whether or not it got through to him is a different matter entirely, but at least it was an effort on my part to change his views on women and their roles.

Belinda describes a more equitable scheme of household work in her own relationship:

I suppose it’s the way me and Steve share things. It’s not all mine – my drive is that it’s not all my job as a female to do the raising of the child, to do the dishes, to do the vacuuming. In our house it’s a shared thing. That’s about as far as I go in driving the feminist side of things. He knows that I’m not going to cook dinner every night of the week if I don’t choose to.35

I find Belinda’s self-deprecatory tone intriguing. Why does she hasten to assure me that enforcing an equitable scheme of housework is ‘as far as she goes’ in her feminism? It is hard to know whether she is making an implicit reference to the limits her own busy life has placed on the kinds of feminism she can engage in, or whether she has internalised the ‘rules’ of feminist activism, and is reaffirming her own inferior feminist status. These questions lead me to wonder which idea of women’s relationship with feminism (and feminist activism) has gained more currency with Western women

35 Rapps, Belinda. Personal interview. 7 August 2003.
today: that certain forms of feminism are too time-consuming; or that most of us can only aspire to an identity as a feminist. Both are important ideas and both are constantly ignored by feminists in discussions of how women engage in feminism and how they perceive this engagement.

Wednesday

Everyday feminism. It’s almost all totally informal, spontaneous, incomplete, interrupted, immediate and temporary. Some days it feels like I have achieved nothing lasting, nothing finite. I feel like every discussion I have about feminism – every attempt to share my knowledge or benefit from someone else’s – will be curtailed and cut short by the stupid trivialities of daily life. Sometimes it feels like the only feminism I trade in is the stupid trivialities of daily life! So why is it, at the end of each day, that I feel the same way Liz Stanley and Sue Wise do? – “almost every day of my life I feel knackered by the fact that I’ve been doing feminism all day long.”

Thoughts of everyday-ness and politics inspired another late night call to Michel de Certeau.

Michel: It’s like the ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers’ “success” in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by altering and rejecting them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept.

Me: So, we need not base our politics on the extreme, polar ideas of feminist vs. anti-feminist – that is, altering and rejecting, or passively complying with, patriarchy.

37 Fabricated conversation, using excerpts from de Certeau.
38 Certeau. Xiii.
Rather, we can recognise that people are active and knowledgeable users of a system that can be unfair and oppressive. And, perhaps women in particular manipulate the system…

Michel: Yes – inferior access to information, financial means, and compensations of all kinds elicits an increased deviousness, fantasy, or laughter. People in an inferior position use clever tricks, know how to get away with things, and make joyful discoveries.

Me: So, this kind of using, or manipulation, of what we’re given is actually about making it easier to live in our social worlds?

Michel: It may go as far back as the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive. It is the art of manipulating ‘commonplaces’ and the inevitability of events in such a way as to make them ‘habitable.’

Me: A lot of feminists object to the current system and see any effort to make it more habitable as a compromise. One particular problem feminists tend to identify with manipulation as a political tactic is that it can disadvantage other women. Things that make it easy for some women make it hard for others. For example, using one’s ‘feminine wiles’ to get something out of a man disadvantages women who aren’t ‘pretty enough,’ or do not know how to – or cannot bear to – use femininity in this way. I take such points, but I also see eliminating ‘dodgy’ tactics from the field of feminism as disadvantaging certain women. However, it seems very difficult to explain our contemporary social environment in any terms other than total oppression, and just as difficult to conceptualise conventional responses to this environment in any terms other than total submission to that oppression.

Michel: Look at it as the equivalent of the rules of meter and rhyme for poets of earlier

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39 Certeau. Xvii.
40 Certeau. Xix.
41 Certeau. Xi.
42 Certeau. Xxii.
times: a body of constraints stimulating new discoveries, a set of rules with which
improvisation plays.43

Me: That idea works well for ‘dodgy’ feminist practices, actually. Manipulations such
as using feminine wiles for gain can be seen as creative, if not always politically pure,
responses to a social order that insists upon the femininity of women…

Thursday

More thoughts about historical feminist activism. This time, religious women.

Joan of Arc dressed as a soldier and led an army into battle; Guglielma of Milan
insisted that her female assistant Manfreda would become pope.44 Lidwina of
Schiedham, got her parents to “back away from an unwanted marriage” by fasting.45
Feminist historian Carolyn Bynum claims that using religion in this way was clever and
feminist – that women could “control their bodies and their world”46 by fasting.
Another feminist historian argues, “food renunciation seems a long way from
feminism,”47 and suggests that it conformed to a cultural model of holiness as women
aspire to models of beauty or thinness today.48

Strange as it may seem, these women were not truly defiant. They were exploiting the
tradition that assumed female inferiority and equated women with weakness and
humility. These were the very qualities that made women appropriate channels for the
divine... [T]he woman who became a prophet underscored her own inferiority rather
than denying it. Prophecy could thus function as a safety valve that allowed women to
bypass authority in special situations while reinforcing it at all other times. The idea of
the female prophet was a subtle form of social control. The more women spoke out, the
more they supported patriarchal assumptions about their second-class status.49

What sprang to my mind when I read about these women’s activities was not that they
were supporting “patriarchal assumptions about women’s second-class status,” as the
idea of fasting in protest might suggest. Rather, I thought of Luce Irigaray’s idea of

43 Certeau. Xxii.
44 LeGates. 42.
45 LeGates. 42-5.
46 Bynum, Carolyn Walker. Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval
47 LeGates. 45.
48 LeGates. 46.
49 LeGates. 43-4.
exposing sex-rules by mimicking and exaggerating these: “To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.”50 In other words, yes, these women exploited their femininity – but manipulating sex-rules in this way shows the great resourcefulness of opportunism. And, yes, the unusual spectacle of women as prophets may have been a kind of “safety valve” – but the need for a safety valve itself shows that women were putting pressure on the sex-rules of the time. And anyway, I don’t think the ingenious coping strategies women came up with in everyday life merely functioned as a safety valve for women’s oppression. At some point, we should acknowledge these activities for their subversiveness, and give such women credit for their own resistant activities.51 Too often, we fail to give historical women credit for agency and opportunistism, the capacity for autonomy, and sly or brazen appropriations of the revolutionary ideals of others.52

**Friday**

I have been reading Janice Raymond’s book *A Passion for Friends*. What a book! Reclaiming those inspiring moments of resistance throughout history and geography; developing an account of women’s relationships. But one statement confounded me:

Caught in the ‘safety net’ of hetero-relations, women pass on to daughters — daughters who become mothers, teachers, counselors, and friends of women — a grab bag of survival tactics. Such tactics do not provide the kind of ‘Surviving’ that Gyn/affection


provides, ‘not merely in the sense of ‘living on,’ but in the sense of living beyond’ — in this case, beyond hetero-relations. These are the survival tactics of women who are still the victims of hetero-relations. They give women the capacity to suffer and to endure and/or to manipulate their way safely and skilfully through the world that men have given them.53

These words do not sit well with Certeau’s idea of habitability. Instead of seeing the “grab bag” of tactics as resourceful and positive, Raymond conceives of it as weak and reactionary.54

I wonder if Raymond is too hasty to condemn the “grab bag” of survival tactics. I wonder what kinds of practices I might find in such a grab bag. Does she mean things like mincing and flirting to ‘catch a man?’ Or tactics like the ability to think and discuss resistance to misogyny with men, rather than publicly demonstrate or withdraw from mixed-sex society? “Survival tactics for hetero-relations” could mean any number of things, but to me it suggests negotiating one’s way through one’s relationships with men, in the same way that woman-to-woman relationships often require negotiation and compromise. Flexibility and concession seem permissible in female relationships, but inexcusable in female-male relationships. The troubling thing about including negotiation of the system in feminism is that certain tactics of negotiation are – rightly – viewed with concern by feminism. And there is no way around this except for each individual feminist to analyse and evaluate such tactics in order to assess whether or not they are the right tactics for her.

Some tactics are, after all, contingent, conditional actions. They are not always appropriate responses to oppression and suffering, and they frequently act simply as short term solutions. The longer term solutions often become available through more extended opportunities to reflect upon the problem (such as writing or reading feminist theory, which of course is not always accessible to certain women – a problem I discuss in the next chapters). In the meantime, the grab-bag can be necessary and useful. For

53 Raymond. 188.
54 My use of the term “tactics” in this section does not draw on Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategy.
instance, there is another way to view the manipulation Raymond speaks of. Narelle says:

I’m not going to say I don’t exploit being a woman to get things. ‘Cause I do, you know. But I don’t see that as being anti-feminist. I see being a feminist as being a strong woman, who doesn’t put up with crap from men or from society or from ... and if that means manipulating others, I don’t have a problem with that myself.

Me: So, you almost see manipulation of others using your femininity, or your being a woman, as a feminist strategy?

Narelle: I do. I think, why throw out the baby with the bathwater?

I can’t say that I feel manipulating people in this way is a good or fair strategy. In fact, this kind of manipulation can perpetuate the stereotype of women as calculating and manipulative, but the way Narelle describes it certainly opens up the possibility that manipulation might be a feminist tactic. After all, women who use manipulation often use it knowingly, because it increases their power (if temporarily), decreases their suffering, and is a tricky little secret and joke that they share with other women. So, while I wouldn’t adopt it as a strategy personally, it is unfair to write it off as an ‘unfeminist’ activity for all women. The way Narelle frames her comments indicates that she herself doesn’t believe manipulation is a particularly positive or long-term strategy – but it is a strategy nevertheless. Belinda Rapps claims:

I’ve been dealing with men…probably since I was fifteen…I’ve proven them wrong many a time, that if they can do something, I can do a thing. I mean, strength-wise, yeah okay, I don’t get away with being that stronger thing, but if I could lift it, or I could do without them, I would. But if I couldn’t, I mean, bat your eyelids and use that side of things…and they couldn’t help themselves…It’s all in the mind, basically. I work ‘em, basically. They don’t realize, but it’s easy. Easy to work ‘em. That’s why I would say that men are the weaker sex. Women are definitely the stronger sex. They wouldn’t be able to survive, you never see a man without a woman. It’s the wife that drives the man, not the other way around.

Rapps combines radical statements about women’s mental/emotional ‘superiority’ with a description of how to manipulate men to compensate for female physical inferiority. She analyses a problematic situation and comes up with a solution that alleviates hardship suffered because she is a woman – which is, therefore (dare I say it?) a feminist solution.

55 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
56 Rapps, Belinda. Personal interview. 7 August 2003.
So, why does Raymond devalue manipulation and endurance as feminist tactics? It is because they involve compromise. They involve using the reworking the suffering associated with femininity to achieve or maintain some state of habitability.

In another part of her book, Raymond condemns the “language of ‘distaste’” that:

…devitalizes the political weight and worth of any resistance movement and summarizes that resistance as an individual quirk or as a defect of the resisters’ collective character. It trifles with the wilful choice, the political philosophy, and the public actions of group movements, and it is consistently applied to women who choose to spend their lives with women and are indifferent to men.57

But isn’t she using this same “language of distaste” to discuss the grab bag tactics? Why is Raymond allowed to “trifle with” the “wilful choice” and “political philosophy” of women who choose manipulation and negotiation of heterosexual relationships as feminist tactics?

Saturday

I wore my under-wire bra yesterday to go out. Today my boobs are all lumpy with blocked milk ducts. Wore a maternity bra today, even though I was wearing a stretch shirt and it made my boobs look droopy. I don’t want those painful lumps again. I wear that bloody under-wire every so often, and every time, I learn that lesson over again.

On a brighter note, Sara from Mums’ Group worked things out with her old workplace. She worked it through with her supervisor. They’ve given her three years parental leave from now and then she can go back to work at her current professional level. It makes things easier in a way, although she still has to contend with the choice the economy/society tends to force upon women when that time comes. As she said, to go back to her current job, she would need to travel nearly an hour each way to work, in addition to working fulltime. There is no opportunity at that level to work part time or closer to home. So the choice would be between working those hours, seeing her

57 Raymond. 139.
boys only a couple of hours per day, plus childcare expenses; or dropping down in both professional level and salary in order to work shorter hours and locally. Nice choice, eh? And they call this equality.

Sunday

Phone call to my sister:

Me: If your husband’s giving you a hard time, you turn around; you might use the whole feminism thing as your defence, or you might just say, “Get fucked.” And either way, I think it’s still feminist. I don’t think you necessarily have to call up the politics to be political.

Her: Well, any time you can tell your husband to get fucked and not get a beating for being a shrew, I think yeah we’re living in feminist times in this country.58

This snippet calls Certeau’s work to mind again. Although Certeau doesn’t devote much discussion to people’s intentions, possibly because of his commitment to a constructivist (not individualist) analysis, I think intentions are an important factor in representations of feminist activism. I see the different instances of messing with the system Certeau describes as variously deliberately, covertly, or accidentally political. And I see feminist activism in the same way. Sometimes we intend and achieve a political act. Sometimes we intend a political act, but the form of activism we choose doesn’t reveal this intention. And sometimes something we do or say becomes political only upon analysis.

Monday

I’ve reached a conclusion about historians of feminism: many of them don’t seem to want to admit that there was such a thing as feminism through history! It is not as though work on how to write decent feminist history hasn’t been done. As early as

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58 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
1976 – nearly thirty years ago – Gordon, et al. were already analysing the different ways historians understood feminist and women’s history, claiming that historians’:

…categories and periodization have been masculine by definition, for they have defined significance primarily by power, influence, and visible activity in the world of political and economic affairs.\(^{59}\)

Gordon, et al. describe the way historians effaced the everyday resistances of women’s lives by conforming to the model of historiography that uses an “organizational perspective,” focusing on “thought and activities of women in public life”\(^{60}\) above that of women in private life. Editors Hartman and Banner, in 1974, say of the contributors to *Clio’s Consciousness Raised*, that:

Some other studies propose that assumptions about women’s power have been wrongly confined to male norms and require drastic revision. Analyzing the situation of women in Victorian America, Daniel Smith challenges current notions of a dichotomy between the supposedly powerless, static roles of woman-in-the-home, and that of the public woman who engages in activist movements for reform and liberation. He provides evidence that married women in the late Victorian period moved toward greater autonomy and improvement of their condition in the home in a development which can be fairly labelled ‘domestic feminism.’\(^{61}\)

Clearly, work on how to produce a fair and faithful account of historical feminism which included a vital understanding of the dailiness of women’s lives has been going on for some time.

However, ten years later, in 1985, Jane Rendall still found it appropriate to concentrate:

…less on the careers of individual women … and more on the historical context which allowed some, often very few, women to come together and assert in their lives and in their actions the values of self-determination and autonomy.\(^{62}\)

Rendall’s chapter titles include: “The Enlightenment and the Nature of Women,” “Feminism and Republicanism: ‘Republican Motherhood,’” and “Evangelicalism and the Power of Women.” These show how it is possible to diminish feminism by associating it *ad infinitum* with other forms of social change of its time. Of course, I

\(^{59}\) Gordon, et al. 75.
\(^{60}\) Gordon, et al. 78.
\(^{61}\) Hartman and Banner. Ix.
\(^{62}\) Rendall. 2.
don’t take issue with a historian providing a proper historical context for the feminist activities of women; but to focus more on the context than on the activities themselves seems to me to be swaying the issue to the other extreme of historical inaccuracy. It shows a fear of presentism (the analysis of historical activities using contemporary terms) that overrides the urge to share with women a meaningful history of feminism. Gordon, et al. cite historian of American women, William Chafe, as another example of the ‘writing off’ of feminism to parallel movements and reformations:

[Chafe claims that] changing employment patterns and a greater acceptance of women in the workforce, rather than feminist arguments,…were responsible for altering women’s role. In addition, Chafe provides a detailed chronicle of legal, political, and economic developments which have affected women in recent American history.63

I mean, think about it. In the past decade, there has been a resurgence of women’s traditional religions, like goddess worship and Wicca. However, I wouldn’t presume to suggest that a 17 year old girl stands up for herself in the face of sexual harassment because of the popularity of books on witchcraft and spells. I don’t credit the resurgence of women’s religion with young women’s feminist activities. Not many people would. Movements and revolutions certainly intersect and feed off one another, but sometimes they almost completely pass each other by, even though they exist at the same moment in history. Patterns do not explain all human behaviour. Sometimes using these patterns to describe human behaviour goes further towards constricting than explaining it. In fact, in his discussion of Wittgenstein’s theory of ordinary language, Certeau claims that:

He would reject even historiography because, by separating a past from the present, it privileges in effect a proper and productive place from which it claims to “command a clear view” of linguistic facts (or “documents”)…64

In other words, the historiographical obsession with presentism is plagued with the danger of mistakenly assuming that we have a greater level of objectivity when we look back and describe, categorise and name historical events. Neither presentism nor its

63 Gordon, et al. 78.
64 Certeau. 10.
opposite (whatever that may be) gives us a true or ‘pure’ view of history.

Another example of writing feminism out of history can be found in the story of the Kwangtung Marriage Resisters:

Long ago, I did feminism in this way: I chose not to marry in my hometown of Kwangtung, China. That was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of my sworn sisters were made to marry, but refused to consummate the marriage. The world sat on us and tried to squash our little bones into a mould we refused to fit: wife, mother, shit-cleaner, punching bag. Somehow, I kept my bones hard enough to hold out, and eventually the world left me to do what I wanted. I'm not suggesting it left me in peace. There were the rants, beatings, tirades, forced marriages, accusations of heresy – all the usual clobber when a woman does as she wishes. Sometimes, when it was clear we would not succeed in resisting marriage, we would drown ourselves all together, lying like logs in the river, hard and triumphant to the last. We had to drug or even murder our husbands from time to time. How proud we were! Me and the other women who lived with me – the Kwangtung marriage resisters. We went down in history. We were so very strong, so respected, so subversive – so feminist.

But historians have traced the Kwangtung marriage resisters back through history like guided missiles to name them ‘unfeminist.’ Can you believe it? Even with the benefit of hindsight – the ability to say, “that was feminism” – someone was ready to say it wasn’t. Marjorie Topley says:

The antimarriage movement in Kwangtung cannot be regarded as any positive progressive movement; the women merely refused to accept sexual relationships with men.

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65 I take the information here on the Kwangtung marriage resisters from Raymond. 115-47.
Not a positive and progressive movement? If refusing sexual relationships with men was not positive and progressive in a location where/when sexual relationships were usually presumed to be a male ‘right,’ and inevitably resulted in numerous, not necessarily wanted, babies, then I don’t know what was! It reminds me of Nancy Cott’s remark that one criterion by which historians can assess the feminist status of an act is by noting: “how a given behaviour opposed, shored up or expressed an intention to alter gender hierarchy.” Cott’s comment implies that activities only become feminism when the woman who does these activities does them consciously. She declares to the world that she is doing them with the purpose of altering gender hierarchy. “I am entering public life in order to change the status of women everywhere!” she must holler. Then duck for cover from a good stoning. Elisabeth Croll says:

The anti-marriage associations were an expression of opposition to the traditional forces of ‘fate’ but they remained at the level of rejection and furnished a force of escapism rather than a significant force for change.

But I prefer Janice Raymond’s discussion about tracing genealogies of feminism. I hope that, particularly in the contemporary moment, women will use historical feminism as inspirational examples. Calling historical resistance feminism:

…is not simply the restoration of the past or the elevation of old matter into new creation. One cannot, for example, see the marriage resisters or nuns as models to be lived by, but rather as instructive examples for the forms that female friendship [that is, feminism] can take.

A more useful way to contextualize historical feminism would be to:

…reflect current concerns about women and women’s roles. Such a preoccupation is ‘presentist’ in the best sense, since it involves a rigorous and empathetic effort to understand the historical roots of issues that especially touch women today.

It is amazing and often depressing to see how little has changed between the traditional, sometimes called ‘masculine’ ways of writing history and an era of prolific feminist

69 Raymond. 209.
70 Hartman and Banner. Xi.
theory in which women have been writing about more progressive ways to represent our history for some decades.

Tuesday

It may seem, as many have maintained, that feminism will never have any chance of success unless it becomes a mass movement, unless feminists find common ground with women who represent the mainstream. But that is precisely when feminism ceases to be feminism, when it fails to offer a radical alternative to the status quo.71

So, should women who identify as feminists decline to find common ground with “mainstream” women? This idea of a “status quo” misses a lot about elite versus popular culture. Popular strategies for the everyday world, like refusing the common ‘sexpectations’ of women, are one point where feminists might find common ground with other women. And meeting on this common ground would certainly be one way to offer a “radical alternative” to the feminist status quo (which can perpetuate the view that feminist battles are fought exclusively in demonstrations or women’s studies journals). Protecting a status quo that keeps various women out of feminism does little to bring about social change in any progressive way. Nor does it account for the way feminism has succeeded in becoming a part of daily life. Alison Jacques reminds us that the “transformation from underground to mainstream is complex, and relationships with mass media and commerce may be scene-specific.”72 And yet we make generalizations about the depoliticization of feminism immediately it enters mainstream culture.

I used to lead a group of Girl Guides, trying to instil in them each week new skills and a sense of confidence. Yes, these activities were double-barrelled – a critic could claim that I shrank from declaring my feminism to my colleagues and the girls’ parents; that I was scared of battle; that I didn’t want to deal with men in an intellectual context; that Guides is a regressive organisation which teaches placid good-girl

71 LeGates. 354.
behaviour and selflessness. All sometimes, and for some people, true – but not the way I was doing it. I was building the girls’ self-esteem, teaching assertiveness skills, and introducing them to adventure. It is worthwhile to look more deeply at activities that seem to maintain the status quo – sometimes we will get a surprise. As Carolyn Steedman says:

> Personal interpretations of past time – the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture.\(^73\)

And the stories we tell ourselves about how to deal with the place we currently inhabit are often in “deep and ambiguous conflict” with the official stories of a culture. In Los Angeles, a cheerleading squad named Radical Teen Cheer chant: “We’re teens, we’re cute, we’re radical to boot!”\(^74\) They twirl pom-poms and create anti-rape chants. Duncan Campbell writes that “other radical teams – among them the Dirty Southern Belles in Memphis and the Rocky Mountain Rebels in Colorado – are springing up… shaking pom-poms for causes from gay and lesbian rights to foreign policy.”\(^75\) However, the cute, sexy outfits and false smiles might appear to some as co-opted and much less than radical. The feminist rhetoric of ‘suspect’ and ‘recuperated’ prevents the deeper look at outside forms of resistance.

**Wednesday**

I was talking to Kerry today about capability and being a woman. She was telling me about the importance of actively seeking out the people who will make things easier for her – people who will show her respect and listen to her when she tells them what she wants. She said:

> For me, because I’m a single parent, and particularly because I have cerebral palsy, people just get totally shocked to think that I would be capable of running my own household and bringing up three children – without a man! (laughing) To pick up all the pieces! And that is something that continually amazes me, and it’s something I

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\(^75\) Campbell. N. pag.
need to be aware of, because as much as I am independent and feminist, I do enjoy the
company of men and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life without a partner. So I’m
careful not to be incredibly defensive when people question me about my ability to
manage life without the aid of a man…[if I do that, I might] miss opportunities and end
up spending my life alone.
It doesn’t mean I don’t want the person to do anything for me – it means I want to be in
a total partnership, and I will be in a total partnership.
I will not have decisions regarding my life…or my recreation, or my work, taken out of
my hands.
Our community likes to define our roles, and if I go to a mechanic to get the car
serviced, they won’t give me the same sort of information as they would give a man…
When you show assertiveness in your roles, people actually like that and they respect
that. There are lots of everyday occurrences where women have to justify [assert] their
intelligence…
Frustration to me is when people assume you’re a woman so you couldn’t possibly take
on a certain task…my frustration is because of my disability because…people assume I
couldn’t possibly do half of the half of the things I couldn’t possibly do because I’m a
woman!
They’ll tell you what’s going to be wonderful for you, but as a woman and particularly
as one with a disability, I’m the only one that can tell you what I need and what would
be good…I have to be very, very cluey [when shopping for service providers].
[When I was shopping for a car, one dealer] tried to sell me a ‘lovely little lady’s car.’
I see using this kind of active awareness when making decisions as a significant
feminist practice. It is an awareness systems of patriarchy and capitalism do not expect
or desire. Patriarchy does not expect women to seek equality, shared tasks, and “total
partnership” when searching for a marriage partner. Consumer capitalism does not
expect women to resist the stereotyped desires thrust upon them by marketing
campaigns. So developing the cluey-ness Kerry describes is a way of resisting being
subsumed into such systems in the way the concept of ‘false consciousness’ implies
women often are. The immeasurability of this awareness means that it is a feminist
practice that feminists can easily forget, ignore and obscure.

Thursday

It’s funny how the activities of our mothers both confound and impress us. My
sister Kim says: “even though [mum’s partner is] not working and mum is, he still
takes a dominating [role]…treats mum like a little woman, and she allows herself to do
that.” But we both know that our mother gets almost frighteningly angry over women

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76 Allan, Kerry. Personal interview. 1 October 2001.
77 Borin, Kim. Personal interview. 7 August 2003.
and men’s disproportionate pay rates, and issues of corporate discrimination. Belinda describes how:

…ten years ago you would never have got [my mum] on the radio, talking. But it’s something that she decided that she could do, and if she put her mind to it, she could do it. So, now she’s okay doing it. It’s not something that she loves to do, because she’s a shy person, but it’s not stopped her.78

Kerry talks about how “after having gone through lots of experiences with escaping domestic violence” and “becoming really aware of myself and…other women” she found herself worrying about her mother. While her parents had been happy together, Kerry saw the death of her father as a chance for her mother to break out of the ‘repressed’ role she had assumed:

I saw this second chance for her to break out and do something remarkable, and I was really worried when she didn’t do it! And I was really sad when she didn’t do it. I have to admit that I was sometimes quite angry. And when she found her new partner, and suddenly I saw her still making sure she was home at five o’clock…and I felt angry about that…’you don’t need to be doing these things!’…But that’s what my mother actually likes to do! She likes to be this person, and she’s safe and secure and happy, and looks after all her – takes an interest in her – children and her grandchildren, and that is enough for her. And that’s fine.79

It’s difficult to get past the idea of false consciousness. Sometimes it’s more empowering both to ourselves and to other women to take a step back and understand that these women have made informed choices about their lives. Some choices may appear to be easier than others, but in fact, the easy choices can be harder than we know. What appear to be easy choices – choices that involve maintaining traditional feminine roles and behaviour – can be choices made in the name of actively liking men, actively enjoying traditionally feminine practices, and the active desire to make a traditional heterosexual relationship work. For some women, living alone, doing as one pleases, going and coming unchecked, can be the easy way out. This is a tough principle to run with as a feminist. We are so used to assuming that our mothers make choices based on their limited skills, knowledge and confidence – or, at worst, pure

78 Rapps, Belinda. Personal interview. 7 August 2003.
habit. Sometimes, we pay lip service to accepting women’s choices (despite our own aversion to such choices), but only rarely do we actually make an effort to understand and value what lies behind their ‘unfeminist’ choices.

Of course, unfeminist choices do happen. And although ‘feminist’ and ‘unfeminist’ are relative terms, I think we can generally identify the moments when choices are genuinely unfeminist. As usual, the key is reflection and conversation. The rationale for a decision can sometimes surprise us. It may force a new understanding of women’s autonomy, of the education they have gained (from friends, sisters, and quiet phone calls) of their legal and fiscal rights, of their personal preference for male company and chivalry, and of their practiced and committed approach to relationships.

As feminists, we can be guilty of assuming too much about generational habits. We often read behaviours through the therapeutic lens that a culture of medicalisation, and television talk shows hosted by psychologists can hardly help but use. Moreover, we tend to see feminist and political consciousness as directly proportionate with the passing of time: we perceive younger generations as somehow so much ‘more feminist’ than older generations of women. 80 We could show so much more respect (not to mention critical reflexivity), however, by giving our mothers the benefit of the doubt when they insist, as they frequently do, that they have made a knowledgeable choice to live as they do.

**Conclusion: the Spectrum of Activism**

My point is not so much that the finite list of specific practices recounted above also count as feminism, but that there are a whole host of other activities out there – activities that do not conform to conventions of feminist activism – which we need to consider as part of a feminist activism spectrum. These other activities are Certeau’s

80 This perception can be reversed in discussions of second and third wave feminists. See Chapter 6.
“tactics.” One example of such tactical resistance is in the Girl Guide leadership experience I described in this chapter’s ‘diary.’ There is little room for a reading of Girl Guide leadership as strategic (organised feminist) resistance: the organisation has its origins in being a mere afterthought of the Boy Scouts, and it originally taught girls the principles of obedience, usefulness and servitude to God, home and country. Girl Guides has not been viewed as a feminist organisation for some time, and in that sense, it does not constitute the kind of formal resistance that clears space for feminist perspectives in hegemonic culture. Recent pushes in the organisation in Australia to foster an ethos of confidence-building in girls and young women (through, for instance, adventurous activities) come closer to being strategic resistance.

However, my (and many other leaders’) tactical use of the Girl Guides structure to make a space for girls to enjoy exclusively female company, to be safe from the male gaze and masculine-identified behaviours, and to revalue girlhood, is a form of resistance which is simultaneously outside the hegemonic perception of women, outside organised feminist activism, and outside the organisation’s mission statement. In other words, I have manipulated an existing structure, and in doing so, I have resisted cultural control. Now you may ask if writing about these tactics in a scholarly thesis, or arguing for their recognition as feminist activism, brings them back into the realm of Certeau’s strategic. I don’t believe these do – not entirely, anyway. I see Certeau’s work as a way of conceptualising the broad spectrum of activity that constitutes feminist activism – a conceptualisation that includes both formal and everyday ways of doing feminism or resisting patriarchy. I can see how some tactics feed into feminist strategies, but tactics are not always a precursor of strategy. I would not want to view the useful categories of tactics and strategy in a sequential or hierarchical way; rather, these are descriptive terms for the often messy split between

81 Certeau. Xix, passim.
official and unofficial feminist activism.

Because feminism is in ‘real life’ and real life is in feminism. Some feminist activism is hard slog, and some of it is fun and silly.Conventionally, the background for feminist activism involves organisation and effort. In addition, we ought to allow circumstance and personal choice to figure as a background of feminist activism when we evaluate the feminism-or-not of any practice. Instead of discussing unconventional activism using terms like ‘sell-out,’ ‘recuperated,’ ‘institutionalised,’ ‘unoriginal,’ ‘incidental’ and ‘selfish,’ we could start to think in terms of women “doing a limited best with what life handed out to them: trying to have a modestly good time.”

However, whenever feminism feels like a good time, we immediately suspect it of being not-real-feminism.

We also tend to assume that women are reluctant to identify with the term ‘feminist’ because they do not want to associate themselves with radical or anti-man practices. I suggest that women often choose not to identify with feminism because they are too familiar with the limited definition of feminist activism, which says ‘only this type of practice counts as feminist activism.’ I suspect that many women genuinely believe that they are not feminists because they don’t do the kinds of feminism proscribed as activism. Perhaps, if women were allowed to feel that their resistant practices were indeed feminist practices, despite their private, transient, or compromised nature, then women might be more willing to identify with a wider feminist movement. This would involve engaging Ang’s redefinition of feminism as a “limited political home” instead of a political “destination” wherein women arrive and stay. We would need to characterize feminism as something we can do, rather than

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82 Steedman. 89.
83 Other theorists would dispute this claim. See the section on “Unboxing the Backlash” in Chapter 6 for different feminists’ explanations of why women do not identify with feminism.
something we must always be. This means feminists must relinquish some control; adjust some of our judgements; and be more flexible when using external criteria for assessing the feminist-or-not of a practice.

In this chapter, I outlined some of the invisible feminist activism that happens every day. At times, this activism crossed over into the realm of theory. It involved written critique, letters and chats, emails and anecdotes (as opposed to, or in addition to, acts of resistance). The line between theory and activism is very unstable. For the sake of being coherent (as I stated in the Introduction), I have marked this line out more clearly than it exists in real life, even while I cross back and forth over it. In other words, I have made an often arbitrary, artificial, and misleading distinction between feminist activism and theory. Right now, I would like to make the transition from one elusive ‘field’ to another – namely, from activism into theory. As in the limiting of feminist activism, we tend to assume that only certain kinds of conventions (this time, linguistic conventions) count as feminist theory. In the next section of this thesis, I explain exactly what counts as feminist theory, and explore some of the other ways of using language that we can include in a more effective definition of feminist theory.
Part 2

Feminist Theory

Definitions of terms

Feminism: resistance to the suffering of women.

Theory:

1. a logical group of statements used as principles to explain something… 2. a suggested explanation not yet established as fact… 3. that part of a science or art which deals with principles and methods rather than with practices. 4. opinion.¹

Or, put simply: ideas, explanations and opinions on a subject.

Feminist theory: ideas, explanations and opinions that work from the resistance to women’s suffering.

What Limits?

Described thus, it is possible to claim that feminist theory comes in a great variety of forms. Academic writing, of course, but also popular writing (novels, poetry, self-help books), other communications genres (such as Internet sites, television and CDs), songs, personal journals, classroom discussions, and conversations. However, these various ways of doing feminist theory are not what we are talking about when we use the words ‘feminist theory’ in common parlance. Rather, we are usually talking about scholarly works – properly researched, professionally presented academic writing about feminism. This is big-F Feminist, big-T Theory. For all its capitalization, I embrace and value this form of feminist theory. My point here is not that official feminist theory is ‘less feminist’ – or more masculine – because it is more widely accepted as feminist theory than other forms of feminist ideology. Rather, the point is that there are other kinds of feminist theory that don’t get a hearing as valid feminist theory. In the following two chapters, I discuss what makes some theory count as ‘real’

feminist theory, and others not. In addition, I ask that we open up our limited definition of feminist theory to include the great variety of non-scholarly works women produce in the name of feminism.

I also ask that we become more conscious of the way we, as academic feminists, write feminist theory. I suggest a review of the writing practices of academic feminist theorists. In asking for such a review, I do not aim to devalue scholarly feminist theory, or relegate it to the status of misguided and inferior feminism. However, I do request that these writers look critically at their own work with a view to:

- widening the scope of their reference material;
- using more accessible language (that is, avoiding jargon and wordiness);
- targeting broad audiences whenever possible;
- concerning themselves less with rhetorical fashions or trends when it comes to using personal experience, research methods (such as empirical scientific experimentation), and metaphysical positions (such as essentialism); and,
- overcoming the fear of co-option (for instance, the fear of one’s work becoming ‘mainstream’).

I appreciate that these practices are not applicable to every feminist’s work, but I suggest that when a feminist writer produces work that does not embrace these practices, she should do so advisedly. As Stanley and Wise put it: “All feminists who are involved in writing and research should be more adventurous, more daring, and less concerned with being respectable – and publishable.”

I ask these things because, to a certain extent, the responsibility to remove the limitations of feminist theory rests largely with academic feminist theorists. It is this group, after all, that ‘owns’ feminist theory right now – so it is this group that can change the terms of ownership to include

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a broader group of women.

In this part of my thesis, you will need to remain aware of my use of the term ‘feminist theory’ to get the best sense of what I am saying. When I discuss scholarly works, I again often use descriptors such as ‘official’ and ‘real’ feminist theory. (I am, as always, using these terms in a conscious manner.) I aim for a conceptualisation of feminist theory that includes a much wider range of ideas, explanations and opinions based on resistance to the suffering of women – in many different forms. Scholarly theory makes up part of this spectrum. My argument is that feminist theory must conform to certain criteria in order to count as ‘official’ feminist theory. I explore these criteria in detail in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 uses the gimmick of the seven deadly (feminist/scholarly) sins, firstly, to show how important the rules of writing feminist theory are (hence the biblical reference) and, secondly, to provide examples of feminist theory that do not conform to these rules.

Before I begin, I wish to present a mocked-up ‘go-around’ – an activity that women frequently use in consciousness-raising groups, and one that teachers also use in the classroom from time to time.3 Here I have collected quotations that make a powerful case against the hierarchical and exclusionary effect of limiting feminist theory. Imagine the topic of the go-around is: ‘Feminist theory: what counts?’

**Go-Around**

_Diane_: Working class women’s own analyses of their situation are frequently seen as anecdotal or merely descriptive. I suggest this is a consequence of academic hierarchies of knowledge which always give primacy to distanced highly theorised overviews.4

_Julie_: It’s important the emotional side of it gets a hearing as well. Men tend to look at

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3 This go-around uses quotations from feminists and other social theorists, including interviewees for this project.

it in black and white.\(^5\)

_Ailbhe_: I’m not questioning feminism’s/feminists’ need for theory: we must strive to comprehend the world and our experiences. The problem is that not all theoretical work is recognised or valued as such – hierarchies again.\(^6\)

_Kay_: If part of our role as academic feminists is to challenge conventions which exclude and marginalise less powerful groups, how can we hope to do this if we continue to ‘play by the rules’?\(^7\)

_Barbara_: Theory has become a commodity because that helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions – worse, whether we are heard at all.\(^8\)

_Bob_: Disciplines…give as well as withhold power, by controlling who may and may not speak on a topic, what must or must not be said, and how a topic must be spoken of for knowledge about it to count.\(^9\)

_Andrea_: People have got to take the economics of the publishing industry very seriously and understand that very few writers will survive who do not write according to the demands of the marketplace, by which I mean essentially the demands of turning out books that you can consume as passively as a television show.\(^10\)

_Kim_: The general public needs to be more aware of what [feminism is] about. They should have some ad on TV or something like that, something that makes a joke about how it’s not just burning bras. There needs to be more public awareness of it…\(^11\)

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Meta: Theory becomes more and more unintelligible and esoteric: while theorists deconstruct the female body, reproductive rights are being chipped away.12

Narelle: [In academic feminist theory,] there’s bound to be some areas where you can bring up a little bit [of personal information]…or just have the voices of real women in there, saying things about what they think.13

Ailbhe: The accusation of incomprehensibility is usually treated with contempt, as old hat, impossibly naïve, absolutely from another level of being. But it ought not to be. If feminist theorists cannot or will not make ourselves understood to women who resist and revolt in other settings, what is the point of making theory?14 Anger gets the better or the worse of me: anger with a certain kind of feminist theory-making – academic, Anglophone, assured, plugged in to powerful resource points most of us have never even heard of. And apolitical, utterly abstracted from the ‘issues and priorities’ of the Women’s Movement anywhere.15

Kathleen: Maybe you still don’t understand? Just as well. These theorists like to think of theory as too complicated for ordinary folks. Deconstruction theories properly float only in the rarefied atmosphere of the ivory tower…Or you understand but don’t agree? Clearly you’re a radical feminist stubbornly persisting with the ‘wrong analysis.’16

Livi: We need structures and networks which will allow women from all classes of society the possibility of meeting and communicating. Perhaps most of all, feminists need to listen and this requires a certain amount of humility – to women who may not want or need what feminism has been able to offer them so far.17

13 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
14 Smyth. 175.
15 Smyth. 173.
Maggie: The solution to oppression is not to devalue theory but to revalue, to rename what we call theory to the theoretical status of feminist thinking.18

Chapter 4

What Counts as Feminist Theory?

_In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing._

– Gwendolyn Fairfax

In this chapter, I discuss canonical feminist theory, and what exactly makes such work count as ‘real’ feminist theory. Under the broad subjects of ‘context’ and ‘style,’ I explore the various unspoken rules for scholarliness that operate when we write feminist theory. In this exploration, I examine some of the history of such rules, existing discussion of the rules, and the reasons why these rules direct the production of feminist theory. Finally, I discuss the link between a hierarchy of feminist theory and a perception of irreconcilable difference between lived experience and ‘the abstract.’ In doing so, I call feminist theorists to account for maintaining a system that excludes great numbers of women from claiming ownership of feminist theory.

Who is Feminist Theory for, Anyway?

_Conversation with Liz Stanley and Sue Wise_

Me: What do you think about the value of canonical feminist theory for feminism?

Liz and Sue: A lot of writing is so jargon-ridden, mystificatory and elitist in its content and expression that it is difficult to believe that it is produced by feminists at all.

Me: Is it fair to say that? I mean, obviously these writers are feminists, because they care about women and the quality of women’s lives. The problem is not so much whether or not these women are feminists, but how they communicate their feminist messages.

Liz and Sue: Well, we see existing ‘difficult’ or ‘complex’ (more often than not read ‘badly written’) social-sciences texts as examples which feminists really shouldn’t try to emulate. We don’t want the act of reading to be an intellectual assault course which

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3 Stanley and Wise. *Breaking Out.* 44.
only the especially athletic can get through.\textsuperscript{4} After all, feminism appeals because it means something – it touches deeply felt needs, feelings and emotions. It makes a direct, emotional and personal appeal, or it means very little except as an intellectual exercise.\textsuperscript{5}

\textit{Me:} So, it’s not simply a stylistic change we need to achieve?

\textit{Liz and Sue:} Certainly not. What we call ‘pretend-naturalism,’ for instance (one-off, revised accounts which deal with the idiosyncracies, quirks and problems of research), has become popular as a more gossipy, lighter and less ‘academic’ way of wringing yet one more publishable paper out of research gone by.\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{Me:} In saying that, aren’t you laying down more laws about what women need to do and how we need to write in order to attain the title of ‘feminist?’

\textit{Liz and Sue:} It is rather that we view this development with some dismay, and see it as a cop-out from attempting to do and write about research in ways which try to combine feminist theory and practice more closely.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{Me:} So how can one combine theory and practice in a productive way?

\textit{Liz and Sue:} By recognizing that we are all of us ‘theoreticians’ because we all of us use our values and beliefs to interpret and so construct the social world.\textsuperscript{8}

\textit{Me:} And the ‘practice’ you mentioned? Where does that come in?

\textit{Liz and Sue:} We need a woman’s language, a language of experience. And this must necessarily come from our exploration of the personal, the everyday, and what we experience – women’s lived experience.\textsuperscript{9} Women have had the power of ‘naming’ our experience of the world taken from us. These experiences have been named for us by men; but men have used the ‘language of theory’ not the ‘language of experience.’

\textsuperscript{4} Stanley and Wise. \textit{Breaking Out}. 7.
\textsuperscript{5} Stanley and Wise. \textit{Breaking Out}. 56.
\textsuperscript{6} Stanley and Wise. \textit{Breaking Out}. 158.
\textsuperscript{7} Stanley and Wise. \textit{Breaking Out}. 158.
\textsuperscript{8} Stanley and Wise. \textit{Breaking Out}. 55.
\textsuperscript{9} Stanley and Wise. \textit{Breaking Out}. 146.
experience has been named by men, but not even in a language derived from their experience. Even this is too direct and too personal. And so it is removed from experience altogether by being cast in abstract and theoretical terms.  

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise’s discussion of the expressive, stylistic and exclusive features of feminist theory began in 1983 in *Breaking Out* and continues to be a topic of some consternation and much disagreement among feminists today. In this chapter, I wish to add to the conversation on scholarly feminist theory. By ‘scholarly feminist theory,’ I mean those works of feminist theory that are part of a scholarly canon, and to which other feminist academics often refer. Those we know as feminist theorists (women who have been researching feminist issues as a career for some time) usually write such works. In other words, women who are not doing academic work, feminist or otherwise, do not write them. I wish to make a shift away from this perspective, and explore what some feminist theorists such as Stanley and Wise have already noted: namely, that non-academic women also theorise. The concept of ‘unofficial,’ ‘non-scholarly’ feminist theory that I want to touch on in this chapter (and investigate more carefully in the next) suggests that *many* women theorise about gender, and that most women can actually put together or analyse *feminist ideas* about gender.

So, why is it that only a handful of women read scholarly feminist theory? Of course, there are various reasons why this happens,  

but it seems that most of the reasons that gain credence in feminist academic work involve assumptions about the lack of interest or ability of everyday feminists, about women’s general resistance to anything that goes by the name ‘feminist,’ and about activists’ condemnation of theory as pointless and ineffective. However, I want to investigate the fact that there are tight guidelines that dictate what counts as official feminist theory as a reason why few  

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11 Another reason, generally forgotten, why relatively few women read feminist theory is the lack of time. I also make note of this factor in Chapters 2 and 3 on feminist activism.
women read academic feminist theory. These guidelines actually ensure that, even when we read, write, chat about, or even show an interest in, feminist ideas, we do not believe we are producing feminist theory unless it conforms to a certain set of criteria. These criteria consist of scholarly conventions: specifically, conventions of scholarly context and scholarly style. In this chapter, I will explore exactly what constitutes a scholarly context and style, and how we know that such conventions make a text count as feminist theory. I also explore some reasons why feminists choose conventional ways of producing feminist theory: that is, I will try to establish exactly what is at stake when feminists make the decision to write one way or another. Firstly, however, I explore a bit of the history of scholarly conventions as they relate to feminist theory.

During what is now called the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, feminists worked hard to establish feminist ideas and the study of women’s issues in educational institutions. By the early 1980s, these women had successfully implemented Women’s Studies programs or courses in a number of universities in the Western world. The burgeoning of scholarly feminist theory, and its accompanying ream of specialised concepts expressed as jargon, was an indicator in the academy that feminism had come of age as a serious academic discipline. Many feminists saw these changes as a triumph of the women’s movement, and rejoiced that women would now have the opportunity to study their own experiences and create their own body of work. However, during the 1980s, a number of feminists raised the concern that certain women were excluded from feminism as it manifested in organised forms (Women’s Studies programs, feminist theory, etc). The excluded women that feminists wrote

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about at the time were black women, lesbians, and working class women. These writers called on other feminists from their various positions of privilege to confess that their ideas and research might not apply to such women.

Around this time, a few feminists raised the point about the exclusion from feminist theory of women who differ academically. This is the point I am trying to emphasise in this chapter. For instance, when Liz Stanley and Sue Wise published *Breaking Out* in 1983, they exposed feminism’s shift away from (supposedly ‘beyond’) everyday experience, and towards a discussion of feminism in abstract terms. As British feminists, they tended to see this issue through the lens of class differences. However, it is relevant that Stanley and Wise protested the idea that an interest in everyday experience is the domain of ‘pre-feminist’ women, and just a stepping-stone to higher feminist consciousness. They unpicked the ideas of false and feminist consciousness, which had been major tenets of early second-wave feminist thought.

Bonnie Mann also subverted the idea of ‘higher consciousness’ when, in 1985, she used Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* with a group of battered women who – horror of horrors – didn’t have the kind of problems understanding it everyone expected them to have! In fact, these women were annoyed that no one had deigned to recommend such texts to them before. The reaction in the group was: “‘Why didn’t we know this?’ ‘How could

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14 For example, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but Some of us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982; Audre Lorde. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Freedom, Calif: Crossing, 1982; and bell hooks. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist; Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989.


16 For example, Sue Dove Gambill. “Looking at Class.” *Off Our Backs* 12.7 (1982), 28 June 2005. <http://prospero.murdoch.edu.au/search/toff+our+backs/toff+our+backs/1%2C3%2C3%2CB/856&FF=toff+our+backs+on&FF=toff+our+backs+on&FF=toff+our+backs+on&FF=toff+our+backs+on&FF=toff+our+backs+on&FF=toff+our+backs+on&FF=toff+our+backs+on&FF=toff+our+backs+on>.

this knowledge have been kept from us for so long?" 18 Stanley, Wise and Mann challenged the reaction to the growth of a market for scholarly feminist theory – a reaction that played to the rules of scholarliness by grounding itself in grand theories, adopting the conventions of ‘serious philosophy’ – as well as assuming that non-academic women wouldn’t understand such works. 19 Feminists like these argued that ‘false consciousness’ and ‘raised consciousness’ are fictions, and writing in a way that plays up or down to these levels of consciousness is elitist. To separate feminism from the real world in this way, they argued, is to alienate real world women from feminism.

However, from here, the concern to include women of difference in feminism appears to have shifted. There was a move to deal more specifically with the alienation of particular minority groups of women. Feminists began to tie the criticism that feminism was elitist up with the idea that feminism was “white and middle class,” 20 and linked, therefore, mainly to issues of race and class. The politics of difference, theorized by academics such as Chandra Mohanty,21 Gayatri Spivak22 and Trinh Minh-ha, 23 is one of the most important discussions feminism has taken part in since the idealistic proposal that feminism should be by, for and about women. Unfortunately, the difference issue has not been an easy one to resolve: we tend to write ourselves into tangles about ethical representation. It is a rare joy to see an attitude of basic confidence and mutual respect when a feminist writes about women of difference. I believe that the way many feminist theorists write about difference reflects our struggle

18 Mann. Xliii.
to understand differences between feminists. Some feminist theorists deal with women of difference with either timidity or apprehension, or by hoping these women will deal with themselves. Woodson notes:

As publishers (finally!) scurry to be a part of the move to represent the myriad cultures once absent from mainstream literature, it is not without some skepticism that I peruse the masses of books written about people of color by white people. As a black person, it is easy to tell who has and who has not been inside “my house.”24

And many white/middle class feminist theorists share this scepticism, or at least have doubts about mainstream feminists’ ability/right to write about women of difference. However, positive outcomes have emerged from the difference conversation, and one of these is that we tend to recognise positions of privilege and relative disadvantage – and we know that we must try to include women of difference in feminism.

Strangely, in the desire to account for some kinds of differences, like class, sexuality and colour, feminists often forget women who differ academically from the feminist norm. Often, we attempt to account for non-academic feminists by naming them as working class or uneducated women – or even non- and anti-feminists. This categorisation fails to account for educated, middle class women who earn a good income, and who live their lives according to at least some basic feminist ideals.

Mainstream academic feminists don’t often make space for non-academic women to read their work, unable to credit these feminists with the interest or ability to engage with scholarly feminist theory. Often, there is simply no way through the style of feminist theory for non-academic feminists. However, if it is feminism’s dearest wish to put itself out of business (in the sense that we might realise social change), then to exclude any women at all is not good feminist business practice.

*About Theory: Knowledge, Purpose and Power*

The premise of my argument in this chapter is that knowledge is not a static block of ideas magically dropped from the heavens in order to instruct us in how to live

more feminist lives. Knowledge is tied to its human maker, and that human maker is in
turn tied to her cultural, economic and historical environment – not to mention the
‘discursive’ environment in which she produces knowledge (that is, cultural theory, or
science, or sociology, or popular fiction, etc.). In other words, theory is never produced
‘free’ of certain influences and constraints. These include assumed audience,
publishation criteria, geographical considerations, the intellectual climate (that is, what
kinds of theory and subjects are fashionable), and the political environment. All of
these influences and constraints lead to decisions (conscious or not) the theorist makes
about how the theory will look, what its purpose will be, and whom it will ultimately be
for. The theorist decides, then, whether or not to use scholarly or other conventions,
based on her writing goals and whom she believes will access the theory. Liz Stanley,
in the introduction to *Feminist Praxis*, rightly states that we need to take:

> …seriously at an intellectual and analytical level the academic mode of
> production…[to take] seriously the research and writing process within the social
> sciences generally, and within feminist social science in particular.25

In addition, we need to have an understanding of the reader’s or audience’s role in
making meaning from knowledge. Ien Ang discusses a variety of conceptualisations of
“the audience” in her essay “The Nature of the Audience.”26 One of these is of the mass
audience with “low taste and intelligence” as passive consumer of knowledge27;
another conceptualisation assumes that the audience uses the media (or a text) because
“doing so will give them some gratifications.”28 Another theory of audience (and this is
the one I would subscribe to), “Reception Analysis,” finds what an audience interprets
or uses or discards from a text an important object of study.29 Ang also points out the

155-65.
necessity of attending to *how* the media (and, I would add, other reading material) are “integrated into our everyday lives.” The point I am making here is that some theory of the audience’s role in making meaning of knowledge is also essential when studying the processes of producing theory.

In this chapter, I will look critically at these various processes of producing scholarly feminist theory, and, in particular, at how these processes define feminist theory as legitimate or not. Legitimacy is a major problem within feminist theory. Feminist theorists express concerns about validating different forms of knowledge as feminist theory, from specific pieces of work, to entire genres, to even broader conceptions of theory. Braidotti uses just such a broad conception, describing feminism as, “the means chosen by certain women to situate themselves in reality so as to redesign their ‘feminine’ condition.” I like this definition and can use it specifically for feminist theory. However, my claim that the means of producing feminist theory (and practice) are many and varied should not suggest that I make a blanket claim for the theoretical or feminist validity for all the experience or theory of women. I do not wish to fall blindly into the trap Joanna Russ describes:

> In some quarters …the crucial idea that all women’s experiences are equally valid has been supplanted by the new and totally muddling idea that all women’s opinions are equally valid, a piece of mystification that accepts almost anything any woman says or does as ‘feminist’ merely because it was a woman who said it or did it.

Rather, I suggest that scholarliness and validity as theory need not go hand in hand. I argue for a wider conceptualization of ‘legitimate’ feminist theory, based on the work’s principles of critical reflection and strategic development, as well as the uses to which the reader puts this work, rather than on the simple presence of the scholarly conventions of feminist theory.

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31 See the section in this chapter on “Scholarly Foundations” for examples of these theorists.
33 Russ, Joanna. *What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class and the Future of Feminism*. New York: St Martin’s, 1998. 2.
Obviously, my discussion in this chapter rests on the idea that feminists within the academy privilege the application of scholarly conventions in feminist theory. I discuss later in this chapter how I know that this happens. Right now I need to ask: what are the implications of this privileging? In 1985, Dianne Court warned that elite styles of theorising would lead “gender studies [into] an elitist, depoliticised ghetto which ultimately would play into the solidification of the empowered knowledge we hoped to challenge.” Court’s is a significant criticism. Feminism has a history of breaking down pretensions to capital-T ‘Truth’ that makes any production of privileged knowledge both thorny and suspicious. An interesting effect of this conflict of interests is that highly scholarly feminist theory does not always enjoy the same acceptance and applause as abstract theory from other disciplines – it has to validate itself over and over as furthering the feminist political cause despite having ‘lost touch’ with experience. This is another one of those contradictions between feminist principles (that is, the renunciation of conventions of ‘malestream’ theory) and the reality of doing feminism that I explored in Chapter 2.

However, even while we keep this contradiction in mind, it is fitting to ask questions about the effects of privileging highly scholarly feminist theory over all other forms. After all, to ask questions is not to suggest that we should discount scholarly theory as feminist theory. I utterly resist a wholesale rejection of scholarly theory. Scholarly feminist theory allows us to increase understanding, decrease isolation, demonstrate both the commonality and diversity of women’s experiences, share strategies, unpick double meanings, and expose sexist messages and acts that are obscured by their familiarity. But we do need to examine the purposes scholarly conventions serve for feminism as a movement. The purposes these conventions serve are to allow academics easily to carry on a conversation about topics seen as important

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to feminism, they show that feminist theory has come of age, that it can measure up to traditional high academic theory, that it belongs in the academy…but hang on, are these appropriate as goals for feminist theory? In one sense, they are appropriate, but they are questionable as the only goals for feminist theory. These goals do little more for feminism than show how, as Adrienne Rich puts it, feminist theory can speak nicely and “wear a dress.” Moreover, I believe scholarly conventions are likely to play keep-it-off with feminist theory, creating a barrier between women who know how to play the game of scholarly production and those who don’t.

Scholarliness tends to be an identifier of ‘real’ feminist theory – and it shouldn’t be. In order to rethink ‘what counts’ as feminist theory, we need to internalise a particularly radical idea: namely, when a woman’s description of her experience fails to gel with my own scholarly theorising, maybe I could move beyond the possibility that she is falsely conscious. I could also admit the possibility that I, as a theorist, could be looking more widely at the world. After all, we cannot always assume that:

...forms of feminism that identify women’s oppression or inequality in terms of structural conditions, ...have made less impact at the level of consciousness ...[so women] have difficulty articulating the structural constraints that frame women’s choices ...

Is it really about an inability to articulate feminist theoretical concepts, or is it that many women have a different feminist focus altogether? Must we assume that women who have this supposed difficulty are ignorant of structures of women’s oppression, or is it possible that they might produce sophisticated feminist theory by referring exclusively to their personal experiences?

An unnamed feminist, whom Patai and Koertge describe as “a prolific and highly visible scholar in one of the social sciences,” makes the point that:

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...there is bound to be a relationship between feminism as a political enterprise and Women’s Studies, but...you can’t collapse the two, because then everything Women’s Studies people do is judged by some political result, and then it’s not scholarship anymore.37

I would argue that feminist theory does need to be subject to some form of political judgement: a judgement primarily made by the theorist herself when she reflects on the purpose of her work. Beasley notes that, “some writers adopt the view that feminism should not be conceived in terms of ideas alone, since it also refers to political struggles.”38 After all, feminism (whether this is in the form of theory or some other form) is a social justice movement. Social justice movements generally have two aims we can consider identifiable and universal: one being to change unfair conditions of existence, and the other being to reach and ‘recruit’ people to the movement. Using scholarly conventions such as relentlessly deploying highly abstract concepts, or writing exceedingly dense language may, therefore, require greater self awareness in the feminist framework. Stanley urges:

…a continuing shared feminist commitment to a political position in which ‘knowledge’ is not simply defined as ‘knowledge what,’ but also as ‘knowledge for.’ Succinctly the point is to change the world, not only to study it.39

Theorists need, therefore, to ask and answer questions about who the theory is for, what the theory is about, and what purpose the act of producing the theory serves – both immediately, and in the bigger political picture.

**Scholarly Conventions Count**

As shown in the ‘conversation’ earlier in this chapter, I disagree with Stanley and Wise that some writing can be “so jargon-ridden, mystificatory and elitist in its content and expression that it is difficult to believe that it is produced by feminists at all.”40 I do not find it difficult to believe that feminists produce feminist theory, no

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matter how dense or difficult. I think it is unfair to call into question these writers’
feminist integrity just because they write in the way the academy requires them to. On
the other hand, I do agree that if there is an intelligent, thoughtful woman who cannot
understand a piece of feminist writing because of jargon, or because she finds her eyes
sliding off the abstract concepts, perhaps we need to rethink our motivations for writing
in these highly scholarly styles. It might well be that it is not the main points or ideas of
a work that are too difficult for this woman – it’s the language used to describe these
ideas. Any feminist writers who are concerned that non-academic women take little
interest in their theory might do well to look at their own work. Is it accessible to more
than an audience already immersed in academic-speak?

Feminist and ethnographer Kamala Visweswaran says: “It has taken me some
time to realize different audiences might require different forms of writing and
theorizing.” Using this axiom, one would assume that the academic world requires
one thing, and the non-academic world another. But must it be so? Cannot the
academic world of feminism form a better relationship with the non-academic world of
feminism? Personally, I object to any suggestion that we must ‘dumb’ feminist theory
down for the non-academic world. Perhaps Visweswaran could have said, “It has taken
me some time to realize different audiences respond to different forms of writing and
theorizing.” The idea of a non-academic audience requiring a certain form of writing is
rather disrespectful, and a way of avoiding responsibility for writing accessibly. Of
course, there are different levels of reading ability and educational background, not to

41 There are less conventional forms of dense and difficult theory – such as that produced by ‘French
feminists’ Helene Cixous (E.g. “Coming to Writing” and other Essays. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP,
1991) and Luce Irigaray (E.g. This Sex Which Is Not One. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP,
1985). The writing styles of these theorists are closely connected with the habits of French philosophy
(for example, highly abstract and self-reflective discussion, less rigorous sourcing, and a more creative
writing structure). I touch on such stylistic features in this chapter; however, my main focus is on the
scholarly conventions of English-speaking countries. Incidentally, the split between French-identified
and American-identified styles of producing feminist theory is discussed in Toril Moi’s Sexual/Textual
Politics (1999) and Domna Stanton’s “Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Dis-Connection”
mention intelligence, amongst women, but even when we account for such differences, there is a gap between scholarly theory and educated, intelligent, reading women who wish to read feminist writing. By the same token, I object to the notion that we ‘smart’ theory up for an academic audience. This idea calls to mind the discussion of levels of consciousness that Stanley and Wise initiated. In essence, it is saying that experience, creative writing, conversations and other non-scholarly forms, are not enough to constitute ‘real’ feminist theory.

When I first presented some of my own work to a group of colleagues, one of them suggested that I write two texts for this project: one that would satisfy the requirements of the university for scholarliness, and another that might be a kind of ‘translation’ of the scholarly work into everyday language – something that could be marketed to a wider audience. Another colleague suggested writing in a scholarly style, but adding a glossary of terms to the thesis so that non-academic women might wade through it. Neither option sits well with what I’m trying to achieve through this work, because neither admits even the possibility that a scholarly work does not need to be written in a lofty scholarly style. For me, the only ethically adequate thing to do is to write a thesis that proposes that feminism is not confined to conventional forms of academia and activism, without adhering strictly to the scholarly conventions I describe. Any other approach would be hypocrisy.

Dumbing down and smarting up theory are ways of describing stylistic attributes of a text. I have apprehensions about the style of my own work. In an ideal world, my work is scholarly in that it is reflective, critical, and engaged with other theory on the subject; but in this world, some readers might find it lacking in the

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44 Stanley and Wise criticize the way “the intelligibility gap between producers and consumers is filled by a burgeoning number of ‘translators’, a group whose work ... is presently crucial to the existence and status of ‘feminist Theory’, but which would become largely redundant if ‘Theory’ was written more accessibly.” From “But the Empress has no Clothes! Some Awkward Questions about the ‘Missing Revolution’ in Feminist Theory.” *Feminist Theory* 1 (2000): 261-288. 266.
stylistic conventions expected from a PhD thesis. Which says it all really: accusations of unscholarliness often come down to differences in style rather than content. Just look at what happened to Mary Daly when she applied for full professorship at Boston College in 1974:

By any and all standards of academia/academentia this was a highly appropriate time to have applied for the full professorship. I had published (in addition to dissertations) two major books – The Church and the Second Sex (first brought out by Harper and Row in 1968) and Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation (Beacon Press 1973). By the fall of 1974 the latter was used as a college text in universities and seminars across the country and was excerpted in several publications. In addition I had made contributions to more than ten books and had published more than twenty articles in professional journals as well as in feminist periodicals. I had done substantial committee work in a variety of areas, had given more than seventy public lectures, and had presented papers to learned [sic] societies. I was listed in a dozen or so Who’s Who Dictionaries and Encyclopedias. I also had seven degrees, three of them doctorates.

I mention these tedious details of qualifications because the university’s decision, unbelievably, was negative. My students and many other supporters demanded an explanation, so the department chair ‘explained’ to interviewers from The Heights, the student newspaper (February 10, 1975): ‘She has made no significant contribution to the field. In terms of achievement, Mary’s case seemed to rest on that book [Beyond God the Father], and it is not a distinguished academic achievement.’

Any academic who has read any of Daly’s books will see immediately why she was refused full professorship. Her writing is dramatic and ferocious, cutting, teasing, and playful. Her work is intellectual in a complex way, being wise but not scholarly in the way we tend to understand scholarliness. Indeed, non-academics might find it more difficult to understand why such brilliant, insightful work is an insufficient “academic achievement.” Daly herself acknowledges that her academic training means she can articulate her argument with precision and clarity, but reminds us that this is quite different from the academic rhetorician, who “merely argues to score points but does not seek the truth.”

Although this is a dated example, and perhaps a good part of the prejudice Daly experienced relates to the reception of feminism in the 1970s, I include this example because it is important to show how those entrenched in powerful levels of academia

46 Daly. Xxix.
can frame the argument for scholarliness. Scholarliness, or lack thereof, is not always just a matter of style; it can actually be a political or philosophical statement. In Daly’s case this is particularly true. Daly’s experience demonstrates how accusations of unscholarliness can be a way of quelling an unpopular or undesirable line of thought, whether this quelling is done from outside or within feminism. Daly was saying some amazing and radical things about religion, men and women, and systems of learning, and it’s not surprising that higher powers within her institution baulked, not just at promoting her, but at recognising her work as genuine academic theory. Feminists (and of course non-feminists) today use similar strategies to discredit work they find politically suspect – particularly those works which question or threaten to overturn deeply valued beliefs.47 However, this is not an honest way to have a feminist conversation: attacking unusual methods as ‘sloppy,’48 or making claims about the level of scholarliness of a work can be more of a deflection of the real issues that are at stake. It might be more useful to listen to and confront what is being said, rather than relentlessly judging how it is being said.49

**Scholarly Context**

The environment we generally associate with the production of ‘real’ feminist theory is the Academy (universities, research institutes and colleges). We will occasionally accommodate theory produced in fieldwork situations, such as women’s refuges or anthropological studies of women in different cultures, under the official feminist theory umbrella. But outside of these study environments, anyone calling

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47 Chapter 6 of this thesis explores some of the ways intergenerational feminist conflict is played out along these lines.
48 I distinguish here between work that resists certain conventions being called ‘sloppy,’ and genuinely ‘sloppy’ research, which might be characterised by inaccuracies, mistaken generalisations and unsubstantiable claims.
herself a feminist theorist immediately becomes suspect. In essence, research and writing become more respectable if they have the express support (often financial) of a university, research institute or college. Even my own research, supported and funded by a university, allows one of my interviewees to describe me as a legitimate or ‘official’ feminist. In an interview, we started to talk about some of the comments I’ve had since I got married. “Oh, you got married? It’s always the ones you don’t expect. You seemed too independent for that.” The interviewee was shocked by the disapproving tone of these responses, and assured me that she’d never had to put up with remarks like that. She added, after a thoughtful pause, “You know, you’re doing this feminist studies and thesis, all the rest of it – [people] see you differently, perhaps, to how they see me.”50 In other words, writing and researching feminist theory at university means I’m now seen as a different kind of feminist – divorced from the real world of daily life and work and marriage – part of a scholarly context that is the Academic Old Girls’ Club.

Conversation with Shulamit Reinharz51

Me: You list a lot of different people’s definitions of what feminism is about in the introduction to your book, Feminist Methods in Social Research.

Shulamit: The variety of definitions of feminism is fortunate because the lack of orthodoxy allows for freedom of thought and action.52

Me: It must make it difficult, though, to choose texts for a study of feminist methodology like the one you have produced. Many feminists work with a single definition.
Shulamit: I reject the notion of a transcendent authority that decides what constitutes ‘feminist,’ consistent with the antihierarchical nature of many feminist organizations and much feminist spirit.\textsuperscript{53}

Me: Well, how do you decide what is feminist in your work?

Shulamit: Researchers must either identify themselves as feminist or as part of the women’s movement; or they must be published in journals that publish only feminist research, or in books that identify themselves as such; or they must have received awards from organizations that give awards to people who do feminist research.\textsuperscript{54}

Me: So, you include works in you analysis based on the context of institutional feminism only?

Shulamit: Yes. It seems unfair to apply a current definition to people’s work two decades ago.\textsuperscript{55} It is also consistent with a feminist valuing of people’s self-identification.\textsuperscript{56}

Me: I’m concerned that your method of defining feminism means you include only works by researchers who are willing and able to identify as feminists, and works that are published in the ‘right’ journals and given awards by the ‘right’ organisations. When you exclude works and research practices resistant to this kind of institutionalisation you might actually be ignoring writers who have avoided systems of institutional feminism by not declaring themselves feminist, or getting published, or being given awards for feminist research. To categorise feminism thus limits your analysis.

Shulamit: It is true, sadly, that my definition prevents me from discussing the work of feminists who were somehow prevented from using the term ‘feminist.’\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} Reinharz. 7.
\textsuperscript{54} Reinharz. 6.
\textsuperscript{55} Reinharz. 7.
\textsuperscript{56} Reinharz. 8.
\textsuperscript{57} Reinharz. 8.
Me: You can avoid this unhappy result by ensuring that you don’t slip into using a “feminist framework which defines some women out of existence.” After all, just because some forms of feminism are problematic, doesn’t mean they are not feminism. Your criteria for selection of feminist works don’t really gel with that freedom of thought and action you say the multiplicity of definitions of feminism provides. You cannot overcome the ethical dilemma posed by this debate when you pass the responsibility for naming feminism onto other people. You can name things feminism yourself – you could have chosen to include ‘illegitimate’ feminist works, such as unpublished or ‘undeclared’ feminist writing, accompanied by a rationale for including them, and perhaps some acknowledgement of problems you had deciding what to use…

One of the problems Reinharz demonstrates is the fear of identifying others as feminists when they don’t identify themselves thus. This problem is in part connected with the identity politics quandary I described in Chapter 2, but it is also an ethical consideration that feminists must take into account. How do we talk about women who clearly act in feminist ways, or produce feminist theory, but who do not identify explicitly as feminists? Is it fair to call them feminists? Is it potentially damaging to them or their work to call them feminists? Again, this involves consideration of the concept of agenda: that is, what was the theorist’s agenda when she produced the theory? As I’ve already noted, agendas are only ever knowable by the subject who has the agenda. Therefore it becomes the reader’s or audience’s responsibility to decide whether or not a work or an act is feminist (and whether we can ethically name it ‘feminism’). This is not a ‘death of the author’ attitude; rather, it is the acknowledgement that specific motivations for producing theory are not always

58 Spender, Dale. Qtd. in Reinharz. 9.
Wasley 193

penetrable. Even when theorists declare their agendas, it is possible to read other motivational factors in a text and, therefore, the reader’s active role in interpreting the theory, as well as considering cultural factors surrounding the production of the theory, become significant.

However, I wish to focus here upon the way that the choice (like Reinharz’s) to discuss only works located in a particular context (in this case, institutional feminism) points up an insidious habit amongst feminist theorists. This habit is to seek out and focus almost exclusively on those works of theory that appear in a scholarly context, in a tacit agreement that it is the context which makes the theory legitimate. A couple of different factors make up this context. The network of colleagues we read and write amongst is one of these. Readers of feminist writing can keep track of whether or not it counts as feminist theory by looking at the bibliography and in-text referencing. To whom does the writer refer for support or dissent? Usually, it is to big-name feminist theorists,60 or feminists who write about big-name theory. The woman from down the street is never an appropriate reference unless it is strictly for raw data (because she probably has false consciousness and we can use her words to show how she needs a proper feminist education!). We also expect feminist theory to be published by the ‘right’ publishers. The wrong publishers may be those who publish popular fiction and autobiography – any of the non-academic publishers, for instance. Self-publishing is an absolute no-no. If no-one except you wants to publish your work, how can you expect anyone to take it seriously as feminist theory? In this section I examine in detail how one produces feminist theory in the correct scholarly context.

60 Stanley and Wise point out “the ritualistic ‘company we keep’ referencing practices of academic audiences” in “But the Empress Has No Clothes!” 273.
There are certain theorists to whom one knows it is always safe to refer (Butler, Harding, Bartky, Spivak, Irigaray), regardless of whether or not one concurs with their work. But there are other theorists to whom we refer with more trepidation, anxious somewhere in the back of our minds that these are not ‘real’ theorists, but in fact merely scientists, or activists, or neither of these! They may be non-theorists or non-experts, who are far too bound up in theorising the concrete realities of their fields/worlds to be producing ‘genuine’ intellectual theory. This phenomenon can even take place when the theorist doesn’t come from the ‘right’ discipline (the right ones being Women’s Studies, Sociology, Philosophy, Cultural Studies or Literary Theory).

The reaction of other academics to our choice of reference material is a good indication that the company we keep counts! For instance, when I presented a paper at a discussion group for women postgraduate students at university, some of the group members wanted to know who a particular writer I was talking about actually was. Her name was Marlene LeGates – not a famous feminist name. The trouble was that I was talking about how feminists can over-define feminism, and using LeGates as an example of this. In other words, I was discussing a general problem and referring to a specific situation – but using an example that was not familiar to the academic feminists in the room. Alarm bells immediately start ringing for these feminists. Where was Marlene LeGates coming from? Well, she had written a history of feminism in Western society, so I guessed she was coming from the academic discipline of History. And there was the problem – I was talking about this woman as though she was a proper feminist theorist to be used as an example when discussing the production of academic feminist theory, but really, Marlene LeGates was just a historian. History

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62 All of these authors have full citations in the Bibliography.
63 The text in question was Marlene LeGates’ Making Waves: a History of Feminism in Western Society. Ontario: Copp Clark, 1996.
(even feminist history) is dates and facts, not feminist theory. “I’d just like to know a bit more about Marlene LeGates,” one of my colleagues kept saying. “I’ve never heard of her.”

Perhaps I failed to introduce my topic properly, but I rather think my colleague wanted to know that Marlene LeGates wasn’t just a writer posing as a feminist theorist. Well, what if she was? Does that make her research any less suitable for my study? Not unless the kind of limiting of feminism I was trying to generalize about was exclusive to LeGates’ writing (which it wasn’t). Now that I check the details of LeGates’ book, I realise with some disappointment that her research is, in fact, suitable for scholarly attention. One of the right academic publishers (Copp Clark) published her work, and she is, in fact, a teacher of tertiary-level Women’s Studies in Canada. In her preface, she mentions lectures and academic audiences.\textsuperscript{64} In other words, LeGates’ book does manage to slide in with the appropriate scholarly context for official feminist theory: it, like other accepted feminist theory, has behind or around it the correct publishing houses, conferences and lectures, research reputations, academic qualifications, dissertations and periodicals. These contextual necessities involve attention to, however neatly concealed:

…how literary canons are formed; the conventions that have defined some texts as ‘literary”; why some histories and interpretations prevail while others struggle to get into print; the differences made by gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, and political and economic power in the writing, publication, and reading of texts; writers, texts, and readers as cultural commodities; the roles of educational and other institutions in defining objects, methods, and values of education; and the relations among educational institutions, governments, business interests, and other cultural components.\textsuperscript{65}

As you can see from my experience of using a ‘suspect’ text in my postgraduate group, all of these things count.

\textsuperscript{64} LeGates. Preface. N. pag.
In 1981, Dale Spender’s essay “The Gatekeepers: a Feminist Critique of Academic Publishing” appeared in Helen Roberts’ book *Doing Feminist Research*. Spender describes some of the problems of academic publishing of the time – most notably, its domination by men. According to Spender’s essay, feminist writers struggled to get their work published in mainstream academic journals that were edited and reviewed primarily by men. Spender also urges feminists to open a discussion of the problems of publishing within *feminist* journals: namely, a system of reviewing and auditing whereby only those whose work is *politically* or *philosophically* acceptable to editors and reviewers (who are often the editors’ friends), gets published; the eagerness to publish big names to the exclusion of emerging writers; and the necessity of getting one’s work published in an academic environment in which the printed word is esteemed over other forms of theory. Interestingly, it does not appear that this discussion has developed in the way Spender hoped it would. Existing work on feminist theory and the publishing industry focuses more on topics such as historical records or profiles of feminist publishers, and the differences between feminist and mainstream publishing, than on self-reflective investigation of the publication process itself. Other work has detoured from a discussion of the publication process to

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69 I have found very few works which discuss the effect of the publication process on the production of feminist theory, although *Politics and Scholarship: Feminist Academic Journals and the Production of Knowledge* by Patrice McDermott (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994) is one exception.
describe how publication relates to academic tenure and other professional issues.\textsuperscript{70} Although I do not use empirical research on feminist publication, I will now describe how the publishing of feminist theory works, and explore further some of the problems Spender identified back in 1981.

The publishing houses, journals, or compilation editors who select and publish feminist writing \textit{count} when it comes to deciding what is or is not feminist theory. The selection of publishing houses is less important these days, but it is interesting to note that when I look at the bibliographies of many of the articles and books I have read during this project, very few of the publishers listed are unfamiliar to me, or, more significantly, unknown to me as publishers of scholarly work. The publisher of a book is still something I think many feminist scholars idly take note of when we work on our own bibliographies, or even flick through others’ bibliographies. A number of the publishing houses become familiar to us as the ‘right’ publishing houses – (in Australia) Allen and Unwin, Oxford University Press, Virago, Routledge, Sage, and so on. Then, when we submit our own work for publication, these become our first preferences. We will settle for other publishers if necessary – even with joy and pride – but that doesn’t change the fact that we send our work to the big-name publishing houses first. Nor does it change the fact that we and respect the author who has managed to get one of these big names to publish her work. However, in the end, the publisher of a work only has a minimal effect on its readership.

The journal in which a scholarly work is published is infinitely more significant. Feminist scholars have definite favourites when it comes to journals. Big-name

feminist journals vary from country to country, but in Australia they include: *Signs, Hecate, Feminist Studies, Feminist Theory, Australian Feminist Studies*, and *Women’s Studies International Forum*. Although we generally look through a journal simply because we’re trying to trace some article or another in that issue, there are a large number of scholars and libraries who actually subscribe to periodicals. This subscription means that it suddenly becomes important to get published in one of the big-name journals – because the more famous the journal, the wider your readership. Of course, the clamour to get published in the important periodicals means that the editors of such journals can pick and choose what they publish. The essays themselves are peer-reviewed by other feminist scholars. Actually pulling off a big-name journal publication is, therefore, more difficult, and gives you quite a bit of prestige as a feminist scholar. Universities collude with this elitist system by allocating extra resources to schools and departments within the university that produce scholars who get published in audited, peer-reviewed journals (‘audited’ means that circulation is restricted to certain kinds of subscribers, such as academics and libraries):

Under the Research Assessment Exercise, university funding is now augmented by funding which is directly tied to a measure of the quality of the research multiplied by the volume of research outputs.  

The “quality of the research” can generally be assessed by where it is published: the audited, big-name journals, of course, only publish “quality” research.

The edited compilation of scholarly essays is another publication context that counts when it comes to ‘real’ feminist theory. It would be highly unusual for an editor to make a general or public call for submissions for a book. Rather, the editor actively seeks contributors to the book, making a request to contribute both exciting and prestigious for a feminist scholar. However, this selective approach puts both editors and scholars in a precarious position. Editors must select their contributors with care,

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ensuring that the contributions they seek will improve and forward the books they edit. They must often consider how the selection of contributors will make their books more saleable or respectable in the academic community. To seek out the big names or up-and-coming big-name feminist theorists is frequently a priority for editors who are working for the success of their publications. The scholars approached for contribution must also take care. After all, once one’s work is published in a book, it will generally become part of the overall message of the book, regardless of how it was originally intended. Scholars must ensure that they don’t connect their work with anything politically disparate from their own theory, controversial (or alternatively, reactionary), or — worst of all — unscholarly.

Publishing houses and journals prefer to publish the big names, the big names prefer to get published by the big name publishing houses and journals, editors prefer to include the big-name authors in their compilations — which all goes to show that publishing in the academic world is an incestuous business. What does this highly selective and elite publishing process actually mean? Why is it done this way? One answer to this question is complacency. We simply don’t think about the fact that the publication process works like this, or the implications of such a process. As a result, the publication process becomes invisible. As Stanley points out, there is an “effective denial” of every stage of the academic mode of production until we arrive at “knowledge’ and ‘science.’”72 I would argue that, much of the time, this denial is not even a conscious one; rather, it is simply that we take for granted all of the processes that occur before a work appears in published form. Even when we understand the process, it is something we do not tend to think about or find relevant to our own feminist theorising.

Another answer to the question of why the publication process works to delineate what counts as feminist theory is that, as authors, editors and publishers, we attempt to protect our work from and ourselves from association with something we don’t like. This ‘something’ might be controversy (or lack of controversy), the wrong kind of politics, the wrong audience, colleagues (for instance, in a compiled book) we disagree with or don’t think we belong alongside in a publication, or even publication style (the scholarliness, for example, of a publication). In the end, our careers are at stake. Sometimes we might not wish to look too radical or too reactionary, too pop or too learned, too middle class or too marginalized. And none of us ever wants to look half-baked, unprofessional, cheap or desperate. So we perpetuate the incestuous cycle of publication, occasionally bemoaning the difficulty of getting into print, but generally accepting the rules that make it so hard.

**Scholarly Style**

In addition to its context, the style of a work also affects its reception as feminist theory. What exactly constitutes the scholarly style? The choice of topic is no longer one of the main criteria for scholarly writing – one can write about almost anything, from Barbie dolls to surf culture, so long as one sticks to the rules. But we generally use formal language, jargon and specialised terms, and a serious tone in order to comply with stylistic conventions. Scholarly style also involves an approach of ‘attack and defend.’ Academic rhetoric characterizes differences of opinion as a battlefield: we argue, debate, shoot down, deconstruct, form alliances; resist, interrogate and clash.73 Generic styles are yet another indicator of ‘proper’ feminist theory. For instance, feminist theory is generally published in a scholarly form (as an essay, a journal article, a book, etc.). If it is to be accepted as ‘proper’ theory, it is

unlikely to be in the form of a poem or story, life writing, a magazine or newspaper article, a film, a song, or a conversation. Finally, scholarly style often requires abstract theory, as opposed to theory tied to, or based explicitly on, personal experience and concrete events. In the following section, I will explore these stylistic attributes in more detail, and discuss some of the reasons why these things count when it comes to feminist theory.

**Scholarly Words: Jargon and Difficult Language**

Jargon (technical terms, or words that are specific to the field, which are used in official feminist theory in a self-evident way) tends to be an obvious way to distinguish scholarly feminist theory from its non-scholarly counterpart. Many academic feminists overuse words like ‘constructivist,’ ‘ontological’ and ‘foundationalism,’ confusing the issue for feminists who don’t have access to the secret code language for academics (“Psst, what’s the password?” “Dominant paradigm!”). In other words, much jargon renders theory highly exclusive. Some work has been done on jargon in the 1980s and 1990s, but little has been resolved on the issue. One of the problems with jargon is, of course, that once you have been inducted into the academic way of thinking and speaking, it’s very easy to revert to the technical terms, even when you don’t intend to.

The following is an excerpt from a conversation I had about feminism with a non-academic feminist:

Me: What we were talking about was not knowing how to talk to boys and men. Communicating. And you were talking about the facilitators at school. My question was ‘rather than learning to cope like these books, for example Raising Boys, encourage women to do, can we look at the rupture created in sexist structures of language when women can’t communicate properly with men as an opening for feminist work?

Narelle: I don’t understand the question.


Me: Okay, what I’m trying to say is, rather than going ‘okay I better read this book so I can work out how to communicate with men,’ can we look at the break in the continuity of the sexist system that we all just go along with every day—‘commonsense’—there’s a break in that when we suddenly realise that women and men aren’t communicating properly. So rather than learning to cope with it by reading these books, can we use that rupture as a space to start feminist work?75

Narelle: What do you mean by feminist work? Writing, action? What do you mean?76

What happened in the above snippet of conversation? Even after I broke down what I meant by “rupture,” “sexist structures of language” and “opening,” I still assumed that my interviewee would know exactly what I meant by “feminist work” – a term that seems self-explanatory but is actually quite mystifying. This is a good example of the way official feminist theorists maintain an academic Old Girls’ Club. It's got its own language, its own interests, and its own modes of communication. The scary thing is just how easy it is to slip into the common mode of communicating when talking about feminism. I did it – even in a conversation that was supposed to be about accessible feminist theory!

Personally, I feel somewhat critical of feminist theorists who use jargon heavily in their writing.77 Every field has its own specific language, and some fields more forgivably have their jargon than others do – fields, for instance, that do not concern themselves with political and social change and therefore do not have a need to reach a large number of people. There are terms that began as feminist jargon, such as ‘sexual harassment’ and ‘reproductive rights,’ that have made their way into common use and are, in fact, important expressions for describing feminist issues in society. However, I am not calling into question the use of terms that describe practical feminist issues; rather, I question the heavy use of academic terms in works that might hold interest and

75 Incidentally, Elizabeth Wurtzel articulated this sentiment beautifully when she said: “Men pretty much do as they will and women pretty much continue to pick up the slack. That’s why books like Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus succeed. It remains to this day, even after feminism, a woman’s chore to close the gap.” From Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women. London: Quartet, 1998. 25.
76 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 18 May 2000.
77 I’m reluctant to point fingers here, and to be honest, I feel it is unnecessary because most feminist academics are familiar with works that use difficult language and/or jargon heavily.
usefulness for women who are not familiar with such terms. Feminist academics need to decide whether the convenience and clarity of academic terms outweighs the importance of communicating with women outside the academic circle. Overusing jargon is not in feminist interests because it limits the number of women who have access to the wisdom and challenges of scholarly feminist theory. Feminist academics are already thinking feminists – it’s not only the academics we should be trying to reach through writing. For me, the feminist movement (and by movement I refer to actual motion) that will occur when feminist theorists stop writing in the secret language of jargon will be towards the women who might enjoy a more thoughtful, deeper, and wider understanding of the way their sex shapes their lives. The movement will be that of reaching out, extending a respectful hand to the non-academic women, rather than the wild gesticulation of wordiness.

It’s not, after all, as though women do not want to read about sex, sexism and sex-rules. We know how popular books on gender are. Look at bestsellers like *Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus,*78 and *Why Men Don’t Listen and Why Women Can’t Read Maps.*79 Women in particular are very anxious to know why men and women have such confusing relationships; why women find it so hard to climb the corporate ladder or even to get paid decently; why we get that feeling of floating alienation and isolation in a man’s world, and why men are still raping and beating us. But non-academic women read books that do not promote change – that simply encourage us to better understand (and even value) the failures of men – at least partly because feminist theory is dense with unfamiliar terms. bell hooks notes that:

> Awakening women to the need for change without providing substantive models and strategies for change frustrates, creates a situation where women are left with unfulfilled longings for transformation. We may know that we need transformation, we may crave transformation, but lack a sense that these desires can be addressed by

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feminist politics or radical politics. It is this space of longing that has come to be filled by a variety of self-help books, which offer models for personal change applicable to everyday life.  

Whilst hooks is more generally concerned with the hole left by feminist education, the statement also applies to the problem of inaccessible language in feminist theory. The subtlest form of pessimism in feminist theory is not that which weaves misery and suffering into its own tale of oppression, but theory that leaves the reader feeling hopeless. Contemporary women writers often fashion exciting theories – one cannot accuse them of failing to put forward strategies for women to resist sexism, or unravel the problems of feminism; but these women often present their strategies in such difficult and obscure language and only a few women are able to understand them. No one wants to read with the book in one hand and a dictionary in the other. These theories become unworkable. As bell hooks rightly points out, we cannot discount the effects of unworkable feminist theory on women readers, because feminist writing that leaves the reader with only confusion over how to work with the strategies it offers (or doesn’t offer) is not really doing anything positive with women’s suffering.

The main reason I criticize the pessimism that scholarly feminist theory can foster is that I feel strongly that optimism is vital to women’s social and mental health. Because feminism is very important to me, I’m super-aware of the subtleties of sexism in my social environment. It’s easy for all of that to bring you down. It’s easy to feel that feminism is a dead-end road – that the government will continue to systematically swipe resources from women; that women will continue to be slaves to beauty; that men will continue to rape and control and abuse. Reading feminism that gives me workable strategies helps me because I can feel like maybe it’s going to be okay. Optimism is the saving grace of feminism: “just as feminism is a politics of risk and resistance, it must hold out to women some promise of happiness now,” says Janice

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80 hooks, Talking Back, 33.
Raymond. Without such a promise, who would want to do it? Only the tough – or maybe the masochistic. Optimism is, therefore, what allows most women to continue to do feminism, and that’s why it is so important. And exclusive language can curtail women’s feminist optimism because it can make otherwise excellent strategies inaccessible and impracticable for many women.

And there is more to it than just that. I also object to jargon because it can lead to a kind of laziness when theorising. As Robert Lifton puts it:

The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed… [Jargon is] relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull: in Lionel Trilling’s phrase, ‘the language of nonthought.’

Sometimes, when writing for my undergraduate degree, I found myself using words of which, had I stopped and thought about it, I would have realized that I scarcely knew the meaning. Today, I wouldn’t dream of using words I didn’t understand. The point is that using jargon encourages a kind of complacency towards meaning. Not using jargon is almost necessarily more thoughtful because it means the writer has to think of new ways to say the ideas that have hardened into scholarly words. Coming up with a new way to speak an idea clears space for a new way of thinking that idea as well. At least some rethinking of a concept must accompany re-naming that concept. After all, jargon is not the language of the real world, and it certainly doesn’t bring feminists any closer to the truths of sexist existence. Rather, jargon often distracts its readers from what’s really being said – or not said. When thinking stops, when meaning goes into stasis, jargon has stagnated the development of feminism: as Raymond puts it, jargon makes for “posturing instead of action;” “gestures instead of movement.” Feminist theorists need to make the use of highly academic language more transparently a choice, and to be able to consciously – and in good political conscience – rationalise that choice.

83 Raymond. 217.
Scholarly Tone: Attack and Defend

When one writes scholarly feminist theory, one goes to war. It is a war against sexism, a war against anti-feminists, but it can even be a war against one’s own colleagues and contemporaries. “Did you ever think of how warlike much of the writing is in the academy?” ask McNabb, et al. “We attack a position, defend a point, set out strategies for demolishing opponents, and try to dominate our readers.”84 We unpick each other’s arguments, and shred each other for failures, compromises, and lack of integrity. Reading critically is one thing, but reading merely to criticize is quite another. More often than not, we search for the holes in each other’s writing and quickly discard anything suspect (perhaps after a perfunctory sneer at another’s errors). Whelehan notes that the shift in approaches to writing theory after the second wave resulted in “a tendency to attempt ‘ownership’ of feminism by the hostile discrediting of another’s perspective.”85 Moreover, we vigorously defend our own work. Sometimes we do this overtly, answering back to criticisms with explanations of what we really mean,86 or even retaliating against critics by attacking their work.87 But by far the most common way we defend our work is by building fortresses of literary support, quoting, paraphrasing, and faithfully referencing other established feminist theorists. We back up our statements with examples of ideas and problems drawn from other works of theory, and we scour the pages of our contemporaries’ works for words that illustrate our own points. It is a pre-war reconnaissance: an exhaustive and fastidious picking over of all the relevant works until we have ammunition for the aggressive act of scholarly writing.

But we also write defensively by writing cautiously. Many writers are clearly reluctant to commit to a political standpoint, a radical ideal, or even to one way of describing women, without first confessing their feminist sins (usually their whiteness, or economic privilege, or heterosexuality, but sometimes even their disciplinary position – history, sociology, or literature). Although interrogating one’s own position in society is important, particularly when writing about underprivileged groups, it is crucial not to be glib about it. Scholarly feminist theory abounds with disclaimers, many of which act as a way of alleviating guilt when writing about a group rather than for that group. Defensiveness extends into rhetorical strategies as well as political ones. Many writers even hesitate to promote their own ideas as resilient – as ‘stayers.’ Instead, they humbly claim that their solution to whatever ethical dilemma they are addressing is a situated, specialised, immediate solution, only applicable to a very specific problem. Evidence of this phenomenon can be found in the proliferation of essays that go towards solutions, keeping their ideas in motion – see the multitude of scholarly theory titles containing the word “towards.”\(^{88}\) Conversation and self reflection are admirable, but sometimes these kinds of rhetorical practices seem to be more about the fear of making a stable, permanent comment. I argue that it is actually okay to find a solution and claim some kind of closure on a topic. Theorists need not fear that they are closing down the discussion by proposing a solution or resolution. The conversation within feminist theory will continue regardless of the terms in which theory is couched.

Feminists such as Jane Flax, after all, encourage the “anxiety…created by the lack of closure” in official feminist theory, and resist “leaping at the prospect of a new system or general theory – which would only repeat past schemata.”\(^{89}\) One could say

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that feminist theorists do not usually write, and do usually condemn, grand narratives.  

This is a recent phenomenon. In *The Second Sex,* written back in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir was able to generalise about women – and still make some powerfully abiding points. This is not to say that she succeeded in producing a theory that works for every woman and in every culture. But at least in the 1940s feminist theorists were not obliged to start writing with thoughts of how they might be critiqued (except perhaps by men and misogynists). They did not start writing with trepidation, or by arming themselves with a formidable bibliography of supportive fellow-writers (because few fellow feminist writers even existed), and a paranoia about failing to account for someone – anyone. Although it may seem that I’m nostalgic for the way theory ‘used to’ be written, actually, I am trying to contextualise the phenomenon of cautious defensiveness as something that has emerged with the increasing importance of postmodern principles of impermanence, flux, dialogue and reflexivity.

Stanley and Wise identify a group of theorists they call “translators,” who interpret the work of the theory “stars” (those who produce highly abstract, often difficult work, and occasionally even a grand narrative). It is in the body of work (that is, feminist criticism) by these translators that we see the most warlike writing, as they find themselves engaged in theoretical battles with other translators (whilst the stars themselves continue to write their high theory, unhampered by such petty semantic considerations). Gallop, Hirsch and Miller discuss features of feminist criticism in their

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90 Feminists often considered to tend towards grand theories are, amongst others, Catharine MacKinnon (*Toward a Feminist Theory of the State.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989); Andrea Dworkin (*Intercourse.* London: Secker and Warburg, 1987); and Camille Paglia (*Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson.* New York: Vintage, 1991). As theorists, however, all of these women are frequently criticised as making sweeping claims and espousing extreme reforms, such as banning pornography. Such reforms are often considered as detrimental to ‘individual rights’ and ignorant of specific situations. Grand narratives in feminism are also generally associated with the second wave (and thus often considered passé).


92 Stanley and Wise. “But the Empress has no Clothes!” 266.
conversation, “Criticizing Feminist Criticism.” In this piece, the conversation centres on the writers revisiting episodes that caused pain and confusion: Gallop has written harsh criticisms of both Hirsch’s and Miller’s theoretical work. Hirsch recalls that:

My response to your [Gallop’s] piece has to do with power. I think reading as well as you do puts you in a position of power over me. So my first response was to try to do it back to you. For about a month or two what I wanted most in life was to take a piece of yours and do the same thing to it.94

Hirsch’s articulation of the defensive response that having one’s work attacked provokes is very honest, as well as telling. In fact, the language throughout this conversation is highly emotionally charged: Miller felt “betrayed” and “angry”;95 Hirsch felt “exposed and criticized.”96 Even Gallop (the critic), relates an all-consuming “wish for …approval”97 when writing a book. Hirsch goes on to claim that “some people’s work has gotten more careful and circumspect, some people have begun to write out of hurt and fear.”98 This conversation exposes the hidden emotional side of writing theory, and explains why we engage in attack-defend habits. Essentially, we put our work into the world as we would send a child to its first day at school – with pride, apprehension and fear. The warlike tone and practices of feminist criticism are a result of that fear – the fear of attack and the fear of being unable to defend our ideas competently.

MacNabb, et al make this point:

Some women say that we should make academic writing more humane. Only writing that is more cooperative and respectful of one another, they say, can help to change the imbalance of power in our society. Others say that women need to learn exactly these battle tactics in writing if they are to compete in our tough society.99

A humane way of writing feminist theory within a worldwide academic community

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95 Gallop, et al. 358.
96 Gallop, et al. 357.
97 Gallop, et al. 363.
98 Gallop, et al. 365.
sounds pleasing, but it would not make feminist criticism any less feminist, or any less theory. I agree with Deborah McDowell that criticisms of feminist theory like my own should:

...not be read as a resistance to ‘theory’ but as an insistence that we inquire into why that category is so reductively defined and why its common definitions exclude so many marginalized groups within the academy.\(^{100}\)

One of these definitions – not so much reductive as unspoken, and even unconscious – expects warlike theory. The failure to attack (possibly misread as a failure to read critically) often bars a work from admission to the realm of feminist theory. The failure to defend (possibly misread as a failure to support one’s work with examples, or as too sweeping and generalised a thesis) similarly rules out a work as theory. And when these things don’t exclude a work from the bounds of scholarly theory, at very least they open that work to critical annihilation instead of reflective consideration. At some point, as feminist theorists, we need to ask ourselves how useful this kind of literary violence really is in a movement that promotes an end to discrimination and vilification. Jane Gallop concludes her conversation with Hirsch and Keller with this comment:

Maybe one has to distinguish between a criticism that actually attends to something and a criticism that’s really dismissive. We’ve had too much of this debate about whether we should or shouldn’t criticize. What we need is an ethics of criticism.\(^{101}\)

I believe that such an ethics of criticism would allow readers to put aside the relentless concern with scholarly style and conventions (including the attack-defend habit), and sensitively “attend” to the ideas being expressed.

Scholarly Genres: the Importance of the Essay

There are few genres or types of texts that are acceptable as scholarly feminist theory. Essays, in the form of an article in a scholarly journal, or a chapter of an edited


\(^{101}\) Gallop, et al. 368.
compilation, or a series of essays, presented as a book or thesis, are pretty much the be-all and end-all of feminist theory. At a pinch, we will include an interview transcript as feminist theory, provided it is with a big-name feminist theorist, and appears in published form. As Spender puts it, “references in published sources which contain the terms ‘private communication’ do not seem to carry the same weight as those that have been printed.”

Genres we don’t count as feminist theory include those that feature fictive or experiential writing (autobiography, stories, novels, popular press articles, etc), and the non-written genres (songs, poetry, films, conversations, etc). We might acknowledge the feminist messages of such non-scholarly genres, but we still consider them by-products of feminism, data for analysis, feminist PR, purely political messages, or just plain marketing. These things should and, in some instances, do inform ‘true’ feminist theory (see my discussion of Steedman’s work on page 226-227). However, they rarely qualify as ‘true’ feminist theory – as part of the feminist conversation.

Note the significance of the essay in explicating feminist theory. What do we know about the essay? We know it has structure, including an introduction and conclusion; we know it is substantiated, usually via reference to other texts; we know it is permanent (written down, and usually published in hard copy – even web publication is suspect!); and that it is logical and analytical. The essay follows an Aristotelian model of logical rhetoric, which gave written form to the abstract idea of logic. The essay maintains conventions of academic rhetoric as honed, perfected, and passed down through the ages. However, the essay is not always the ideal genre for producing feminist polemic: Elaine Showalter describes feminist Susan Sontag’s experience with the essay:

After many years of producing learned essays…, Sontag realized that she had always felt constricted by the demands of the essay form and had found writing essays difficult.

102 Spender. 188.
and limiting. For years she had been trying to write in a way that would give expression to her volcanic feelings.\textsuperscript{103} 

I believe that many scholars, especially women, but also men, find the essay a difficult mode of expression for political ideas. However, the conventions of the essay form are what we, as scholars, continue to use.

So, what is it about feminist theory that does not appear in essay form that makes it unscholarly? Firstly, lack of conventional structure. A conversation, for instance, might lack the traditional introduction: an event or observation, or just an idea flitting through one of the participants’ heads, might spark the discussion. It might also lack a conclusion, particularly if the conversation ends because of an interruption, or if it just dribbles away into other topics. Secondly, writers using non-scholarly genre often fail to substantiate their writing. In fact, the very idea of quoting notable academics and accurately referencing them \textit{in a poem} is laughable.\textsuperscript{104} Can you imagine? I could spoil Sylvia Plath’s quiet, beautiful, tragic poem, “The Mirror” for you by mocking up a snippet of the poem with a reference to a feminist who has theorized the loss of beauty associated with ageing as a loss of female identity, but I won’t. Instead, enjoy some of its lines undistracted by the miniaturized numerals of a footnote:

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Perhaps those engaged in creative writing and life writing do not feel the need to defend ideas using substantiation – as we do when we write ‘real’ feminist theory.

Thirdly, songs, poetry (when unpublished or orally performed) and conversation are often mutable – they lack the permanence of a written work. Writers change them from


\textsuperscript{104} Occasionally, poets and anthologists footnote ancient or poetic references in poetry, but I have never seen a reference to a scholarly theorist in a poem.
one performance to the next, either through editing and revising, or on the spur of the moment; or they are altogether unable to replicate them.

Non-scholarly works can also lack logic. ‘Real’ scholarly works proceed logically from one point to the next, explaining and substantiating each idea before a smooth transition into the next proposal. The essay unfolds in order, developing through a number of different ideas and culminating in something that looks tidy and entire. Non-scholarly genre, on the other hand, might be creative, emotive and illogical. They might skitter about from point to point, leaving one undeveloped before proceeding to the next. Transitions might be bumpy and confusing, or hearken back to previous ideas without any warning. Neat completeness is a pre-requisite of scholarliness, and often an anathema in non-scholarly kinds of feminist theory. Finally, non-scholarly genre messes up the accepted model for analysis in feminist theory. ‘Real’ feminist theory analyses things. It analyses patterns of behaviour, cultural norms, and, importantly, it *analyses the non-scholarly genre*. In their article about the fraught relationship between women’s studies and activism, Silliman and Bhattacharjee say:

> [Life experiences are] not seen as part of intellectual wealth, which is usually narrowly defined to include only printed and published material, written in a certain way and in a certain language(s).\(^{105}\)

While Silliman and Bhattacharjee describe the life experiences gained in an activist context, their point translates into a discussion of women’s everyday experiences. They go on: “As a community activist, I was somehow then the keeper of ‘real’ information – or raw data, if you will – as opposed to ‘theorized’ information.”\(^{106}\) If organised *activist* information is “raw,” everyday information is positively bleeding! Again, we can see how the notion of levels of feminist consciousness comes into play: theory is on the highest level of feminist consciousness, with activist data receiving a barely-above-


\(^{106}\) Silliman and Bhattacharjee. 126
false-consciousness rating. Everyday theorising doesn’t rate at all in the feminist consciousness stakes. Exclusion is inevitable: how can the academy admit non-scholarly feminist theory to its body of work if canonical, accepted, scholarly feminist theory uses films, poems, novels, interviews – uses works within these non-scholarly genre – as its raw data?

*Scholarly Foundations: Experience and the Abstract*

My statement that feminist theory takes experience as its raw data introduces the concept of ‘the abstract.’ I want to now turn to the curious divide between ‘the abstract’ and ‘experience’ in order to further explore the generic conventions of scholarly theory. Before going any further, however, I will define both terms – a task which will also entail exploring a little of the history of the discussion of experience and abstraction within feminist theory. An abstract idea is an idea that floats. It cannot be pinned to an object, like a ball, or a dog. It describes something intangible. It has tie lines to the ground, where we all live, but it is all too easy to cut those tie lines and watch it float away. Definitions of the word ‘abstract’ from the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* are telling: “theories which distort in order to simplify…which do not give accurate descriptions, predictions, or explanations of what actually happens.”

Even the definition of abstract art is interesting and relevant: “making no identifiable reference to the visible world.” Highly abstract writing is a relatively new phenomenon in feminist theory, having emerged in the 1980s in response to a more critical and reflective approach by feminists to feminist practices. Whelehan describes the effects of this shift:

>This has the positive effect of demonstrating that feminism has the theoretical maturity to reflect upon its own processes. The obverse effect is, of course, that self-reflection begins to take over from reflection upon the original object of study.*

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109 There are, of course, exceptions. Simone de Beauvoir’s writing, for instance, uses abstract concepts associated with existentialist philosophy (for example, *The Second Sex*).
110 Whelehan. 127.
The increasing presence of highly abstract feminist theory caused (and still causes) some consternation among certain feminists,\textsuperscript{111} while for others it allows for important discussions of feminist approaches, or a higher level of scholarly integrity.\textsuperscript{112}

The idea that experience is somehow the opposite of the abstract is misleading. Experience involves emotion and introspection, as well as concrete happenings – in other words, it is the stuff of everyday life, but this doesn’t mean it excludes thinking and analysis. It does mean that the language of experience is usually basic, local and specific. To some, it can feel unintellectual, anecdotal or flippant. Personal experience has held a significant position in feminism for a long time – feminists in the first wave (1800s and 1900s) were interested in the separation between the public and private spheres of life.\textsuperscript{113} Perhaps the significance of experience for feminism is related to women’s socialisation (we are socialised to value personal experience), but also to the fact that the place women really feel the pinch of sex rules is in our personal lives. For a long time, women were obliged to feel inferior about valuing personal experience because, as the ‘important’ people in society told us, there were much more significant things going on in the public than in the private world. During the second wave of feminism (the 1960s and 70s), many feminists criticized this hierarchy of public-over-private, and created opportunities to talk about personal experience\textsuperscript{114} – but even more importantly, feminists began to validate the life experiences of women and tried to reclaim some scholarly legitimacy for personal writing.\textsuperscript{115} This was a radical move. It is one thing to claim something for one’s sex, but it is another thing entirely to say

\textsuperscript{115} For example, Carolyn Heilbrun. \textit{Writing a Woman’s Life}. London: Women’s Press, 1989.
personal writing is just as valid and important for all people. Men were quite happy to see women as the keepers of the private domain for a long, long time. So, to suggest suddenly that the private and experiential in life have just as much importance as abstract ‘high theory,’ was a shocking thing indeed.

The world – everyday experience of the world – is, of course, filled with intangibilities and, therefore, we need abstract terminology and discussion to describe the world. The way we make sense of our experiences is also through the use of abstract ideas and analyses. Therefore, abstract analyses and discussions of abstract concepts are not simply necessary, but an inextricable part of the way we theorise our lives and the world. The difference between experience-based analyses and abstract scholarly theory is twofold: firstly, there is a difference in expression. I have already covered stylistic features, such as the overuse of jargon and warlike writing. Other expressive devices also come into play: the serious tone of a work and its often exclusive focus on abstract ideas or other works of abstract theory. Secondly, there is a big difference in the reception of experience-based analyses and abstract scholarly theory. Aside from the obvious difference of limited distribution, abstract scholarly theory is accorded a much higher value than the experiential analyses. Moreover, even theory produced within the academy, when it does not read as highly abstract work, receives a lower value than more conventional abstract scholarly theory. Such work might include quantitative and scientific studies, fieldwork descriptions, creative and ficto-critical works, life writing and popular publications. Notice that these works draw heavily on the foundation of experience as a place to start thinking and writing.

116 In recent times, some male writers are experimenting with a more personal style, but they rarely thank feminism or women for it. More often than not, they put it down to ideas of ‘postmodern unrepresentableness’ and ‘queer subjectivities’ – more jargon. Alan Peterson notes that, ”Many texts [in masculinities/men’s studies] do not acknowledge feminist studies at all, which is perceived as a discourse parallel to the study of ‘men.’” Unmasking the Masculine: ‘Men’ and ‘Identity’ in a Sceptical Age. London: Sage, 1998. Of course, Michel de Certeau, a male theorist whose work I have used throughout this thesis, wrote about the everyday as political, albeit after the conception of the feminist dictum ‘the personal is political.’ The Practice of Everyday Life. Trans. Steven F. Rendall. Berkeley, Calif.: U of California P, 1984.
To be clear: the simple *presence* of abstract theory in feminism is not the problem. Rather, it’s how we treat abstraction in political discussion that causes problems. Stanley and Wise refer to the “absence of ‘real world’ criteria for assessing the adequacy of [feminist theory’s] in-passing ‘descriptions’ of the world.”117 In other words, we do not often ask questions about the reverence we seem to have for highly abstract feminist theory – nor do we often hold this kind of theory up against experience to see how well it describes (or not) lived reality. My criticism in this section is of the uncritical acceptance of highly abstract theory as the best, most appropriate, most intelligent, highest, or most important form of feminist theory. My aim is to point out how and why this happens, to explore other ways of conceptualising the relationship between the abstract and experience, and to break down the way we tend to value highly abstract theory over other forms.

At this point I might need to clarify – to show how I know which forms of theory are more highly valued than others. We can perceive the hierarchy of feminist theory simply by looking at what is *treated as* theory. In other words, we simply need to check which works are being published in scholarly journals, which works are being quoted by feminist academics, and which feminist writers are being employed as professors and given tenure at universities. However, there is also a conversation within feminist theory concerning what should and should not count as theory. bell hooks, for instance, claims that creative writing and other such experiential forms should not be required to serve the purpose of feminist theory:

> Novels and confessional writing can and do enhance our understanding of the way individuals critically reflect about gender, the way we develop strategies to resist sexism, to change lives, but they cannot and do not take the place of theory.118

Whilst I agree with hooks’ injunction that creative forms of writing should not always have to measure up as instructional models for living/thinking (which may well further  

117 Stanley and Wise. “But the Empress has no Clothes!” 263.  
restrict what could be written in the name of feminist literature), I’m not sure exactly what more she requires from a work than critical reflection and strategic development to elevate it to the realm of theory. Sylvia Walby makes the case that genres such as storytelling are inadequate for producing feminist theory. Walby is:

…happy to agree that the rich repertoire of feminist narratives in the public sphere has been a powerful part of feminist politics…But I am reluctant to equate feminist politics with feminist theory.119

A number of other feminist theorists have also recently contributed to the discussion of what counts and doesn’t count as feminist theory – and why.120 I consider some of the other work done on the validity of theory later in this section.

But I wish to leave this discussion for the moment, because Walby’s words bring me to my next point. I think that there is an interesting connection between the supposedly irreconcilable dualisms of politics/theory and experience/the abstract. Walby defines feminist theory as “an attempt to explain the nature and complexities of gender inequality.”121 Presumably, feminist politics is more about trying to change that inequality. On the other hand, ‘the abstract’ generally refers to existing structures and patterns, and experience is about living in those structures and patterns. By extension, theory is a way of acting on the abstract (that is, analysing structures and patterns), and politics is a way of acting on experience. The interconnected relationship between the abstract and experience that I’ve been trying to explain, then, highlights the similarly interconnected nature of theory and politics. To elucidate – I find it hard to believe that the act of analysing inequality is not in itself a political gesture. It is a delusion to imagine that politics doesn’t occur without a theory of injustice, and feminist theorists do not tend to write explanations of gender inequality that are an end unto

119 Walby. 236.
121 Walby. 238.
themselves.122 The nature of feminism as a critique of sexism means that feminist theory necessarily has a political edge, regardless of the demands of scholarship.

In fact, the oppositions between experience/the abstract and politics/theory are even defended within feminist theory. I would suggest that certain theorists push to protect abstract theory from the muddying influence of politics and/or experience. This phenomenon is most prevalent in the increasingly powerful canon of post-structuralist influenced feminism of the mid-1980s until now. Post-structuralism insists on the primacy of language in constructing our experiences and identity, and in doing so backgrounds experience and identity as valid starting points from which we might forge theory or politics. Denise Riley, for instance, warns that the terms “woman” and “women” should be carefully guarded from too simplistic a function as identity politics. “‘Being a woman’,” says Riley, “is also inconstant, and can’t provide an ontological foundation.”123 Joan Scott cautions that using experience as a foundation for theory “reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems.”124 Scott also contends that doing so may produce theory or knowledge that ignores the historical and discursive contexts of the experience125 – or worse, it could be a treacherous stumble into a new hierarchy of knowledge, uncritically privileging experience over attempts at objectivity.126 Thinking in a similar vein, still other feminist theorists scramble to ‘save’ feminism from itself, expressing concern that an insistence on principles such as experience and politics is a total rejection of rationality, higher reasoning and larger societal patterns – the “wholesale condemnation of nonfeminist writings and ideas.”127

Says an unnamed political science professor quoted in Patai and Koertge: “I have not

122 Marchbank and Letherby see fit to make the injunction that, “when meta-theorizing issues of theory, the product (if the product is Theory) is not, or should not, be the end point.” 104.
125 Scott. 25.
126 Scott. 31-32.
127 Patai and Koertge. 117.
thrown off the yoke of one master to have it replaced by another, even if its name is feminism.”128

Perhaps this very instinct to protect scholarly theory has led to the recent re-marginalisation of personal experience in feminist theory. Stanley and Wise note the “barrage of critical comments about ‘experience’ (try living without it) over the past decade.”129 It seems that the feminist reclaiming of experience was closely followed by a period of intense questioning and a now emerging repudiation – because experience can only provide a flawed and paradoxical foundation for feminist theory and politics. Once again, emotions, conversations, action, relationship, and the everyday make for, if not ‘sloppy’ theory within the academy, then certainly a questionable foundation for knowledge. Some feminist writers even imply that personal experience is little more than an entry point into feminism. Leder, et al claim that the students in their Women’s Studies program have “relatively little grasp of how or why society is structured around women’s subordination,” and take “liberation” merely to mean “having opportunities and achieving personal empowerment.”130 To get somehow beyond personal experience appears to be the goal of some of the feminist writers and teachers I have discussed in this section. Experience is simply stuff for feminist theorists to unpick and dig around in, instead of valid theory to hear and value, argue with, answer, and account for.131

I believe that experiential forms of writing can function as feminist theory in that they can raise profoundly reflective questions and produce powerful cultural critique. It is certainly possible to write politically and philosophically about

128 Qtd. in Patai and Koertge. 195.
129 Stanley and Wise. “But the Empress has no Clothes!” 271.
131 Valeria Wagner discusses the fact that women we consider ‘feminist authorities’ somehow escape the analysis we impose on women who are outside this circle. “In the Name of Feminism.” Feminism Beside Itself. Eds. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman. New York: Routledge, 1995. 119-130. 121.
experience, as well as broader social patterns. Look at theoretical/autobiographical work by Carolyn Steedman (*Landscape for a Good Woman* \( ^{132} \)) and Drusilla Modjeska (*Poppy* \( ^{133} \)). Steedman’s work is an analysis of class relations in Britain and a feminist theorising of motherhood told through the story of her mother’s material and psychological life. Modjeska’s *Poppy* is a highly reflective feminist discussion of psychology, autobiography, and history that again uses the genre of autobiography/biography as its medium. These texts make abstract analyses of the cultural conditions in which the authors and their mothers live, using experience to both build and supply those analyses. It is misleading, therefore, to distinguish theory produced in non-scholarly genres, such as storytelling, from scholarly theory using the blurry ‘oppositions’ between politics/theory or experience/the abstract.

A Final Thought on Scholarly Style

It is extremely important that my readers understand that my criticism of these conventions of scholarly feminist theory does not mean that I consider works that conform to these conventions any less feminist. Scholarly and academic work does not become ‘unfeminist’ simply because it adopts the stylistic conventions of its genre; and nor is non-scholarly feminist theory somehow more authentically feminist. I wouldn’t want to give an impression that I believe scholarly feminist writers always privilege abstraction over experience, or deliberately exclude non-academic women, or care only about their ambition and careers. This is why I have tried to keep my discussion these conventions general and free of personal attack: if scholarly feminists are guilty of anything, it is a lack of reflection on the effect of these scholarly conventions on their audiences (or potential audiences). My view is that, when producing scholarly feminist theory, we should make every effort not to engage in practices that exclude interested women from engaging with that theory.


Conclusion: Inbreeding and Feminist Theory

I hope my readers can now see just how repetitive the cycle of academic feminist theory production can be. The same institutions fund the same researchers, who produce the same kind of writing for the same publishers, which the same audience reads. There is not much movement on and off this carousel. The same people get to ride all the time. To let people who produce different kinds of feminist theory onto the carousel would take something momentous: we would need to let the carousel slow down a bit. This braking is a grinding deceleration of the whirling cycle that feminist scholars take part in; a pause to reconsider what constitutes valid theory, and who counts as a legitimate theorist. As hard as it may seem, the responsibility for this reconsideration rests mainly with feminist theorists – with women who deploy the conventions of feminist theory. Because it is by listening to and reading a wider range of work as legitimate feminist theory, and including such work in one’s own scholarly, funded, institutionally-supported research, that such non-scholarly texts will start to count.

These feminist theorists, then, must make the first move – and that move is to recognise exactly what it is that makes us feminist theorists. It would be easy to say that the ‘real’ feminist theorist exists only in the minds of non-academic feminists, but that doesn’t explain the ivory tower we, as feminist theorists, build and sit in. We tend to blame the barriers between academic feminists and non-academic women on their reaction against the radicalness of feminism, or their complacency with the status quo. It cannot possibly have anything to do with our failure to share. However, at some point, we must take responsibility for the exclusion that our contentment to rest in the secure, closed environment of the academy, and play the scholarly game, can cause. Feminist theorists play a significant part in the estrangement between non-academic
women and ourselves when we write feminist theory that has “got to be,” as Narelle Wasley puts it, “in a certain style and inaccessible to the masses to be valid.”

Therefore, my criticism of feminist theorists is not really about criticising scholarliness per se as the favoured style of feminist theory. Rather, it is about calling feminist scholars to account for perpetuating the exclusion that means scholarliness is a compulsory attribute of ‘legitimate’ feminist theory. After all, the carousel of theory production we are riding is not whirling us towards The Revolution. Rather, little revolutions happen daily, both on and off the carousel. At the moment, we spend much of our research energy riding that carousel. We could look a little broader. In fact, we could simultaneously look inwards and outwards – inwards at ourselves, at our own writing, at our own judgements about others’ writing, and at our motivation for writing the way we do. And outwards, at what else counts as feminist theory. As Mary Zeiss Stange puts it:

…to bring more women into the conversation, we professional feminists need to learn to speak, and to hear, another language: one that comprehends, without necessarily trying to change, certain political and cultural perspectives that most of us, as individuals, may not share. That means not imposing our structures of thought and belief on politically “other” women, hearing their take on feminism, learning from it, and allowing it to enrich our understanding of the many forms women's empowerment can take. There are models for that: the evolving literature on global feminism provides one; the current debate on black conservatism among African-Americans another.

In the next chapter, I look to some of the texts on the ‘outside’ of feminist theory and make the case that these texts do, in fact, count.

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Chapter 5

Seven Deadly Sins

Sometimes it seems like the gulf between progressive academia and the real world is so huge you need to sprout wings to get from one to the other.

— Ruthann Lee, 2001¹

This chapter illustrates seven deadly sins of feminist theorizing – in other words, this is where I give you some examples of feminist theory that doesn’t fit the official mould. I have moved from an analysis of the typical situations, trappings, and agendas of feminist theory, to a more creative location. This is a space where I can build and develop a picture of ‘unofficial’ feminist theory. I use seven arbitrary categories to organize my examples, but the works of theory themselves cross over the boundaries of the seven sins. The limited space I have to provide some instances of the abundant array of ‘unofficial’ feminist theory means that this chapter should act as a seed. Grow the seed at your leisure into a fruitful source of feminist theory for your own use.

Bridging the Gulf

Bless me father, for I have sinned…

I recount here the sins of my own feminist theorizing, as well as those of others.

I am guilty of feminist theory without a feminist agenda.

I am guilty of common-sense feminist theory.

I am guilty of optimistic feminist theory.

I am guilty of pragmatic feminist theory.

I am guilty of pop feminist theory.

I am guilty of post-feminist theory.

I am guilty of suspect feminist theory.

Accessibility and Out-thereness

This chapter explores two styles of feminist theory that many academic feminists find difficult to accept as valid feminist theory: accessible theory, and theory that is ‘out there.’ When I say accessible, I mean theory that is readable,

understandable, and enjoyable. Even if we don’t agree with it, it engages us. We feel like we can make a genuine response to accessible theory, and whether we respond to criticise or to agree, the response will be valued. To explain accessibility, I want to talk about the difference between the theorising we do at home, compared with that we do in the public eye. At home, we use real words: intelligible, colourful, unpretending words. We use them generously. Stinginess with knowledge generally happens away from home, at work, in the academic ivory tower. A feminist theorist has different sets of words for home and work: at home she can be herself; at work, she is expected to prove herself (usually through words). Kamala Visweswaran suggests that we do our “homework” when we theorise and research:

…questioning of heretofore unexamined points of privilege and blindness forms the basis of an accountable positioning that seeks to locate itself in and against the master discourses of race, class and sexuality [and I add to those master discourses ‘academia’] that inscribe it.²

This questioning is difficult, but essential. Daphne Patai explains the conundrum in which official feminist theorists often find themselves when we question ourselves honestly:

On the one hand, we are obligated to our academic disciplines and institutions, within which we must succeed if we are to have any impact on the academy (and this in itself involves us in numerous contradictions, as part of our project entails transforming those very disciplines and institutions). On the other hand, if we take feminism seriously, it commits us to a transformative politics. In other words, most of us do not want to bite the hand that feeds us; but neither do we want to caress it too lovingly.³

Homework involves selectively picking back through the layers of intellectual privilege that an education in canonical feminist theory can provide. Homework is keeping and loving the knowledge that contributes to an understanding of women’s position in a man’s world; keeping and loving the ideas and visions that encourage us to make changes to the state of things; and recognising the conventions of academic snobbery,

simultaneously discovering a new affection for that which doesn’t fit the traditional mould of feminist theory. Homework means being accountable to women and, importantly, to those women at home. After all, home is vital – especially where feminism is concerned:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home ... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks out equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there they have little meaning anywhere.4

Then there is the feminist theory that is ‘out-there.’ Out-there theory is unusual, unconventional, and non-traditional. We might find it where or when we do not expect to find it. Adrienne Rich nostalgically describes the out-thereness of feminist theory prior to what she sees as its domestication through institutionalization:

[W]omen’s studies programs [are] ‘the dutiful daughter of the white, patriarchal university – a daughter who threw tantrums and played the tomboy when she was younger but who has now learned to wear a dress and speak almost as nicely as Daddy wanted her to.’5

However, the out-there feminist theory I am referring to is not a hearkening back to the heady days of second-wave feminism; rather, it is that which never really counted as feminist theory in the first place. It is the things feminist theorists know about, but are reluctant to admit to the canon. For even experts (in this case, the feminist theorists) worry that outside, and in spite of, academic learning, there are other things we know:

The most monstrous...are those things that people know or believe without benefit of (in opposition to the claims to expert status of) disciplinary experts – and what experts themselves know or believe in spite of, and outside, the hard-won knowledges that have made them what they are.6

These are the things that go beyond ‘official’ feminist theory, but also beyond false consciousness. Narelle Wasley makes the point that an academic woman might think, in conversation with a non-academic woman: “my understandings are so much greater

than what she understands and knows about, so I can dismiss what she thinks and believes." But, as she reminds us: "always, in any group where you’re not getting people widening their viewpoints, other people are losing out." Feminists lose out when we draw strict lines between what is and is not feminist theory. We enhance the effects of the backlash against feminism. Our hesitation to call non-academic women feminist theorists effectively confirms and deepens those women’s unwillingness to identify thus. And just as important is the fact that when we act as though non-academic women’s theorising is not ‘real’ feminist theory, we undermine our own politics and careers: we limit our field of study, and distance ourselves from the strategies we, as real women, use daily to get by in the real world. Worst of all, however, we are most unwisely denying ourselves access to the huge reservoir of feminist knowledge and practices created by non-academic women who must cope in a sexist society just as the academic women do.

I also use the term ‘out-there’ in the sense that this kind of feminist theory is *out there* in the world, and not confined to institutions or establishments. It is impossible to keep track of, because it is now here, now there, in time and space. It is found in banal places such as shops and bank queues and staff rooms, as well as ‘loftier’ locations, such as science laboratories and government ministries. Feminist theory is *out there* in homes and marriages, and hospitals, and late night movies. New developments occur unremarked. Major breakthroughs disappear into oblivion a moment after they occur. Triumph and feminist revolution happen within one person’s soul, and give that woman a secret smile, but remain private and uncelebrated. In Chapter 4, I briefly described a book Carolyn Steedman wrote about socialist and feminist theory in the everyday life of her mother. This work can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, we can see the book as Steedman ‘using’ her mother’s experience and ideas as fodder for feminist study.

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7 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 18 May 2000.
However, there is this statement at the end of the book:

I must make the final gesture of defiance, and refuse to let this be absorbed by the central story; must ask for a structure of political thought that will take all of this, all these secret and impossible stories, recognize what has been made out on the margins; and then, recognizing it, refuse to celebrate it; a politics that will, watching this past say ‘So what?’; and consign it to the dark.

Steedman asks us to allow her mother’s story to remain ‘out-there.’ Steedman’s ambition (whether or not she succeeds) is that her own work – a work that exists inside the ‘official’ context of a political movement and institution – will not subsume her mother’s theory. Likewise, feminists can explore the fine line between drawing on and engaging with out-there feminist theory, and using and manipulating it to prove their own ‘higher’ theories or finding other ways to capture and pin it down and bring it inside. In the words of Donna Haraway, we need to go “Coyote”: to “give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while that we will be hoodwinked.”

We need to accept and get excited about the existence of feminism beyond our control without trying to bring it back under our control. In this chapter, I will discuss ‘outside’ forms of feminist theory.

Feminist Theory without a Feminist Agenda

One question that plagues feminism is: is it fair to call a work ‘feminism,’ when these works were written before such a term even existed, or with an altogether separate overt purpose? In other words, can we call a work feminist when it wasn’t written as feminism? I argue that we can name historical and undeclared feminism ‘feminism’ when it is necessary or useful. Under my definition of feminism (feminism as resistance to women’s suffering), we have the privilege and opportunity to take a stand, to take that which is outside the boundaries in a clumsy, squirmy embrace, and be prepared for a slap in the face for doing so, because we are doing something vital – letting that which is outside know that it is welcome as/in/to feminism. This is not to

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say that those who claim we should refrain from unproblematically using categories such as ‘feminist’ and ‘woman’ do not make valid points. Points like: we should make a greater effort to understand people’s various agendas; it is flat-out inaccurate to call something feminism unless it was done as feminism; we should respect people’s decisions to resist identifying as feminists; calling a work feminism arrogantly takes it over, subsuming and sinking it in an established movement, when it might have something more to offer the worlds of academia, metaphysics, or politics. Sometimes, in the case of works produced in different cultures, we need to be especially cautious about naming the work feminism – if there is a chance that the author might come to harm by us calling her a feminist, then we should indeed refrain.

However, I contend that to name some out-there works ‘feminism’ does something of great significance – it allows us to have such discussions, but to put them aside in order to go forward with feminism. We can debate without reaching impasse. The important thing we do when we name outside things as feminism is to highlight to the world that feminism is greater and older and more present in our daily lives than we suspected. That it is a normal, everyday, positive thing, and has been for longer than we know. Can you imagine with what optimism women could start their days knowing we are part of something real and powerful that has our interests at heart? And knowing that we are not only part of it, but that it has its own history? Narelle Wasley names the authorship of nineteenth-century novelist, Colette, as a feminist activity, despite the fact that she did not write explicitly as a feminist:

And she was with that husband, who put her down so much, and treated her so badly, but eventually she got away, and created her own life and lived a better way. Not a better way – it was hard, you know, but she got out and did something, she became an actress, you know, which was a…radical kind of thing to do. And then also claimed back her work, and writing, and all that kind of thing that she’s done. And I think, to me, all those years that she just sort of sat with him, in a lot of ways wasn’t very

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10 For example, Denise Riley. Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.

11 According to some histories, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette’s first husband forced her to write works which were then published under his name. Holmes, Diana. Colette. London: MacMillan, 1991. 29.
feminist – although she was writing books, which was a good feminist activity. Whenever you write a book, I think that’s a good feminist activity.\textsuperscript{12}

It is the tone and content of this kind of statement that shows not only that we, as women, have a history of resistance to suffering and oppression, but how exciting the discovery of that history can be. Knowing these things can do something profound for the way women resist suffering – it can provide a buffer to disappointment and failure, and a sense of pride and collaboration in our successes. I cannot measure the value of these things.

In Chapter 4, I showed through a conversation that author Shulamit Reinharz chooses to not name out-there works as feminism. In her book, \textit{Feminist Methods in Social Research},\textsuperscript{13} she uses feminist works as her research data, but ensures that such works are openly declared or accepted as feminist theory. She does this in order to avoid casting feminist pretensions on works whose authors did not intend them as feminism, ostensibly from the perspective that it is disrespectful and inaccurate to describe such works as feminist. However, I want to turn the idea of disrespect on its head by saying that feminist theory is such a grand, empowering, exciting body of research that authors can and should actually feel honoured to have their works referred to as ‘feminist.’ It is strange and sad that, while feminist theorists rejoice that their own work is classified as feminism, they are reluctant to drag outside works into the same category. More than anything, I think this reflects the ambivalence many feminists have towards the category of feminism – loving and embracing it, whilst entertaining a perverse kind of repulsion to it. As for accuracy when naming outside works as feminism, as I have said before, history is always ‘inaccurate’ because it is always an interpretation. Naming something ‘not-feminism’ is as inaccurate as naming it feminism. There is no one Truth. Nor does naming a work as feminist presuppose that

\textsuperscript{12} Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
the work is unambiguously feminist, or that it is free of ignorance or critical gaffes.

Once again, one woman’s feminism is another woman’s failure of feminism. Just because we name something feminism does not mean we are calling it perfect and unproblematic.

In an analysis of her grandmother’s experiences, Katherine Borland works around this problem in an admirable way.14 Borland frames, in feminist terms, an instance where her grandmother (Beatrice) triumphed over male ridicule and authority in betting on a winning horse. Borland uses Beatrice’s experience as an example of “a female struggle for autonomy,”15 and effectively names it feminism. When her grandmother reads Borland’s interpretation, however, she is resentful and outraged that Borland describes her actions as feminism. Says Borland:

Beatrice brings up a crucial issue in oral narrative scholarship – who controls the text? …I agree that the story has indeed become my story in the present context.16 However, Borland “cannot agree” that her reading “betrays the original narrative.”17 She explores ways of conceptualising such stories to justify interpretative analysis, discussing the way Beatrice sees the story as inextricable from her intention in telling the story, whilst Borland sees the story as inextricable from the activity of listening and interpreting. Borland claims that she offers “instead a different reading, one that values her story as an example to feminists of one woman’s strategy for combating a limiting patriarchal ideology.”18 In other words, Borland shows how interpreting and naming a story as feminism, however ill received, unwelcome or deplored, can deepen, broaden, and enhance a subject:

[Not] all the differences of perspective between folklorist and narrator, feminist scholar and speaking woman, should or can be worked out before the final research product is

15 Borland. 70.
16 Borland. 70.
17 Borland. 70.
18 Borland. 70.
composed. Nor am I suggesting that our interpretations must be validated by our research collaborators. For when we do interpretations, we bring our own knowledge, experiences, and concerns to our material, and the result, we hope, is a richer, more textured understanding of its meaning…Lest we, as feminist scholars, unreflectively appropriate the words of our mothers for our own uses, we must attend to the multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings generated by our framing or contextualizing of their oral narratives in new ways.19

Sometimes theory turns feminist on us without warning. In my vision for an ideal world, it would be a pleasant surprise to have someone point that out to us. In the meantime, reflection, not fear, ought to surround our decision to call a thing ‘feminism.’

Common-sense Feminist Theory

Carolyn Steedman writes:

[The] tension between the stories told to me as a child, the diffuse and timeless structure of the case study with which they are presented, and the compulsions of historical explanation, is no mere rhetorical device. There is a real problem, a real tension here that I cannot resolve…20

Every day, people interpret and contemplate the meaning of life.21 Every day, many women interpret and contemplate the meaning of their own suffering or happiness. As Steedman points out in the above statement, the widely accepted interpretations of stories and experiences do not always gel with the micro-interpretations of individual people. People commonly adapt the accepted interpretation of a story, manipulating that interpretation so that it fits more comfortably with their knowledge of existence. In other words, we carve ourselves into the big story in a way that makes our own existence more habitable – curdling and transforming the story as we go. We are “after all, only people doing a limited best with what life handed out to [us]: trying to have a modestly good time.”22 So we use our sixth sense: ‘common-sense’23 – that is, the

19 Borland. 73.
20 Steedman. 21.
22 Steedman. 89.
23 The notion of common sense is a Western one; however, its links with group interpretations and “little traditions” of colonized peoples (described by Prell 249) indicate to me that a similar notion is at least
understandings of situations that are common to a people. Some might say common
sense is simply the hegemonic interpretation, or the interpretation we’re supposed to
make. However, Prell reminds us of the way people bend and adjust the grand
narratives of their culture:

Robert Redfield drew a distinction between the ‘great tradition’ and the ‘little tradition’
...the great tradition was upheld by the literati. It was the written, elite, self-conscious
body of knowledge of an often urbanized priesthood...the little tradition coexisted with
that elite formulation. The ideas of the folk, their beliefs and practices thought of as
superstitious by the priesthood...Great and little traditions were connected and mutually
effecting...the idea of two traditions...[allows us] to explain how individuals continue to
place themselves in a great story even when they alter it, often beyond recognition.24

Women bend the official words on sexism and feminism in the same way. Common
sense doesn’t usually involve saying anything completely radical or revolutionary, but
nor does it mean accepting the oppressive ideology of capitalist patriarchy.

Common-sense feminist theory is made up essentially of mutations of the
official word. It includes the folklore of contemporary western society: proverbs,
sentiments and sayings we use daily, ‘naughty’ thoughts and diarising, jokes, reverse
sexism, backchat, laughing up stereotypes, and practicing these stereotypes to ironic
excess. What distinguishes these things from the more usual interpretation of such
things as false consciousness is that women – and I’m sure people in general – often (I
cannot vouch for always) use this common-sense theory knowingly, consciously, and
shrewdly. Feminist theorists tend to assume that common sense is a rehashing or blind
spouting of those things we hear and repeat on a daily basis. It is not always so. It is not
even frequently so. Rather, these common-sensical things are (more often than not)
meta-sexism or meta-feminism: thoughts on, or critique of, the ‘isms’ through laughter
or pragmatism. For instance, I received the following piece on why it’s good to be a
woman via email:

New lipstick gives us a whole new lease on life.

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24 Prell. 249.
If we’re not making enough money we can blame the glass ceiling.
If we’re dumb, some people will find it cute.
If we cheat on our spouse, people assume it’s because we’re being emotionally neglected.
We have an excuse to be a total bitch at least once a month.\textsuperscript{25}

Whether or not it was written by a woman is irrelevant. The fact is that many women read it and feel a resonance with it. It pokes fun at men and at women – yet the piece is somehow more complicated than, and as simple as, that. It pokes fun at the expectations we place on each other as men and women – at the stereotypes and gender tensions. The piece presupposes common sense. It expects an understanding of how to read it: with humour and recognition, with rue and rolling eyes. Women read it and laugh, but we are laughing at the simultaneous gravity and stupidity of gender expectations. We are laughing because we recognise ourselves in those expectations, as well as recognise ourselves messing about with those expectations.

A good example of common-sense feminism is Elizabeth Wurtzel’s book \textit{Bitch: in Praise of Difficult Women}.\textsuperscript{26} Wurtzel makes the revolutionary claim that nasty, miserable, difficult women are actually okay. She suggests that these women have often chosen to be that way in a society that contradictorily values good-girl behaviour but tends to reward bad-girl behaviour. However, Wurtzel insists that bad things usually happen to bad girls. Not in the simplistic sense that some people say, “If you dress and act like \textit{that}, you should expect to be sexually harassed,” but in a much more complicated way that ties in with a sexist reality. Wurtzel recovers for feminism the women who didn’t know what they wanted, who were confused and angry, who messed up, and who walked into their own dire consequences. For Wurtzel, these women are the ones neither patriarchy nor feminism were able to rescue – patriarchy couldn’t make them behave themselves and feminism couldn’t make them be reasonable. Nicole Brown Simpson is one of Wurtzel’s examples. Nicole empowered

herself to escape an abusive marriage and rebuild her life, but she also flirted with
dumb, *unfeminist* decisions like repeatedly returning to O.J., breast augmentation, and
accepting trophy wifedom as a career. Wurtzel asks why Nicole made these choices,
exploring the contradictory forces in her life that tempted her to make the bad choices
that culminated in her murder. But Wurtzel also rebukes the mentality that casts Nicole
as purely a victim, claiming in her chapter, “I Used to Love Her but I had to Kill Her,”
that Nicole played out her life in a way that led to her fate as inevitably as any
Shakespearean tragic hero. The implication is similar (although not necessarily
identical) to the common-sense injunctions we all hear from our parents: if you’re
going to act a certain way, accept the consequences. Be accountable for your fate and
take control of your choices.

Wurtzel’s message simultaneously affirms and confounds both patriarchal and
feminist thought. She explicates and criticizes the dangerous and oppressive systems
that allow women to get themselves into bad situations, but she drags these women
back from the status of utter victim. Wurtzel resists an uncomplicated view of male-
female power relations in the same way that people using their ‘common sense’ do. To
give another example, the following statement made by a woman interviewed for a
documentary on women’s suffrage makes use of existing stereotypes and expectations,
but makes a radical statement of female superiority: “Women run a home, and if the
country was run a bit more like a home, things might run a bit smoother,” the woman
says.27 Common-sense feminism frequently makes an in-depth and powerful
assessment of women’s positions in society, drawing on ideals from a variety of
sources, including those from feminism. It shows:

> …with what creativity people may use the stuff of cultural and social stereotype, so
that it becomes not a series of labels applied from outside a situation, but a set of
metaphors ready for transformation by those who are its subjects.28

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18 July 1999.
28 Steedman. 103.
Common-sense feminist theory is that which we cannot be told by experts, that which we create for ourselves, and that which we cannot in good conscience deny – in spite of the chasm between our own common-sense knowing and the ‘official word.’

Optimistic feminist theory

I want to say something amazing. Even without ideals, or a vision of the future, staying true to the reality of feminism when writing actually forbids pessimism. If reality were simply sexism, feminism wouldn’t exist. Sexism and feminism have a relationship that feeds back and forth. Sexism tries continually for mastery over feminism; feminism reacts continually to sexism’s mastery. China Galland explains the tension between reality’s misery and its pleasures: “It is in this grappling to remain affiliated, to keep the community intact, to include suffering, that we find grace – not hope, but grace.”29 I love her idea of grace – dignity, wisdom and alertness within injustice. But I think that we find hope, too. Grace is dealing with reality of sexism and feminism. Grace is realism. Hope is striving further. Hope is finding happiness, either in realism or through idealism. Optimism is possible with just the bare bones of our own realities today. The hope is located in the grace. Unfortunately, we often mistake optimism for naivety. Janice Raymond warns that feminists ought to avoid a “quietistic confidence”30 – an expression that conjures the image of women wandering through patriarchy with expressions of vacuous happiness on their faces. Awareness and analysis of the reality of women’s suffering “serve as correctives to a shallow sentimentalism”31 that optimism might otherwise become. However:

…one-dimensional emphasis on the ‘State of Atrocity’ in feminist literature, in feminist organizing, and in women’s sharing of experiences can inadvertently impress women with the fact, almost like reinforcing a painful ancestral memory, that woman is for man…32

31 Raymond. 211.
32 Raymond. 23.
I am sure that Raymond does not mean here that woman actually is for man; rather, she is saying that women’s suffering is based on the ideology that woman is for man. However, women usually know we are not for men. Theory that supposes we are for men, even in order to disrupt this idea, is pessimistically predating itself on an illusion that most women do not share. Optimism resides in the very real fact that many women, despite their decisions and actions, understand our independence of men, and our ultimate autonomy.

So, what exactly is optimistic feminist theory? Optimistic works come in two varieties. There are those that present us with strategies and describe advances in women’s resistance. The book *I’m Not Mad I’m Angry: Women Look at Psychiatry* is an example of this kind of optimism. This book contains work on the dreadful experiences of women in mental institutions, as well as recommendations for women’s therapy and writing about women’s ‘madness.’ Such works usually count as ‘proper’ feminist theory. Another example is Janice Raymond’s *A Passion for Friends*. This book is a positive discussion of hetero-normative, homosocial and lesbian relationships between women today and in history. See also Pauline Bart’s work on the avoidance of rape, which she describes in her essay, “Being a Feminist Academic.” Then there is the second kind of optimistic feminism: feminist works with happy endings. Happy endings, while desirable and enjoyable, are somewhat rare and definitely suspicious as feminist theory. It is much more appropriate for official feminist theorists to conclude their writing with humility, disparaging their own imperfect methodologies or inadequate representations, or even with a timely warning to the reader to go about their own feminist theorising with vigilance and prudence. To finish by saying, “I did

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all these things – I talked about all this sexism and feminism, and now I’m damn proud, and hey, look at the great person I’ve become,” is unthinkable – even frightening. A Creole SISTREN Theatre Collective member describes her own happy ending:

All my life, me did haffi act in order to survive. Di fantasies and ginnalship were ways of coping wid di frustration. Now me can put dat pain on stage and mek fun a di people who cause it.35

The function (a function that is often unintentional) of the feminist happy ending is a vital one for feminist theory: it is inspiration. Happy-ending feminism encourages women by example to use analyses of their own sexist realities in positive ways. China Galland does this in her book *The Bond Between Women*. The book is about Galland’s spiritual quest, but a large part of the story is taken up with coming to terms with oppressive realities: her own childhood rape, child prostitution in India; the unwillingness of anyone but mothers of ‘the disappeared’ in Latin America to ask questions about what happened to their children. Galland uses the inspiration of strong women’s activism and altruism, and the wisdom she draws from various spiritual teachings, to cope with these real sufferings in practical and useful ways. For instance, analysing her own assault in terms of her rapist’s self-delusion and her own capacity for peace of mind and forgiveness enables her to confront and reconcile with the man who raped her as a child, without for a moment condoning or even understanding the act. Galland gets somewhere. She doesn’t just make moves towards closure, or initiate a journey – she works something through, and offers us the wisdom of her own resolution.

In *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*,36 Ruby Langford also writes optimistic feminism. An Australian Aboriginal woman, Langford has written a book about her personal life that is also about feminism and politics. But it has a happy ending. Langford loses three of her children in heartbreaking circumstances. She writes about

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being unable to read, and stuck for words for days after reading a report on black deaths
in custody when her own son was in gaol. And yet, while on a journey with her sisters
to the place she was born, Langford can listen to the song “Ruby, Don’t Take Your
Love to Town,” and think over her many pregnancies and failed relationships and
abusive partners. Her sisters look at her “sideways,” but Ruby fronts up in a moment of
self-reflection: “I turned on a high black mama voice and patted my chest. ‘I took my
love to town too many times!’ and burst out laughing.” This joke is a thrilling
political gesture! However, the blurb on the book makes no mention of political
resistance: Langford’s story is simply “the ultimate battler’s tale.” The interpretation of
Don’t Take your Love to Town as an inspirational and optimistic feminist text is beyond
the publisher’s imagining. For a final example, one of this thesis’ interviewees, Kerry
Allan, kept a journal throughout a messy and painful divorce during which her ex-
husband threatened and abused her. She is now a successful professional in a happy
relationship. She hopes to publish her journal, and use her own experiences of suffering
and strength as a resource for women in similar situations: something that will help
these women know they are not alone, and to help them see the light at the end of the
_tunnel. However, such texts usually receive recognition only as texts for feminist
review and analysis. I contend that inspiration is a relevant political gesture in a cynical
era prone to the production of texts that act as harsh correctives to confidence and
optimism within the women’s movement.

Pragmatic feminist theory

Pragmatic feminist theory generally comes in the form of instructions. We are
often unable to extend these instructions to other situations. They range from the advice
given by a friend, to pamphlets and other bureaucratic literature, to the financial advice
of a divorce lawyer. They might conflict with the official ‘feminist line’ on a subject,
but they count as theory because they indicate a considered feminist position on sexism or resistance. However, instructions do not usually count as ‘proper’ feminist theory because they are foremost, non-scholarly, but also practical, concrete, direct slices of information. Often, they are informal and impromptu, as in friendly advice (“You can’t stay in this relationship. He’s abusing you, for God’s sake!”). Sometimes they can be cynical and negative, as in a statement such as “If you’re after work in the male-dominated meatworkers industry, I advise you not to bother.” These still constitute statements of feminist analysis. At times, pragmatic feminist theory does not seem particularly intellectual, and even slips into the much-maligned (within feminism) realm of psychotherapy.39 (Recall how irate I was to discover feminist texts in the ‘Self-Help’ section at my local bookshop?) Self-help books for women dealing with problems such as depression may fall into this category. Below I have produced a list of examples of pragmatic feminist theory to illustrate these points.

Instructions:

- If you wish to write, and you are a woman, make sure you have a room of your own and five hundred pounds a year.40

- Look, you’ve got to sit down with him, right? Sit down with him and tell him, “I’m not happy with they way things are right now.” You’ve got to explain that, as you get older, you’ve gotten more assertive – you’re not going to sit back and take his rudeness and criticism anymore. And as you get even older, you’ll get even more assertive. That’s why you’re having these arguments all the time – because you won’t take it anymore. I swear, it will bust you up if you let it go on. He can’t get away with it forever. I understand that it’s his insecurities making him act this way, but you’re fed up, aren’t you? I mean, how long are

39 One of the major criticisms of consciousness raising within feminism, for instance, is that it is therapy rather than politics. See Marsha Rowe. “False Consciousness Coops People Up.” Spare Rib 30 (1975): 6-9.
you going to let him hide behind his own lack of confidence? Sit down with him, all right?

- **Me:** So how do you think that we could write about feminism in a way that still makes a push for change, but still reaches women?

  **Narelle:** Presentation is a big thing, I think. Ease of language. Case studies. Like I said, women are so interested in case studies. I find that, often if I’m flicking through a book, I’ll stop if there’s a case study. If it says like ‘Susan, 54’ up the top, then I’ll read that…

  **Me:** So, case studies.

  **Narelle:** I think are really good.

  S: What can they show, though? I guess that we’re not isolated.

  **Narelle:** Yeah!...I don’t know how you’d present them. I mean, I think if you look at what a topic in your chapter is about; like if you’re doing ‘abuse,’ or if you’re ‘clitoridectomies,’ or if you’re doing um...

  **Me:** Okay, let me give you some of my topics, and let me show you how difficult it would be to do a case study! Okay...writing about the backlash in feminism, and whether or not it actually exists, which is something I’m going to be talking about. I personally think that it’s been overplayed, or played up as an excuse for why women aren’t interested in feminism.

  **Narelle:** Mm. I think you could present case studies of that perhaps if you talk to women…who do feel that feminism doesn’t apply to them anymore, and ask them some questions, and say to them, “Look, what about this issue? What about women not getting equal pay here? What about there being such a percentage of women in education and such a percentage of them in administration, which is a big disparity? What about those sorts of things? Do you think those sorts of things apply to you?” Different things like that. Bring it
up, and say to them, “Well, consider.”  

- Before you begin, make sure you have something to drink and if you so desire, a snack and something to read or the remote control! I prefer just to watch my baby during feeding times though. It's a great time for eye contact. Make sure you're in a comfortable environment with lots of pillows. A Boppy is an excellent U-shaped pillow that goes around your waist and supports your arms or your baby. I like to nurse in a quiet, dark, area if possible as babies tend to be more responsive when there are fewer distractions. Newborns especially tend to dislike bright lights and will fall asleep if the room is too lit. If your baby falls asleep and doesn’t finish eating, you may want to undress her down to her diaper for feeding time. Of course wrap a blanket around the both of you so that she won’t become chilled. Also, tickling her feet is a good way to keep her awake. Do not tickle her chin or cheeks during a feed though as this triggers her rooting reflex and she’ll let go and turn her head…When latching on, tickle the baby’s chin or the side of her cheek. Wait for her to open her mouth really wide. If it doesn’t look wide enough, just wait and then when her mouth is as wide as it can be, bring her to your breast. Do not lean over and put your breast into her mouth that way, as you’ll develop a backache over time. If you feel really uncomfortable or something hurts, slip your pinkie finger into the corner of her mouth to break the suction and start over. The baby shouldn't be sucking on your nipple but on the areola, the dark tissue around the nipple. The nipple itself should be way back along the roof of the baby’s mouth.  

- The use of male (or sex-specific) terms for generic situations is one form of generalization, one of our sexist problems. However, there is another aspect to the same problem: the use of generic terms for sex-specific situations, which is...
just as problematic as is the first manifestation. For example, if researchers talk
about workers in general while only having studied male workers (constantly
and cautiously using ‘they,’ ‘people,’ ‘the individual,’ ‘the person,’ and so on,
with nary a female in sight), they simply replace one sexist problem with
another in the manner in which language is used…In other words, when the
content is sex specific, the language used should also be sex specific.43

• Breathe in. Breathe out. Imagine your unhappy thought in a clear bubble. Allow
it to float away…

Pop Feminist Theory

What do I mean by popular feminist theory? Widely read works, such as
autobiographies and novels, as well as works that appear in mainstream genre, like
television and music videos, film, radio, Internet discussion forums, chat rooms, and
websites. These things do not count as feminist theory because, in the minds of many
academics, popularity precludes a radical position. As Marlene LeGates puts it:
“feminism ceases to be feminism, when it fails to offer a radical alternative to the status
quo.”44 After all, if popular theory could also be pertinent feminist theory, where would
that leave the academic, with her years of training in high theory and abstract thought?
The academic who calls popular writing a thinking work of feminist theory is
(hypothetically speaking) doing herself out of a job! Feminists stand at a fork in the
road when we write: we must choose between “popular success and the struggle for
literary status.”45 The academic view of popular feminist writing, therefore (even when
it is thinking feminism), is that it can’t cut the mustard as an intellectual analysis of the
ways sexism and resistance work. Academics rarely refer to these works in intellectual

43 Eichler, Margrit. Nonsexist Research Methods: A Practical Guide. Allen and Unwin: Winchester, MA,
1988. 15.
44 LeGates, Marlene. Making Waves: A History of Feminism in Western Society. Ontario: Copp Clark,
1996. 354.
45 Thomas, Lyn and Emma Webb. “The Place of the Personal in French Feminist Writing.” Feminist
debate or writing, except perhaps to disparage or to analyse as a phenomenon/raw data. They certainly do not use them to support their arguments, or to argue against as a respectable critical position.

Lyn Thomas and Emma Webb carry out an interesting experiment in their article, “The Place of the Personal in French Feminist Writing,” on the fiction writers Marie Cardinal and Annie Ernaux. Cardinal and Ernaux are French feminists who write in a personal but not academic style “which attempts to speak more directly to an audience.” Thomas and Webb compare these books’ reception by “women journalists, both in the mainstream press, and in women’s magazines,” with that by the academic world. Not surprisingly, Thomas and Webb find that, whilst the mainstream press “produced almost entirely positive reviews” of Ernaux’s Passion Perfect, scholarly writing on the books is relatively scarce:

The MLA database (1981-97) produced a list of sixteen articles and one book on Ernaux ... For Cardinal, nineteen articles and two books were listed. In comparison, in the same period, the MLA listed 150 entries for Irigaray, and 226 for Cixous. (Irigaray and Cixous are, of course, ‘genuine’ feminist theorists.) The mainstream popularity of Ernaux’s and Cardinal’s novels effectively slaps a ‘co-opted’ sticker on them. Kathleen Karlyn noted a similar reaction to her work on popular feminist television icons:

Recently I spoke to a large group of academics and other professionals who work with girls about the ways such media icons as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena Warrior Princess and the Spice Girls challenge familiar representations of femininity by affirming female friendship, agency and physical power. While my audience was entertained by my examples, many could not see past the violence, overt sexuality and commercialism in the clips I showed and in fact were troubled by my argument.

Popularity is suspicious because, in the official feminist imagination, feminism cannot be that which is mainstream – it is only that which is against the mainstream. The

46 Thomas and Webb. 44.  
47 Thomas and Webb. 37. 
48 Thomas and Webb. 37. 
49 Thomas and Webb. 34. 
mainstream comes to stand for anything patriarchal, sexist or oppressive; and anything that suggests patriarchy in popular texts simply confirms the suspicion of feminist theorists. Many feminists have even adopted the term ‘malestream’ to talk about conventional practices/theories/research.\textsuperscript{51} For many official feminist theorists, mainstream feminist theory is a contradiction in terms.

The one criterion for popular feminism is that it is widely circulated. Wide circulation happens when a piece is accessible. For many people, there are two main things that make theory accessible: a pop context and colourful language. The pop contexts I am referring to include the Internet, television, radio, music, high-selling publications (novels, magazines, self-help manuals, etc.) and anything else that has currency and a wide audience in contemporary Western culture. Cyberfeminism has comics, zines and all the riot grrrl sites,\textsuperscript{52} which, as Kathleen Hanna’s original manifesto claims, exist:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{BECAUSE} we are angry at a society that tells us Girl=Dumb, Girl=Bad, Girl=Weak.
\item \textbf{BECAUSE} we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousy and self defeating girllike behaviors.
\item \textbf{BECAUSE} I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{itemize}

Cinema has films like \textit{Thelma & Louise}\textsuperscript{54} and \textit{Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon}\textsuperscript{55}. Television has sitcom characters like Lisa Simpson,\textsuperscript{56} comediennees like Judith Lucy, and funny little low-budget series like \textit{Life Support}.\textsuperscript{57} Music has Bikini Kill, Ani DiFranco, Tori Amos, Hole, No Doubt and even Spice-esque girlpower. Print has

\textsuperscript{51} For example, Pamela Abbott and Sue Wallace. \textit{Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives}. London: Routledge, 1996.
\textsuperscript{52} For example, \texttt{<http://riotgrrrl.com/>}; \texttt{<http://riotgrrls.com/>}; \texttt{<http://riotgrrrlurope.net/>}
books like Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*,\(^{58}\) Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Bitch*,\(^{59}\) Alix Kates Shulman’s *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*,\(^{60}\) Helen Garner’s *The First Stone*,\(^{61}\) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.\(^{62}\)

As for colourful language, I don’t mean it in the usual sense,\(^{63}\) rather, I mean language that is interesting and fun, funny and human, warm and passionate. Colourful language is not the sum total of popular feminist theory, but it is certainly the most common factor. More than a rejection of the jargon and big words that characterise official feminist theory, colourful language embraces features as simple as italics and expressive punctuation. However, my referencing manual\(^{64}\) warns me that, “Italics for emphasis…is a device that rapidly becomes ineffective. It is rarely appropriate in research writing.”\(^{65}\) Similarly, when I was at the editing stage in my honours thesis, my supervisor crossed out an exclamation mark. Another editor, equally immersed in academia, but with a different point of view, crossed out my supervisor’s crossing out. She recognised that sometimes, when writing, we experience emotions, private smirks and recollections that we want to share. It’s valuable to share these, because they make the writing mean something. Bells of recognition and understanding go off in the reader’s head. Narelle Wasley is enthusiastic about colourful language in popular books about gender:

> Well those books are fun! They’ve got cartoons in them; they’re written in simple language; they’ve got gags; they’ve got case studies, which women love – you know, they love to read a real story about a real person. And they’re accessible to men too, cause they’ve got funny things. You know, like the brain hemisphere – for men, the ‘fart section’s’ like, that big, and in women the ‘fart detection section’ is, like, that big…\(^{66}\)

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63. ‘Colourful’ language usually indicates profanity or ‘swearing.’
65. Gibaldi. 66.
Wasley goes on to say that she would not think “to go out and buy them [canonical feminist texts] because, you know, I’d much rather go out and spend fifteen dollars on a nice fantasy book, that I’ll read again and again.”67 The “nice fantasy book,” while Wasley’s personal preference, represents that which official feminist theory cannot provide for many of its readers: pleasure. Reading pleasure makes colourfully written feminist theory popular.

Funky ex-breakfast radio presenter Helen Razer made a speech at Sydney University: “Antagonism as Therapy.”68 Her speech is about feminism in the younger generation – how it manifests as hard-nosed cleverness, audacity, and an I-know-how attitude to negotiating the world. It is an idea many contemporary feminist scholars are working on, theorised as the shift from ‘second wave’ to DIY feminism.69 But Razer says it this way:

I rub my eyes every day and I’m starting to see a new kind of kick. I went to see Iggy Pop and there were women at his side...gruny little babes of no more than fifteen who’d outrun the boofy bouncers to join him briefly at the microphone to scream ‘Lust for Life’...No boy will mess with these rock and roll juniors. And if they do, they’d better watch out...cos when they take their penile pole projections and play at plugging them in to a nurturing feminine desk, the women of the heavy metal tomorrow are prepared. They have learnt the girlish art of electrocution.70

Razer’s essay is a pleasure to read – it is my version of one of those fantasy books that Narelle Wasley can read “again and again.” I feel like Razer cares about me as a reader enough to make her words interesting. What many feminist theorists seem to miss is that colourful language works from a position of respect, for both the subject of discussion and the audience. The respect for the subject translates as a passionate interest in, and an attempt to make current, the subject. Respect for the audience translates as the presumption that they can cope with the ideas presented, no matter

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67 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
70 Razer. 81.
what their academic background, and an attempt to make the subject interesting for
them.

Post-feminist Theory

HUGE DISCLAIMER: I don’t identify as a post-feminist.71 I refer here to the
version of ‘post-feminism’ that assumes we have reached the period after feminism,
and that feminism is no longer necessary.72 I don’t think we live in a post-feminist age.
I live and breathe feminism and see its vitality and necessity everywhere I look. As
Susan Douglas puts it:

I would think it [post-feminism] would refer to a time when complete gender equality
has been achieved. That hasn’t happened, of course, but we (especially young women)
are supposed to think it has. Postfeminism, as a term, suggests that women have made
plenty of progress because of feminism, but that feminism is now irrelevant and even
undesirable because it has made millions of women unhappy, unfeminine, childless,
lonely, and bitter, prompting them to fill their closets with combat boots and really bad
India print skirts.73

I am not a post-feminist. But I certainly would like to know why I feel the need to put
that disclaimer there. Post-feminism is a dirty word in ‘pure’ feminist politics.

Feminists baulk at the idea that we are in a post-feminist world: “To say that feminism
is over and that postfeminism means that we don’t have to fight for our rights anymore
since it’s all cool now because we’re equal is wrong because we’re not.”74 So where, if
at all, do post-feminist writers fit into feminist theory? Believe it or not, I think this
form of post-feminism does have a place in feminist theory. Just because I don’t agree
with it, doesn’t mean that post-feminism is invalid or a backlash-derived smokescreen.
Intelligent women are theorising feminism, and theorising that feminism is no longer
necessary (or no longer necessary as it was formerly practiced). That in itself is
significant, and to ignore or dismiss such claims would be, once again, disrespectful

71 See Chapter 6 for further discussion on where I see my own work fitting in the feminist/postfeminist
frameworks.
72 There are conflicting definitions of ‘post-feminism’ – a point which I cover in Chapter 6 – hence my
clarification of the kind of post-feminism I am discussing in this section.
<http://www.alternet.org/print.html?StoryID=13118>
<http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr3/forum/fem.htm#femthree>
and limiting.

Therefore, I propose the somewhat radical idea that post-feminism does, in fact, count as feminist theory – feminist theory that is glad, proud, and even satisfied with the contemporary state of feminism. Often, feminists mistake this kind of feminist theory for complacency and false consciousness. The common understanding is that women who make post-feminist theory don’t see a broader picture of women’s suffering. However, little attention is paid to the fact that many of the sanguine statements about gender are written in relative terms: that is, these statements make some kind of comparison with a time or place in which women had/have very little control over our lives. Documentary street interviews yield comments like: “Women didn’t have that right centuries ago,” “A bit of power ... I don’t think we had a lot of that back then,” “I think there’s equity now,” and “More ‘say’ than we used to.” This kind of feminist theory might also make claims about the opportunities available to women in Western culture, or in the contemporary period. “I can make changes for my daughter,” said one woman interviewed. Narelle Wasley comments, “[In some fundamentalist Muslim societies] little girls can get raped and be stoned to death and things like that…And you think, well, god, we are lucky.” These statements do not necessarily suggest that we have no further to go, or that all’s right with the world for women. In an interview with Narelle Wasley, we discussed popular books on gender (Raising Boys, Why Men Don’t Listen and Why Women Can’t Read Maps, etc). I questioned and re-questioned her about the political worth of such texts. My sister explained and re-explained that writing about the present state of gender was actually political because it accounts for and accepts how women and men’s social lives have changed because of feminism. It is only now, years later, that I ‘get’ what she was talking about:

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75 The Centenary of Women’s Suffrage.
76 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 10 March 2000.
Me: Do you think, though, that it’s actually furthering the cause of women’s value being improved in society?
Narelle: No. It’s not the aim. That’s not the aim, and that’s not what it’s doing.
Me: It’s just exploring gender in a fun way?
Narelle: That’s right, it’s just exploring gender, and letting you know how men’s brains work and how women’s brains work, and how that distance can be shortened. It can never really meet; never the twain shall meet, but there are times when you can communicate and be effective and understand each other and...
Me: So it deals with life and society as it is now, but it doesn’t actually make any push for change.
Narelle: No. Well, the push for change is that we’ve got to this point, men and women’s roles have changed, the lines have blurred, the guy doesn’t just go out and work anymore; the woman just doesn’t stay at home and do the housekeeping anymore ... roles are swapping: how do you deal with that? How do you still communicate with each other when it’s the wife coming home and saying, ‘hey honey, I’m home and I’m hungry’? Rather than the husband always coming home and saying that, and how do you cope with those differences? And especially – I think – helpful, because families are smaller. And like us coming from a family with not a lot of men, and we don’t understand how they think. And it helps me to understand how [my husband] thinks, or how any man thinks. And it helps me with my students.
Me: So, they’re helpful, but not promoting some kind of revolution, or something...
Narelle: No, no. I don’t think they promote revolution. I think that the only revolution that they promote in a subtle way is that if men and women understand each other and they’re more thoughtful of each other, people will be kinder to each other. You know? You start being unkind to each other, and that’s when things go downhill. You know, you’re off having affairs...you’re beating each other up... 

In my understanding of feminist theory at the time, there was simply no way to include such complacency in the realm of feminism. I returned doggedly to the point that the books don’t talk about future change, determined to ignore my sister’s attempt to point out that, sometimes, such theory is working with what feminism has already achieved.

How doggedly will some readers of this section of my thesis insist that such feminist theory is a ruse – that I have been tricked as have so many before me, into accepting the status quo of women’s suffering? I don’t think women are that ignorant. I think of much post-feminism as glee rather than ignorance – a kind of ongoing wicked joy in an inner knowledge. The knowledge is that change has already occurred, and that it is happening now. As Janice Raymond puts it, “the more that endeavor is transformed into existence, the more one is ‘life-glad.’” Accepting life-gladness as feminist theory is one of the toughest things I can ask feminists to do. After all, is not

77 Wasley, Narelle. Personal interview. 18 May 2000.
78 Raymond. 238.
the very premise of feminism, as I explain it, resistance to women’s suffering? Where is post-feminism’s understanding of women’s continued suffering? But there is another way to look at it: I think that there is something quite profoundly heartening about the fact that many women, even young women, feel contentment and find happiness (however contingent and limited) in the state of gender today. Oughtn’t feminism also encompass the distance we have come to end women’s suffering – that is, the here and now of feminist success? “The world is more than men have made of it,” says Raymond. 79 Discussion, analysis, and pride in what women have made of the world up to this point, also counts as feminist theory.

Suspect Feminist Theory

I’ve saved the most difficult section for last. I think the best way into this section is to discuss representation, because it seems to result in enormous suspicion amongst feminist theorists. Representation is the way we talk about a topic – women, for instance; all women, everywhere; women as a group. For thousands of years it was good enough to talk about women as women. Then certain thinking men 80 started to say that language can only ever be a means for expressing reality – and a means laden with specific cultural beliefs at that. Language cannot express reality in its pure form. From there, the idea of a ‘pure form’ of reality started to fall apart, and the most popular philosophical view now is that culture and language make our realities. That is, people make their realities – reality is not there first. 81 Neither language nor reality can be trusted, which makes representing women a tricky business. Since these revelations, almost all we’ve done in the humanities is wonder how to represent people and events.

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79 Raymond. 207.
81 This is a very basic description of post-structuralism. It would not be to great purpose to engage in an excessively detailed discussion of post-structuralism here because I simply want to show some effects of this intellectual movement on fostering the atmosphere of suspicion in feminist theory.
We know we can’t do it perfectly, so we try various strategies to do it in the most accurate way possible.

To start with, what makes a woman? Is it the ability to bear children? Breasts? A vagina? Or something less tangible, like ‘womanliness,’ nurturance, emotivity and tenderness? Is it her psychosexual development: passivity and penis envy? Or is it simply the way she is socialized to be a little carer, to be neat, helpful, obedient and needy? Any set or combination of these beliefs can be said to make a woman. There is, in other words, no one, true, pure thing that makes a woman. However, early feminist theorists had to start talking about female oppression somewhere, and the place they started was in a fairly confident assertion that there was such a biological and social thing as ‘women.’ Unfortunately, this assertion was quickly denounced as ‘essentialist.’

The slipperiness of the word ‘woman’ makes it very difficult for feminist theorists to feel comfortable with writing about a universal ‘woman.’ Moreover, the pressure that trends in social theory place on feminist theorists to account for this slipperiness makes us even more tentative about discussing ‘women.’ As Nina Baym puts it:

Feminist [literary] theory addresses an audience of prestigious male academics and attempts to win its respect. It succeeds…only when it ignores or dismisses the earlier paths of feminist literary study as ‘naïve’ and grounds its own theories in those currently in vogue.

As feminist writers, we feel like we must try to avoid predicating ‘woman/women’ on any of the known criteria for being a woman altogether. We must account endlessly for difference, as is the popular push in theoretical writing.

It is hard to write about real, stable forms of oppression when the oppressed

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subject of your writing is neither real nor stable itself. This problem must seem insane to those outside the sphere of academic social theory. I assure you, sometimes it seems insane to academics as well. Certain feminist theorists question the increasingly prevalent recourse to post-structuralist theory to analyse and describe the world. Judith Evans, in an analysis of Joan Scott’s post-structuralist reading of a famous sexual discrimination court case, is puzzled as to “why we should need a technique called deconstruction, a theory called poststructuralism, to understand a legal case.” Evans implies that other forms of theorising are also available and sufficient for feminist analysis. On the other hand, Rosi Braidotti calls attention to “the theoretical complexity and the subversive potential of post-structuralist philosophy,” and warns against “replacing them with a generalized nostalgia for humanistic ideals.” I certainly do not wish to dismiss post-structuralist principles because I draw heavily on these myself.

In the case of representation, many feminists take Braidotti’s warning on board and decide that, despite the fact that representation is necessary, imperfect representation is as good as it gets. Such feminists tend to write with the knowledge, often made explicit, that we write in a moment of time, that our writing is not an ultimate truth, and that it is just part of a bigger conversation between feminists. They may talk about keeping representation in motion, and never letting it sink into stasis. Often, this kind of theorist chooses a representation that does not harm too many women, and goes with it.

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88 For example, I espouse reflective writing and critical reading, I use the premises that knowledge and subjectivity are constructed, I seek to locate the processes of feminist writing and practice in material and historical conditions, and I constantly question boundaries and binaries.
89 For instance, Donna Haraway has the idea of forming “partial connections” in “Situated Knowledges” (passim); and Denise Riley discusses the difficulty of using terms to describe groups (such as ‘women’) in a permanent way in Am I That Name?
in order to get somewhere. In other words, these theorists choose a representation that is *adequate* rather than accurate. Kamala Visweswaran warns that this attitude of “success-in-failure” can be a cop out from trying to achieve a more ethically sound way of writing about women. But she goes on to quote Gayatri Spivak, explaining that we must be able “to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing her.” However, we do increasingly paralyse ourselves; we are more and more reluctant to choose a representation of women to work with, even when we know it’s not the be-all and end-all of ‘woman.’

An example of *adequate* representation (which uses but does not drown in post-structuralism) is the way some feminists work with the idea of ‘essential woman’ – not to debunk it as a myth, or even to make claims for the Truth of a female essence – but to say, yes, many women have certain traits, and the way society values these traits has got to change. In diverse ways, theorists such as Mary Daly, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous all valorise the ‘feminine.’ Negative associations with ‘the feminine’ are revised: fickleness might become flexibility; passivity becomes pacifism; irrationality becomes the ability to see from every angle, and dependence becomes intimacy and responsiveness. Many feminists baulk at what appears to be an assignation of personality traits to an entire sex. However, whether or not you agree with this perspective, you have to admire it for its no-nonsense approach to the ethical problem of representation – it is an approach that feminists can work with and from,

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91 Visweswaran. 98.
embracing and defending their ‘womanhood’ instead of trying to be like men in order to get equal recognition. Women will, after all, inevitably be shunted into the categories of slut, bitch, angel, ballbreaker, no matter how we try to resist them. A woman might do things so varied and unexpected that there is no way to accurately represent her through these categories, but never fear – society will still try. Therefore, there is room for a politically and theoretically strategic position which valorises traits specific to women.

However, there is another group of feminist theorists who show no post-structuralist ‘paralysis’ – no such awareness of, or interest in, post-structuralist theories of representation. Such theorists represent women in an untrendily static way, using a definition of ‘woman’ that assumes a biological or social (as in socialised) foundation. Andrea Dworkin,\(^97\) Catharine MacKinnon\(^98\) and psychoanalytic feminists such as Juliet Mitchell\(^99\) come to mind. Whilst we question the representations these feminists use, we must remember that they are also doing something quite valid: they are accepting, if just for the writing moment, a responsibility to describe and thus represent the ‘women’ they are writing about so that they *can* theorise the oppression and resistance of those women. The essentialist approach in no way has the only answer to the representation problem – but it certainly provides one way to deal with myths about women. Essentialist representations of women are obviously not perfectly accurate. If the nurturing and relational qualities are to be attributed to all women, then what do we say about women who are not nurturing or relational – what do we say about hard, rational, independent and decidedly unmotherly women? However, when used for the purpose of questioning female subordination, the essentialist representation works. It is *adequate*. And, for the most part, such theorists run with it, rather than

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circumnavigating it, bewilderedly trying to make it work for all women, or abandoning all hope when it doesn’t.

The discussion of representation above shows how notions of being theoretically mature/correct/up-to-date allow theorists to criticise and even reject feminist theory that doesn’t adopt popular concepts and methods. Although the complete list is much longer than I have the space for here, I will recount two or three more of these unpopular positions. One of these positions is ‘unsituated writing’ – that is, writing from nowhere. This is the “god-trick” of objectivity – of effacing oneself as an embodied writer of theory. In order to avoid vilification as a pseudo-omniscient narrator, writers often rattle off a few personal details and then consider themselves exonerated from fronting up about their situations as writers any further. As Daphne Patai says:

A currently popular strategy is that of ‘situating’ oneself by prior announcement: ‘As a white working class heterosexual…’ or ‘As a black feminist activist…’ Sometimes these tropes sound like apologies; more often they are deployed as badges. Either way, they give off their own aroma of fraud, for the underlying assumption seems to be that by such identification one has paid one’s respects to ‘difference’ – owned up to bias, acknowledged privilege, or taken possession of oppression – and is now home free.

An honest and faithful account of oneself as writer is preferable to a tokenistic one, but what about when there is no such account at all? Must we automatically question the work’s argument, research, and integrity as feminist theory?

Similarly, we tend to distance ourselves, as feminist theorists, from radical statements of female superiority and man hating. Little consideration is given to how feminists use these positions, strategically speaking. Instead, people often talk about such positions as ‘letting the side down,’ and blame such extreme politics for the backlash against feminism. Emotion, however female-associated, is not an appropriate

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100 Haraway. 581.
102 Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge discuss the wholesale condemnation of ‘objective’/non-standpoint theory endemic to contemporary Women’s Studies programs in Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies. New York: BasicBooks, 1994. 116-134.
political stance. Discussing her working class mother in relation to socialist theory, Carolyn Steedman describes how:

Her envy, her sense of the unfairness of things, could not be directly translated into political understanding, and certainly could not be used by the left to shape an articulated politics of class…Envy as a political motive has always been condemned…

However, theories based on emotion and anger have a strategic place in feminist theory. Further work has been done on negative emotions as theoretical and political starting points, but the field is very new and, as yet, little used in feminism (work done on shame, for instance, is usually located in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy). Generally, feminist theorists still cringe slightly when women make claims like: “[Without the vote] you’re just a servant to the male race,” and “In the dark ages women were treated as subhuman.” “Do you know what it feels like for a girl in this world?” asks Madonna as she drives off on a wild spree with an elderly woman, running down various men. Such statements cast men as the enemy, but in doing so they make a point about living under patriarchy: namely, that oppression can be flesh-based. That men can and do indeed oppress women. Naming an enemy is, however, passé. One must move on to blaming systems and structures to be a feminist theorist to be reckoned with. “Feminists do not so much hate men as they hate male-dominated socialization that both men and women undergo,” says Leigh Fought, attempting to defend feminism from negative stereotypes in the article “Popular Myths make Feminism Unpopular with Women.” But the fact is that some feminists do appear to hate men, and some cast men as the enemy – and it is all too easy to dismiss what such feminists say because man-hating is perceived as so utterly, childishly emotive and

103 Steedman. 8.
105 The Centenary of Women’s Suffrage.
outmoded.

Finally, one of the most common faux pas that makes feminist theory suspect is ‘equality feminism,’ captured in statements like: “Women are the same as men,” “we’re just like men,” “[the vote] shows that women are taken equally and taken seriously.” Many feminists treat equality feminism as a red herring of the women’s movement, casting the notion that men and women are the same as reductive and unfeasible as a premise for feminist work. Helen Lobato claims, “True feminism is about liberation, for all human beings, not a search for equality in a flawed system.”

But equality politics has always been a vital part of women’s liberation, allowing for a multitude of changes in areas such as family law, suffrage, employment practices, sexual harassment education and anti-discrimination policy. Some feminists have attempted to resuscitate the concept of equality through critical discussion of ways of using the term ‘equality.’ But the very idea of using the term ‘equality’ in a self-evident way would raise gasps from many contemporary feminist theorists. There is little attempt to go beyond criticism to take seriously feminist theory that uses such ideas.

So how do we go beyond condemning unpopular/suspect feminist positions as ‘not feminist?’ Devoney Looser, in an essay about eighteenth century poet and writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, shows how quick we are to discard suspect feminist theory, and how counter-productive this practice can be. Looser explores the inspirational effect of the historical feminist, Montagu, on her contemporaries, as well as modern-day women. But there is a problem with Montagu’s politics: her travel writing from her time spent in Turkey is filled with culturally-insensitive descriptions.

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108 The Centenary of Women’s Suffrage.
and analysis of Turkish women’s customs, and sentiments that are difficult to reconcile
with contemporary feminist positions. In recent times, some feminist theorists have
expressed discomfort over whether or not we can recuperate Montagu’s politics so that
they sit happily with contemporary feminism.112 Writers such as Barbara Smith make
claims about racist politics precluding feminism: “To me,” says Smith, “racist white
women cannot be said to be actually feminist.”113 But Looser begins to ask questions
about the either/or mentality that not only causes feminists to reject suspect works as
feminism, but also causes feminists to react defensively to such rejection:

The sense remains in some feminist circles that you are either with us or against us.
‘With us’ means primarily lauding the female/feminist writers of history, as well as
recent feminist critics; ‘against us’ means critiquing historical female subjects or
criticizing other feminists’ work.114

Patai describes the potential results of this kind of ‘either/or’ feminism thus:

My fear is that the search – and demand – for feminist purity (of both attitudes and
identity) will eventually result in a massive rejection of the very important things that
feminism, broadly speaking, aims to achieve. Today, feminists who have the temerity
to criticize negative tendencies within feminism risk being automatically placed in the
enemy camp, thus seeming to swell the ranks of opponents of progressive
scholarship… Marginalizing friendly critics will not advance the credibility of
women’s studies or other revisionist scholarship.115

Nor will it be conducive to the kind of healthy dialogue of differences that characterises
feminism and that might allow ‘impure’ feminist theory to reside within the boundaries
of feminism.

Looser examines the way feminists variously celebrate and condemn Montagu’s
writing because it simultaneously reflects contemporary feminist ideas, demonstrates
some elite and racist tendencies, and stands as a beacon and inspiration in the progress
of feminism from the eighteenth century till now. Some theorists call Montagu a
heroine; some suggest she is a traitor. Looser asks: “Must Montagu be held up as a

114 Looser. 57.
115 Patai, Daphne. “The Struggle for Feminist Purity Threatens the Goals of Feminism.” *Chronicle of
politically progressive figure at all costs?"116 In other words, does feminism have to fit all the criteria of a ‘good’ contemporary social movement in order for us to call it feminism? Must all of Montagu’s work be nameable as feminism? Or, conversely, if she wrote some suspect texts, must we discard her as a feminist icon? Looser suggests that we reject such a black-and-white approach:

>Rather than scolding or exonerating her (or any of our predecessors), we might instead move toward more complex tasks of shifting, local theorizing, and examining complicity as thoroughly as we do resistance.117

Instead of rejecting a work as feminism because it does not work from popular and acceptable feminist positions, perhaps we might become more willing to embrace such feminist theory’s accomplishments as comfortably and keenly as we expose its flaws. Perhaps we might use ‘suspect’ positions strategically, rather than disposing of them as universally flawed and untenable.

>Over-emphasizing the imperfections of a work or a practice “fosters a policy and a style of antiracist, anticlassist, and/or antiheterosexist consciousness and behaviour that is based on terrorizing other women in both an intellectual and social way.”118 This guilt tripping is exemplified in this scenario described by a feminist scholar in Patai and Koertge’s *Professing Feminism:*

> I remember the kind of debates we had in my C-R [consciousness-raising] group. There was one woman who wore makeup, and we were down on her like a ton of bricks! We said it was a betrayal of feminism and so forth. At one point she literally said to us, ‘if you’re going to say that I can’t put eye makeup on when I come to this group, you’re not going to see me.’ And in fact shortly thereafter she was gone. We didn’t ease up. I look back at that now and I’m horrified at myself. I always associate that with a form of competitiveness, a kind of pressure to be the most pure and the most ideologically untainted…119

Raymond describes a similar kind of hounding “in women’s groups where some women berate other women for racism, classism and/or heterosexism.”120 Feminist

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116 Looser. 50.
117 Looser. 58.
118 Raymond. 189.
119 Patai and Koertge. 196.
120 Raymond. 189.
scholars do not need to be in women’s groups to berate other women in this way. In fact, feminist theory is rife with guilt tripping. As well as fruitful dialogue about issues of race, representation, and any of the other hot potatoes of suspect theory, this guilt tripping unfortunately seems regularly to culminate in ultimatum. Feminist theorists are quick to point the finger of judgment without first assessing the political goals of the suspect theory they are judging. However, there must be a way to find a balance between the plaintive voice that asks, “Can’t we all just get along?” and the accusatory shriek that commands, “Get thee to a consciousness raising group!”

**Conclusion: a note on suspicion**

This chapter was exceptionally difficult to write. Fitting the variety of forms of theory I discuss into seven categories was, at times, a confusing task. I did a lot of cutting and pasting of examples into different categories. I found this happened most often with the sin of ‘suspect’ feminist theory. Essentially, almost all of the other sins are sins because they use suspect concepts, methodologies or writing positions. But there are certain feminist theories that official feminist theorists consistently question and condemn, so these needed a category of their own – hence the conception of the ‘suspect’ section. I also needed a place to discuss the fact that the search for perfection and purity in feminism is a major factor in the limiting of what counts as feminist theory. ‘Suspect’ feminism is that which we suspect is not perfect – not the real thing. However, it is significant that we only suspect imperfection. Imperfection is not provable because there is, of course, no such thing as perfection. There are only attempts, strategies, confessions and judgements.

A wealth of knowledge and wisdom opens up before us when things we suspect of imperfection count as feminist theory. I think the hardest thing to achieve when
reading/listening to feminist theory is a sense of trust.\textsuperscript{121} It is rare that we accept in good faith the theorist’s feminist intentions. It is more usual to read, not just critically, but suspiciously, watching for lapses into false consciousness or underlying prejudice. I want to trust in the good faith of feminists, because I do not believe that doing so diminishes my ability to read critically. It just helps me to read with greater understanding and a wider perspective, accepting all kinds of feminist theory as contributions to the feminist conversation. In the next chapter of this thesis, I explore the rhetoric of ‘suspect versus trustworthy’ further, scrutinizing the preconceptions with which ‘second-wave’ and ‘third-wave’ generations of feminists approach each other’s work.

Part 3

Problems of ‘Intergenerational’ Feminism

In this part of my thesis, I explore the way we limit feminism by pinning certain practices and theoretical styles to certain moments in history. Discussions of feminism tend to divide the women’s movement into three finite historical periods: the first, second and third ‘waves.’ We also tend to envisage contemporary resistance to feminism as a giant ‘backlash’ against feminism – which we conceptualise as a phenomenon parallel to feminism. I have explored ways we represent first-wave and other historical feminism in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. In this part of my thesis, I wish to focus more on unravelling the web of complicated and criss-crossed expectations we associate with the second and third waves, and the backlash. I have found such tensions to be intriguingly absent from discussions of intergenerational interaction of first- and second-wave feminists. It is difficult to say whether this is an actual phenomenon or simply the way the two waves have been represented (that is, the characterization of the first and second waves as having different goals: first-wave ‘reformist’ goals versus second-wave ‘grassroots’ approaches). Jane Newman discusses some of the “narrative manipulations of the relationship between the past and the present” in “The Present and our Past.”\(^1\) However, conflicts between second- and third-wave feminism have proven divisive and demoralizing to feminists of all ages, and thus deserve urgent interrogation.

Second-wave feminism was the strong movement that arose in the late 1960s and continued into the 1970s, often called ‘Women’s Liberation.” We (as a culture) tend to associate second-wave feminism with liberal campaigning (that is, campaigns for equal rights, equal employment opportunities, equal pay, greater representation in

parliament, etc.), and with radical practices (separatist female communities, public demonstrations, graffiti protests against the sexual objectification of women, Reclaim the Night marches, etc.). The second wave (or at least its inception) is often located geographically in the United States. When the second wave ended is less obvious. There is some dissent over whether it ended around the early 1980s (when the corporate and media bigwigs of the greedy eighties led a campaign in which the pressure to consume ‘oppressive’ products, such as fashionable clothing, as well as the rise of negative feminist stereotypes, are supposed to have forced feminism back underground), or whether the flurry of feminist activity called the ‘second wave’ died down at the end of the 70s. There is additional confusion over the possibility that second-wave feminism is still going.

The third wave is a lesser-known phenomenon. It is mainly ‘official’ feminists and social theorists who claim we are living in the third wave of feminism. The third wave is thought to have begun around the late 80s or early 90s. The character of the third wave is less defined than the other two waves, but the general consensus is that it is a movement led by a number of ‘young’ women who have spoken out against the problems of second-wave feminism. Katie Roiphe (The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism), Naomi Wolf (The Beauty Myth; Fire with Fire), Kathy Bail (DIY Feminism) and Natasha Walter (The New Feminism) come to mind. These women tend to criticise the ‘second-wave style’ of doing feminism, claiming that improved women’s rights mean that women can now enjoy a more relaxed attitude towards

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feminism, can make personal choices independent of feminist dogma, and can reclaim our femininity. We also associate the third wave with a burgeoning of abstract feminist theory and a general retreat of feminist activism. Key foci in third-wave feminist theory are issues of difference, sexuality, language and technology. The interesting thing about the third wave is the fact that we are in it right now, and yet, many women do not seem to know this. In fact, some might even dispute that we are in the third wave of feminism; rather, they suggest, we are living through the backlash against (second-wave) feminism. The backlash dates from the early 1980s, and involves a general loss of interest and sympathy in the women’s movement, on behalf of both men and women. This indifference soon turned to hostility, marked by increases in anti-woman practices, from restrictive fashions to soaring sexual assault statistics. Other markers of the backlash include the men’s movement, which urges men to reclaim their machismo, and claims of reverse discrimination (the old “feminists have gone too far, and now men are getting the short end of the stick” line).

That the campaigns, practices and effects of feminism are genuine historical events I have no doubt. However, the use of such miscellany to circumscribe periods of feminist history has its share of problems. I have been at some pains in this thesis to present feminism as an ancient and enduring response to women’s suffering under patriarchy. In the following chapter, I re-emphasize the ever-present and evolutionary nature of feminism by looking critically at the way we have tried to control the

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9 There is some confusion about whether the third wave refers to ‘post-feminism’ (literally ‘after feminism’) or the proliferation of postmodern theory within feminism. I explore this confusion in Chapter 6.
10 For example, Faludi in *Backlash*.
11 Faludi. 203-36.
presence of feminism by defining it in terms of waves and troughs. The wave metaphor is a strange one: I like the conception of feminism as a wide, spreading ocean in which waves of organised activity rise up from time to time. However, the image of ‘waves’ that really pervades cultural consciousness is that prior to and after a wave, there is nothing; that feminism is in a lull when it is not part of one of the waves. Also difficult for me is the idea that the women doing feminism in each wave are completely different – not to mention the problem of assuming that women of previous waves are dead and gone (or at least silent). ‘Third wave’ feminist Deirdre Carraher, writing in Bell and Klein’s *Radically Speaking*, describes how:

> Far from feeling distant from Catharine McKinnon and her peers [‘second-wave’ feminists], I feel inspired by the possibilities for striking a powerful union between the second and third waves.\(^{14}\)

This “powerful union” almost makes second- and third-wave feminism out to be enemy camps, with only the “possibility” of working as a harmonious community. For me, breaking down the factionalism that we associate with contemporary feminism will not only come from creating coalitions between younger and older women; rather it will come from a different way of talking about feminist history – one that dismantles the generation gap between the second and third waves via a greater awareness of both the diversity and the evolution within feminism.

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Chapter 6

Which Wave am I Surfing?

Inside academia or out, whether as demonstrations, community activities, popular books, scholarly articles, rap groups, and so on, feminism persists. It does not, however, persist unchanged.

– Joanna Russ, 1998

In this, the final chapter of my thesis, I take my argument about the limiting of feminism into a discussion of generational feminism. In order to expose the problems of stereotyped and limited ways of looking at the feminist ‘waves,’ I adopt the persona of a formulaic ‘second-waver,’ criticising the attitudes of certain third-wave feminists towards second-wave feminism. Throughout this parody of second-wave attitudes, I have placed comments and quotations that variously confirm and confound the comments made by the second-wave persona. I then expose two distinct stereotypical characters of the ‘third-waver’ in the same way. One piece takes up the persona of the post-feminist who believes we have moved past feminism, and the other illustrates the supposed ‘postmodern feminist,’ who has abandoned activism and the ‘fatally flawed’ foundations of second-wave feminism. The final part of this chapter questions the assumed monolithic character of ‘the backlash’ and makes the effort to get past some of these stereotypes and unproductively restrictive boundaries.

During the term of this project, I was urged over and over again by older (‘second-wave’) feminists to consider generational issues in my argument. Perhaps these women were concerned that I would be labelled. Perhaps they themselves saw my attempt to describe a more inclusive feminism, and particularly my vindication of personal, daily practices, as the marks of a third-wave feminist. Imagine my relief when I saw that Robyn Wiegman (an older feminist!) had made the point that:

Generation is of course a limited way of thinking about time and transformation, too wound up in reproductive logics, much too bound to the nation. It has no analytic ability to comprehend diasporic or counter-nationalist political subjectivities, and routinely fails to situate feminism and social change in a complex interaction among organizational, epistemological, and political modalities.

Generation (the waves of feminism) does not tell the whole story about differences in the ways we do and think about feminism. Generation certainly constitutes one form of difference between women. However, the most ghastly thing about grouping people to

1 Russ, Joanna. *What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class and the Future of Feminism*. New York: St Martin’s, 1998. 10.

theorise them (which is something all social theorists do – not just feminists) is how badly we tend to cope with difference. Generational difference is no exception.

Prominent contemporary feminist writers, including Katie Roiphe (*The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism*) and Christina Hoff Sommers (*Who Stole Feminism*), having noticed changes in women’s outlook on their own oppression, wrote books about these changes. These authors explore the types of feminist practice the writers find appropriate to the current social climate; however, in doing so, the authors do tend to come across as accusatory and vitriolic about certain feminist practices (often characterised as second-wave or, in Sommers’ case, as the practice of “gender feminists”). Sommers, for instance, refers to the “mind-numbing” polemic of “gender feminists,” and describes a “feminism of resentment that rationalizes and fosters a wholesale rancor in women.” Likewise, Rene Denfeld makes claims about a large group of older feminists:

A movement that began in the 1960s with a fierce fight for economic, social, and political parity has degenerated into a series of repressive moral crusades that have little to do with most women’s lives.

In doing so, such feminists associate ‘second-wavers’ with extremism and man hating. Similarly, feminist writers such as Germaine Greer and Helen Garner, criticize ways of doing feminism associated with the third wave respectively as superficial lifestyle change and over-litigious hypocrisy. These kinds of texts set off a sometimes frightened, sometimes triumphant response from both feminists (young and old) and anti-feminists. All are quick to label the books, using words like ‘extremist,’ ‘radical feminism,’ ‘backlash,’ ‘post-feminism,’ or ‘the death of feminism.’ However, I want to

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3 Sommers. 16. Passim.
4 Sommers. 40.
5 Sommers. 41.
suggest that we take a more respectful interest in the claims of such feminists, and analyse the shift their writing illustrates in terms of *how feminism has come along*, rather than giving in to the temptation to shoot names at them. Attempting to understand these texts solely through the lens of generational disparity disregards the idea of feminism as a historical process. Such an interpretation accepts only in the most superficial way that the Western feminist struggle is a different struggle today from what it was ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. Rather, we need to acknowledge that feminism, as a radical political movement, has its mutations and evolutions. When we decided that feminism happens in ‘waves,’ instead of as a continuous historical process, we created a definite them-and-us feel in the feminist community.

The parodies I have created below expose the pigeonholed ‘differences’ between *them* and *us* and, I hope, show some of the actual continuity between the ‘waves.’ In order to understand the next section, I will now briefly explain its structure. The parody itself is the main body of the section, written physically from the left to the right of the page, in regular font. The comments appearing on the right hand side of the page are quotations and analyses – things for us to think about as we read the parody. In order to keep the indented commentary pieces distinct from the main body of the parody, I have also italicized my own comments (the words and quotations of other theorists are presented in the commentaries in regular font so that they are easily distinguishable from my own comments). Thus there is a minor dialogue going on within the parody so that it does not become too static a bloc of stereotypes. Read the section as you will: you may wish to read past the commentaries in your first reading, to get an idea of the parody as a whole, and then return to the commentaries in a second reading. Or you may wish to read the commentaries alongside the parody. Most importantly, keep in mind as you read that I am discussing *representations* of second-
wave feminism – please do not mistake the parody for a serious description of a second-wave feminist.

**Boxing Second-Wave Feminism**

*Women are again the dupes of capitalist patriarchy!*

**The ‘Second-waver’ says:**

When it comes to feminism, we are living in a drought. Forget the third wave – what is happening now is more like a trough.

A number of feminists, such as Ann Brooks¹¹ and Suzanna Walters,¹² use the term ‘third-wave feminism’ interchangeably with ‘post-feminism,’ and sometimes even with ‘lifestyle’ or ‘DIY’ feminism and, rather unsettlingly, ‘the backlash.’

“We have reached a point when the way ahead seems to have petered out.”¹³ Feminist activity in the developed world has been at an all-time minimum for around twenty years now, and there are no signs of improvement. Lifestyle feminism¹⁴ is yet another way to back out of doing real feminist work. ‘DIY’ feminism¹⁵ makes no connections between women’s individual lives and the structural oppression of patriarchy. It is all self-gratification. Never mind the sexual enslavement of Eastern-European girls going on right under our noses, so long as we have the ‘right’ to wear lipstick. Never mind the confinement of Muslim women to the house, as long as we have the ‘right’ to stay at home and pop out babies.

Leder, et al, describe beautifully the tense and muddy relationship women have with ‘official’ feminism in this statement:

> Writers and the media have portrayed feminism as the cause of women’s problems and have complicated matters by co-opting the language of feminism: women have the right to beauty, romance, and maternity.¹⁶

DIY feminism shows no understanding of systemic power relations, and is ignorant or indifferent about international women’s issues. Big-name feminists of today bear no relation to those of the second wave. Political activism has been replaced by theorizing – and not even the inspiring polemical theory it once was. Now it is just a wishy-washy wondering, asking unanswerable questions and harping on about ethics. Ethics! What

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¹³ Greer. 15.
¹⁴ The term ‘lifestyle’ feminism describes individual decisions women make about how to live their lives in a feminist fashion, whilst avoiding more traditional forms of feminist practice.
¹⁵ The term “DIY feminism” is used most famously by Kathy Bail in her book *DIY Feminism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996). The term is another descriptor for individualist feminist approaches women take in personal life.
an irony. What I’d like to know is how it is ethical to do nothing but talk. How ethical is it never to act on women’s behalf, even after exhausting the discussion of ethics?

Diane Reay notes that: “[m]uch has been written from a feminist perspective about the way in which power imbalances compromise research endeavours.”\footnote{Reay, Diane. “Dim Dross: Marginalised Women both Inside and Outside the Academy.” \textit{Women’s Studies International Forum} 23 (2000): 13-21. 17.} More recently, feminists are writing about the way in which the obsession with such ethical matters compromises political work.\footnote{For example, Diana Fuss. \textit{Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference}. New York: Routledge, 1989.}

The fact is that post-feminism is just a re-appropriation of feminism into patriarchy. Patriarchy hijacks various structures and discourses to recuperate feminism, and by far the two most successful are consumer capitalism and postmodernity. Consumer capitalism has fooled younger women into thinking that feminism is a saleable commodity, available to buy, wear and discard whenever it is required. They buy it as girlpower or raunchy lingerie, or trendy books about being a single thirty-something in a corporate world. Magazines barely pause for breath between articles on why men “need” to masturbate\footnote{Sandiford, Fiona and Laurence Orkin, eds. “Inside Masturbation: What it Feels Like for a Boy.” \textit{Cleo}. Australian edition. July 2003. 82-84, 86.} and why dieting screws with a woman’s mind.\footnote{Le Poer Trench, Brooke. “Food and You.” \textit{Cleo}. Australian edition. July 2003. 107-114.}

“Postfeminism is, in fact, an ongoing engineering process promoted most vigorously by the right, but aided and abetted all along the way by the corporate media. Postfeminism is crucial to the corporate media because they rely on advertising. If millions of women stopped and said, “Hey, I don’t think I need lipstick, Lestoil, Oil of Olay, Victoria’s Secret boulder holders, Diet Coke, L’Oreal or Ultra Slim-Fast anymore,” that would lead to a serious advertising revenue shortfall.”\footnote{Douglas, Susan J. “Manufacturing Postfeminism.” \textit{AlterNet.org: In These Times}. 13 May 2003. <http://www.alternet.org/print.html?StoryID=13118>}

One of the young women Chilla Bulbeck interviews in her article on Women’s Studies students and how they talk about their feminism says that:

I don’t see femininity as a handicap. I revel in it. When I read a fashion magazine that is filled with beautiful women, I do not feel as though my gender is being exploited. These magazines are produced mainly by women and are filled with articles and images of professional women pleasing themselves…\footnote{Bulbeck, Chilla. “Articulating Structure and Agency: How Women’s Studies Students Express their Relationships with Feminism.” \textit{Women’s Studies International Forum} 24 (2001): 141-156. 148.}

On the contrary, Leder, et al, claim that such young women are “seduced…by the culture of narcissism – the emphasis on self promoted by capitalism – and… blinded by women’s token advances.”\footnote{Leder, et al. 188.}

Who can we say is right here? At what point does the notion of false consciousness go from being insightful to just plain insulting?

Similarly, the patriarchal world of academia has almost entirely absorbed feminism,
regurgitating it as post-feminism, clouded by wanked-up terminology, parenthesis and chic little wordplays, and held afloat by irrelevant abstractions. Feminism in this form appears indifferent to the real suffering of real women, and bears almost no resemblance to the political movement it once was.

_Ailbhe Smyth asks:_

...questions about trends and directions within western feminist thought which appear to be exacerbating distinctions between activism and theory-making or, more concretely, increasing the distance between Women’s Movement activists, feminist theorists – and women.

_And Jane Martin also worries that:_

In assigning theory a kind of sovereignty over practice...the academy's conception or model of the theory/practice relationship coheres nicely with a self-definition as an institution having as few dealings as possible with the everyday world. Indeed, it allows academy members to pursue theoretical knowledge while letting the chips fall where they may. But the trap of a practice-independent theory can do feminists two sorts of harm. On the one hand, it obscures the potential of feminist practice to inform feminist theory and even serve as its source. On the other, in establishing a hierarchical relationship in which feminist theory is the dominant and feminist practice the subordinate partner, it all too easily leads to the valuing of feminist scholars and theoreticians over feminist activists and practitioners.

Third wavers are horribly tangled in the trivia of sexism – the wee little insults and irritations of being a woman. There is no scope, no perspective. And they don’t fight their own battles. Everything takes place in court. They get litigious over some unwanted workplace slap and tickle that they could easily fend off with a swift kick to the offender’s groin, or by exposing the culprit’s actions to the rest of the office.

_Virginia Trioli questions whether associating anti-legislation rhetoric with an older generation of feminists and cowardly litigiousness with younger feminists is not the “easy way out...[posing] the knowing, mature, libertarian feminists on one side; the cringing, punishing young things on the other.”_

Post-feminism, in both its forms (which, let’s face it, amount to pretty much the same thing – the abandonment of anything in feminism that matters or means something),

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26 Helen Garner discusses her bafflement over young women’s use of the legal system to deal with sexual harassment (and, incidentally, writes off a professor groping the breast of a student as “a clumsy pass”) in _The First Stone._

focuses on time-wasting individual grievances rather than the higher cause of collective women’s oppression. It diverts attention away from the things that need work. It takes one or two instances of men getting their come-uppance (say, a woman sexually harassing a man, or a man staying at home with the kids), and makes a big deal out of them, suggesting that things have come full circle. Post-feminists are so damn ungrateful for the work we did. Our reward is the effective obliteration of the most important political movement that ever rocked our society – an obliteration that finds its cause in the in-fighting and disruption that has broken the women’s movement into factions, dismantling women’s collective power.

It is easy to become confused by the two different kinds of post-feminism: that which describes ‘life beyond feminism’ and that which draws on postmodern, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories.

It’s a damn shame that consciousness-raising is so unpopular these days, because these girls could certainly use some of it. I went to a women’s group the other day and “half the women are talking about where they buy their meat, having rummage sales, telling and retelling labor and delivery stories.”28 Women today seem to think sex play and queer sex is sexual liberation. They think women’s getting equal wages makes up for the women who never make it to the level of tenured professor, or school principal, or CEO. They think staying home to do unpaid housework is somehow a real, positive choice for a woman. They think date rape is just some college girl pissed off with bad sex.29 They think that differences among women override the fact that women – all women, to varying degrees – are oppressed by virtue of being women.

Sandra Coney says: “Postfeminism is not a political position, it’s a style.”30 Ailbhe Smyth further explains the claim we tend to associate with second-wave feminism – that third-wave feminism is apolitical or, at best, underpolitical: There is, for me, a loss of politics in the Women’s Studies I know – defeminism, in Kathleen Barry’s phrase…Is this a “personal problem” (my state of mind)? Generational, perhaps (the weary disillusionment of middle age)? Internal to Women’s Studies (institutionalisation, “professionalisation,” Americanisation)?

The variety of Smyth’s questions highlight the uncertainty with which we approach the issue, as well as the inadequacy of universalising statements of ‘generation’ as the key to such critiques of third-wave feminism.

There is a profound and overarching lack of understanding of the deeply systemic injustice done to women. With all their posturing, vacuous happiness, superficiality, indifference, and bratty, childish self-gratification, these women are selling out their

28 Russ. 8. (Letter to Joanna Russ from an unnamed correspondent.)
29 I refer here to Katie Roiphe’s frequently misrepresented work on date rape statistics in The Morning After.
31 Smyth. 172.
sisters. They are young, often pretty, upwardly mobile and utterly self-indulgent. What the third-wavers don’t understand is that lifestyle feminism is just pissing into the wind. And one day, when they’re tired and middle aged, and have nothing to show for a life of playing at kinky sex games, and are abandoned by their gay male friends, it’s just going to hit them in the face. One day, in all the fighting feminism for women’s rights, they will realize that they need feminism to fight for their rights.

Comment: Confusion about Second-Wave Feminism

Perhaps I need to re-emphasize here that the parody of second-wave attitudes above is much more complicated than a jab at second-wave feminism. In fact, it is more of a jab at the representation of second-wave feminists by writers such as Rene Denfeld. Denfeld’s book, The New Victorians, criticises second-wave feminists as puritanical and anti-sexual, over-reactive and outdated. The feminist movement, declares Denfeld, “has become bogged down in an extremist moral and spiritual crusade that has little to do with women’s lives.” In Fire with Fire, Naomi Wolf also suggests that a number of feminists associated with the second wave have lost touch with contemporary reality:

The focus of some feminists, like Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and Adrienne Rich, on female victimization foreshadowed over female agency, derives from conditions that were once truer than they are now.

And in Who Stole Feminism?, the feminists Christina Hoff Sommers is criticising are “articulate, prone to self-dramatization, and chronically offended.” Such writers represent second-wave feminists as either encouraging victimhood in women or enacting it in themselves – and, for these writers, victimhood is the ultimate in undesirable traits for women. According to Rebecca Stringer, Wolf and Katie Roiphe both “argue that feminism has become an exercise in representing women as victims,” and Roiphe even “uses the word ‘victim’ to refer to a fully-fledged, calculating and

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32 Denfeld. 5.
34 Sommers. 21.
duplicitous agent engaged in a cynical feminist ‘performance.’”35 The concept of the female victim is one of a woman without power – and perhaps this is the reason feminists such as Wolf and Roiphe object to second-wave representations they see as forcing the victim card. It is possible that these writers look at a ‘second-wave preoccupation’ with the notion of woman-as-victim as stripping women of the power they have earned through feminism (or perhaps, in Roiphe’s case, in spite of feminism).

What is particularly interesting about the second-wave ‘victim’ association is that certain second-wave feminists actually see third-wave feminists as clinging to victim status: Helen Garner, for instance, describes the political position of young women who went to the police in a particular sexual harassment case as “based on the virtue of helplessness.”36 Christina Hoff Sommers throws further spanners into the works, ‘debunking’37 myths of female victimhood and oppression supposedly perpetuated by what she calls “gender feminists”38 (as opposed to “equity feminists”).39 Sommers adds to the confusion over the second-wave/third-wave distinction, claiming that gender feminists are a new breed40 (despite the fact that the gender feminists she discusses include many feminists frequently associated with the second wave, a number of whom are definitely senior to certain (‘old’ style) equity feminists against whom Sommers contrasts them). Sommers relates equity feminism to a “First Wave”41 kind of feminism, which is populated not only by first-wave feminists, but also feminists

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36 Garner. 99.
38 Sommers. 16.
39 Sommers. 22.
40 Sommers. 21. Sommers includes Marilyn French, Gloria Steinem, Catharine Mackinnon and Naomi Wolf in her list of “new” or “gender” feminists. 17.
41 Sommers. 22.
generally considered second- or third-wave. Clearly, the issue of who is an old, new, first-, second- or third-wave feminist, is a convoluted one over which few writers can agree.

More confusion arises when those who box the ‘second-wave feminist’ invoke (as, for instance, Rene Denfeld does) the image of the radical feminist. Sommers even pokes fun at these feminists, describing with an acid tongue the “gender” (read: radical) feminists she encounters at conferences, whom she represents as constantly attacking male speakers, disregarding or condemning ‘liberal’ sentiments, and wallowing in their own oppression. These representations of ‘radical feminist’ usually operate in the negative (the lack of). We only know what she is not, does not, and argues against. She does not shave her body hair. She needs a man. She cannot understand the present time. She is man hating, anti-individualist, anti-sex, devoid of fun, under-theorizing, ahistorical, irrational, censorious, unethical, angry and never satisfied. Un-, anti, under, lacking, without. These are all words that say something about what the stereotyped second-wave/radical feminist is not. The words betray the fact that some of the critics do not know what radical feminism is. The words betray the fact that some of the critics do not know what radical feminism is. We do not account for affirmative attributes when we grasp onto an idea of the radical feminist, because we cannot. We are not interested in what she stands for. What radical feminism does stand for—the positive ideals, visions and positions that make up the vast and complex number of women who may or may not be ‘second-wave’ feminists – makes no sense in the closed definition we tend to use. Later in this chapter, I will make some attempt to give a more realistic picture of what second-wave feminism is and who participates in it. Right now, I will explore some of the ways we misrepresent third-wave feminism and feminists. Again, I have structured the parody as the main body of the section, with my own commentaries

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42 Sommers suggests that Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan (23), Katie Roiphe (214) and a number of other lesser-known men and women who criticize questionable statistical data and feminist analysis are equity feminists.

43 See for example Sommers’ descriptions on pages 19-21 and 36-40 of *Who Stole Feminism?*
and quotations of other theorists indented on the right hand side of the page.

Boxing Third-Wave Feminism

*Box 1: Feminism – I’m over it.*

**The ‘Third-waver’ says:**

Well, seriously, the second-wavers can’t think that the radical sort of feminism they were doing is still relevant? I mean, sure, it worked for the time.

As I pointed out in the previous section, many people confuse second-wave feminism with radical feminism, as our ‘third-wave’ persona does here. I find it intriguing that this happens in just the same way that critics of third-wave feminism often conflate third-wave and post-feminism! The usual result of the second-wave/radical feminism conflation is the view of radical feminism as a “spent force.”

One mechanism by which contemporary feminists can discredit and dismiss radical feminism is through claiming it is outdated and therefore old-fashioned.

Diane Reay explains this phenomenon further, describing how the academy is a territory that is “heavily discursively policed.”

Academics discount “modernist statements that assert gender and class inequality [seen as, second-wave sentiment]...as simplistic, reeking of old discredited metanarratives.”

Sexism was so ingrained in the fifties and sixties. It was all like, post-war, woman get thee back in the kitchen, make babies for the nation, and so on. I know there was a lot wrong with the world for women then. They were getting paid much less than men, they didn’t have any opportunities to work in different fields, there was a general silence on rape and sexual abuse, women had to put up with sexual harassment, or get blamed for being provocative, and a woman didn’t even have the right to terminate a pregnancy. There were hardly any women in parliament, no women heading up the multinationals; work for women was just something you did until you found a husband. Women had mental illnesses because of the contradictions they lived with – they would find that they had all the right ingredients for happiness in their lives, and yet they were miserable. So what happened to them? Shut up in institutions, of course. Men treated women like possessions. Wives were trophies, sitting pretty alongside their collections of guns and model cars. The father gave the bride away at her wedding, and the husband took her into his home, having procured her promise to “obey.” You just have to look at the representations of women in old advertisements. Smiling women concerned about getting their hair curled right for their fundraiser fete meeting, or

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45 Richardson. 144.
47 Reay. 14.
getting dinner ready on time for when the husband gets home. It was enough to make you sick.

The organising done in that era was necessary and timely. If they went over the top, they did it for a reason. They had to make a big fuss, because they had to let women know that things weren’t right. And that they weren’t alone in their frustration and resentment. Consciousness raising groups, for instance, were great because they encouraged women to talk to each other about the things that happened to them – to see that those unfair things were happening to all women, and to see that the personal is political.

_Leder, Plotnik and Venkateswaran, Women’s Studies teachers at a community college, claim that:_

It is hard…for our students not to believe that women have already arrived at their liberation, limited though their concept of liberation may be. For them, liberation means having opportunities and achieving personal empowerment. They…don’t easily connect their situation with that of patriarchy more broadly."48

_These writers imply that ideals associated with third-wave feminism are little more than innocently erroneous, just requiring a bit of consciousness raising._

Feminists were getting important messages out to women: sexual images of women can be degrading, pornography can objectify women, women’s work is as good as men’s, women can do any job, sexual harassment and assault is unacceptable, domestic violence is unacceptable, and so on. In a way, the feminists of that time had to be extreme. They had to spread the word and get noticed. For such a long time, everything was male-oriented, so to even things up a bit, feminists pushed really far the other way, blaming and hating men, claiming that women were victims…

_As Marcia Ann Gillespie points out, instead of crediting feminism with women’s empowerment, women today frequently claim their assertiveness and independence as qualities they have in spite of – not because of – feminism. She claims ironically:_

…the movement was nothing more than one big pity-party, where we gathered to wallow in our victimization and trade tales of woe.49

…creating separatist communities, converting to lesbianism as a political move, interfering in women’s personal lives if they had problems with their men. Going crazy over workplace sexism and equal opportunities legislation, and bullying women out of the home and into the workplace.

_Whatever the era, people have always said that feminism is too narrow. Gillespie rails against journalists attacking feminism:_

…those smug hypocrites acted as if we were part of the problem. First they do the “Critics charge

48 Leder, et al. 185-6.
that mainstream feminism hasn’t done enough for women in poverty,” and then in their conclusion the writers declared, “Now that American feminists are looking beyond abortion, their priorities may be more relevant to the forgotten women at home and overseas.”

In addition to its radical persona, second-wave feminism is also likely to be represented as obsessed with liberal-associated policy change and demonstrations against institutional sexism.

But you can understand it, because it was so male-dominated for so long. The rash of demonstrating and publishing and organising that went on was totally necessary at the time.

But things are different now. Women and men have equal rights in employment and family law. In fact, women’s rights in family law are probably even better than men’s. Women have entered the workforce at every level, and they now have the opportunities to pursue almost any career they like. It is the choice of the individual woman to go as far or as high as she would like in her career – she just has to have the guts to go for it. And many women do. But there are women who wish to stay home and raise a family too – and really, that’s their choice. No one should bully women into the workforce just to prove some feminist point. If they want to stay at home with the kids, and look after their husbands, and do housework, well, that’s what they want. Isn’t that what feminism is about? Giving women the right to do what they want to do? And the legal system has become more protective of women.

Films such as Disclosure (in which a man is sexually harassed in the workplace by a woman) go towards the notion that men can suffer sexism in just the same way as women – with the added disadvantage of poor legal recourse. In addition, men’s rights agencies push for more ‘equitable’ legislation regarding child custody and maintenance payments, using the rhetoric of ‘discrimination against men.’

Women can stand up to sexual harassment, and pursue the issue in a court of law if necessary. They have the opportunity to obtain justice for sexual assault and molestation. There are shelters and welfare for battered women. Divorce doesn’t penalise women anymore: single mothers are most often awarded custody of the children, as well as child support payments from both the government and the kids’ father. As for images of women in the media, there are obviously still some pretty suspect images around, but there are a lot of smart, sassy, sexy and strong female images to counter that. Samantha from Sex and the City. Any of the three Charlie’s Angels. Even Felicity Shagwell in Austin Powers: the Spy who Shagged Me knows what she wants and goes for it. These women aren’t the victims feminism has

50 Gillespie. 141.
sometimes made them out to be, just because they’re sexy. They are powerful, independent and, yes, they like men.

_Coney says:_

I’m not clear who made the decision that the feminist task is completed and we can move on to the next stage. There were no resolutions that I know of passed through feminist conferences, no proclamations in women’s bars. It comes as a bit of a shock to find that you’re redundant, that you’ve been beavering away on something when it wasn’t really necessary, like surfacing from the coalface with black lung only to find everyone’s converted to natural gas.55

In fact, men are the ones who often get the short end of the stick these days. Women were encouraged to blame, castigate and reject men. They were also made to feel inadequate if they chose to live with a man as a partner. Women are made out to be pathetic if they want a man – as if they feel incomplete without a man to make them whole. Second-wavers are resistant to the fact that more equal partnerships of men and women are taking place in contemporary culture. Women have risen in terms of power, whilst men have fallen. Many men live in fear of feminism.

_According to one presumably male webpage writer, “feminism is the world’s most significant ideology, ‘cleansing’ our minds from dawn to dusk”:_  

I get on the bus but there is only one seat left. There is a woman my own age who gets on behind me and I let her take the seat. Was I being sexist? I feel unsure about that but I know that I have to stand for half an hour.56

Once, men had all the privileges, but nowadays, they cannot so much as hold a door open for a woman without the fear of being charged with sexual harassment.

_Chilla Bulbeck writes:_

The yearning for both equal opportunities and respect for women’s differences expressed in these comments was so pervasive among Riley-Smith’s (1992, p.39) women of “middle Australia” that she labelled it “the car door dilemma”: “If you want to be a bloody feminist, open the door for yourself.” In my research...I found this viewpoint expressed most frequently by women in their 60s and older. Its significance also to young women in my classes is thus of interest.57

In fact, radical feminism of the second wave made nearly as many problems as it solved. Commonly over-reactive, often man-hating, feminism of the day was more like reverse sexism, creating a deadly political correctness that took over the Western world and led to an imbalance of women’s and men’s rights. Its frequently downwardly...

55 Coney. 275.
57 Bulbeck. 147-8.
mobile politics were relevant to a moment in time that is now over. Second-wavers who berate third-wave women for their independent style of dealing with gender are the women of yesteryear, clinging to feminist ideals no longer relevant to young women today. In essence, the third wave, or post-feminism, exposes some of the inadequacies of feminism.

Some contemporary feminists dislike the polarisation of men and women they believe second-wave feminism produced. Cherry Smyth, for instance, “both desires and sees the possibility for new alliances across gender, as well as sexuality and race, through queer politics.”58 Diane Richardson notes that gender polarisation is seen as a cause of “dangerous” and “self-indulgent” radical feminist strategies, such as separatism.59

And Deirdre Carraher, et al, remind us that:

…we do have foremothers and calling us “Generation X,” as if we were lost and without moorings is not accurate. Similarly designating us the “Third Wave,” must not be a way of driving a wedge between us and radical feminists…60

The beauty of post-feminism is that it has been the first political movement qualified to point out that there are times when feminism doesn’t work, and there are situations in which a radical feminist approach is inappropriate.

Comment: Feminism or ‘Humanism’?

What I have done above is parody a limited or ‘boxed’ representation of the first kind of ‘post (meaning ‘after’) feminist.’ It describes the way some61 believe this version of the third-waver/post-feminist thinks about second-wave feminism. Anne Summers claims that a younger generation of women vehemently resist what they see as second-wave feminist behaviour, afraid that they will become like second-wave feminists. “They,” explains Summers, “had looked at us and seen a bunch of sad and lonely people who lived only for their jobs and their politics and they had pitied us.”62

In the parody I have produced, the ‘third-waver’ is similarly deluded: she confuses ‘second-wave’ feminism with radical feminism, and makes an uninformed and naïve

58 Richardson. 153.
59 Richardson. 153.
61 To give examples of such feminists, I have used ideas and/or quotations in my parody from Helen Garner (The First Stone), Germaine Greer (The Whole Woman), and Anne Summers’ “Letter to the Next Generation” from Damned Whores and God’s Police. 1975. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1994.
62 Summers. 507.
claim that all is now well with the world when it comes to women’s oppression. She claims that men and women have attained equality in the western world. Of course, she knows that there are still some international issues requiring feminist work. She knows feminism still has its uses, mainly as a bandaid to some leftover patriarchal injuries. However, rather than working for greater, deeper changes – say, working on eliminating men’s predation on women – she is ‘content’ to do what some feminists may consider the patch up job of increasing women’s awareness and recourse to the legal system. She distances herself from more radical approaches to feminism, giving such practices some credence as relevant to the inequality women suffered in history, but affirming that these are quite ridiculously passé in contemporary society. She uses words like “self-actualization” and “individual” and prefers a modest, discreet kind of feminism. She dislikes making a fuss, not because it is embarrassing so much as unnecessary. “If someone tries to discriminate against you, for God’s sake, just sue their ass,” she exclaims. Of course, this representation of a third-wave feminist is severely limited and stereotypical. Later in this chapter, I will attempt to do a bit of ‘unboxing’ of third-wave feminism, but first I would like to look at another common representation of the post-feminist: that of the third-wave feminist with a postmodern theoretical turn of mind.

Box 2: Post-feminism and the ‘Posts.’

The ‘Third-waver’ says:

The reason feminists abandoned the radical forms of feminism associated with the second wave is, for the main part, that these approaches make certain critical gaffes that can no longer be ignored.

Richardson points out that there are, in fact, clear links between the ideas of radical feminism and post-feminism:

…many of the ideas associated with postmodernism are products of radical feminist thinking: [for instance,] the idea of knowledge as contextual and situated.

63 Again, I have structured this parody as the main body of the section, with my own commentaries and quotations of other theorists indented on the right hand side of the page.
64 Richardson. 145.
Second-wave feminists struggle particularly with issues of difference, and find themselves unable to account for women of colour, multiple sexual identities, and the fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity. It is an unfortunate truth of second-wave feminism that, in feminists’ eagerness to mobilise all women into action against oppression, they elided, forgot, or even deliberately played down the differences among women.

*With particular regard to a discussion of difference, radical feminism comes off as “at best, theoretically naïve and unsophisticated.”*  
However, Richardson reminds us that:  
…it is important to distinguish between productions of radical feminist explanations for women’s oppression in terms of patriarchy and the claim for the universal validity of theoretical models developed…  
*In other words, we ought not to confuse universalist approaches, or the idea that all women can mobilise against a basically similar experience of oppression, with the misconception that all women are, in fact, the same. Kathleen Barry makes the interesting point that “no politics of difference intends to include. It is the making of the ‘other.’”*  

Contemporary feminists have made use of postcolonial and queer theories that expose the inadequacies of identity politics, paving the way for more thoughtful work on some of the pressing abstract problems of representation and location that feminism must now face. Too frequently, feminists of the second wave relied upon essentialist representations of women, using the valorisation of these as a political tool.

*Diana Fuss exposed the theoretical pitfall of unproblematically opposing essentialism to social constructionism, making the case that essentialist tendencies appear in all areas of social theory. Moreover, Fuss explains how we constantly deploy the “risk” of essentialism as a political strategy.*  
*Tania Lienert, on the other hand, argues that radical feminism is not necessarily essentialist, describing how noted radical feminists have shown awareness “of how men have ‘defined’ women” and of the problems of “patriarchal socialisation.”*

In the same way, these women wrote about men as the enemy, failing to locate the subject position of ‘man’ within any kind of structure of power relations – in short,

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65 Richardson. 147.  
66 Richardson. 148.  
68 Fuss. 18-21.  
assuming male guilt instead of analysing gender relations within patriarchy. Contemporary work starting in the 1980s explored more fully the concept of subjectivity, exploding the idea that the self is static, and developing ideas about multiple discursive and contextual identities.

Methodology, too, has emerged as a major factor in the modern-day feminist’s decision to identify with a post-feminist position. Second-wave methods were often masculine identified or insufficiently interrogated as acceptable feminist research tools. Feminists have since done much work on the method of interviewing, for instance. Theoretical work\textsuperscript{70} shows that interviewing can be either a collaborative process of research or a game of deceit and hierarchy.

‘Speaking for’ another woman is an object of deeply-held feminist fear, particularly when doing any kind of collaborative research with women of different cultures, classes, sexualities, etc. Diane Bell describes her experience of working with close friend Topsy Nelson (an Aboriginal woman) to produce a journal article about rape in Aboriginal communities. She was “accused of… appropriating Topsy Nelson’s voice by citing her as ‘co-author’ rather than ‘informant.’\textsuperscript{71}

The accusers, in their rush to rescue this Aboriginal woman from appropriation, effectively silenced her, “demoting” her from co-author to informant.\textsuperscript{72}

Until recently, interviewing was often an exercise in academic superiority, wherein the interviewer would stake out a position of power over the interviewee, leading and directing the discussion, making decisions about what (if anything) was important enough to include in her work, and presuming to interpret the words of her subject in any way she chose. The feminist theorist must divulge as completely as possible the topic and aims of her research, finding out which areas the participants believe deserve research, discussing methodology with the participants, reciprocating during interviews, in order to avoid replaying traditional power relations of researcher-researched relationships. In addition, she should do multiple interviews, confirming the information and analysis with the participants, presenting the participants’ voices in as unmediated a way as possible, and allowing the interviewees to self-analyse. Interviewing has the dangerous potential, as do many time-honoured research methods, to reinstate phallocentric imperatives and ethically violate the rights of interviewed subjects.

Part of the reason why second-wave feminists used such suspect methods was the political pressure to act, and the thinking endemic to second-wave feminism that theory was ‘just words,’ and theorising research approaches and activism was a waste of feminist energies.


\textsuperscript{72} Bell. 250.
Lynn Bentz claims:
Third wave feminists...have opportunities to obtain a formal education in women’s history, philosophy, and sociology that our foremothers did not have. I believe that this helps us to be more secure in our activism.73

Moreover, Jan Clausen, an activist during the ‘second wave’ and an academic during the ‘third wave,’ makes the interesting claim that it was: “a big relief to get away from the strain of anti-intellectualism that has sometimes plagued grassroots feminism.”74 However, Clausen feels that her students:
...need something more than just intellectual approaches to understanding why the world is shot through with suffering and injustice...75

Meanwhile, LeeRay Costa wonders why she is unable to integrate academic and activist work in the United States “without being labelled ‘too political’ or ‘not scholarly enough.’”76 The amount of words women spend justifying their ‘unscholarly’ or ‘apolitical’ feminism in response to the tyranny of those who police activism and academia is surely out of proportion to the importance of what makes for ‘the best’ feminism.

The decrying of academic theory is the thorn in the side of second-wave feminism. Perhaps due to the immediacy of women’s oppression, but also because of the mentality that condemns theory as divorced from ‘real life’ and ultimately counter-productive for the movement, many second-wave feminists engaged in activism and renounced theory, widely and urgently. Not only did many of these women reject the grand narratives of religion, nationalism, economics and metaphysics that they identified as masculine, but they rejected theory altogether as a viable political outlet. Theorising created divisions in the perspectives of these women: divisions between, and even hierarchies of, the women who acted and the women who wrote. Even the Women’s Studies courses that were emerging in the Western world (programs that were perhaps the birthplace of feminist theory as we now know it) preached activism and contained heavy activist components. Post-feminists are conscious of the importance of theory – an importance that encompasses both the ethical transgressions committed against women and men in the name of ‘acting not yakking,’ as well as the maturity of feminism as an ideology, with its own canon and set of research practices.

Diane Reay argues that:
Paradoxically, there is insufficient contestation, disruption and destabilisation of dominant understandings in our supposedly postmodern times. In an era when there is ‘no such thing as truth’ just myriad versions, only a few select versions are circulated among academic, media and political elites – those that play around with the

75 Clausen. 261.
dominant constructions of ‘the way things are’ rather than challenge them.77

One criticism of ‘post-feminism’ is that its theorists claim multiple truths whilst adhering to specific dominant conventions of style and subject.78

Developed feminist theorizing locates and celebrates feminism as belonging among the academic disciplines of the metaphysical realm.

Comment: “Just be sure you can tell a fin de siecle from a fin de shark”79

Above is a parody of the stereotypical academic ‘post-feminist.’ She has a solid grounding in Foucauldian and Derridean theory, and writes “abstractions about abstractions.”80 She thinks blaming men for crimes against women is dreadfully lacking in a structural analysis of power relations. She is concerned about ‘othering’ women of difference, but takes little interest in the actual lived realities of, say, third world women. She emphasizes a divide between feminist theory and practice, and cautions against the folly of untheorised practice whilst carefully defending theory as a form of feminist practice. At the same time, she encourages ‘praxis’81 – the integration of theory and practice (neatly avoiding any deeper investigation of how such integration might actually work). She analyses feminist research methods but rarely uses any such methods herself, unable to get past the ethical tangles these create. She is careerist in focus, bent on academic tenure, and reluctant to associate herself with the discipline of Women’s Studies (more likely to pursue her career in Gender Studies or Media and Cultural Studies)82. She is hopelessly entrenched in the jargon and rhetoric of scholarly theory – to the point where we find her politics disconnected from real women’s

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77 Reay. 18.
78 Smyth, for example, criticizes the contemporary adherence to fashionable grand narratives in feminist theory. 174-6.
82 I do not, of course, intend to diminish the contributions of Gender Studies, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, or various other disciplines, to feminist theory. I emphasize once more that I am exposing a stereotype.
suffering. In the conceptual world of the academic post-feminist, it is less important that men rape women with their fleshly penises than it is that theorists ‘rape’ their subjects through phallogocentric writing.

The next necessary task is to look in more depth at why these representations of post-feminists not only persist, but gain such currency within feminist thought. Indeed, it is necessary to explore why we feel the need to pigeonhole numerous historical periods of feminism and their ‘representatives.’ Looking at the reasons why we box the waves is the first step towards unpicking the stereotypes. As I’ve already suggested, representations of second-wave feminism are tightly bound up with a misconception that feminists during the sixties and seventies practiced a monolithic kind of feminism. This misconception is pointed up most obviously by the way the terms ‘second-wave feminism’ and ‘radical feminism’ are frequently used interchangeably in common parlance. On the other hand, representations of ‘post-feminism’ are deeply snarled by a contradictory relationship with the backlash against feminism. For this reason, it is vital to take a moment to consider ‘the backlash’ before we go on to break down representations of the feminist ‘waves.’

Boxing ‘the Backlash’

The backlash against feminism is a supposed reaction within mainstream culture against the fury and power of second-wave feminism. Feminists generally accept that men stand to gain from the suppression of feminism. Therefore, we usually understand the backlash against feminism as driven by men, or at least as driven by

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supporters of patriarchy. Books such as *Men, Sex and Other Secrets* illustrate male backlash explanations of where feminism went wrong or what to do about it:

What threatens me is what feminists refer to as the personal-political, the nexus between the general and the particular. What I say to my partner is understood by her to have a political context, and a meaning beyond that which I intended…It is a very powerful weapon women wield when they politicise the emotional dynamics of two people.84

Andrea Dworkin confirms this sense that the Backlash is driven by the powerful (that is, men), claiming that feminists:

…apparently didn’t anticipate that people who had power were not going to be thrilled to give it up and might actually start fighting back. When they started fighting back some blood was going to flow because they have the means to hurt you very badly.85

But what truly confounds us as feminists is when women participate in the backlash, embracing and publicising the idea that feminism has gone too far, supporting men’s and father’s rights groups, and condemning feminism as narrow and restrictive. Some women have decided that feminism has been profoundly damaging to their relationships with men. These women may even turn the tables on feminism, taking on pre-feminist roles within marriage and rebuilding on more traditional terms the remains of unhappy and confusing relationships with men.86 Other women seem wilfully to misunderstand feminism, believing it to be about man-hating, overbalancing gender equality in favour of women, or forbidding some of the traditional perks of womanhood (such as staying at home with the children; male chivalry in the form of holding the door and paying for the meal; and the pleasure of feminine adornment). Even when feminists try to get the word out on what feminism is really about, these women refuse to listen, having made up their minds that feminism is reverse sexism.

The two concepts feminists most invoke in a discussion of women’s roles in the backlash against feminism are false consciousness and upward mobility. In false consciousness (as discussed in the Introduction), women fail to understand the seriousness of oppression and the ‘true’ goals of feminism, and end up as the butt of the giant practical joke that is patriarchy. Meta Plotnik, Women’s Studies teacher, takes up the rhetoric of false consciousness when she explores the reasons why her young students are reluctant to identify with feminism:

…[young women] have endured the intensification of corporate and consumer society and the years of backlash against feminism. They have experienced the pressure of popular culture, fashion, TV, MTV, movies, violent sexuality, macho posturing, and anti-intellectual attitudes. Advertisers sell the beauty myth with images of anorexic thinness and makeup that in one ad resembled black eyes. These are just some of the aspects of societal backlash that Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf described so well. Many of my women’s studies students have issues with their appearance. Many have been starving themselves since junior high school, dumbing themselves down, reading little or not at all, fearing to use the “f” word – feminism.87

Clearly, feminists call on false consciousness as a pervasive and highly effective weapon of the patriarchal overlords to explain the backlash. We also tend to conceptualise false consciousness as an imposed ‘training’ for women. We think of it as the way culture provides hegemonic, patriarchal ‘reasons’ for the awkward questions women sometimes ask about power imbalances. Travis describes how colleagues “repeatedly reinterpreted” the experiences of a feminist faculty member who had experienced harassment, “explaining them as having nothing to do with sexism.”88

The idea of false consciousness has traditionally been important to feminism, because it allows us to explain the behaviour of women who reject feminist ideals.

The other important idea invoked in discussion of the backlash, upward mobility, allows us to claim that when successful women participate in the backlash, they have ‘succumbed’ to the temptation of ambition in a patriarchal world, forsaking

87 Leder, et al. 192.
their sisters for either phallic (inauthentic female) power, or power enjoyed vicariously through men. Clara Ehrlich says, combining the rhetoric of false consciousness and upward mobility:

> Women need to know (and are increasingly prevented from finding out) that feminism is not about dressing for success, or becoming a corporate executive, or gaining elective office; it is not being able to share a two career marriage and take skiing vacations and spend huge amounts of time with your husband and two lovely children because you have a domestic worker who makes all this possible for you. 89

As Dworkin puts it, “women are making decisions for individual survival over political solidarity and political, what I would call, honour.” 90 Somer Bodribb names the “politics of flirtation” women are encouraged to adopt when discussing matters of discrimination with offending male colleagues. 91 When we adopt such politics, we are supposed to be participating in the backlash. Stanley and Wise even develop a convincing discussion of selling out within academic feminism as backlash-esque behaviour in their article “But the Empress Has No Clothes!” 92 They describe how ‘official’ feminist theorists have replicated patriarchal structures wherein the production of highly abstract theory in the institution dominates, and feminists fail to look towards themselves to criticize elitism. Judging from the comments of (amongst others) Bodribb, Dworkin and Stanley and Wise, ambition, career success, and even professional relationships with powerful men, are often regarded as highly suspect and stinking of the backlash against feminism. With two such powerful notions (false consciousness and selfish upward mobility) underlying so many explanations of backlash activity, it is not surprising that the backlash becomes something we can neatly package into one big glut of conservative reactionism.

90 Dworkin. 206.
So far in this chapter, I have sketched what the boxing of feminism into waves and ‘the backlash’ looks like. I have explored some of the confusions and erasures that characterise such limited concepts of the history, currency, and suppression of feminist activity. In particular, I have exposed the myths and stereotypes that fuel such limited definitions. Some writers have already d these misconceptions: Virginia Trioli’s *Generation f*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ *ManifestA: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*93 and Kathy Bail’s *DIY Feminism*, all of which analyse and revalue third-wave feminism; Bell and Klein’s *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*,94 which sets the story ‘straight’ about radical feminism and its conflation with second-wave feminism; and Susan Faludi’s *Backlash*,95 which gives rarely seen detailed attention to individual backlash practices. In the next part of this chapter, I discuss the effects of stubbornly locating feminist activities and styles in generational contexts, and challenge this practice by giving examples of intergenerational crossovers and backlash anomalies. I examine what happens when feminism itself breaks out of these boxes and encourage feminists to do what some of us are already doing: actively interrogating restrictive categories that close down possibility and connection among feminists and feminist practices.

**White Water**

I have some questions about a so-called ‘generation gap’ in feminism. Audre Lorde says, “The ‘generation gap’ is an important social tool for any repressive society.”96 We lost some valuable things when we accepted as real and concrete the idea of a generation gap and chose to sort feminism into waves. We lost the possibility

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of seeing the exchange of ideas between younger and older women. We lost the vision of feminism as a continual historical process. We also lost the ability to see differences amongst young women and amongst older women. We tend to gloss over the interaction between older and younger women’s feminist theory, presuming that it will be divergent or antagonistic in nature. However, women of different age groups constantly draw on each other’s work, (particularly when their theory is about anything other than intergenerational feminism). A feminist generation gap also misses a lot about the nature of ageing, including the vital point that there are women in a fuzzy area (say, 40ish years of age) who do not figure at all in the concept of a generation gap. Would it not be more useful to look at feminism as a continuum? It certainly makes for a better (more realistic and optimistic) view of the changes and successes, legacies and developments. To be always claiming a feminist generation gap also elides the differences that exist between an older feminist and other older feminists (and ditto younger feminists). We discount and recuperate these differences, forcing them into the moulds of second- or third-wave feminism, paying lip service to the diversity within the waves. Are there not other ways to talk about what it is trendy to call, somewhat ungrammatically and evasively, “feminisms?” Ways that allow for continuity, interaction, and relationships between differing historical moments, styles, animosities and correlations, of feminism?

To answer such questions, we must first decide in which contexts we can use terms like ‘second-wave’ and ‘third-wave’ feminism. In fact, the practice of boxing feminism into waves, other than for the purposes of historical location, is not useful, and frequently inaccurate. The practice of sorting feminists into waves is the worst kind of controlling. Claiming that all feminism of one kind belongs in one wave or another:

- obfuscates and obliterates the feminist work that was done between the waves;
- shuts down the possibility of historical feminism (prior to the ‘first’ wave);
Wasley 293

- misinterprets and misapplies the work of women which doesn’t actually fit into a wave. Boxing it into a wave can lead us to miss its potential for other readings and meanings;
- ignores the transitions, stases and evolutions of feminism;
- leaves feminists in the ‘third wave’ without a paddle for future feminism. The spectre of the third wave finds us wandering aimlessly, hoping this is not really ‘post-feminism,’ frightened of the mystery that is to come, and without any sense of legacy, to us or from us; and,
- compares all feminism to all other feminism, making claims about what is better, more modern, outdated, more radical, etc.

Secondly, we must slowly start to chip away at the great monoliths we call ‘second-wave feminism,’ ‘third-wave feminism’ and ‘the backlash.’ This means we need to approach the things we have already boxed with a fresh perspective, willing to see the points where they escape categorization. Think of feminism as snakes in a cage, a seething mass of movement; wound and knotted together so you can’t see where one ends and another begins; creeping out between the bars, slithering back in so they find themselves simultaneously inside and outside the box. The trick is to be happy with the glorious slithery mess, and to relinquish – even avoid – control.

Unboxing the Second Wave

Oh, how to unbox the second wave!

There is, of course, no point in denying that there was an explosion of feminist activity in the 1960s and 1970s. There is, without a doubt, a period we can confidently name the second wave of feminism (just as we named the first wave based on the historical fact that many women organised to resist women’s suffering and subordination between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). However, the facts that women worked to create social change and to make feminist ideas a public
concern during this time really are the only boundaries we can safely work with when we talk about a second wave. Everything else is hearsay. We construct the meaning of the second wave of feminism – it is not inherent in the activities that occurred. Frequently, we construct the meaning in order to trash it. As we grow more distant from the second wave, it becomes easier to trash. We make claims about extremism, and outdated concepts and practices. But even when we don’t trash it, we still box it, longing nostalgically for the rich and heady days of feminist energy, rejecting current feminist practices as impure and co-opted. As one feminist says, “I had some young students read *Sisterhood is Powerful* last semester and they really noticed the difference – said they wished they’d been around then.”

And, even if we don’t trash or valorise it, we still box it for the sake of pseudo-objective analysis, classifying and dissecting its components, naming some bits ‘cultural’ and other bits ‘radical’ and still other bits ‘liberal.’ This becomes a problem when we trap such terms in the second wave and resist the idea that they might apply to feminism before and beyond the second-wave era.

In the unboxing of second-wave feminism, some unalterable facts arise:

- **Fact**: feminism continued after the second wave had finished’ (as well as existed before it ‘began’);
- **Fact**: many women who organised and wrote or otherwise did feminism during the second wave, are still around, and still doing feminism;
- **Fact**: many of the styles, concepts and practices we associate with second-wave feminism persist in contemporary feminism, and are even deployed by young women (supposed ‘third-wave feminists’);
- **Fact**: second-wave feminism took many forms, including liberal, radical, separatist, Marxist, socialist, social constructionist, reformatory – and even what

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we might now call postmodern or post-structuralist! Often, a single campaign
would include all these different kinds of feminism. Often, a single woman
would enact many different kinds of feminism.

These facts require our attention. It is not good enough to pretend that the second wave
was a *kind* of feminism, and that that particular kind of feminism is now done with. The
unethical thing we do when we box second-wave feminism is to blank out the
interaction of whole groups of women. Women who did feminism during the second
wave become ‘second-wave feminists,’ part of our history, branded with a specific
style. They do not appear even to exist in current feminism, except as relics or
examples of ‘second-wave attitudes.’ The activities of feminists between the second
and third waves become shadowy and silent. We do not know how to understand these
activities because we cannot brand them with a name. Contemporary young women
who do the kinds of feminism we associate with the second wave become a nonentity,
incomprehensible and unrepresentable, except as an oddity. The only way to avoid the
deadly boundaries is to unbox the second wave – a move that involves a broad and
radical revisioning.

One of the first steps in revising second-wave feminism is to sink that dominant
and universalising conflation of second-wave and radical feminism. Importantly, while
we extricate the two, we need to recognise that radical feminism was and is a vital force
in both second-wave feminism and feminism of other periods. I believe the most
alarming thing to face, if we were to rework the definition of radical feminism in this
way, would be the ebb and flow of the term ‘radical feminism,’ which we generally use
in a rigid, monolithic way. Women of all eras and locations would be seen to be doing
radical feminism (to give an example, George Sand’s wearing of men’s clothing in the
1830s can be compared to the ‘masculine’ dressing styles of some radical lesbian
feminists today). It would become clear that many young women are producing radical
feminist theory. It would also become clear that many young theorists are producing theory that relies heavily on concepts we associate with radical feminism – but that their theory does not resemble radical feminism as we know it. One particular group of young feminist theorists claims that:

…the work of Catharine McKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Gloria Steinem and many others, form the theoretical base from which many radical feminists of my generation formulate their own questions and activism.

However, it is not even as simple as basing one’s work on earlier works. Rather, my point is that ideas we associate with radical feminism cut right across generations of women. They are not confined to ‘second-wave’ feminists.

Another step towards unboxing the second wave involves making room for a positive re-conceptualisation of the radicalism associated with the second wave, and rejecting the negative (anti-, lacking, etc.) definition we use. The variety of affirming and – importantly – continuing practices and ideals we would discover in second-wave feminism would force us both to undo our own categorisation of what second-wave feminism is, and to recreate for it a much more slippery and uncomfortable definition. First and foremost, we would be obliged to admit that ‘second-wave feminism,’ as a category, cannot work as a description of styles, practices, theories, activism, intellectual material, propaganda, or artistic endeavour, because these things are quite simply far too diverse, even when they fall within the historical timeframe of second-wave feminism. That diversity persists. We naïvely designate our current period the ‘third wave’ – and yet, women are still doing many of the feminist things we associate with the second wave. We might be doing some things we didn’t do during the second wave, but we are still doing much of what we did do back then. So, are we really being as clever as we think we are when we label some practices ‘new’ and others ‘old?’ In 1927, Elizabeth Abbot knew that:

\[98\] Carraher, et al. 196.
The issue is not between ‘old’ and ‘new’ feminism. There is no such thing as ‘new’ feminism, just as there is no such thing as ‘new’ freedom. There is freedom; and there is tyranny. The issue is between feminism…and that which is not feminism.99

When we encounter new (present-day) feminist activities that look more like second-wave than third-wave feminism, should we really think of them as hearkening back to a time gone by? Should we really make nostalgic statements that disparage contemporary feminism, such as, “Spender’s work gives me hope that the straightforward, hard-hitting feminism of fifteen years ago may be in for a revival”?100 Perhaps we could clear away some of the associations that box second-wave feminism and say, “ah, that straightforward, hard-hitting feminism persists even today!”

Unboxing the Third Wave

Joanna Russ warns:

The attempt to substitute for the uncompromising radicalism of the feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s an account of women that sees us as a group with a ‘unique’ psychology and ‘special’ needs, possessors of an already existing ‘culture’ that needs only to be recognized, is about to land a great many of us in the tar pit where (so to speak) our bones will be found in a hundred years or so and confused, not unreasonably, with those of the dinosaurs – who also hadn’t enough sense to trot onto drier and safer ground.101

Sometimes I think that unboxing the third wave is an even harder task than unboxing the second wave. Perhaps it is because, at the very least, second-wave feminism is respectable feminism. It was groundbreaking, it was widespread, and it was energetic. And what label does third-wave feminism get slugged with? Apathy. Apathy is probably the worst stereotype third-wave feminism has to shake – can there be anything more repulsive in a radical political movement than apathy? Anne Summers asks the younger generation directly: “Will apathy replace activism and seem to signal that, once again, women are content with what they already have?”102 Michele Landsberg quotes “distinguished law professor Eleanor Holmes Norton, rejecting the idea that the

100 Russ. Xvii.
101 Russ. 11
102 Summers. 523.
young have abandoned the movement”: “We [second-wave feminists] were catalytic feminists.” The implication is that second-wave feminists set the revolution in progress – that they were the very agents of change in feminism. Comments like Norton’s represent third-wave feminism as merely the fizzing (or fizzling out?) that happens after the catalyst has worn out. I guess that means we’re now well on our way to the conclusion of the chemical reaction that was feminism. If a high profile feminist makes this kind of statement in support of third-wave feminists, what are the feminists who revile third-wave feminism saying? Well, they’re saying a lot of things, whether they are older or younger feminists. In particular they are saying that the third wave is characterised by the lack of a collective feminist identity: that feminism for younger women is about personal lifestyle choices. However, such feminists frequently criticise this focus: “Emphasis on identity and lifestyle is appealing because it creates a false sense that one is engaged in praxis,” says bell hooks. Attending a first year women’s studies lecture when I was tutoring, I noticed that the lecturers criticised third-wave feminism, and distanced themselves from the ‘post-feminism’ of the third wave, despite the fact that most of the students were young women. By contrast, another lecture, this time a discussion of some of the ‘wimmin’s’ religions that re-emerged during the second wave, such as Wicca, was respectful and uncritical, despite the fact that the lecturers were not actively involved in any such religions. Many feminists tend to represent third-wave feminism as ‘wet,’ soft, and apathetic feminism. The implication is that third-wave feminists require quite a bit of consciousness raising to become truly political. I contend that third-wave feminism demonstrates several things: the

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105 Some examples include Anne Summers (“Letter to the Next Generation”), Germaine Greer (The Whole Woman) and Phyllis Chesler (Letters to a Young Feminist. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1987).
106 Anne Summers, for instance, notes the “failure” of her own generation to pass on details of their feminist struggles to young women. 507.
evolution of feminism; diverse responses to contemporary western society and economy; feminist reaction to backlash practices; and feminism’s continuing political role.

Again, unpicking a conflation of terms (as well as the terms themselves) is the starting point for unboxing third-wave feminism. Third-wave feminism is a particularly badly defined term: we frequently conflate it with post-feminism, which allows us to cast the third wave both as part of feminism, and as part of the backlash against feminism. Post-feminism, when it describes that which comes after feminism (or women calling feminism ‘obsolete’), generally refers to the backlash. As Ann Braithwaite puts it:

Increasingly…the term “backlash” has come to be used almost interchangeably with that other ubiquitous late 90s/early twenty-first century word, “postfeminism.” Both of these terms are most often wielded as a kind of shorthand to identify and denounce examples of what are perceived to be anti-feminist (and in some arguments, even anti-women) emphases throughout popular culture.107

On the other hand, we have a definition of post-feminism which refers to:

…a continuing relationship to an earlier moment, as the ‘post’ in other current and equally contentious terms such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism does. Thus, rather than being an ‘anti-feminism,’ postfeminism instead becomes…a way to talk about the changes in and growth of feminist thinking over the last 40 years, especially as it has intersected with a variety of other critical languages and approaches (including those other ‘posts’).108

This definition actually describes practices within the boundaries of feminism.109

Already, we find that we are using a monolithic ‘third-wave feminism’ to describe diverse and often irreconcilable sets of practices and theories. The problem this conflation causes is twofold: firstly, the third-wave-as-backlash produces a conceptualisation of third-wave feminism that is tangled up with the associations of the

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108 Braithwaite. N. pag.

backlash (women with false consciousness and ruthless ambition). Secondly, ‘third-wave-as-feminism’ is the context for production of a whole body of work that, by virtue of its association with the backlash, is immediately suspect (having supposedly been created either in an environment of naïve and misguided sanguinity, or one of complicity and co-option). Braithwaite suggests that defining backlash and post-feminism as ‘anti’-feminism:

…leads to a dismissal or rejection of the complexities and nuances of both contemporary feminist theories and popular culture overall, rather than a critical engagement with the many changes in both of these fields [and]...overlooks – indeed, it cannot see – how those examples of a supposed backlash against feminism might alternately be seen as illustrations of how much something about feminism has instead saturated pop culture, becoming part of the accepted, ‘naturalized,’ social formation.\textsuperscript{110}

The best way we can deal with the confusion these conflations create is to investigate and dismantle them. Again, the designation of a ‘wave’ ought to be mainly historical – not descriptive of a style or kind of feminism. In this case, the term ‘third-wave feminism’ makes more sense as a description of the period following the second-wave period of feminism than it does as a puzzling blend of feminism and anti-feminism.

Dismantling the problematic conflation of post-feminism and third-wave feminism is best done by examining what the third wave is actually about. What characterises the third wave is the same as that which characterises the second wave: its diversity. Older feminists and young feminists alike participate in all kinds of practices: demonstrating, speaking out, writing, teaching, and quietly making use of feminism to combat sexist oppression in their own lives. Those who practice ‘official’ feminism interact widely. Younger women in particular often identify with older women’s feminist positions, drawing on older feminists’ wisdom to inform their own work. Young women read second-wave history with awe and excitement. Older women marvel at the seemingly natural self-sufficiency that feminism has brought about in young women:

\textsuperscript{110} Braithwaite. N. pag.
The contrast between where young women in their twenties are today and where I was at their age is hard to grasp. It didn’t occur to me to talk to women friends as Tsering talks to us now, to ask for advice.111 Many feminists, regardless of their ‘official’ or ‘unofficial’ status, are willing to listen to and learn from each other, putting aside all concerns about who hails from which wave. I do not pretend that there is not antagonism between some ‘second-wave’ and ‘third-wave’ feminists (as I have already documented in this chapter), but that antagonism is not the final word on feminist generations. Patai, discussing identity politics feminism versus other feminist ideologies, claims that feminism has become self-destructive in its “rigid factionalism”:

Where will it end? My fear is that the search – and demand – for feminist purity (of both attitudes and identity) will eventually result in a massive rejection of the very important things that feminism, broadly speaking, aims to achieve.112 Is it truly possible that feminists (and especially older and younger feminists) cannot, by virtue of their massive ideological differences, agree, empathise, or even co-operate? Feminism daily proves this is not the case. Women continually resist the suffering of women both singly and collectively. We struggle to unite across generation, culture and geography. We do not always succeed – but sometimes we do. And when we don’t, we try to figure out where it went wrong – hence the cautionary, if somewhat pessimistic, articles such as Patai’s. The periods of energy described as waves are just that – waves, in a sea of women doing feminism across time and the continents.

Finally, I find it is necessary to address briefly the problem of claiming a current phenomenon as a discrete and describable period of time. First (and most amazing), we are living in the moment that we identify as third-wave – and yet, we don’t even know how this part of the feminist revolution is going to pan out! However,

in our Western eagerness to name periods of social history, we complacently discuss
the third wave, as though we know exactly how it works/worked, or what was
distinctive about it as an historical moment. Okay, it _is_ a myth that we can stand at a
truly objective distance, but isn’t this going a little too far in giving up on any hope of
objectivity? One cannot accurately contextualise the present in this way. We can locate
what has led us here, but we cannot describe what our future holds. In my view, this
ought to permit us to speculate but not to make definitive claims about the third wave.
Fifty years from now, we might look back and say, “well, it turns out what we called
the third wave was just the middle of the second wave after all,” or “what we called the
third wave was actually the precursor to the third wave.” I do not believe that we
should stop analysing the directions of feminism, particularly in terms of its
transformation over time; but I do think that we are too hasty to brand ourselves an
historical event, complete with its own set of styles and dogma. The second problem
with a ‘third wave’ is the fact that all the young women on the third-wave side of the
gap are ageing, and even younger women are coming into play as feminist theorists.
These women are, of course, going to reflect their own historico-cultural moment in
their feminist practices and writing. But if their views don’t match the views associated
with the third wave, what will we say about them? Are we really ready for a fourth
wave, or post-post-feminism? The women who will begin producing feminist theory
over the next few years stand as a reality check for us. Try as we might, we cannot
stand outside ourselves and analyse the picture. The picture will always be distorted.
The best we can do is look out from where we stand and decide where we can align
ourselves, to whom we do harm, to whom we are responsible, and where we want to
go.
We experience the backlash differently when it comes from men and women. When it comes from men, comprehension accompanies our exasperation, despair, and scorn. We know why they hate feminism. We are used to the ways they express that hatred and fear. But when women turn to other women and say, sometimes quite aggressively, “I don’t want your help. I don’t need your help,” feminists are taken aback. We experience shock and pain. The shock and pain turns quickly to anger and disbelief. “How can you be so stupid?” we find ourselves shouting. “How can you be so ungrateful?” Hastily, we shuffle through our papers looking for answers. The answers bring relief:

[Women don’t identify as feminists] because they’re weak. I don’t know why they wouldn’t want to, because it’s out there now – they don’t have to fight for it anymore; it’s part of life, of bringing up.113 Belinda Rapps

[Women refuse to identify as feminists] possibly because they are submissive people…Or maybe they have the wrong belief that feminists believe all women should be working, and they don’t want to work.114 Kim Borin

…the women who are committed to achieving various kinds of reform and improvements in women’s lives, as opposed to changing the complete structure…are very important and there are fewer and fewer of them. I think that what it means is that you can save a woman’s life by doing something that helps her get past the problem that we have not socially been able to solve…I think that women who work in what I would characterise as the reform part of the movement have very, very little tolerance for people who work in the radical part of it. In other words, they don’t understand that we’re necessary to them but I think a lot of us understand that they’re necessary to us.115 Andrea Dworkin

…it’s they don’t call themselves feminists through lack of understanding about what feminism is, and also because sometimes if you declare yourself a feminist, it can have detrimental effects from the people around you. And when you’re out there you’ve got to protect yourself in any way you can. And if that means not acknowledging your feminism, then that’s what you will do.116 Kerry Allan

While third wave feminist zines, web sites, writings, and art are fun, ground-breaking, and challenging, they aren’t being met with a widespread renewal of feminist activism, organizing, or campaigns…Young women like myself are drawn into individualist

113 Rapps, Belinda. Personal interview. 7 August 2003.
115 Dworkin. 212-3.
activism and thought because we have few other ways to channel our feminism.  

*Rebecca Ellis*

When one is feeling stranded, finding a safe harbour inevitably becomes a more compelling course than struggling against social currents. Keeping the peace with the particular man in one’s life becomes more essential than battling the mass male culture. Saying one is ‘not a feminist’ (even while supporting quietly every item of the feminist platform) seems the most prudent, self-protective strategy.  

*Susan Faludi*

Another angle on young people resisting the label/idea of feminism: many of my students resist *anything* that denies that individuals have the ultimate power to control their own destinies. I see this resistance not only in relation to “the F-word” but in their arguments about everything from drunk driving to racism. They prefer to argue for total individual responsibility and change that happens “one bad apple at a time,” than to consider solutions or responses that involve policies, campaigns, mass education, or other group-based action. This resistance is particularly true of but not limited to white middle-class traditional-age college students. It’s a mainstream culture response (pop culture, American culture, 2004-5 culture), an adolescent response, sometimes a survival response, and perhaps even a cognitive/developmental response. There may be a darker side – deliberately sweeping problems under the rug or denying responsibility – but I see that more malevolent kind of mindset happening more on Capitol Hill than in my students’ lives.  

*Shelley Reid*

Fear of feminism is also fear of complexity, fear of thinking, fear of ideas – we live, after all, in a profoundly anti-intellectual culture.  

*Lisa Hogeland*

The answers bring relief, and they do present us with genuine reasons. We cling to the answers, using them to assuage our anger and heal our wounds. We write about women’s ‘backlash’ behaviours as choices made through pressure, ignorance or personality defects.

In spite of this, we know the answers do not tell the whole story. We know there is more to it than this. The only answer that allows us to enter the swamps of the backlash with wisdom is simply this: that women and men have unfathomably diverse reasons for rejecting feminism. Adopting a set of explanations like those above as the final word on the backlash creates (once again) a monolithic vision of ‘the backlash’ – one that I would suggest confirms its imagined status as the most powerful force.

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118 Faludi. 79-80.
<http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/fem_hs.html>
shaping women’s lives today. Susan Faludi accords blame for the currency of ‘the backlash’ to 1980s journalism, which:

…delivered the backlash to the public through a series of ‘trend stories’, articles that claimed to divine sweeping shifts in female social behaviour while providing little in the way of evidence to support their generalizations.121

‘The backlash’ comes to describe everything that counters feminism in contemporary society. Interestingly, the number of descriptions of backlash behaviour goes on, and on, and on. Why? Because ‘the backlash’ itself is too diverse and diffuse to fit the definition we proscribe. We claim that the backlash is a setback for feminism; a reaction to second-wave feminism. But the truth is that the backlash is just a word we use to describe the things that have been going on since patriarchy began. Susan Faludi points out that there have been backlashes against every feminist uprising in history.122 I would add that there are even backlashes against a vast number of daily feminist activities. If we unpick ‘the backlash’ and allow ourselves the luxury of looking at it as a great many things (male disgruntlement, fatherly control, misogynist words, fear of women’s economic independence, sexual restriction, the sanctity of motherhood, conservative government, unjust legislation, contentment with personal lifestyles, media hype, etc.) within the seething mass that is feminism-within-patriarchy, it becomes something we can understand. Revolution-speak makes us want to crash down obstacles, but that’s not how change usually happens. Real change happens slowly, via a sometimes loud, sometimes quiet, picking away and building up. Unpicking, unboxing the backlash allows us to set a course for change. The single, giant, exhausting block we think of as the backlash becomes a multitude of activities, behaviours, ideologies and movements. We can focus on one thing at a time. We make our revolution do-able.

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121 Faludi. 103.
122 Faludi. 66.
Conclusion: Resurfacing

Conversation with Kerry Allan

Me: Why do you think it is that women who are clearly living their lives according to feminist ideals are often reluctant to identify as feminists?

Kerry: One of the reasons that a lot of ‘true feminists’ would deny their feminism is because there are many women who are looking for a type or looking for a niche – feminism is a very marketable niche in modern society, so it’s very easy for people to declare themselves a feminist. But I think the most true feminist is one who is by nature a feminist…a true feminist will find themselves ‘there’ before they will ever acknowledge their feminism…Anybody can get up on their soapbox and say “I am a feminist” and be very loud and violent and jump up and down, and make…noise and make the politicians listen and do what’s an expected feminist act, and I think that’s really detrimental to lots of true feminists who will be out there working very hard to be the individual that they are, and doing the best work that they can do by themselves, by their families, by the people they work for – they’re the quieter achievers…Within any group of people there are a minority who will set up a public impression…Within feminism…the ones who stand up and make the most noise are not always the true feminists.

Me: What about women who reject what we tend to see as feminist ‘goals,’ like economic independence and career, and so on?

Kerry: [Some women will] never understand feminism, they’ll never understand women in independent roles…if you are a true feminist, you need to have some sort of thought for that minority of people, and not judge. Just as we wouldn’t want people to judge our feminism, I think that we should be really mindful not to judge other people’s

123 Fictional conversation, using excerpts from Kerry Allan. Personal interview. 1 October 2001.
choices not to be feminists…There are still women born today who would choose these absolutely non-feminist roles…[and] as long as you’re happy, as long as the situation that you’re in is not being taken advantage of, then we should respect each others’ decisions…Many people who have that drive [to always be striving for something]…find it very difficult to accept and understand people who don’t have that drive.

Me: There seem to be so many different levels of doing feminism, and being feminists. It’s like we have an uncontrollable urge to control people by classifying them.

Kerry: [Nowadays,] instead of just putting women and men into their respective boxes,…we put women into feminism and non-feminism and within those boxes there are hundreds of boxes.

Me: I wonder which box I’ll be put in….

Representing historical moments (the waves) in feminism as monolithic sets of styles and practices limits both the way we participate in feminism, and the people we reach with it. Representing the backlash as an overwhelming current phenomenon tempts us to down our tools and give up on the project. Neither is useful for feminism.

I know that younger feminists hardly ever get away with writing any kind of critique of, or vision for, feminism without being lumped in together with all the other ‘third-wave post-feminists,’ who supposedly gripe about feminism or gaze at our navels. This is where I come in. It will be too easy either to dismiss or parade my work as an example of third-wave feminism, simultaneously contracting my ideas about everyday feminist activism and theory into an illustration of DIY practices, and cutting off whole generations of women from identifying with what I say. It would also be tempting to some to call my work part of the backlash against feminism – the parts that call ‘official’ feminists to account for some of the exclusive practices we perpetuate.
Such categorisation weakens my work and extracts it from the bounds of the earth-and-flesh world, distancing it from real women doing feminism, transforming it into just another theoretical position for us to critique or support, and then put back on the bookshelf. It relieves us of any responsibility for acting on the ideas I have produced here. Therefore, I resist the boxing of my feminism. I want to ask now that you *defy the urge* to categorise my thesis as *merely* part of some wave or backlash, and listen with an open mind to the things I have said. I ask you to attempt to put aside the baggage that makes us read with prejudice, waiting for those telltale slips into what we assume to be radical/post-feminist/backlash rhetoric, forgetting how we miss some important things in our false vigilance. I ask you to read my words with interest and respect, to take note of the points where our ideologies intersect, the points where my words resonate with or diverge from your thoughts, and to be prepared to respond with your own wisdom.

I think of these women bringing light to dispel the darkness, responding to each other’s call, not leaving each other isolated and alone to contend with danger, but coming to each other’s aid with a firm, clear form of nonviolent resistance – their steady gaze, their unmovable presence, the light they carried.\(^{124}\)

This feminism is a liquid thing, is it not? Sometimes we crest the waves like surfers; sometimes we get dumped; and sometimes it’s tempting to slip under the water and take refuge from the battering. I appreciate the liquid form of feminism. It’s nice to think I can wade, bask, churn and splash about.

\(^{124}\) Galland. 152.
Conclusion

In Praise of Awkward Questions¹

“I would not creep along the coast, but steer 
Out in mid-sea, by guidance of the stars.”
— George Eliot, 1874²

One way we organise our understanding of the world in Western culture is by privileging certain kinds of knowledge over others. In doing this, we leave ourselves with a comfortable bank of knowledge we are prepared to accept as ‘The Truth.’ But “what has masqueraded as truth is largely an exercise of power.”³ The people who possess ‘The Truth’ are ‘The Experts.’ For instance, we would generally privilege a doctor’s medical advice over a friend’s medical advice. We generally regard the advice of a doctor as based on a long period of study and practice, up to date with the newest developments, and ‘safe’ or accountable (because medical practice is policed by higher bodies). We consider the medical advice of a friend less reliable. It is more likely to be based on personal experience, and there is no possibility of legal recourse if your friend gets it wrong and makes you even sicker. The basic idea underlying the privileging of different kinds of knowledge is that some knowledge is purer than other knowledge. It is pure because it is widely accepted, often backed up by repeatable controlled experiments, and unsullied by personal biases. Sometimes, the privileging of certain information is tried and true. Medical advice from a doctor probably is more reliable than that of a friend. It is entirely possible that the doctor has both more experience and a stronger educational grounding in issues of medicine than your friend. Sometimes, however, purism is inappropriate. There are, in fact, certain things about which we can

all be regarded as experts. One of these things is gender. Everyone is an expert on
issues of sex, sexism, and feminism, because everyone is gendered.

Whilst attending a conference in the United Kingdom a couple of years ago, I
was travelling alone. You meet a lot of people when you travel alone. One of the
standard questions was, “What do you do?” This would lead to an explanation of my
studies, and onto the topic of feminism. I would inevitably end up taking part in long
and sometimes tiresome discussions about things like women’s rights, reverse sexism,
where feminism ‘went wrong,’ child custody law, and so on. I used to complain that I
wished I were studying Heidegger or the structure of plant cells – because at least then
I would have been left alone when I told people about my project! But everyone I
spoke to about feminism had an opinion. And that is just the thing I am trying to say in
this thesis: everyone has an opinion about feminism. Everyone’s an expert. We cannot
arbitrarily privilege one person’s knowledge of feminism over another’s. This is not to
say that the academic’s years of study, or the activist’s years of work, have been in
vain. It is still possible to develop proficiency in feminism the sense that one can gain a
high level of skill in writing and research, become widely read in the field, be able to
produce thoughtful and sophisticated theory on a topic, and have significant experience
in effective ways to practice. Rather, I am suggesting that there is no pure feminism.
Feminism is an ideology, not a science, and we must relinquish the idea of ‘The Expert’
when it comes to ideological knowledge. As Janice Raymond puts it, “It would be
much more fruitful to talk about the issues and the content of our differing positions
than about relative postures of authority.”4 But this is not happening. Rather, the
boundaries around ‘pure’ feminism close and tighten, and the number of ‘experts’
grows ever more exclusive. This thesis is about the increasing amount of feminist
purism that closes the doors of feminism to countless women.

4 Raymond, Janice G. “Connecting Reproductive and Sexual Liberalism.” Radically Speaking: Feminism
The irony is that almost every woman can be discounted as a feminist in some purist perspective or another. The motivation to discount certain types of feminists and feminism is this: it is hard to see a wide range of people’s (sometimes antagonistic and competing) knowledge as worthy of consideration. Doing so jeopardises some of the things we hold dear – like the sense of mastering an academic discipline; or the strength of a powerfully-held political conviction; or the belief in a closed community of feminists; or the feeling that feminism is stowed safely away somewhere (not causing us grief). However, change happens when an issue remains current, and currency is people talking about an issue. Ideological issues (feminist or not) must, therefore, remain the topic of conversation – and a broad one, at that. In a broad conversation, it is easy to see some comments and questions as crazy or dumb. But it can pay to take a closer look. Perhaps these are the awkward questions that lead to major changes in the way people think about feminist issues, or groundbreaking new areas of research, or just an upsurge in the conversation (which boosts feminism’s currency). In this thesis, I have begun to ask some awkward questions about feminism. The questions are awkward because they force us to reflect on our own positions of security in relation to feminism – whether we feel secure as anti-feminists, non-feminists, feminist theorists, feminist activists, second-wave feminists, or post-feminists. In essence, I am asking those who think about feminism to shift the boundaries and rethink the way we limit what counts as feminism.

I was asked an awkward question a couple of months before I completed this project. A male acquaintance asked me what I was writing about in this thesis. I told him it was about feminism and its accessibility. He said:

Okay, you know about feminism – women’s rights and all that. Tell me this. How come women want equal pay and equal rights, but if you take a woman out to dinner, she still expects you to pay?
I sighed inwardly, wishing that, just once, someone would ask me for more details about my work rather than air his/her own private beef with feminism. I deflected his question quite deftly: “I see that as more to do with questions of chivalry. I’m not dealing with things like that in my thesis. I’m looking at the way we put boundaries around what counts as feminism and what doesn’t.” He deferred to me respectfully, praising my analytical skills. Perhaps it was his politeness that made me think more about his question later on – he didn’t get indignant and harp on about having to pay for a date’s meal, but accepted my ‘expertise’ in the field of feminism as sufficient grounds for me to put his question imperiously aside. But doing so didn’t answer the question for him. The truth is that that question is still out there, and it is one being asked by great numbers of people, along with other questions feminists might find awkward. In this situation, I could have thought seriously about a great number of issues that spring from this man’s question. What are the differences between charming old-fashioned customs of heterosexuality and practices that represent women as dependent and reinforce male economic control? Where does one end and the other begin? How do the gains women have made through feminism sit alongside more traditional privileges of being female and any disadvantages of being male? Why is it that practices many women tend to regard as ‘chivalry,’ and about which it has become highly passé to get political, cause such a high level of disgruntlement with men? Why does feminism get the blame for anyone and everyone’s dissatisfaction with gender behaviour?

There are more awkward questions being asked all the time. These questions deserve good answers. It was a woman of colour who first asked the awkward question: “Why do I feel alienated from these white women’s descriptions of oppression?”5 – a question which gave rise to a whole new area of feminist work on difference. Awkward

5 For example, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but Some of us are Brave : Black Women's Studies. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982.
questions are a sign of feminism’s health, not its demise or illness. These questions indicate the continuation of the conversation and the flourishing of knowledge. As Harding puts it:

We need to be able to cherish certain kinds of intellectual, political, and psychic discomforts, to see as inappropriate and even self-defeating certain kinds of clear solutions to the problems we have been posing.  

What I am saying is that the questions we consider the most annoying, the most repetitive, and the most uncomfortable, are actually very valuable. Such questions make us cringe and squirm; they force us to look inward to the things we avoid and deride, and they also remind us to look outward to what others find important in the power relations between men and women. Awkward questions make us feel uncomfortable – which means they are resonating with our experience, even while they clash with our beliefs. In short, we must attend to these questions because they strike a chord of truth within us. As feminists, we have become adept at deflecting the hard questions because there is always something more pressing to which we must attend. However, at some point (and I suggest that point has arrived), we do have to treat these questions as serious and valuable questions about our own practices and beliefs, or people will not take feminism seriously.

Heed the awkward questions, because these are the ones that grow into chasms of hatred and misunderstanding when we try to ignore or cover over them. Hear them, ask them, and answer them. Be not afraid, sisters. Steer into the rough sea.

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