

CHAPTER ONE AN INTRODUCTION

Currently, feminist intellectuals are undergoing a crisis that threatens to overwhelm them and their ability to act effectively.¹ This crisis is largely the result of three significant losses: (1) loss of vitality and critical edge, (2) loss of direction and purpose and (3) loss of cohesiveness and connection. In this introductory chapter, I begin by detailing this crisis in its three forms and the impact of it on feminism and its future as an effective and relevant movement for the twenty-first century. Then, I argue that if feminism is to recover from this crisis, it must develop and practice a radically democratic ethos. Finally, after briefly describing what is meant by democracy and democratic ethos, I introduce the central question of this dissertation: How can feminists develop and sustain a radically democratic ethos?

THE FEMINIST CRISIS

The feminist crisis is due to three losses. The first loss, that of vitality and critical edge, is not exclusively felt by feminist intellectuals, but is part of a larger threat posed to all members of leftist-leaning social movements who work for justice and social transformation. In the post-September 11 world, there is a widespread hostility towards

¹ I use the term “feminist intellectual” rather broadly in this dissertation. As opposed to feminist academic, feminist intellectual includes feminists both inside and outside of the academy whose intellectual labors contribute to the resistance and transformation of a wide range of communities.

leftist intellectuals and their expressions of critical and dissenting speech.² This hostility is pervasive, affecting any scholars/activists/citizens who challenge the status quo and those who are in power. Describing the hostility as an “escalating authoritarianism,” Cornel West writes that since 9/11 there has been an “increasing monitoring of viewpoints [and] disrespecting of those with whom one disagrees” (2004, 7).³ This “tightening of surveillance” has not only led to the silencing of those who speak out but has resulted in the punishing of those dissenters by labeling them as traitorous, immoral or unpatriotic and by stripping them of their cultural capital (Bourdieu) and their ability to be recognized as viable and legitimate subjects/scholars.⁴

In the case of academic intellectuals, the simultaneous silencing and stripping of power has come in many forms, including denying tenure to those who speak out, forcing them to resign their leadership roles within the academy and “blacklisting” them as troublemakers.⁵ Beyond any specific example of punishment, this anti-intellectualism and anti-critical thinking has created a climate of fear, a fear of thinking, a fear of speaking

² In describing this crisis, I am thinking particularly of the U.S. context and the impact of this hostility on those intellectuals living and working in the United States.

³ In addition to escalating authoritarianism, Cornell West discusses two other recent trends that are damaging to the deep tradition of democracy in the United States in his 2004 book *Democracy Matters: free-market fundamentalism and aggressive militarism*.

⁴ The term cultural capital comes from Pierre Bourdieu. In terms of being recognized as a viable subject, Butler writes: “To charge those who voice critical views with treason, terrorist-sympathizing, anti-Semitism, moral relativism, postmodernism, juvenile behavior, collaboration, anachronistic Leftism, is to seek to destroy the credibility not of the views that are held, but of the persons who hold them. It produces the climate of fear in which to voice a certain view is to risk being branded and shamed with a heinous appellation” (2004, xix).

⁵ As I wrote an early draft of this chapter in January 2005, a professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of Colorado, Ward Churchill, was stripped of his chairmanship and prevented from speaking at several other universities around the country because of the critical remarks he made about U.S. foreign policy.

out and a fear of being relegated to the status of non-subject, as one who is not taken seriously and whose voice and ideas are not counted.

For feminist intellectuals, particularly but not exclusively those with the least amount of power within hegemonic (white, middle/upper class, western, heterosexual) feminism and within the academy, being silenced and/or punished for critically speaking out is nothing new. What makes the current hostility towards critical thinking and critical speech particularly troubling for feminists is that it comes at a time when they are making (albeit moderate) gains within the academy, when they have been heard and have made a difference in social, cultural and political policies, and when they have acquired some amount of authority. The pervasive climate of hostility towards any and all forms of dissent represents a reversal in many of those gains.

Additionally, this pervasive attitude is troubling because it does not merely represent an attempt to silence and punish specific undesirable voices or groups of voices. The current hostility towards critical thinking is an attack on the very act of critical speech and dissent itself. It is an attempt to devalue and erase the practices of critical thinking altogether, practices which help to invigorate politics and political movements like feminism. Because feminism is founded on the goals of coming to voice and critically challenging dominant and oppressive systems and because it gains its strength and energy through these critical practices, the suppression of critical thinking and critical speech is a serious threat to its vitality.

But anti-intellectualism and “escalating authoritarianism” are not the only reasons for the loss of vitality and critical edge within feminism. While these external threats

have had a significantly negative effect on feminist intellectuals and their critical practices, internal threats have also weakened the movement. Within mainstream feminism, stability is privileged over vitality. Many feminists believe that feminism's strength and effectiveness comes from its solid and secure foundations, foundations that are rooted in a shared sense of identity and purpose and that necessarily exist prior to any theorizing about or practicing of feminist politics.⁶ When these feminists do have disagreements over what feminism is or should be, the differences that those disagreements produce are understood to be ultimately superficial and are smoothed over or ignored in favor of presenting a united front to those both inside and outside of the movement.⁷

Feminists are reluctant to take the differences of others seriously. They are unwilling to let those differences invigorate the movement and help shape feminist practices and policies in more democratic ways. And, as a result, they are unable to participate in the collective process of critically exploring and debating each other's ideas. Because of this disengagement from difference, the vitality of feminism, which comes from the creative energy that is generated when feminists engage with the multiple differences between them, has been lost.

⁶ Since its resurgence in the 1960s, feminism has most frequently functioned as an identity politics, one in which a singular identity, that of "woman" has served as the stable (and assumed) foundation of feminism. As many critics of identity politics have argued, an emphasis on stable and pre-existing identity can come at the expense of critically thinking through how identity has been formed and at whose expense. For more on this critique, see Butler (1990) and (1993).

⁷ In believing that they are only superficial, feminists are not suggesting that differences are unimportant within the movement. Instead, they are suggesting that ultimately, beneath all of the differences, a common connection/cause/identity/essence drives feminism.

In addition to losing vitality, feminists have also lost much of their critical edge and their ability to critically question the limits of their own work and the work of others within feminism. They are afraid of how internal critique could weaken the effectiveness of their theories and goals. And they are afraid that if they devote too much energy and time to critically questioning those theories and goals that they will never be able to practice feminism.⁸

Without the ability (or the desire) to practice internal and self-critique, feminists cannot properly deal with the complicated and complicitous relationship that they have with the system that they are attempting to transform. It is not the case that feminists are able to easily and innocently step outside of the dominant system. Unwittingly they can perpetuate its ideologies.⁹ It is also not the case that feminists have full control over the theoretical and political claims that they make on behalf of feminism. Nor can they predict the future effects of those claims.¹⁰ For these reasons, feminists need to remain critical of their own theories and actions, to be attentive to the ways in which their claims

⁸ This fear of spending too much time thinking (and critiquing) and not enough time acting speaks to a major divide within feminism concerning theory versus practice. For more on this divide see Hanssen (2000).

⁹ For more on this, see Butler and her discussion the identity “woman” and the ways in which it perpetuates dominate (heterosexist) ideologies (1990, 1993).

¹⁰ For example, Judith Butler discusses the unpredictability of making political claims in *Bodies That Matter*. Discussing the ambiguity of claiming the identity “queer,” she writes: “As expansive as the term ‘queer’ is meant to be, it is used in ways that enforce a set of overlapping divisions: in some contexts, the term appeals to a younger generation who want to resist the more institutionalized and reformist politics sometimes signified by ‘lesbian and gay’; in some contexts, sometimes that same, it has marked a predominantly white movement that has not fully addressed the way in which ‘queer’ plays—or fails to play—within non-white communities; and whereas in some instances it has mobilized a lesbian activism, in others the term represents a false unity of women and men” (228).

can reinforce dangerous ideologies and to be willing to let go of those claims when they become damaging to others or when they lose their potency.

The second loss that feminists are experiencing is that of direction and purpose. Uncertainty and disorientation threaten to overwhelm them as they engage in political and theoretical practices within postmodern feminism. This uncertainty and disorientation is largely due to the highly critical and troubling relationship that they share with modernity and its master narratives about who practices feminism (the autonomous Subject), how they practice it (by appealing to Universal and certain truths) and what kind of future they imagine for it (a steady and singular progress towards eliminating oppression).¹¹

The modern subject of feminism requires fixed boundaries and easily identifiable interests and identities (Brown 2001, 10). The modern practice of feminism relies on feminists' ability to confidently and reliably assess the world and develop clear, effective and correct plans for how to transform it. And, the modern vision of the future of feminism is based on the understanding that feminist actions involve a steady and purposeful progress towards a better world.

Through critical challenges to these narratives, feminists have demonstrated that they do not work for feminism. First, feminists do not function as fully autonomous

¹¹ In *Politics Out of History*, Wendy Brown discusses the troubling relationship that exists between modernity and its master narratives and new social movements such as feminism. She writes: "we have ceased to believe in many of the constitutive premises undergirding modern personhood, statehood, and constitutions, yet we continue to operate politically as if these premises still held, and as if the political-cultural narratives based on them were intact. Our attachment to these fundamental modernist precepts... would seem to resemble the epistemological structure of the fetish as Freud described it: 'I know, but still...'" (2001, 4).

subjects. They do not have fixed boundaries with easily identifiable interests and identities. Instead, they are fluid subjects, with multiple and overlapping identities, who sometimes have conflicting allegiances.¹² In promoting fully fixed (and rigid) boundaries within and among individuals or groups, feminists frequently fail to consider how those boundaries bleed into each other and produce complicated and messy relationships within and among feminists and between feminists and members of other social movements.

On the one hand, these complicated relationships make it difficult (albeit not impossible) to clearly and completely distinguish between feminism and other movements. For, while feminism does have its own agenda and interests, it is not a movement that exists wholly apart from other new social movements. The goals—and critical theories and practices for achieving those goals—of feminism are very much connected to and implicated in other movements to end oppression.

On the other hand, these complicated relationships make it difficult to clearly and completely define what (or who) feminism is or should be. Indeed, feminism is a movement that is made up of relational subjects who claim more than the identity “feminist” and who are invested in ending oppression in a wide variety of ways.¹³ Moreover, the identity “feminist” that these individual subjects claim can take on a

¹² These allegiances primarily come into conflict when individuals are expected to choose between their identities or ideals, privileging one over the others. See Boyce Davies for an excellent discussion of how Black women have often been forced to choose between their allegiances to other women and to other blacks (1994).

¹³ Take, for example, two of the feminists I will discuss in this dissertation. While committed to the goals of feminism, Butler is also heavily invested in queer politics and the gay and lesbian movement. Bell hooks not only speaks to feminist communities but also to black communities.

number of different meanings depending on who is doing the claiming and from where they are making their claims.

Second, it is not the case that feminists can confidently and reliably assess the world and develop clear, effective and correct plans for how to transform it. Feminists have not had the ability to confidently and reliably know how the world is or should be because their perspectives have been limited and their knowledge has been inextricably tied to the dominant system that they are challenging and attempting to transform. Nor have they been able to develop plans that effectively and fully dismantle that dominant system. Multiple accounts of feminism's history are filled with evidence of how feminists have been misguided or wrong about what feminism's goals should be, who should count as a feminist and how the patriarchy operates. Additionally, the dominant system has not weakened. Instead, it has gained strength, becoming more pervasive and far-reaching in its control.

Third and connected to this last point, past feminist visions of a less oppressive and more just future have not been realized. While feminists have made some advances in their struggles to eliminate oppressive systems, these advances have not enabled them to get much closer to reaching their goals.¹⁴ As feminists face increasingly complicated and intertwined expressions of oppression, the promise of a better future (more inclusive, less oppressive) seems beyond their reach.

¹⁴ For example, as the feminist movement gains more acceptance within the global (academic) marketplace, its ideas and theories are frequently appropriated and increasingly reduced to snappy slogans and sound bites. In effect, the movement has become a "freemarket feminism," one in which feminist ideas and ideals are commodified and exchanged (Alexander/Mohanty 1997, xv).

In rejecting the master narratives of modernity, feminists have not developed any alternative ways for guiding feminists' practices. And without these guiding narratives, feminists are left with no guarantees of a better future, no absolute truth to refer to, no ability to operate outside of power and no sure vision of what feminist agendas should be. The uncertainty and disorientation that this loss of guiding narratives causes makes many feminists anxious about feminism's future(s) and the possibility of changing the present. With no clear path for the future (or the present for that matter), these feminists feel as if they have lost their way; they have no direction on how to proceed. This uncertainty and disorientation also makes them anxious about what could motivate and sustain their feminist practices and how they can fight the hopelessness that threatens to overwhelm them and their projects. With no guarantees for success, these feminists struggle to find and maintain a purpose for the feminist movement and their actions within it.

The final loss that feminists are currently experiencing is the loss of cohesiveness and connection. As feminists have become increasingly aware of the differences between them, many have lost faith in feminism's ability to be a strong and unified movement.¹⁵ They believe that unless the differences that exist within feminism are reconciled, they will serve only to divide the movement, making it almost impossible to develop a cohesive and compelling understanding of what feminism is or should be. For these feminists, primarily but not exclusively those within mainstream feminism, differences

¹⁵ Most historical accounts of feminism suggest that differences between feminists only became a problem in the 1970s and 1980s when feminists of color and lesbian feminists challenged the notion of "woman" and its unproblematic role as the foundation of the movement. However, differences over what and who feminism (or the women's movement) is or should be have existed since the beginning of any political organizing by women against oppression. And, from the beginning, many feminists have critically challenged feminism's attempts to erase or ignore those differences. See Jakobsen (1998, 58-97).

over the goals of feminism and over who gets counted as a feminist can be useful for producing a richly diverse movement. But if left unresolved, they threaten to prevent feminism from making any real contribution to the fight against oppression.

In short, many feminists feel overwhelmed by the wide range of possibilities for what it means to be a feminist or do feminist work and are unequipped to deal with how to negotiate between these multiple possibilities. They understand difference only in terms of how it divides us as feminists instead of the ways it might invigorate our politics and our theorizing about how to work for better, more democratic futures.¹⁶

Even when these feminists attempt to acknowledge and work with and through differences between themselves and other feminists, they do so in a way that is meant to contain those differences—to make them more manageable and less complicated—instead of seriously engaging with them.¹⁷ Adopting "liberal-pluralist multiculturalism,"¹⁸ they treat different experiences and understandings of feminism (such as differences based on race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, able-bodiedness, age, geo-political positioning) as items to be added to an ever-growing list.¹⁹

¹⁶ Audre Lorde discusses this treatment of difference in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," writing, "we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change." She believes that we must transform our understanding of difference from "divide and conquer" to "define and empower" (112).

¹⁷ In the introduction of *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, Janet Jakobsen discusses the disarticulation of diversity from complexity and the ways in which feminists have attempted to flatten and contain that diversity.

¹⁸ For more on "liberal-pluralist multiculturalism" see Mohanty and Alexander, particularly the introduction in which the authors introduce the term (Alexander/Mohanty 1997, xvi-xvii).

¹⁹ Judith Butler discusses this idea of a list in both *Gender Trouble* (143) and *Bodies That Matter* (116-117).

This approach to difference has troubling consequences for feminism and has contributed to its loss of coherence and connection. When feminists attempt to incorporate diversity into the movement by simply adding more and more items to a list of what defines feminism, they end up producing a definition that is very long and unruly. With so many items to include in their definition, it becomes difficult to succinctly (and easily) express what feminism is.²⁰ And, when feminists only treat the differences between themselves and other feminists as separate items to be added on to some all-encompassing list, they fail to see the relationships between those differences and the possible connections and deeper meanings that those relationships can provide for feminists. They also fail to see the underlying structures of power that exist between these differences and the ways in which certain types of differences are privileged over others or created at the expense of those others.

In assessing the impact of difference on feminism, the problem is not with difference itself but with how that difference is treated. Or, rather, how that difference is not treated. As Audre Lorde suggests in *Sister Outsider*: “Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences...” (114). When confronted with the fact that feminism is a complexly diverse movement made up of a wide range of women (and men) from very different backgrounds and with very different

²⁰ Moreover, the task of completing that list is never done. Invariably some new set of experiences or understandings of feminism will need to be added. As Butler writes in her conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, “The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed “etc.” at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete” (143).

understandings of feminism and its goals, some feminists are unwilling to participate in the difficult work of actively engaging with those differences.

This active engagement requires that feminists not only acknowledge that differences exist, but critically examine those differences and allow those differences to influence and transform them and their understandings and practices within feminist theory and politics. Instead of an active engagement with these differences, many feminists only participate in a “noninteractive acknowledgement” of them.²¹ They do not incorporate them into their practices or theories, but consider them only in token or superficial ways.²² Because of this noninteractive acknowledgment, many feminists are unable to connect in meaningful ways to other feminists who have conflicting visions of feminism and its goals. And, as a result, feminism has lost much of its cohesiveness and connection, becoming a movement that is divided over difference.

In light of these three losses, how can feminism recover? How can it be an energetic and relevant movement when it lacks vitality and a critical edge? How can it be a motivated and effective movement when it lacks direction and purpose? And, how can it be a compelling and meaningful movement when it lacks cohesiveness and connection? My dissertation begins with these questions and argues that in order for feminism to

²¹ In “On the Logic of Pluralistic Feminism,” Maria Lugones describes the problem of difference within feminism as one in which white feminists only offer a non-interactive acknowledgement of the differences between themselves and other feminists. She writes: “As white women are beginning to acknowledge the problem [of difference] in their theorizing, it is interesting to see that the acknowledgment is a noninteractive one...” (2003, 68).

²² As Mohanty and Alexander suggest, the “non-interactive acknowledgment” is exemplified on the women’s studies syllabus when only “a week or two” is spent on the work of “women of color” and only in relation to the specific experiences of those women. For Mohanty and Alexander, this token inclusion “without reconceptualizing the whole white, middle-class, gendered knowledge base effectively absorbs and silences” those women of color (1997, xvii).

recover from these losses, feminists must recreate feminism in terms of democracy. Indeed, all three of these losses speak to the “waning of democratic energies and practices” within feminism (West 2004, 2).²³ If feminism is to recover and to become a successful and relevant movement within the twenty-first century, it must rebuild its practices and goals by developing a democratic ethos.

RECOVERING FEMINISM

For many feminists, the future of feminism is dependent on our ability to rebuild feminist practices and goals through the framework of a radically democratic ethos.²⁴ This radically democratic ethos is one in which pluralism and the irreducibility of differences between and among feminists is encouraged. And it is one in which the questioning of feminism’s key terms and the critical debate and creative experimentation that this questioning generates is emphasized. Fundamental to this democratic approach is the idea that differences and conflicts are not to be prematurely resolved for the sake of a stable and unified feminist movement.

The feminist democratic ethos helps to recover the *vitality and critical edge* of feminism by encouraging feminists to critically and creatively engage with differences and conflict in order to keep the movement vital and relevant for the twenty-first century.

²³ Cornel West discusses the deterioration of the deep democratic tradition within American politics in his recent book, *Democracy Matters*.

²⁴ For more, see Bickford (1996), Brown (1995, 2001), Butler (2004a, 2004b), Fraser (1997), Jakobsen (1998), Laclau/Mouffe (1985), Welch (1999) and Ziarek (2001).

To recover feminism's *direction and purpose*, the feminist democratic ethos suggests that this critical and creative engagement is explicitly linked to and motivated by a political, spiritual and material need for social transformation and social/political/economic justice. Feminist democrats work with the differences and conflicts between themselves in order to develop strategies for achieving less violent and oppressive futures. Through this process, they are able to forge deep and sustainable alliances that help to recover feminism's *cohesiveness and connection*. These alliances are based on engaging with differences and conflicts instead of dismissing or ignoring them.

a. Recovering feminism's vitality and critical edge

As a democratic enterprise, feminism has had to forfeit the presumption that at base we can all agree about some things or, more equivalently, to embrace the notion that each of our most treasured values are under contestation and that they will remain contested zones of politics.

—Judith Butler

One central theme within the feminist radically democratic ethos is the idea that conflict and tension are valuable and inevitable parts of feminism and its projects. As Butler suggests in the above quotation, feminists are unable to come to a consensus about many issues within the movement. Because they have many different perspectives that are rooted in different histories, traditions and cultures and because they experience oppression in many different ways, feminists often find it difficult to agree on what feminism is and what its agenda should be. Questions about who counts as a feminist, what a feminist issue is or what feminism's relationship to other movements should be

frequently dominate feminists' thinking and theorizing about feminism's future as a relevant and effective movement for the twenty-first century.

Instead of lamenting these conflicts and tensions as weakening the movement, when we embrace a radically democratic ethos, we can learn to see them as potential sources for social transformation and democratic energy. First, by allowing tensions and conflicts to continue to exist between feminists instead of attempting to reconcile them into one unitary principle, we are afforded a wide range of real alternatives for how to envision and practice feminist politics. This wide range of alternatives not only ensures that feminism remains a pluralistic and democratic movement, but it enables us to approach the problem of oppression and injustice from a number of different angles.

In their highly influential book on radical democracy entitled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue that tension, which they describe as “antagonism,” contributes to the transformation and revitalization of the democratic project within new social movements (such as feminism) on the Left. This tension ensures that different movements are never reduced to one principle and, in so doing, guarantees that the Left is not a totalitarian but a democratic system, one in which the interests and beliefs of all groups that identify under “the Left,” not just those of any one particular group, are recognized and valued.²⁵

²⁵ According to Laclau and Mouffe, this valuing of different beliefs is necessary because, within traditional Marxist thought, the working class was privileged as *the* site of struggle for socialist change. As an increasing number of new social movements developed, they were subsumed under the struggle of the working class, either as existing at the margins of the true struggle of the workers or as revolutionary substitutes for an already integrated working class (1985, 87). In this sense, unity and consensus (universal) were always produced at the expense of the plurality of individual movements and their very different methods and goals (particulars).

For Laclau and Mouffe, tension and conflict within new social movements like feminism represent a “new stage in the deepening of the democratic project” (xv). This stage is one in which key strategies/theories/methodologies for resistance and transformation are distributed among a plurality of movements and groups within those movements, each of which offers a different, yet equally important, way in which to resist and transform the system.

Second, in addition to providing us with multiple alternatives, internal conflicts and tensions help to restore and revitalize our democratic energy. When we recognize and embrace the fact that these conflicts and tensions cannot be reconciled—that differences do and will continue to exist within feminism and that we, as feminists, will continue to clash over our theories and projects—we are able to leave the practice of democratic feminism open to take on new and potentially more effective meanings in the future. Indeed, the project of feminist democracy must fundamentally be an open-ended one in which all feminists, in order to ensure that feminist democracy remains democratic instead of becoming totalitarian or authoritarian, are willing to submit their claims and theories (and the theories of others) to a collective process of critical and creative questioning, debate and experimental revision.

Because it an open-ended project, feminist democracy is necessarily uncertain and ultimately unrealizable. In their practice of a radically democratic ethos, feminists do not have total control over the claims that they make or the projects that they promote, nor can they securely predict that those projects will be successful. According to Judith Butler, this uncertainty and unpredictability results in a politics of hope and anxiety, “one

in which the key terms of its operation are not fully secured in advance [and] one that assumes a futural form for politics that cannot be fully anticipated...” (1997, 161).

The openness that feminist democracy requires should not be understood as an empty space, produced by feminism’s failure to reconcile its conflicts and tensions and resulting in a politics void of any kind of meaning or agenda. Nor should openness be understood as a crowded space overflowing with an ever-increasing number of feminist agendas. Instead, openness is a space of democratic energy where feminists can be critical of their claims yet still assert them. And it is a space where feminists “can speak of [their] uncertainties about what are or should be feminist agendas, rather than assuming that such uncertainty necessarily involves a loss or failure of collectivity” (Ahmed et al 2001, 12-13).

Third and finally, in focusing on the tensions and conflicts within feminism as important sources of democratic energy and social transformation, feminists are able to learn how to be more effective in their critical explorations of their own projects and the projects of others. A primary task of the feminist democratic project is to train feminists *how* to engage in debates and experimentation, that is, “how best to have them, how most productively to stage them, and how to act in ways that acknowledge the irreversible complexity of who we are” (Butler 2004c, 176). Through their adoption and practice of a feminist democratic ethos, feminists can learn how to deal with the difficulty, uncertainty and vulnerability that necessarily accompany practices of self-critique and debate.

b. Recovering feminism’s direction and purpose

People are moved to do all kinds of things when they genuinely care. Ideas that engage this deep love, caring and commitment can energize people and move them to struggle...

—Patricia Hill Collins

The prime task of democratic politics is not, as deliberative democrats argue, to eliminate passions or to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere. It is to mobilize those passions toward democratic designs.

—Chantal Mouffe

A second central theme within a feminist radically democratic ethos is the idea that the democratic process of critically and creatively engaging with the tensions and conflicts within feminism is explicitly linked to and motivated by a political, spiritual and material need for social transformation and justice. While critique and contestation are essential to the practice of a radically democratic feminism, they are not ends in themselves; we must not be critical of ourselves and others merely for the sake of disrupting or destabilizing each other's theories or agendas.²⁶ Instead, our critical practices should be motivated and guided by a feminist political consciousness, one in which we are critically aware of the various forms of injustice due to "socioeconomic, ideological, cultural, and psychic hierarchies of rule (like those of class, gender, race, sexuality, and nation" (Alexander/Mohanty 1997, xxviii), and by an urgent need for social transformation and justice.

Within a radically democratic feminism, the political, spiritual and material need for social transformation and justice is not connected to any one specific agenda or course

²⁶ See Collins (1999, 124-154) for a powerful critique of deconstruction as a methodology/practice that understands disruption and destabilization as ends in themselves. See also Smith (1997, 13) and her critique of French feminism as another type of practice that envisions disruption as an end in itself.

of action. Instead, it is connected to a deep passion that can inspire and drive all of our practices. This passion is born out of love, caring and commitment for ourselves and others and out of moral outrage and anger over the daily injustices many of us experience. When we embrace a feminist democratic ethic, we can learn how to translate and transform these passions into sustained and committed resistance to oppressive institutions.

First, the passion that drives a feminist democratic ethos comes from a deep love for self, community and the world. This passion is propelled by our need to “throw off the conditioning of being despised” and reject the climate of hate in which we have been raised in order to “see ourselves as human, flawed, and extraordinary. All of us—extraordinary” (Allison 1994, 36). And it is motivated by our desire to foster an “intense connectedness” within our various communities and to seek to care for (and about) others.²⁷ “This intense connectedness,” when linked with specific democratic strategies and a feminist democratic consciousness, “can foster a revolutionary politics” (Collins 1997, 2000).

Second, the passion that drives a feminist democratic ethos comes from the intense anger and rage that we feel as a result of our various experiences of oppression and injustice.²⁸ This passion is incited by “those moments of rage and resentment so

²⁷ In *Fighting Words*, Collins illustrates this passion through her discussion of the “actively struggled-for, passionate love ethic” that her mother and other women on her block practiced and promoted. Through this love ethic, these women were able to inspire, encourage and care for their daughters in ways that “no one else did and as no one else could” (Collins 1997, 200).

²⁸ Anger and rage is experienced by feminists in many ways and to many different degrees. Both Lorde and Lugones discuss anger in relation to racism within feminism and to the unacknowledged privilege of white feminists. See Lorde (1984, 124-133) and Lugones (2003, 103-118).

intense” that we are compelled to act, to respond, to resist (hooks 1990, 15).²⁹ These moments, if we are able to hold onto them, can be converted into powerful expressions, theories and projects of resistance and transformation. As Audre Lorde suggests in *Sister Outsider*, “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy [passion] serving progress and change” (127). When we adopt and practice a feminist democratic ethos, we can learn how to focus our anger and how to generate a passionate energy that results in effective and powerful strategies for social transformation.

In helping us to focus our passion for justice and social transformation, a feminist democratic ethos does not provide us with a singular path for how to proceed in our feminist political projects. Nor does it guarantee that those projects will succeed. However, in promoting (instead of discouraging) the value of passion within democratic feminism, it provides us with guidance and meaning by encouraging us to develop and practice projects that compel us to act and that move us to struggle.

c. Recovering feminism’s cohesiveness and connection

Relativism is not necessarily a situation of criterialess indeterminism, but rather can be seen as a situation in which diverse persons and groups, their norms and values, are *related* to each other in complex ways.

—Janet Jakobsen

²⁹ For more on the significance of rage in hooks’ work, see hooks (1995).

In place of relativism, [a] critical application of feminist praxis in global contexts would substitute responsibility, accountability, engagement, and solidarity.

—M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty

A third central theme within a feminist radically democratic ethos is the idea that through the collective process of critically questioning, debating and experimenting with difference, feminists can begin to discern the complex relationships that exist between them and, in so doing, forge deep and sustainable connections. Adopting and practicing a democratic ethos makes these connections possible in several different ways.

First, within feminist democracy, feminists are required to engage with difference in a number of ways. In contrast to the practice of “liberal-pluralist multiculturalism” in which difference is only understood in a simplistic way as a discrete unit and commodity of exchange, the practice of a radically democratic feminism requires that feminists think about difference in a complex way, existing in a multiplicity of forms. Feminists who adopt a democratic ethos learn to not uncritically embrace or celebrate difference for the sake of difference, but to critically engage with it, exploring ways to distinguish between those differences that can energize us and those that can divide us and developing strategies for addressing and negotiating between difference in its many forms.

In *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, Janet Jakobsen offers “four analytically distinct but interrelated sites” of difference: (1) diversity among, (2) diversity within, (3) différence and (4) diversity between. *Diversity among* refers to those differences that distinguish us, as feminist individuals or groups, from others and that enable us to claim specific and unique identities. These differences are based on varied

social, political and cultural positions within the system. *Diversity within* refers to feminism's own multiple, intersecting and diverse experiences of race, class, gender or other such categories. It indicates that feminism is made up of a wide range of different experiences of feminism. These differences occur within the feminism group, between different feminists, and within the feminist individual, between her different and sometimes competing identities. *Différance* refers to Derrida and his notion of the excessive remainder that the failure to fully identify with any category of difference necessarily creates. This type of difference reflects the ways in which none of us are able to fully fit into the categories of identity we claim or are assigned. For example, while most of us, as feminists, would claim the identity "woman," none of us can fully inhabit that identity because we "cannot be all of the possibilities of what it might mean to be a woman, and what it means to be a woman cannot articulate all that we are" (Jakobsen 1998, 6). Finally, *diversity between* refers to the "spaces of limit and possibility"—the messy interstices—that the excessive remainder produces (12-13). It is in these spaces of difference, spaces between fixed and rigid identities (such as "woman") and units of difference (such as "gender" or "race"), that we learn to negotiate new relationships and connections.

In promoting a simplistic notion of difference, feminists fail to see varied ways in which difference gets played out within communities and among individuals; they see difference as only existing between discrete individuals or groups with unique and specific identities. However, in adopting a radically democratic ethos, feminists learn

how to critically and creatively engage with difference on all of four of the levels identified by Jakobsen.

Second, in a feminist democratic ethos, feminists are encouraged to shift their focus on differences within feminism from relativism to relationships. One of the key concerns that many feminists have with accepting feminism as a movement made up of different interpretations, agendas, perspectives and experiences is that they believe that such an acceptance will produce an uncontrollable relativism. As the number of meanings for what and who feminism is continues to increase, they believe that feminists will be unable to find points of connection or commonality. And with too many meanings, feminism will become a movement that is meaningless and perpetually divided.

However, if we shift away from merely increasing the number of meanings that we assign to feminism and shift towards examining the larger structures and forces that bring those different meanings into existence, we can begin to see and/or cultivate underlying relationships that exist between those meanings. We can see, for example, how the distinctions that we make between “first world feminism” and “third world feminism” are not as simple as we once thought and that they are dependent on and constructed through each other in ways we may never have anticipated.³⁰ This shift enables us to focus our theoretical and activist energy on learning how to engage with others who have very different perspectives and experiences, how to be responsible and accountable to those others and how to rework ourselves and our feminist claims in order

³⁰ For more on how first world understandings of feminism are developed at the expense of the identity “third world woman,” see Mohanty (1991).

to forge feminist alliances that are based on difference instead of similarity. In adopting a feminist democratic ethos, we come to understand feminism as a movement connected and made cohesive through action *and* interaction instead of assumed and pre-given identities. And we learn how to participate in the difficult and democratic labor of engaging with our multiple differences, not by reconciling them but by reworking them in ways that potentially transform all of our understandings and experiences of feminism.

FEMINIST DEMOCRACY DEFINED

In appealing to democracy, I wish to be clear about what I mean. I am not interested in exploring democracy as a form of government or as a method, one that includes specific theories and actions for how to function within a social movement like feminism.³¹ Nor am I interested in exploring particular examples of how democracy is realized and institutionalized within various nation-states, organizations or communities. Instead, I want to explore the democratic ethos. That is, I want to examine democracy as a “mode of being” and a passionate energy that can incite, motivate and inspire feminists to work for more inclusive and less oppressive futures.

Fundamental to my understanding of the term is the idea that democracy is never fully realized because once it becomes established in specific practices or institutions, it can become congealed and its energizing spirit of dissensus and passionate conflict can

³¹ Although my understanding of democracy shares some affinities with deliberative democracy and even more affinities with agonistic democracy, it does not represent one particular method or approach. For more on these two types of democracy, see Benhabib (1996), particularly her introduction (3-18).

get lost. To ensure that the spirit of democracy is not lost permanently, democracy must remain open for the future.

Because democracy is never fully realized, it is fragile and fleeting. As Sheldon Wolin argues in “Fugitive Democracy,” democracy “succeeds only temporally” and only in the brief moments when individuals are able to achieve collective agreements that do not come at the expense of those who are less powerful (43).³² But, even though it is fragile and never fully realizable, democracy is a powerful resource for feminism. And, as long as the memory of it survives, it can serve to inspire us to rebel, resist and transform violent and oppressive institutions or structures. To ensure that the spirit of democracy is remembered, each generation of feminists is charged with the task of collectively developing and passing on the story of democracy’s promise and possibility to future generations. In many ways, this dissertation focuses on this task by exploring the democratic ethos for twenty-first century feminists.

In addition to never being fully realized, democracy is always in process—the process of becoming, the process of being negotiated and the process of being critically re-assessed. Because it is in process, democracy is not about institutions but about practices. Looking to Alexander’s and Mohanty’s description of democracy in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies and Democratic Futures*, I understand it to be defined through the collective (and daily) practices of individuals as they attempt to rethink the idea and realize the promise of democracy (xxix).

³² Wolin describes the political as: “an expression of the idea that free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity” (31),

The emphasis on process and practices has two important consequences for my understanding of democracy and the democratic ethos. First, adopting a democratic ethos is fundamentally about engaging in the difficult labor of negotiating our differences and of forging connections with others that are not exclusionary but inclusive and that allow for the active participation of as many individuals as possible. This labor is not an easy one, nor is guaranteed to succeed, but when we engage in it, we have the possibility of developing better, more effective and democratic futures for feminism. Second, by suggesting that democracy consists of the daily practices of individuals, I understand the democratic ethos as one that can (and should be) adopted by a wide range of feminists, not only those who “do” theory in the academy, but those (theoretical) activists who work within any number of (local, national, global) communities inside and outside of the academy to further feminist goals.³³ In this understanding, each individual feminist or group of feminists has the power to enact change and to transform oppressive institutions. If feminist democracy is to be effective, it must look to those “ordinary citizens” and not just elite feminist political theorists/scholars.

Although I draw heavily (but not exclusively) upon Western feminist theorists in my description and exploration of the democratic ethos, I am not interested in promoting an exclusively Western vision or version of feminist democracy. If a feminist democratic ethos is to be successful—that is, successful in recovering feminism from its crisis in

³³ Describing the importance of daily practices by “ordinary individuals” for the renewal of the democratic moment, Sheldon Wolin writes: “Individuals who concert their powers for low income housing, worker ownership of factories, better schools, better health care, safer water, controls over toxic waste disposal, and a thousand other common concerns of ordinary lives are experiencing a democratic moment and contributing to the discovery, care, and tending of a commonality of shared concerns” (43).

three forms, it must respond to globalization and be transnational in scope. In addition to requiring that considerable attention be focused on the differences and the relationships across cultures that exist between women around the world, a feminist democratic ethos also requires that feminists actively work to develop and promote an “anticolonialist and anticapitalist vision of feminist [democratic] practice” (Alexander/Mohanty 1997, xxvii).

As anticolonialist, democratic practice must be aimed at reconfiguring the relationships that exist between individuals due to factors of race, gender, class, sexuality or nation and redistributing the power in those relationships so as to ensure agency, in the form of autonomy and self-determination, for a wider range of individuals (Alexander/Mohanty 1997, xxviii). As anticapitalist, democratic practice must be aimed at delinking democracy from capitalism. In particular, this delinking requires that feminists move beyond “freemarket feminism” and the notion of specific differences/identities/theories as commodities to be exchanged (and appropriated) on the world marketplace.

So far, I have suggested that democracy is fleeting and fragile, that it is created through the collective and daily practices of individuals and the difficult labor of forging connections across difference and that it must be transnational in scope. For all of these reasons, democracy and the democratic ethos are risky, uncertain and difficult to practice. They demand that we exert a great deal of energy and express a deep commitment in projects that are only ever briefly successful and that must be continually reworked.

So, why should feminists practice democracy? As I argue earlier in this chapter, the adoption and promotion of a democratic ethos provides feminists with the best chance for recovering from its current crisis, a crisis which has resulted in a loss of vitality and

critical edge, meaning and purpose and cohesiveness and connection. Through the practice of a democratic ethos, feminists learn how to critically explore their own claims and the claims of others in ways that energize the feminist movement. Far from weakening the movement, these critical practices enable feminists collectively to create more effective strategies for resistance and transformation. Through the democratic ethos, feminists also learn how to translate their own experiences of injustice and their passion for social transformation into powerful sources of guidance, hope and purpose. Finally, through the adoption of a democratic ethos, feminists are able to forge more democratic connections with others, connections that are based on solidarity and responsible action instead of assumed commonality and similar identity.

But, in promoting a democratic ethos, what is meant by the term “ethos”? Before moving on to an outline of my dissertation, I pause briefly to define ethos and its relationship to the ethical.

ETHOS AND THE ETHICAL

The question of ethical method is not one of finding the overarching values which frame all others, but one of reworking the multiple values of the various traditions in and between which we work. In this sense, ethics is a language for an on-going way of life, not for a single answer to a moral dilemma.

—Janet Jakobsen

Loosely defined, the term ethos refers to both the spirit and the character of an individual or a community. In this dissertation, I understand the feminist democratic ethos

in both of these ways. First, in terms of spirit, it is an energy and passion, one driven by a political, spiritual and material need for justice that can animate and invigorate feminist democratic theories and practices. And second, in terms of character, it is a mode of being, a disposition, or an ethical/moral way of approaching feminist democracy.

I use both of these definitions to analyze the democratic ethos from an ethical perspective. In particular, I will explore the ethics of feminist democracy by examining how feminists can responsibly and democratically practice a feminism that embraces conflict and difference, that is guided by a passionate need for justice and that is risky, uncertain and never guaranteed to succeed. In approaching this examination of democratic feminism ethically, I am not interested in developing an ethical method that firmly establishes a definitive answer to the question of how to approach and practice democratic feminism. Instead, as Jakobsen argues, I want to develop an ethical “language for an on-going way of life” (171), a language that enables us to think creatively and critically about how we can translate our passion for justice into effective and responsible action and that encourages us to reflect on what kind of person we need to be in order to adopt and sustain a democratic ethos.

By linking ethos with character, my ethical understanding of feminist democracy shares some affinities with the broadly defined field of virtue ethics.³⁴ Much like virtue ethics, it is focused on the question of how one should live. In the case of a democratic

³⁴ As a type of ethics, virtue ethics is a relatively new field, one that encompasses a wide range of theories/philosophies of morality. In the broadest sense, it is in the tradition of Aristotle and his emphasis on character. For more on virtue ethics, see Crisp/Slote (1997), Foot (1978), MacIntyre (1984) and Sherman (1989).

ethos, this question becomes: How should one live and act within feminist democracy? And much like virtue ethics, it answers this question not by looking to specific practices, but by examining the attitude and approach that an individual or community takes when engaging in feminist democratic projects. But, even though my ethical understanding of feminist democracy fits within the field of virtue ethics, it does not do so easily. In many ways, this dissertation represents a complication of some basic understandings of character and virtue.³⁵

For example, in contrast to Aristotle's understanding of virtue as an enduring and unchanging disposition that we obtain through the proper and unconstrained use of moral and practical wisdom, I argue that within feminist democracy virtue is a trait and a skill that we are forced to develop while under the constraint of an oppressive and unjust system. This shift away from Aristotle necessarily influences our understanding of how the virtues are acquired and for what aim.³⁶ For Aristotle, obtaining virtue and continuing to practice it is aimed at being able to flourish and to achieve the good and happy life. But, for the feminist, who develops and practices virtue within a system that works to oppress and control her, the more pressing aim is to survive and achieve a livable life, that is, a life in which one is acknowledged and granted the status of a legitimate and valuable self/subject.³⁷

³⁵ For more on this, see my description of the chapters in the next section.

³⁶ It also influences the types of virtues that we privilege within our ethical system. I will take up this issue in chapter four when I explore four feminist virtues: flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision.

³⁷ The search for a livable life is not in place of the good life, but it does precede it. The good life is, in fact, predicated on the existence of a livable life. I will be addressing this issue in greater detail in chapter four, section II.

While this examination is primarily an ethical one, it is not divorced from the political. Ethical and political concerns over how to develop and sustain a feminist democratic ethos are very connected to each other. For example, the ethical question that I pose in my investigation of a radical form of feminist democracy—How should one live and act within feminist democracy?—informs and is informed by political concerns over what political strategies we should develop in order to act most effectively and what actions we should take to ensure that more individuals have the opportunity to participate (to live and act) within feminism. Agreeing with Bar On and Ferguson in their critique of the ethical-political divide within feminism, I believe that any attempt to rethink ethics in the context of feminism necessarily requires that we rethink politics and the relationship between ethical and political visions and strategies for feminist resistance and transformation (Bar On/Ferguson 1998).³⁸

HOW DO WE DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN A FEMINIST DEMOCRATIC ETHOS?

As I have argued throughout this introduction, feminism’s best chance for recovering from its current crisis and becoming an effective and relevant movement in the twenty-first century is to rebuild itself through the development of a radically democratic ethos. Taking this assertion as a starting point, this dissertation will

³⁸ In the introduction to their collection, *Daring to be Good*, Bar On and Ferguson trace the history of the ethical-political divide within Western thought. Replacing this division with a new ethico-political approach, they argue that feminists should devote energy to answering the “central ethico-political question of feminism: *What is wrong with our current state, government, economy from a feminist perspective, and what ethical and political alternatives, values, visions, and strategies should feminists stand for and engage in?*” (xiii)?

investigate the question: How can feminists develop and sustain this democratic ethos? In asking this question, I am particularly interested in exploring the types of resources that exist within feminism for individuals to draw on in their efforts to develop and practice a democratic ethos (chapters two and three). And I am interested in exploring what kind of individual and collective work feminists must do in order to create and sustain that ethos (chapter four). In addition to providing some specific strategies for how to practice and maintain the democratic ethos, this investigation will help to clarify what is meant by a feminist democratic ethos and what it offers to feminism and its future.

Chapter two will explore how feminist role models serve as valuable resources. In particular, I look to three trickster figures within feminism—the troublemaker, outlaw, and storyteller—and argue that they function as important examples of the resisting feminist (moral and political exemplars) and as moral leaders who can guide and educate us as we attempt to adopt and practice a democratic ethos. As shifty and shifting figures who always stand in (some form of) opposition to what is “right”, these three tricksters do not properly or completely inhabit the role of moral exemplar or educator nor do they cultivate and practice the virtuous character as it is traditionally understood. Instead, they serve as powerful examples of feminists who effectively resist the system and, while under the constraint of that system, are able to develop and practice a feminist democratic ethos. And, they serve as important educators who, through their commitment to their various communities inside and outside of feminism, help to incite, empower and inspire us.

Chapter three will explore how feminist communities both help to nurture and encourage us as we struggle to engage in the difficult and demanding process of feminist democracy and to empower and equip us with the theoretical tools and skills that we need to survive and thrive within our political practices of resistance and transformation. Rejecting the more popular forms of community as home or coalition, I argue that the type of community that works best for feminism is alliance. Existing somewhere in-between homes and coalitions, alliances emphasize meaningful and supportive relationships between individual feminists that are created by and supported through a continued engagement with difference. In promoting the alliance, I reject the belief, shared by many feminists, that feminist communities must be created and sustained through a continued attention to the ways in which we are similar. I argue instead that it is attention to and critical and creative engagement with difference that enables us to develop democratic (non-violent, inclusive) and sustainable feminist communities.

Finally, chapter four will explore the type of work that we need to do, individually and collectively, in order to develop a democratic ethos and create stronger and more sustainable feminist alliances. Dividing this chapter into two sections, I argue in the first section that feminists need to make themselves into allies for others by cultivating and practicing a playful attitude. This attitude is not one that we easily choose, but one that requires the repeated and intentional practice of four specific democratic virtues: flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision. In the second section, I argue that, through the process of making ourselves into allies, we engage in another type of work: the collective critique (in the form of critical questioning, debate and experimentation) of our basic

claims and beliefs about feminism and its future. In the case of this chapter, I focus on feminist claims concerning the livable life and how to achieve it, arguing that the critical exploration of these claims could enable us to develop a democratic ethos (in the form of a playful attitude and the practice of the four virtues) and to forge meaningful and lasting connections with others who have different understandings and experiences from us.

Throughout this dissertation, my emphasis will be on feminist critical theorizing as an important practice of the democratic ethos within twenty-first century feminism. While not the only type of practice needed, critical theorizing is essential for the continued effectiveness and sustainability of feminism. In promoting the value of critical theorizing *as* practice, I am not arguing for a rigid and elitist definition of what theory is (as abstract and removed from everyday experiences of localized individuals), who engages in it (esoteric intellectuals who are equipped with highly specialized jargon) or where it is practiced (exclusively in elite academic institutions). Instead, I believe that critical theorizing *as* a democratic practice includes a wide range of activities, is practiced by a diverse group of feminists and takes place in a number of different locations *both* inside and outside of the academy.³⁹

Each of the chapters speaks to the importance of feminist critical theorizing for developing and sustaining a democratic ethos. In chapter two, the three types of feminist tricksters that I focus on (troublemaker, outlaw, storyteller) all engage in their trickster

³⁹ For this reason, much attention must be given to specific and concrete examples of how critical theorizing is practiced in the democratic context. However, my dissertation will not undertake this investigation. Instead, the goal of my project is to outline some of the key (and general) features that are essential for critical theorizing. The project of investigating specific examples of feminist critical theorizing, which I hint at in the concluding chapter, will be taken up in a future project.

activities of subversion, resistance and transformation by practicing some form of feminist critical theorizing. And in chapter three and four, the feminist democratic alliances that I discuss are created and sustained when feminists engage in the difficult work of critically thinking through and theorizing about the differences and conflicts that exist between them.