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Feminist Theory 2007; 8; 69
DOI: 10.1177/1464700106069042

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Response to Rachel Torr



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SAGE Publications
(Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi, and
Singapore)
vol. 8(1): 69–76.
1464–7001

DOI: 10.1177/1464700106069042
<http://fty.sagepub.com>

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I am delighted to have received such a direct response to my article, ‘Telling Feminist Stories’, and even more delighted to have the opportunity to respond to some of the issues that Rachel Torr raises in ‘What’s Wrong with *Aspiring to Find Out What Has Really Happened in Academic Feminism’s Recent Past?*’ Torr queries the value of my historiographic approach to the recent past of feminist theory, an approach in which I argue for the importance of interrogating ‘the technology of Western feminist storytelling – its form, function and effects’ (Hemmings, 2005: 117), over and above the importance of deciding which version of history one endorses. As Torr rightly indicates, there is a tension in my article between my rejection of a corrective move finally to tell the right story, and my abiding belief that we can ‘begin to tell a more accurate story than those that are currently being told’ (Torr, 2007: 61). I’ll come back to this belief in the second part of my reply.

Of irritation and mockery . . .

It was rather disconcerting to realize, in the course of reading and re-reading Torr’s response, that *irritation* seemed to be the principal affect motivating her critique. I say disconcerting partly because entering into a dialogue of this kind immediately raises the question of tone for one’s own part too. How will I respond to this response to my work? What kind of dialogue might I have liked to occur among feminist and other theorists in response to my particular inquiry? How does this response propel us into a desired or feared dialogue? What does any of this tell me about my work and how it might develop? Irritation wasn’t really what I had in mind, I confess, but it isn’t surprising that it surfaces in response to my own insistence that we think through ways of challenging singular answers to the problems of feminist representation and representation of feminism. I can hear Torr groan as she reads this, just as her article snaps at me: ‘Why can’t you just get on with it? We’ve got work to do, and damn it, if you’re trying to tell me that focusing on how we tell Western feminist stories, rather than risking claiming a *real legacy* as academic feminists, is real intellectual work, then I can show you a sociological thing or two . . .’ She is

disappointed in my approaches (Torr, 2007: 59), frustrated by my 'gestures' (p. 61), and impatient with my adoration of feminist stars (pp. 62, 63). Of course, you'll notice that my own response has already taken a bit of a tone as I provide a somewhat mocking characterization of her own paper, a stereotypical reduction of her engagement with the flaws in my own argument. And so we face one another, in irritation and in mockery, under- and over-reading both, imagining each other. Was that what I wanted?

Torr's irritation is not reserved for me alone, of course, but works to position me as embarking on a similar project to other irritants (primarily Butler and Foucault), one that refuses to seek *the* or even *a* truth, but is content to use the rather self-regarding and not very rigorous 'methods' of cultural analysis to tease out exclusions inherent in language and discursive practice. All critique and no trousers. Meanwhile, marginalized disciplinarians refuse to be ashamed of their attachment to rigour and emerge stalwart in their attachment to reality, properly *aspirational* subjects of knowledge. Torr is 'happy to admit that [her work] has a disciplinary bias and that this discipline is sociology' (2007: 64), whatever the terrible consequences attending such an admission. And so the terms of what is of course a very common feminist argument are reiterated, clearly demarcated from one another, opposing ideas of the real, the political, knowledge, and transformation exchanged and then given back intact, while we remain proper subjects of the different stories we tell about what happened in feminist theory. My response will write itself then. I can take up that interdisciplinary, poststructuralist position Torr (2007: 60) assigns me and have the battle out in the open. People will probably agree or disagree on the basis of what they already think about poststructuralism, and Torr and I will subsequently both get on with our separate work (Torr in sociology, me in feminist studies). Perhaps Torr will continue to believe in the feminist marginalization of disciplinarity, despite her own admission of its centrality to current national higher education training and funding practices (p. 60); perhaps I will continue to navel gaze about feminist narrative tactics from the smug security of my interdisciplinary ivory tower. No real harm done.

But here my flippant characterizations of both of us should end, because it is precisely this polarization of strands in feminist theory that I want to take issue with, and that Torr seems to want to reproduce. 'Telling Feminist Stories' argues in this vein that these familiar, competing presentations of Western feminist theory as a story of either progress or loss fail to do justice to the complexities of feminist history, and lock us into an either/or account of 'what has happened'. Further, these presentations, while narrated as mutually exclusive, combine to produce a remarkably similar account of what has been left behind, namely unity under the category 'woman', identity challenges to that unity, and the difference focus of poststructuralism. Positively or negatively viewed, added to or critiqued from other European, or non-Western perspectives, the characterization of this trajectory is remarkably consistent, including the current consensus that the cultural turn is over and that we need to

do something else – more disciplinary, more bodily or biological, more affective, whatever.

Telling feminist stories again . . .

There are several reasons that I find this doubled story obnoxious. My article evidences these more fully, but to summarize here, these are the ways in which the 1970s become over-associated with radical or cultural feminism, racial and sexual critique within feminism become locked into the 1980s, and poststructuralism becomes positioned as the ‘taker upper of difference’ in the 1990s, beyond both essentialism and identity critiques. For this narrative (positive or negatively inflected) to be convincing key ‘border figures’ – in interdisciplinary cultural and social theory Butler, Spivak and Haraway very often – are credited with being the first to challenge both essentialism and identity politics, such that they are, ironically, separated out from the feminist trajectories they are a part of. In this respect alone I was disconcerted by Torr’s characterization of my work as poststructuralist (and in her reading then, rather pointless), since one primary aim of this inquiry is to document poststructuralism’s political reframing as ‘beyond difference’, as merely a series of abstract reflections on language and text. To be understood in this way, I argue, feminism has to be gobbled up and spat out, then flushed away.

Many readers will, I think, be very familiar with some of the broader resonances of this historical production of ‘Theory’ in the present. For social and cultural theorists (of either gender) this telling of stories contributes to the construction of feminism in general as over – critically and politically – and for those who continue to believe in its relevance as not cutting edge at best, or worse, as locked into a previous era of identity politics or essentialism. This chimes with media and broader cultural renditions of feminism as ‘over’, as having had its day, and of course as having done its job in the West (always preserving a role for it elsewhere, where presumably it will also no longer be necessary eventually). As the Feminist and Women’s Studies Association (UK and Ireland) has discovered in its documenting of narratives used to justify closures of women’s and gender studies departments in the UK (Hemmings, 2006), this position is consistently reiterated as a reason for not needing feminist courses in higher education any more (Griffin and Hanmer, 2001). Fine; it can hardly come as a shock to feminists that institutions hostile to academic feminism use whatever discourses are available to them to rationalize closures, marginalization and inadequate resourcing. But, as I argue in my article, Western feminist theory’s own production of its past consistently reproduces the same linearity, even, or most particularly, when these shifts are lamented. Thus past politicization and unity are nostalgically invoked, and the extraordinarily vibrant and diverse experiment in alternative knowledge production that is academic feminism today is routinely accused of forgetting politics, women, its own legacy and so on. Insofar as such accounts confirm the belief that politics, reality and transformative feminist knowledge can *never* be found in or accessed via

poststructuralist accounts or tools, feminism contributes to the conditions of its own critical and political erasure.

Interestingly, Torr and I are both concerned with accounts of recent Western academic feminist history, and in fact some of our sources overlap, namely interdisciplinary feminist scholarly journals in English. We differ dramatically in what we understand to be the nature of those particular sources, however. Torr reads articles discussing shifts in feminist theory as evidence of those shifts; I read these same articles as producing an account of feminist history in the moment of writing (and of publication and reader agreement). I do this because I believe that accounts of the past are always motivated accounts that tell us about the writer's investments and interests. This is not because I think past events are fictitious, but that since it is impossible to tell a full story about the past (all writers, events, discussions, trends, contradictions), accounts are always selective ones that do precise work in the present. And I am particularly interested in feminist stories when a consensus emerges about what really happened, because that indicates fixing of both the past and present as providing their own evidence for one another in ways that reduce rather than increase political and theoretical accountability. The story no longer needs to be interrogated because we all recognize it; we no longer need to explain why we think this story needs to be told; the storyteller is not responsible for its effects.

Refusing correctives . . .

I could stop my reply there, perhaps, but I do want to return to the question Torr raises that I began my reply with, concerning whether there are *better* ways to tell feminist stories. I believe that there are, and that as a result our tales will be more accurate in two ways: in foregrounding the investments of the teller of tales to increase accountability (irrespective of and not reliant on author reflexivity); and in providing accounts of contested meaning in feminism, rather than seeking to find a singular answer to the story of what happened, or what is happening now. In 'Telling Feminist Stories' I suggest two primary ways of doing this, both of which merely add to Torr's feelings of frustration. Firstly, I discuss the importance of a historiographic approach to storytelling in which one does not seek an alternative history, but picks at the conditions of dominant stories to establish what political, epistemological and ontological work they are trying to achieve; secondly, I imagine retelling our two dominant stories by messing directly with the representations of those thinkers most associated with engineering these stories' foundational shifts. Both of these approaches emphasize methodology over content on the basis that opening up rather than closing down versions of history is a way of reorienting our focus on to the significant political battles of the present.

One of Torr's (2007: 61) critiques of my article is that while I insist on the value of focusing on the technologies and political effects of feminist storytelling over and above the value of trying to set 'the story straight' (White, 1978, in Spivak, 1999: 203), I also rely on a knowledge of a feminist

past that I gesture towards but only partially represent. She points to a rather weak footnote (Hemmings, 2005: 132, n. 7) in which I provide a 'starting point' for challenging the common claim that a black feminist critique only emerges in the 1980s, despite my protestations about the value of precisely this kind of revisionist move. Torr is absolutely right to call me up on this point. Earlier versions of the article were resolute in refusing corrective gestures, but external readers wanted me to add some examples of the knowledge I was seen to be presuming. I caved in, justifying this to myself as a sign of my openness to a range of feminist modes of challenging dominant and destructive histories. But I wish now that I had not included this note, except insofar as it enables me to restate my historiographic commitment more strongly here: *I am absolutely convinced that the proposing of a singular feminist history as fact requires the erasure of its contested authorization*. This is why I seek to intervene at the level of means of authorization of dominant versions of that history, to highlight the politics that produce and sustain those versions as facts. To correct the story in a linear fashion – that is from past to present – will produce a different history that will also erase its own construction (and the stranded note could be read as a hyper-representation of this erasure), and produce a de facto subject of authority for feminist theory – the author, or the represented, or both. Which authors should we choose? Who will tell this story?

I am not suggesting that we simply forget about the past, as if that were even a possibility. But neither do I believe that there is a common history that can answer the problems of the political present. We can only know what kind of history might be useful by attending to the multiple erasures (historical and contemporary) of the present. And indeed, which of these one prioritizes (and therefore also which affinities, proximities, possibilities, and thus contests over meaning) is contingent upon geographical and subjective location. So, my own priorities are the potent absences that occur when social theory is understood to have transcended the specific differences of race, sexuality and gender, and the relation of these absences to larger social and political mobilizations of feminism in Western culture. This is of course a very specific political motivation, presumably not shared by all theorists or all feminists. It situates me in a specific place and time, and I am interested in *aspiring* to be accountable for the interests that this motivation reveals. For me, 'what's wrong with *aspiring* to find out what has really happened in academic feminism's recent past?' is that Torr's aspiration is presented as neutral, even innocent of what she will find.

On idolatry . . .

Given her interest in a project that seeks to find out what has really happened in academic feminism's recent past, I can see why it is that Torr reads my interest in current representations of Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak and Donna Haraway as a reiteration of a star system antithetical to feminist commitment to transformation of academic practice. I conceive of

my interest in key writers within dominant stories of the recent past of Western feminist theory rather differently, of course. In my article I argue that key feminist thinkers act as transition figures in representations of feminist theory as a history of progress or loss. In their citation, they are separated out from feminist theoretical investments and antecedents, and are made to bear the burden of a shift from identity to difference. I understand these citation practices as productive of such figures' appropriation into a dominant history that wants to erase feminist and critical race contributions to poststructuralism, often in order to 'find them anew' contemporarily. The ways in which such figures are made to appear, in other words, are a central technique in securing the telling of feminist stories I understand as having highly problematic effects. This is not about Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Donna Haraway, or any other feminist 'star' as such, but about the work that their citation, and the citation of their influences, performs. Indeed, and this is not likely to convince Torr of my argument but I thought the quote too apt not to include, Butler asks the following of her own 'academic life':

What are the institutional histories . . . that 'position' me here now? If there is something called 'Butler's position,' is this one that I devise, publish and defend, that belongs to me as a kind of academic property? Or is there a grammar of the subject that merely encourages us to position me as the proprietor of those theories? (1992: 8–9)

If representation of key feminist stars does particular work in the present, what should a feminist theorist do in turn? One could, as Torr suggests (2007: 64–5), ignore those theorists altogether and seek to build an alternative, more egalitarian history. But this would be to ignore the reasons why these theorists have become framed as exceptional within the histories we want to challenge. It would also risk the making exceptional of different theorists, perhaps for different reasons, and place these reasons under erasure in turn. Instead, I propose an approach that starts from an assessment of what is 'forgotten' in the making exceptional of a writer like Butler. Which other possible histories are obscured by rendering her as breaking with her feminist antecedents, and why should this particular representation of her work have such purchase?

My initial experimentations with intervening in accepted histories of Butler's role in Theory are, as Torr indicates, genealogical. A politically motivated genealogy of the kind I advocate does two things in this instance. It highlights the ways in which specific representation of a key theorist is secured, such that this is held as common interpretation; and it seeks to fold back in theoretical traces that work to make visible the erasures that occur in and through that 'common interpretation'. Monique Wittig is important for this project because folding her influence back into representations of Butler's work highlights the elimination of *lesbian feminism* from Theory when Foucault or Derrida are figured as uniquely influential. It has been really useful for me to have to think about this experiment again. Torr's response to this aspect of 'Telling Feminist Stories' has highlighted the importance of framing this line of inquiry more clearly, not as

a competition for primacy between Foucault and Wittig, but as a laying bare of what is at stake in the critical certainty that the answer is Foucault.

Torr takes issue with my interest in animating Wittigian traces for similar reasons to those underwriting her dismay at my resistance to providing a corrective history for feminist theory – that there is a right way to read Butler (Torr, 2007: 62–3). Significantly, the right way that she provides reproduces the history of feminist theory as loss I find so counter-productive. For Torr, as for Stevi Jackson whom she cites, Butler misreads Wittig insofar as she is not faithful to the ‘historical materialist method that Wittig had appropriated from Marx’ (p. 62), but perverts her legacy by modifying her work ‘to fit a poststructuralist framework’ (p. 63). A particular version of feminist history is effected here, one which laments poststructuralism’s reification of ‘difference in general’, certainly, but which has to erase other connections between Wittig and Butler in order to do so. In particular, the insistence that Butler is influenced only by her male interlocutors allows us to ignore the *lesbian character* of both Wittig’s materialism and Butler’s poststructuralism. This forgetting occurs both in the closed pitting of Marxism against poststructuralism here, and in the moment that my own use of the term ‘lesbian’ is dropped from the example of re-reading I propose. At the end of ‘Telling Feminist Stories’ I re-read a common critical phrase, ‘Judith Butler transformed the study of gender by using Foucault to apply poststructuralist conceptions of the subject to it’ (*Australian Feminist Studies*, 2003), asking us to imagine what difference it would make to write instead ‘Judith Butler transformed the study of gender by using Wittig to apply Marxist/lesbian concepts of the subject to it’ (Hemmings, 2005: 131). Torr ignores the ‘lesbian’ part of this experiment in her response, separating out Marxism from its neighbour as I inscribe it, and in doing so contributes to a critical present that evacuates an ongoing critique of heteronormativity as central to feminist theory. Such a history would not necessarily evacuate Foucault from the discussion, of course, if one is interested in reading Wittig, Foucault and Butler as trying to refigure sexuality as both pleasure and constraint.

My intention in advocating folding erased histories into critical representations of feminist history in the present is not, as I hope is clear, to propose a singular alternative history we could hold in common. It is not about Wittig or Butler in and of themselves, but about developing a tactics of memory that might allow us to challenge some of the political erasures that these stories effect. The intention is modest in that respect, wanting to surface what is potentially absent through recombination. This works as a kind of serious joke, ideally productive of a laugh of recognition in the reader; its function is disruptive rather than instantiative, and is intended to open up rather than close down other possibilities in the present. I believe that keeping meaning open in this way is a primary feminist responsibility.

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