

European Journal of Women's Studies

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European Journal of Women's Studies 2012 19: 315

DOI: 10.1177/1350506812443620

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European Journal of Women's Studies

19(3) 315–329

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DOI: 10.1177/1350506812443620

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Abstract

In the UK, many have argued that the past five years or so have seen an increase in the radicalism and visibility of feminist activism, jarring somewhat with the strong emphasis on loss in much recent scholarship – as well as media commentary – on feminist politics. Against this backdrop, this article asks how, and to what extent, this resurgence of feminist activism has unsettled the centrality of loss within the affective economies of contemporary British feminism, by examining a range of recent texts produced within (pro-feminist) academic, activist, publishing and media spheres. After arguing that attachments to loss remain remarkably intransigent, the latter part of the article draws on Sara Ahmed's account of 'sticky affects' to provide a theoretical account of why notions such as 'young women are not feminist' and 'feminist activism is a thing of the past' continue to yield such force despite empirical evidence to the contrary.

Keywords

Activism, affect, feminism, generations, loss, resurgence, UK

Introduction

Loss, writes Srila Roy (2009: 341), 'seems to inform a greater part of the affective economy of feminism today'. Although writing about contemporary Indian feminism, her reflections resonate strongly with the current UK context, in which narratives of women's movement decline and young women's distaste for feminism circulate widely in academic and non-academic spheres. In such a context, it might seem odd to claim that contemporary British feminism is in the ascendancy. However, one now frequently hears

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that feminists are dusting off their placards, remobilizing and spearheading an increasingly visible movement for the transformation of gender relations in the UK. While initially such declarations of a resurgent feminism were largely internal to the feminist activist community, this increased movement visibility – alongside the publication of a series of non-academic books in 2009–2011 discussing contemporary feminism – has generated a burgeoning interest in feminism within the mainstream British media. Consequently, the belief that the present is marked by a resurgent feminism has now penetrated beyond the boundaries of feminist activism and into mainstream public discourse as well. Against this backdrop, this article asks how, and to what extent, this resurgence of feminist activism has unsettled the centrality of loss within the affective economies of contemporary British feminism.¹

In tackling these questions, the analysis presented here focuses less on the concrete practices of feminist activists in the UK, and more on how these practices are represented in academic, activist and media discourse. The specific discourses I am analysing are all the work of feminists, or people sympathetic to feminism, even though some of their claims could be seen as problematic from particular feminist perspectives. In analysing these (pro) feminist discourses, I would argue that the period from around 2008 onwards has witnessed an *intensification* of discourse about feminism in the British public sphere. Some of these discourses are characterized by optimistic and affirmative declarations of a renewed visibility and confidence in feminist activism, while others consist of pessimistic claims that these new feminisms are in some way not properly feminist, or not the right kind of feminism.

My main line of critique highlights how narratives of the loss of feminism – often expressed through claims that young women are not feminist, or that contemporary feminism lacks visibility and vitality – are so entrenched in the feminist imagination that they remain largely untroubled even by empirical counter-examples (such as instances of young women becoming politicized). However, my argument is not directed at loss and pessimism per se. After all, such affective dispositions can act as key motivational factors for renewed political action. Rather, my claim is that specific attachments to narratives of loss, in the current UK context, often serve to erase important forms of feminist mobilization from view. Not only is such a situation problematic when one is trying to analyse aspects of the current feminist movement, but it can also lead to a politics marked by moralism, defeatism and conservatism. After fleshing out these ideas in more detail, I conclude with an attempt to make sense theoretically of the persistence of attachments to narratives of loss in current feminist discourse. I suggest that existing work on feminist generational conflict has some resonance with the debates analysed, but that a reading of Sara Ahmed's account of affective economies (alongside Christina Scharff's work on young women's disidentification with feminism) provides a richer theoretical lens through which to make sense of current debates about UK feminist activism.

Contextualizing UK feminist activism

The discussion that follows is entirely UK-based (with a bias towards London and south-east England), and reflects the various quirks and specificities of its context, although many non-UK readers will no doubt identify with the themes of resistance, subjectivity

and generational conflict that it touches on. The UK has historically been a hegemonic power within feminism, particularly in academic circles. While the legacy of this disproportionate influence is, to say the least, ambivalent, it has at least resulted in a rich and expanding array of scholarly and biographical work on the history of British feminist politics. This literature cannot be adequately summarized, but it will suffice to point out that the British Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) – which started to emerge in the late 1960s – was, for a time at least, extremely lively and vibrant, and had close yet contested ties with socialism and the left (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993; Rowbotham et al., 1979). However, in contrast to the broadly affirmative scholarship on the early British WLM, literature on the contemporary feminist movement has been fairly consistent in putting forward a gloomy diagnosis of the post-1970s feminist scene, framed largely by notions such as loss, decline, institutionalization, fragmentation or depoliticization (Bagguley, 2002; Byrne, 1996; Gelb, 1989; Lovenduski and Randall, 1993; McRobbie, 2009; Nash, 2002; Squires, 2007). The general picture painted by these accounts depicts, as Lynne Segal (2000: 19) puts it, a 'declining passion for politics' alongside a 'frank rejection of feminism by many young women'. Indeed, the kinds of loss narratives described by Clare Hemmings (2011) that posit a transition from an activist, politicized feminist past to a professionalized, apolitical feminist present typify the kinds of narratives one finds in scholarly and biographical accounts of the WLM in Britain (Dean, 2010a). As Angela McRobbie puts it, if feminism is to be found anywhere, it is in 'a retirement home in an unfashionable rundown holiday resort' (2004: 512).

But despite the rather gloomy picture painted above, there is substantial evidence to suggest that since around 2006, feminist mobilizations in the UK have increased in visibility and influence (Dean, 2010a; Redfern and Aune, 2010). To give a few examples: groups such as the London Feminist Network have helped spearhead a huge proliferation of Reclaim the Night marches against violence against women across the country; Object - an increasingly influential human rights organization - have received substantial media attention for their high profile campaigning against the objectification of women in media and popular culture; grassroots socialist feminist group Feminist Fightback and the established campaigning organization the Fawcett Society have both mobilized against the gendered impacts of the UK government's deficit-reduction measures; and the group UK Feminista was formed in 2010 to provide UK-wide coordination between feminist activists. This apparent feminist resurgence has been boosted by, and helped give rise to, ongoing forms of activism concerning the intersections of feminism with (among others) anti-racism, anti-homophobia and 'no border' campaigns, while the substantial feminist presence in the recent student mobilizations in the UK and across Europe raises further questions about the intersections of feminism and leftist politics more broadly.

In contrast to narratives of loss, these new forms of feminist mobilization have led to a proliferation of often celebratory narratives of feminism's return, but have also given rise to modes of critique, dismissal or outright erasure. Much of this discussion has taken place within the activist blogosphere, but the key public forum for debate about the current state of British feminism is arguably the liberal broadsheet press (particularly *The Guardian*),² which in turn arguably both generates and reflects a range of class and racial biases in the (actual or intended) audience for these discussions. To give some examples

typical of these more celebratory narratives: early in 2010 Bidisha – occasional presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* – announced a 'mass awakening' of women (Bidisha, 2010); *Guardian* women's editor Kira Cochrane (2010a) noted that 'after years of derision, feminism is finding its voice again'; a 2009 article by Susie Measure in *The Independent* was framed by the claim that the hitherto apolitical 'Topshop generation . . . [have now] had enough' (Measure, 2009b). Equally affirmative stances can be found in the claim – in the context of a profile of author and activist Kat Banyard – that the UK women's movement is 'bursting with energy' (Cochrane, 2010b), while beyond the pages of the broadsheet press BBC Radio 4's flagship daily news programme *Today* contained a news item on 31 July 2010 exploring the idea that the present is an 'exciting time' for British feminism. Furthermore, the same period saw a spate of popular, non-academic books addressing the state of contemporary British feminism. This included some lighter, more populist titles (Levinson, 2009; Moran, 2011) and some that were more serious and overtly politicized in their approach (Banyard, 2010; Walter, 2010). Taken together, these developments tap into a pervasive sense that, to borrow a line from a rousing speech given by Finn Mackay (of the London Feminist Network) at the London 2009 Reclaim the Night rally, the women's movement is 'on the march once again'.

The analysis that follows bears the hallmarks of the context in which it was carried out, in at least three ways. First, this article contains a number of thoughts that began to circulate during conversations with academics and activists, in both social and professional settings, about themes of optimism/pessimism, hope and despair in commentary on contemporary UK feminism. Such conversations also prompted me to reflect on how ideas and affective investments move unpredictably across the porous boundaries of academia, activism and popular discourse. Second, the argument presented in this article is heavily influenced by the responses I received to my previous research (Dean, 2010a), which argued that we were witnessing what appeared to be an increasing appetite for feminist politics in the UK and that this should give us cause for hope, perhaps even optimism, at a time when the received wisdom was that feminism was unfashionable and had lost its political dynamism. Although many people who engaged with my research expressed interest, surprise and enthusiasm for emergent forms of feminist activism, this often did not translate into a more affirmative or hopeful affective orientation towards the feminist present. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect people to change their worldview on the strength of a single encounter with a colleague's research, but it did nonetheless prompt me to reflect not only on the character of attachments to a feminism that had (allegedly) been lost, but also on attachments to the *idea* that feminism had lost its fervour, radicalism and impact.

Third, this article was originally written during a period of significant political upheaval in British universities, coinciding with the wave of student protests and occupations that took place during winter 2010–2011. While writing the first draft of this article, I participated in a number of staff/student protests in and around my university (Leeds), and made several visits to a lecture hall that had been occupied by a sizeable group of students, and which played host to a number of lively debates about (among other things) the connections between feminism and the burgeoning student movement. None of this is to suggest that these various political goings on were wholly unproblematic (particularly from a feminist perspective), but it did mean that I felt bemused, and at

times frustrated, by the continued peddling of narratives of declining enthusiasm for radical politics, despite evidence to the contrary all around.

What happened to the sisterhood? Examining techniques of erasure

In light of this, the rest of the article asks to what extent these new forms of feminist mobilization – and the affirmative responses they often provoke – displace attachments to loss within the affective economies of contemporary feminism? The short answer is a little, but perhaps not as much as one might expect. Despite the recent resurgence of feminist activism in the UK, narratives of loss continue to circulate widely. But, crucially, these new feminist activisms produce a shift in the character of attachments to loss. Previously, attachments to loss took the form of nostalgia, a melancholic longing for a now lost radical activism. Now, we sometimes encounter a more active form of erasure and/or dismissal, whereby these newly visible feminist activisms are ignored, cast out or deemed not appropriately feminist.

These modalities of erasure are manifest in a number of sites, and circulate within and across the boundaries of academia, media and (slightly less so) activism. While the broadsheet press has seen numerous affirmations of the new feminisms in recent years, a dominant discourse remains grounded in loss, or disappointment. A common narrative here is that feminism has become swallowed up by a hedonistic popular culture, and/or that young feminists have got their political priorities wrong. A 2009 article in *The Independent* by Susie Measure (2009a) (prior to her conversion to a more optimistic stance – see above) condenses both of these themes, berating British feminists (who are ‘too busy picking personal fights over assaults on our personal image’) for their alleged lack of activism around the Lubna al-Hussein case in Sudan.³ Similarly dismissive sentiment towards young feminists and indeed young women in general pervades Cassandra Jardine’s lament in *The Daily Telegraph* in 2010 that feminism has ‘sunk into mindless hedonism’ by virtue of the ways in which ‘a generation of young girls is interpreting liberation as the right to behave like top-shelf models’ and for whom – she alleges – ‘STDs are almost a badge of honour’ (Jardine, 2010). Jardine writes this in the context of a discussion of the work of British feminist writer Natasha Walter, but her discourse in effect erases contemporary feminism by problematically and unreflectively conflating feminism with specific forms of public displays of sexuality by young women. ‘Perhaps it is time for the third wave of feminism’ (Jardine, 2010), she concludes. Needless to say, third wave feminism has been around for a long time.

A similar set of troubling connotations of feminism and femininity pervade Janice Turner’s 2009 *Times* article, which argues that ‘feminism has never had it so bad’ (Turner, 2009). The article displays an affective disposition of despair and infuriation towards young women’s alleged complicity with an increasingly sexist popular culture. ‘Is it only me, Ms Ranty-Pants and my generation who care? Why do women seem largely oblivious?’ she asks rhetorically. After several paragraphs in which feminism is conflated with the public display of female sexuality for heterosexual male enjoyment, Turner again asks ‘where are the young women questioning the orthodoxy here?’ and claims that ‘feminism has slumbered for too long: it is high time it woke up’ (Turner,

2009). Turner's article taps into a broader sense of despair and disappointment with young women's alleged lack of mobilization against problematic constructions of female sexuality in popular culture. However, while she acknowledges the inroads made by the campaigning group Object, her discourse relies on strong investments in loss and disappointment, precluding acknowledgement of the existence of diverse forms of activism, and erasing the possibility of a more hopeful affective orientation towards the feminist present.

However, two particularly troubling examples of the cultural erasure of feminist activism can be found in two recent BBC documentaries, one on TV and one on radio. The BBC4 programme *Activists* (first broadcast on 22 March 2010) was an overview of new forms of activism by predominantly younger feminists, focusing on the build-up to the 2008 London Reclaim the Night march. The programme contains interviews with a number of activists, often fixating on the question of whether those interviewed have an 'angry' personality disposition. Particularly problematic is a depiction of the young activist Sophia Morrell. The film makes it clear that Morrell comes from a privileged class background, and repeatedly draws attention to the presumed disjuncture between her feminist politics and her feminine dress and physical appearance. Interspersed with footage of her attending a boxing class, the interviewer repeatedly asks her if she is an angry person ('not really, only feminism and commuting make me angry', she replies), but the interviewer persists, making her visibly uncomfortable. The film then cuts to an interview with her bemused parents, who struggle to answer director Vanessa Eagle's question about the sources of Sophia's 'rage'.

The portrayal of Morrell in the documentary is deeply problematic: it implies that her privileged class background and her physical appearance are such that her radical politics cannot be read as authentic or primary, but as derivative of some pre-political or psychological disposition. The possibility that her radicalism is an understandable and authentic response to existing social and political conditions goes largely unacknowledged. In this sense, even though the subject being interviewed is clearly a young feminist, the programme draws on a range of discursive techniques to deflect the possible challenge that Morrell poses to the truism that young women are not feminists.

The truism that young women reject feminism (and that young feminists in some senses do not really exist) provides the key anchoring point for a recent edition of BBC Radio 4's *Analysis* entitled 'Whatever Happened to the Sisterhood?' The programme does acknowledge the existence of new forms of feminist politics, and indeed contains interviews with high profile feminist activists such as Catherine Redfern, but remains wedded to the idea that young women are refusing to identify as feminist, and are largely complicit with their own subordination. As the title implies, the programme is structured around a binary opposition between an upsurge of feminist radicalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and a depoliticized, complicitous present. This is given further symbolic weight by the programme coinciding with the release of *Made in Dagenham*, Nigel Cole's dramatization of the 1968 strike by women workers at the Ford plant in Dagenham in Essex (just to the east of London). The movie, presenter Jo Fidgen says, 'evokes a time when women fought alongside each other, noisily, often joyously', and she contrasts the 'boisterous activism of the second-wave' with the 'beleaguered, low-key feminism of

today'. The programme goes on to affirm the belief that contemporary feminism is on the back foot, drawing on contributions from feminist political theorist Anne Phillips, cultural theorist Angela McRobbie and sociologist Jessica Ringrose. While contemporary feminism is acknowledged, it is critiqued on the grounds that it primarily takes place online and is too cerebral to generate widespread appeal. Phillips' observation that 'I don't think there is an enormous emphasis on fighting for gender equality' prompts Jo Fidgen to remark, 'perhaps the complacency that Professor Phillips detects is the reason why there are no banner-waving women descending on Parliament Square'. Similarly, while acknowledging that membership of the Fawcett Society has risen, Fidgen qualifies this by saying, 'there haven't been protests, Dagenham-style'. She then goes on to point out that 'some second-wave feminists look at younger women and say this is not what we were fighting for. They think they are sexually liberated. In fact they're colluding in their own oppression.' In the conclusion we hear some reflections from Angela McRobbie on the status of feminism in mainstream culture, before Fidgen signs off by remarking that maybe it will take 'feminists of Professor McRobbie's generation to come out of activist retirement, dust off their banners, and lead the younger generation out of internet forums and into the mainstream'.

'Whatever Happened to the Sisterhood?' is of course right to raise questions about the state of contemporary feminism, but its insistent reinstating of attachments to a now lost feminist activism is arguably symptomatic of the broader centrality of notions of loss, decline and disappointment within both academic and media representations of contemporary feminism. Crucially, the programme shows that even an acknowledgement of the existence of new forms of feminist activism need not complicate narratives of decline or attachments to loss. Indeed, 'Whatever Happened to the Sisterhood?' deploys an impressive repertoire of techniques of erasure. These include: (1) framing 'Dagenham-era' feminism as an idealized and unreachable benchmark against which contemporary feminism is compared; (2) constructing protest and 'banner-waving' as hallmarks of authentic feminism (in contrast to the inauthentic or unsatisfactory realm of online activism); and (3) conflating feminism and femininity by presuming that feminists consent to problematic constructions of female sexuality that circulate within consumer culture.

Unsurprisingly, a number of younger feminists have reacted with frustration and dismay towards the widespread erasure of younger feminists' political activism. Several contributions to UK feminist website *The F-word* have discussed tendencies in mainstream media and society to ignore, or express disappointment with, new feminist activisms (Livesey, 2008). Indeed, Catherine Redfern (founder and former editor of *The F-word*) asked 'when will we be good enough – and should we stop caring?' (Redfern, 2009) after attending an event organized by long-running left-of-centre organization the Fabian Society at which discussion bemoaned the absence of effective and exciting activism by contemporary feminists. She wonders 'for those who are sceptical about today's feminism, what exactly *would* count as a "proper" or valid feminist movement?' (Redfern, 2009) and asks 'why is it that time after time when conferences [that] aren't predominantly feminist-focussed have a panel on feminism it's all framed around the question of whether "a new feminism" is needed, as if feminism is dormant or dead' (Redfern, 2009). In response to Redfern's article, current *F-word* editor Jess McCabe

highlights the core of the problem when noting that ‘often it seems to me the truth is not “there’s no feminist activism happening”, but that it’s just not happening within the field of vision of the people who make that complaint’ (McCabe, in Redfern, 2009). Not only that, in response to the aforementioned articles by Susie Measure and Janice Turner proclaiming the absence or shortcomings of contemporary feminism, *F-word* contributor Laura Woodhouse was driven to announce that she was ‘frantically waving the feminist flag, jumping up and down, blowing a whistle, tearing my hair out’ (Woodhouse, 2009).

The F-word contributors’ frustrations are of course grounded in the fact that the forms of erasure exhibited in ‘Whatever Happened to the Sisterhood?’ and elsewhere provide a deeply selective reading of the empirical aspects of what has *actually* been happening in British feminism in recent years (see Dean, 2010a; Redfern and Aune, 2010). But perhaps even more troubling are the strategies of argumentation they employ. There is little engagement with the content or demands of these new forms of activism by younger feminists, because they are typically framed as unable to ‘count’ as properly feminist or properly political in the first place. Here, I think there is a crucial distinction to be made between erasure and critique. Partly in line with Pereira’s (2011) cartographical account of the exercise of epistemic status in the discipline of gender studies, I use critique, in this context, to refer to practices of judgement and evaluation of specific instances of feminism, but whereby that judgement presumes that the instance of feminism being judged deserves to be ‘counted’ as a candidate for feminist judgement. Thus, I may, for instance, take issue with a particular tactic or practice enacted by, say, Object or the European Women’s Lobby, but critique implies that I acknowledge their existence as legitimate objects for feminist judgement. Erasure, by contrast – e.g. saying that young women’s activism is not properly feminist – does not really perform a critical judgement because it prevents specific practices from even emerging as candidates for critical judgement in the first place. Strategies of erasure serve instead to cast certain practices and ideas out to the margins of the symbolic field within which discussions of contemporary feminism operate, severely damaging prospects for what we might call, following Chantal Mouffe (2000), an ‘agonistic pluralism’ of views about contemporary feminism.⁴

Erasure and loss: Theoretical considerations

However, this still does not directly address the question of why, despite an apparent resurgence of diverse forms of feminist activism in Britain, do techniques of erasure and narratives of loss continue to inform so much reflection on contemporary gender politics? To frame things in a more Foucaultian vein, the question to ask is not, as most do, ‘why is there so little feminist resistance?’ and/or ‘why do young women refuse to embrace feminism?’ but, rather, why do people insist so much that young women are not feminist and that there is no feminist resistance?

To answer this question, one might be tempted to turn to models of generational conflict between different ‘waves’ of feminism, which has been a feature of recent scholarship on feminist identity, particularly in Anglo-American contexts. Such work typically seeks to analyse the processes by which ‘third wave’ feminism comes into being, often by exploring the structure and effects of third wave feminism’s disidentification with the figure of the second wave feminist mother, who is often portrayed

as resentful, puritanical and doctrinaire (Dean, 2009; Henry, 2003; Siegel, 2007; Snyder, 2008). And there is no doubt that there are traces of feminist generational conflict and disidentification in the material discussed here. For instance, the frustrations expressed on *The F-word* resonate strongly with the irritation and exasperation with older feminists that characterize much 'third wave' discourse (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). But there are several crucial dimensions of the problems and debates discussed here that resist subsumption into existing models of generational conflict. One is that few, if any, of the discourses studied are explicitly framed by wave-based generational metaphors: indeed, they almost never refer to 'third wave' feminism, which in turn reflects a broader turning away from wave-based generational identities within UK feminist activism, and a greater emphasis on cross-generational alliances (Dean, 2010a: 162). Second, the idea that 'young women are not feminist' circulates in and across specific communities of scholars, activists and commentators, without being confined to specific age-cohorts. For instance, it can also assume the form of young people bemoaning the alleged lack of enthusiasm for radical politics among their own age group.

The kinds of wave-based generational conflict described by critics such as Siegel (2007) and Henry (2003) are much more easily applicable to Anglo-American feminist temporalities than elsewhere (Graff, 2003), but even in the UK and the US the story of a passage from 'second' to 'third' wave is a highly selective narrative (Dean, 2009). Thus, even though wave-based models of generational conflict do adequately characterize *some* recent disputes within British feminism, the specific situation discussed here is fluid and complex, and not reducible to the retrenchment of simplistic generational differences that typically mark cleavages between second and third wave feminisms. Consequently, I would argue that we need to adopt an alternative set theoretical tools if we are to make sense of the context under discussion.

But let us reiterate what it is we are trying to explain. As stated, loss continues to inform much of the affective economy of contemporary feminism. Ostensibly, this arises from an investment in an object (feminist activism) which has been lost. This suggests that affects centred upon loss might be alleviated by the return of the lost object. However, the above analysis suggests that a more fundamental, perhaps more intransigent set of attachments are in place, as a typical response to a particular instance of new feminism is either to ignore it or to say 'no, that's not it! That's not the right kind of (returning) lost object!' This in turn suggests that for some the possibility of a return of the lost object (feminist activism) might be experienced as troublesome, even traumatic.

Indeed, the fact that narratives of loss remain in place even when the lost object – or some approximation of it – returns might be read as meaning that the investment is not in a (now lost) feminism, but in a prior object which the loss of feminism perhaps in some way stands in for. Some strands of queer theory might link this lost object to the losses incurred through submission to the demands of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), while some psychoanalytic perspectives might link it to the loss incurred through oedipalization (Jones, 1999). Meanwhile Lisa Adkins (2004) has suggested that feminist loss narratives betray a prior investment in a specific kind of socioeconomic formation that characterized earlier stages of modernity. In recent psychoanalytic theory, the category of melancholia – conceived as an inability to mourn an unavowed loss – has proved

attractive to many seeking to make sense of the psychosocial dimensions of narratives of the loss of feminism, and indeed emancipatory politics more broadly (Brown, 2000; Butler, 1995). The deployments of the category of melancholia in specific contexts by Roy (2009) and Özselçuk (2006)⁵ are illuminating and persuasive, but as with wave-based models of generational conflict I worry that a strong conception of melancholia might struggle to adequately explain the *diversity* and contextuality of narratives of loss (and the different forms of erasure that sometimes arise). Furthermore, to posit the claim that the loss of feminism stands in for a more fundamental loss necessarily requires a somewhat speculative hermeneutics of suspicion to identify the lost object which remains unavowed.

In view of this, I want to draw on Sara Ahmed's (2004) account of the 'stickiness' of affects to advance the arguably simpler – and more 'historicized' – explanation that the reluctance to affirm these newly visible feminist activisms is an effect of the constant repetition of narratives of loss. Ahmed argues that affects are not inherent properties of specific objects, but rather become attached to objects through repetition. Sometimes, Ahmed argues, these repetitions can intensify to such an extent that particular kinds of affect come to be seen as inherent to – rather than contingently associated with – particular kinds of bodies and/or objects. Christina Scharff (2010) takes up Ahmed's account of the 'stickiness' of affect in her analysis of young women's (largely negative) views of feminism. Scharff notes that in the eyes of her interviewees, various negative affects have, through repetition, become intractably stuck to the signifier 'feminism'. As she puts it:

Through repetition, unfemininity, man-hating, and lesbianism are attached to feminism: feminism becomes a 'sticky sign' that therefore evokes a chain of associations which have become intrinsic to the sign through reiteration. The stereotype of the ugly, man-bashing, lesbian feminist comes into existence through repeated reiterations and produces that which it seeks to designate every time it is named. (Scharff, 2010: 839)

Interestingly, Scharff also makes the crucial point that when asked, her respondents were invariably unable to name a specific example of a man-hating, ugly feminist: 'the trope of the feminist', she writes, 'connected to unfemininity, man-hating, and lesbianism, figures prominently in the research participants' accounts but continually disappears from sight when related to actual experiences' (Scharff, 2010: 837). The crucial point here, then, is that the affective orientations towards feminism remain unchallenged by their lack of correspondence with the empirical world. But I wonder if one could perhaps turn Scharff's argument around: while associations of old-age, lesbianism and ugliness stick to feminism, perhaps it is just as much the case that notions of anti-feminism stick to young women. Consequently, the strategies of erasure described above arise because associations of vitriolic anti-feminism come to 'stick' to young women. The notion that 'young women are not feminist' thus becomes a truism through constant repetition such that, in the minds of many feminist critics in both academic and media circles, anti-feminism becomes constitutive of young womanhood. Ahmed notes that affects are not fully owned by, or manifest in, particular individuals, but circulate across the social field. This, it seems to me, reflects the character of affects of annoyance and disappointment

towards young women's alleged lack of politicization: such attitudes are often manifest in casual comments at academic conferences, or are fleetingly invoked in magazine articles. In these spaces, it seems that the trope 'young women are not feminist' circulates largely independent of any empirical referent, just as 'feminists are ugly, man-hating lesbians' circulates in popular imaginings of the feminist.

The key point is that these tropes often become repeated to such an extent that they become unquestioned, and take the form not of falsifiable empirical statements but key underpinnings of the affective economies of contemporary feminism, remaining largely untroubled by evidence of the widespread existence of, say, attractive heterosexual feminists (in Scharff's case) or young feminists in general (in the case discussed here).⁶ As with more overtly psychoanalytic accounts, Ahmed and Scharff's analyses of the performativity of affects acknowledge that affective attachments are constitutive of the self, and as such the possibility of a different set of orientations may be difficult, even traumatic. But they also emphasize how the intransigence of certain affective orientations is linked to specific historical circumstances and, unlike some more psychoanalytically inflected accounts, the analyst does not need to mobilize a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Seeing young women as (potentially) feminist

So far, I have drawn attention to the ways in which the entrenchment of ideas such as 'young women are not feminist' and 'feminism as a social movement is dead' in fact serves to denigrate, erase and marginalize the efforts of numerous young feminists across the country and across the world. The task, therefore, is to develop an ethos that can foster critical thinking about different kinds of feminist theory and practice, but not in such a way that certain feminist practices are denied entrance to the symbolic field of feminist politics in the first place. One way of framing the problem would be to pitch it in Wittgensteinian terms: what we are suffering from is a form of 'aspect blindness' in which we lack the capacity to see young women as potentially feminist (see Norval, 2007: 169–170). To paraphrase Wittgenstein (1958: § 115), pictures of an anti-feminist present, and of a pervasive hostility towards feminism on the part of young women, hold us captive because they are repeated to us inexorably. There are, I would suggest, fruitful resonances between this Wittgensteinian framing of things, and the attempts by feminist economic geographers JK Gibson-Graham to problematize what they call 'capitalocentrism'. That is, the tendency to subsume a broad range of economic practices under the conceptual monolith of 'capitalism', rather than seeing the economy as diverse and differentiated (Gibson-Graham, 2006b: 6).⁷ Capitalism, they argue, has colonized our minds and our ways of seeing more than it has our economic space. One of JK Gibson-Graham's key intellectual endeavours, then, is the self-consciously hopeful project of constructing what they call a 'language of economic diversity' (2006a: 53–78), so as to generate alternative ways of seeing the economy beyond the aspect-blind confines of capitalocentrism.

While Gibson-Graham are talking primarily about issues related to economy and class, we would do well to embrace their unflinching attempts to foster affective dispositions other than despair and moralistic attachment to marginality. Notably, they describe

how they encountered significant resistance to their project of opening up more positive affective dispositions towards the present, by virtue of their interlocutors' attachments to a pessimistic economic analysis that positioned capitalism as all encompassing. Although not expressed in quite these terms, their problem is not so much an empirical one (of capitalism *really* being completely dominant), but that we lack the kinds of affective dispositions and ways of seeing necessary to see certain practices as heterogeneous to capitalism. A similar task presents itself here in relation to contemporary feminism. Crucially, while pictures may indeed hold us captive, both Wittgenstein and Gibson-Graham affirm the possibilities for aspect change, or the cultivation of new ways of seeing. The more optimistic accounts of feminist resurgence can help us do that, but, for me, what is required is not so much an onslaught of optimism to counter the pessimists. Rather, what we require is a critical ethos that foregrounds what Linda Zerilli (2009) calls political (as opposed to subsumptive or determinative) judgement. In our case, this would mean fostering a judging practice that avoided subsuming particular cases under rules (e.g. by saying 'she is a young woman, young women are not feminist, ergo she is not a feminist'), but involved critical analysis of specific instances of feminist politics.

Conclusion

To avoid being misunderstood, the above observations are not by any means intended to suggest that current actions by young feminists are to be welcomed uncritically. Indeed, the exploratory analysis advanced here gives rise to a broad range of potentially troubling questions. For one, there is undoubtedly a sense that, at present, the debates discussed here emerge from, and are addressed to, a community of scholars and activists that is predominantly white, middle-class, university educated and secular, which in turn throws up a host of questions concerning how intersectionality and axes of difference undercut the symbolic space of contemporary British feminism. Even though such questions lie well beyond the scope of this article, I would argue that the kinds of attachments, erasures and dismissals analysed here may well obstruct such an undertaking. For it is only once we acknowledge existing and potential sites of feminist politicization that such a conversation about these tricky issues can begin.

To go about doing this, I would argue that rather than naively celebrating all forms of contemporary British feminism, we should affirm the much more minimal claim that contemporary forms of politicization by young women merit entry into the symbolic field as candidates for feminist judgement, rather than being erased and marginalized before such a conversation can begin to take place. As indicated earlier, this critical ethos has resonances with Chantal Mouffe's (2000) account of agonistic pluralism, characterized by agonistic respect for competing opinions, rather than antagonistic desires to annihilate opposing positions.⁸ We should, therefore, be vigilant of the ways in which our affective investments and our assumptions about recent feminist history might inadvertently narrow the possibilities for such a feminist agonistic pluralism to emerge.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Kaitlynn Mendes, Kristin Aune, Christina Scharff and (especially) Maria do Mar Pereira for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Earlier versions of the article were presented to the Leeds Political Theory Research Group in December 2010 and at the European Conference on Gender and Politics in Budapest in January 2011. I would like to thank attendees at both events, who asked insightful and probing questions.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. My understanding of the term ‘affective economy’ is informed by Sara Ahmed’s (2004) account of the circulation of affect, stressing the processes by which particular affects and emotions come to be aligned with particular objects. For Ahmed, the use of the term ‘economic’ captures the fact that affects do not reside in signs or objects, but circulate across a social field, and are thus both context dependent, and subject to contestation and realignment. I find her emphasis on the contextuality and performativity of affects more theoretically persuasive and more amenable to use within empirical research than notions of affect drawn from Spinoza or Deleuze, for whom affect is that which escapes or resists analysis and explanation (Clough, 2007; Massumi, 2002).
2. See Dean (2010b) for a more detailed analysis of representations of feminism in *The Guardian*.
3. Lubna al-Hussein is a Sudanese media worker who in 2009 was arrested and subsequently prosecuted for wearing trousers.
4. Mary Hawkesworth’s (2004) descriptions of the ‘premature burial’ of feminism resonate strongly with the kinds of erasure under investigation here.
5. Roy describes a highly affectively charged scenario in which the shift towards a more ‘NGO-ized’ model of political practice in the Indian women’s movement has become a source of considerable anxiety, unease and resentment. Her work – along with Özselçuk’s account of a post-socialist melancholia characterized by ‘a righteous pride in its powerlessness’ (Özselçuk, 2006: 227) – certainly has strong resonances with the moralistic attachments to marginality sometimes encountered in dismissals of new feminisms.
6. As Linda Zerilli (1998) argues, the citing of empirical counter-examples is rarely sufficient to disturb settled frames of reference and regimes of thought if it is unaccompanied by attempts to imaginatively reconstitute how we see and interpret the object or issue concerned.
7. For instance, gift-giving, volunteer work, time banking, cooperative exchanges, alternative currencies and domestic labour are just some of many non-capitalist (or at least, not-overtly-capitalist) economic practices they mention in their taxonomy of the ‘diverse economy’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 70–71).
8. Less academically, such a view is sympathetic to Libby Brooks’ (2009) call in *The Guardian* for a ‘good scrap’ over the meaning of feminism.

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