

## Statement of Research Interests

### Sara L. Puotinen

As a visiting scholar at the University of Minnesota, I am currently involved in further research on my dissertation topic. In my dissertation entitled, "Feminist Ethics and the Project of Democracy," I argued that feminists should develop and practice a radically democratic ethos. After briefly describing the democratic ethos, I raised the central question of my project: How can feminists develop and sustain this democratic ethos? Taking an ethical perspective, I framed my exploration of this question in terms of character and virtue, arguing that feminists are able to develop and sustain a radically democratic ethos by looking to role models who embody the role of the virtuous and effective resisting feminists (chapter two) and by drawing upon alliance communities who nurture and train them in their efforts to engage in the adoption and continued practice of the democratic ethos (chapter three). I also argued that feminists' ability to adopt a democratic ethos is predicated on their willingness to participate in the difficult and exhausting labor of critically and creatively engaging with the differences that exist between them and other feminists (chapter four). While in residence at the University of Minnesota (2006-2008), I am building upon the feminist virtue ethics that I began in my dissertation, by exploring two important virtues that feminists need in order to create and sustain that democratic ethos: troublemaking and truth telling.

I envision three key areas for my future research, all of which build upon my dissertation and my research as a visiting scholar at the University of Minnesota. First, I am interested in continuing my exploration of the virtues and how these virtues are connected to feminist theoretical activism. Second, I hope to develop a richer notion of the livable life and how it informs feminists' practicing of the virtues, especially the practice of truth telling, by exploring how the livable life is denied to women diagnosed and living with cancer. Third, I plan to complete my manuscript on feminist role models and their importance for the development and promotion of a feminist virtue ethics.

### **1. The Virtues**

Chapter four of my dissertation offered a brief description of four virtues—(1) flexibility, (2) vigilance, (3) courage and (4) vision—and argued that the practice of these four virtues enabled feminists to develop and sustain a radically democratic ethos. At the University of Minnesota, I have added two more virtues to that list: trouble-making and truth telling. In my future research, I wish to explore how these virtues are connected to feminist theoretical activism. Starting with the virtue of truth-telling, I will closely examine Foucault and his notion of parhelia and assess how his understanding does or does not fit with the truth telling through storytelling that some feminists practice (such as Dorothy Allison and Trinh T. Minh-ha). Then, I want to examine how all the virtues are developed under constraint and shaped by the ways in which women live and work within a system that oppresses them. I am interested in examining Lisa Tessman's new book, *Burdened Virtues*, as a starting point for this investigation. Third and finally, I want to investigate how these virtues function within specific contexts both nationally and transnationally.

### **2. The Livable Life**

In my dissertation, I was concerned with two key questions: (1) How do we make ourselves into virtuous selves who can effectively practice the feminist democratic ethos? and (2) What resources do we have for becoming such a self? In my current research, I am also interested in the overarching questions: (1) What motivates the feminist democratic ethos? and (2) What are feminists attempting to achieve when they develop and adopt the democratic ethos? Within virtue ethics, these questions are most frequently answered by appealing to the good life. While I do not wish to deny the importance of thinking about the good life, I believe that a feminist democratic ethos is more concerned with the livable life, that is, with survival and being granted the status of a legitimate and valuable self/subject.

I plan to work on developing a richer notion of the livable life and examining both how it differs from the good life and how it informs a feminist democratic ethos. First, I will start this work by looking to Judith Butler and her description of the livable life in *Undoing Gender* and to Black Feminist pragmatists and their emphasis on status and acknowledgement (Toni Morrison, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks). Then, I will compare their understandings of the livable life with virtue ethicists' understanding of the good life. Next, I will explore the question of dignity and the livable life for women diagnosed with cancer. Drawing upon theoretical texts used in my dissertation and new research on women's cancer memoirs and dis/ability studies, this research will be used to support my production of a documentary video on my mother's diagnosis and her experiences of living with pancreatic cancer.

### 3. The Role Models

In the second chapter of my dissertation, I explored what role models are possible for feminists as they attempt to engage in the democratic ethos. Currently, I am working on a manuscript in which I further explore how these role models function as non-ideal models for feminists. In this manuscript, entitled, "Moral Saints or Sinners? The Troublemaker, Outlaw and Storyteller as Feminist Role Models," I argue that the troublemaker, the outlaw, and the storyteller serve as effective examples of the resisting feminist, enabling individuals to believe that it is possible to survive and thrive within the difficult and uncertain process of practicing feminism. They also serve as moral leaders, guiding individuals as those individuals attempt to sustain their own ethical and political projects. But, while these figures are role models and moral leaders, they are not moral saints who embody pure virtuous behavior or who always exemplify successful resistance. They may serve as examples of the effective resisting feminist, proving that she does and can exist, but they do not always serve as ideal examples of *how* we should resist. In my essay I argue that the troublemaker, outlaw and storyteller function as non-ideal role models/moral leaders for feminism in three ways: (1) Because they operate from within a system that oppresses them, their emphasis is not always on how one *should* live but on how one *can* survive. (2) Their resistance practices are shaped by their concrete and specific experiences of that oppression and, as such, are not universally applicable or effective. (3) And, through their very practices, they subvert the idea(l) of the morally good and virtuous person.