

feministkilljoys

killing joy as a world making project

Making Feminist Points

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In my first ever blog (not that long ago, but already it feels like a long time ago!) I created a list. We might call this a list of the tendencies that feminist killjoys share, or a list of points that feminist killjoys tend to make (if feminists have to sharpen our tools just to get through the walls of perception, no wonder we tend to be heard as sharp!).

I suggested that you might be interested in a blog on feminist killjoys if you *as a feminist killjoy* tend to do x. One of these tendencies relate to citation. Feminist killjoys “*will point out when men cite men about men as a learned social habit that is diminishing (ie. most or usual citational practice).*”

I am of course describing this feminist killjoy tendency in my own terms here. But so many of my feminist killjoy experiences within the academy relate to the politics of citation: I would describe citation as a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies.

These citational structures can form what we call disciplines. I was once asked to contribute to a sociology course, for example, and found that all the core readings were by male writers. I pointed this out and the course convener implied that “that” was simply a reflection of the history of the discipline. Well: this is a very selective history! The reproduction of a discipline can be the reproduction of *these techniques of selection*, ways of making certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline, and others not even part.

I have noticed as well that these citational practices can occur even when the topic is one that feminists have written extensively about. I recently attended a conference in which there was a panel on reproductive justice, a topic that feminists have written rather extensively about, and two of the three papers were entirely framed around the work of male philosophers! Or take the case of scholarship on the body. Feminists have been writing about the body (and critiquing mind-body dualisms) for well over a century. But how often have I heard utterances in which such-and-such male theorist is identified as the origin of the turn to the body!

Indeed men can even cite only men when critiquing male privilege, as we can see [here](#):

I also stated that this citational structure is “most or usual citational practice.” And I think within feminist and gender studies, the problem does not disappear. Even when feminists cite each other, there is still a tendency to frame our own work in relation to a male intellectual tradition. And there is certainly an expectation that you will recognise your place through giving your allegiance or love to this or that male theorist.

I mentioned this problem in my earlier blog post: [“Creating Feminist Paths”](#).

I have noticed when giving talks or hearing other female academics giving talks how often the first question is ‘how does what you are saying relate to such and such a male theorist?’ as a way of *slotting* you into an established male intellectual genealogy. I think it is hard to convey how this works in the abstract; but it’s a style of questioning (where you almost become “the but” of a rebuttable, *but* what about, *but* what about) and you learn to hear the trouble they have in hearing you.

We are not just talking about citation within academic contexts. We are talking about what I think of as *screening techniques*: how certain bodies take up spaces by screening out the existence of others. If you are screened out (by virtue of the body you have) then you simply do not even appear or register to others. You might even have to become insistent, wave your arms, even shout, just to appear. And then of course how you appear (as being insistent) means you still tend not to be heard.

When we think this question “who appears?” we are asked a question about how spaces are occupied by certain bodies who get so used to their occupation that they don’t even notice it. They are comfortable, like a body that sinks into a chair that has received its shape over time. To question who appears is to become the cause of discomfort. It is almost as if we have a duty not to notice who turns up and who doesn’t. Just noticing can get in the way of an occupation of space.

When I think back to my own experience as an academic many of my most uncomfortable moments have been as a result of asking this question: who appears? And: who does not appear? There was one conference on Australian feminism for example, when only white women were invited as speakers. Hey: I was used to this, you come to expect this, and I didn’t say anything. Whiteness is wearing.

But then many of those speakers began talking about native title. They did so without referring to any Indigenous scholars; indeed they were talking about native title almost entirely in relation to the European philosophical tradition (Derrida, Deleuze etc.) There was no discussion of the politics of that framing; no discussion of whiteness; or of what it means to speak from the position of occupying stolen land. When I

pointed this out, it caused quite an upset. It became very uncomfortable. And then a special issue of a journal was published (again with all or only white non-Indigenous feminists) and the introduction stressed how Australian feminism was “good” with questions of cultural difference. Up against it, you come up against it. The wall keeps its place so it is you that becomes sore.

I am obviously giving my own account here, told from my point of view. But I want in this blog to think *about* as well as *through* these situations.

I am sharing below some paragraphs from the conclusion of *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. I will develop these arguments in *Living a Feminist Life* and will blog more about the politics of citation as I go along.

When the restrictions governing who can occupy a category become explicit you are noticing what is around you, what gathers, but what does not ordinarily come into view. When you realise that the apparently open spaces of academic gatherings are restricted, you notice the restriction: you also notice how those restrictions are either kept out of view or defended if they come into view. Over and over again, it is revealed to me: this institutional lesson, which is also a life lesson, of coming up against a category *in the very attempt to make the restrictions more explicit*. How many times have I had male colleagues defending all male reading lists, all male speaker lists, all male reference lists! To give an account of these defences is to account for how worlds are reproduced.

An open call comes out for an academic event on power and resistance. A number of speakers are named on the call: all male speakers but one, all white speakers, but one (is this “but one,” a way of holding onto the “all”?). Some of us point out the restriction. A wall comes up in the very denial of a wall. We begin with a friendly openness. It’s an open call, they say. Come along, they say. Take our places, they even say. Note here how the gesture of inclusion, which is also a promise of inclusion, can be offered in a way that negates a point about exclusion. To suggest incorporation as potential (come along as you *can* come along) blocks an acknowledgement that the open call was restricted as a call. How to respond? We point out publicly that the publicity of the call suggests the event is not open. We didn’t mean anything by it, they say; it’s unfair to assume we did, they say. You have hurt our feelings; you have presumed knowledge of our intentions. That’s just who turned up. I respond: if privilege means going the way things are flowing, then letting things flow, will mean that’s who ends up going. The friendly tone ceases. You are the problem, they say. In assuming we have a problem, you are the problem.

It is not noticeable this “all” to those who pass through this “all” until you point it out, becoming a feminist killjoy, making sore points, assumed to be sore because of your points. I do not even usually bother to point out that the “all male” is often “all white,” though I could make that point, becoming an angry person of colour. Sometimes we have to take the risk of fulfilling the fantasies other people have of us! I should note as well that I have experienced the most defensive reactions to such points from white male academics who think of themselves as “critical.” When criticality becomes an ego ideal, it can participate in not seeing complicity. Perhaps criticality as an ego ideal offers a fantasy of being seeing. Critical whiteness might operate as a way of not seeing in the fantasy of being seeing: critical white subjects by seeing their whiteness, might *not* see themselves as participating in whiteness in the same way.

At one moment I express my fatigue at the repetition of these gatherings, where the all is hidden by the assumed generality of a particular (open to all often translating into all male, all white; or all but one). I express a sense of what is lost when academic gatherings are restricted to certain kinds of bodies. And someone replies that they thought I sounded “very 1980s,” and that they thought we had “got over” identity politics. Not only might we want to challenge the use of identity politics here as a form of political caricature, but we might want to think of this “over.” What does it mean to assume we have “got over” something? This claim might participate in a genre of argumentation I describe as “overing.” In assuming that we are over certain kinds of critique, they create the impression that we are over what is being critiqued. Feminist and anti-racist critique are heard as old-fashioned and out-dated, as based on identity categories that we are assumed to be over.

It is not always the case that “overing” arguments are made explicitly. I would say that in the landscape of contemporary critical theory there is a sense – sometimes spoken, sometimes not – that we need to “get beyond” categories like gender and race: as if the categories themselves have restricted our understanding; as if the categories themselves are the blockage points. Those who point out restrictions and blockages become identified with the restrictions and blockages they are pointing out, as if we are creating what we are describing. The hope invested in new terms (movement, becoming, assemblages, capacities) can thus be considered a way of “overing” as if these terms are how we “get over” the categories themselves. And in turn, academic work that works on questions of gender, or race, or which works with existing social categories (whether or not these categories are the starting points, and whether or not the categories are assumed in advance of starting), becomes associated with stasis.

An example of how categories are understood as “blockages of thought” is offered in the following statement [here](#):

those of us who want to build on struggles in a way that embraces and amplifies the capacity to act instead of storying every momentary gain as ‘cooptation,’ —no wonder there is still a lingering melancholia of the left in some corners!—or those who want to think beyond the narrow categorizations of gender race and class (and ableism, ageism, et cetera) to new configurations and alliances. I think *Hegel or Spinoza* provides a kind of metaphysics that helps us move beyond current blockages in thought.”

Here race, gender, and class (and all that is relegated to the bracket, as well as all that is pointed to by the et cetera) enter theoretical discourse as “narrow categorizations.” The implication is that to exercise such categories would be to restrict not only the “capacity to act” but our capacity to think that capacity. Category thinking becomes seen as a narrowing of vision, associated with a lingering melancholia, as what is holding us back, stopping us from moving on. Perhaps those who point to such categories are the ones who linger, who are stopping the forward movement we might attach to progression. This is how those who “stay behind” can get in the way of a forward progression. I am not saying here that we need to dismiss these new theoretical vocabularies: we need resources to think differently as we encounter worlds. I am suggesting that the hope invested in “new terms” can mean *turning away* from social restrictions and blockages by identifying restriction and blockages with the “old terms” that we need to move beyond. And indeed, we need to note the *narrowing* of the descriptive or analytic potential of the old terms is part of this narrative of overcoming; a caricature of the work done by these terms allows the terms to be as it were, “given up.”

We can also consider how the language of critique and how that language is also assumed to be dated. I think even within some feminist writing, the idea that we should be critical of sexism has indeed been seen as rather dated and even as a habit that is blocking us, holding us down, or keeping us back: stopping us from reading or engaging most positively and affirmatively and creatively with the texts that are the objects of critique. It would be timely to re-state the arguments that sexism and racism are not incidental but structural, and thus to understand sexism and racism, requires better, closer readings of what is being gathered. Attending to the restrictions in the apparently open spaces of a social world brings us into closer proximity to an actual world. We need feminist and anti-racist critique because we need to understand how it is that the world takes shape by restricting the forms in which we gather. We need this now; the time for this is now. We need this critique now, if we are to learn how not to reproduce what we inherit.

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