

**CONCLUSION:
TELLING THE STORY OF DEMOCRACY
IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FEMINISM**

I began this dissertation by making the following claim: If feminism is to recover from its current crisis, a crisis brought on by its loss of vitality and critical edge, direction and purpose and cohesiveness and connection, it must develop and practice a radically democratic ethos. After briefly describing the democratic ethos and how it can aid in this recovery, 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/leaders who embody the role of the virtuous and effective resisting feminist (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).

In concluding the fourth chapter, I suggested that one such way to participate in this labor is to critically question, debate and experiment with a central question within feminist ethics, particularly a character-driven feminist ethics: What is the livable life and how do we achieve it? In continuing to explore this question instead of prematurely

resolving it, we are not only able to become clearer about what feminism is, but we are able to learn some strategies and skills (virtues) for how to practice critique and the negotiation of differences more effectively *and* democratically. And, we are able to collectively create a more compelling and cohesive story of feminism's future as a democracy.

But, what is that story? And how we should tell it? In concluding this dissertation, I wish to offer a preliminary sketch of the story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism. My sketch is not intended to tell the story in its entirety. Instead, I offer a fragment of the story as an invitation to others to contribute to the project of remembering and creating feminist democracy anew.

THE FEMNIST STORY OF DEMOCRACY

The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding and creating what we have heard together to keep coming into being.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha

The story becomes the thing needed.

—Dorothy Allison

First, the story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism is a story about the democratic ethos. It is a story about the spirit of feminist democracy, that is, the passion within feminism that is driven by the political, spiritual and material need for justice, social transformation and the livable life and is incited by those resources deep from within us—our emotions (e.g. love and anger) and our experiences of oppression (our outsider perspective)—and those resources within our communities—feminist

tricksters. And it is a story about the character of feminist democracy, that is, the ethical attitude and approach that feminists must take in order to engage effectively in feminist democratic practices. This character is best defined as playful and loving and is achieved through the cultivation and continued practice of four virtues: flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision.

Telling the story of democracy in this way indicates that the value of democracy is not to be found in specific methods or theories about how to practice democracy or what democracy is, but in our commitment to making ourselves into a certain type of person—a character—who is able, through her playful and loving approach to all activities, to ensure that the energy and vitality of democracy—its spirit of justice, its recognition of the creative potential of conflict and its critical engagement with difference—is kept alive for present and future generations of feminists.¹

Second, the story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism is a story about three distinct, yet equally important, actions: (1) the disruption and challenging of basic claims and assumptions, (2) the translation of the democratic ethos (as spirit and character) into specific theories and strategies for action and transformation and (3) the forging of connections through difference and the development of a compelling and guiding vision out of those differences.

Each of these actions is essential for the effectiveness of feminism as a democratic politics. We need to be able to disrupt and unsettle our own claims and the claims of

¹ This is not to suggest that specific practices/methods/theories are not important. We must investigate how this character becomes actualized in specific and concrete practices of the democratic ethos. In future work, I am interested in exploring how the democratic ethos (as feminist critical theorizing) is or is not practiced in three particular settings: women's studies classrooms, feminist consciousness raising groups and academic exchanges between feminist intellectuals within scholarly journals.

others so as to guarantee that those claims do not become congealed in undemocratic ways and that our critical edge, that is our ability to critically assess our limits, does not become lost. We need to be able to translate our critical energy and passion into concrete theories and strategies in order to focus that energy in ways that are productive, effective and directed towards social transformation. And we need to be able to forge alliances through our differences and to create a compelling vision for feminism to ensure that we remain a cohesive movement with direction, purpose and vision.

These actions do not occur in any particular order, presenting us with a logical (and inevitable) progression towards a better feminism. Nor do they always easily fit together. The need for critique frequently comes into conflict with the need for constructive and strategic visions for what is to be done. The challenge in telling the story of these three actions is to find a way to weave them together, even when they overlap or conflict, in ways that do not privilege one particular action and that guarantee that all three are represented.

Third, the story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism is a story with three compelling characters: the troublemaker, outlaw and storyteller. These characters play the leading roles in the feminist story of democracy: the troublemaker disrupts, the outlaw develops tactical strategies and the storyteller weaves visions and forges connections. And these characters also exemplify the four primary virtues (characteristics) that we aim for in practicing a democratic ethos: the outlaw possesses flexibility, the troublemaker effectively practices vigilance and the storyteller embodies courage and vision.

If the story that these characters inhabit could be described as a quest, it is not a quest for the good and purely virtuous life, or at least the virtuous life as Aristotle defines it. And, it is not a moral tale of how to “properly” and morally behave within feminism. Each of these figures is morally flawed and has harmful tendencies that could render their actions ultimately ineffective. In other words, they are not moral saints nor do they aspire to be. The troublemaker sometimes likes to make too much trouble, the outlaw can spend too much time on her strategies and the storyteller can become lost in her imaginative stories. Instead, these characters tell the story of individuals who, while under the constraints of a system that limits and devalues them, are able to effectively resist that system and develop helpful strategies/skills/virtues for participating in a democratic politics.

Fourth, the story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism is a story about how we can potentially forge deep and meaningful connections through the difficult labors of making ourselves into allies and of critically and creatively engage with the differences between us. The connections we make can enable us to develop alliance communities that provide us with nurturing support and the tactical strategies, skills and virtues that we need in order to be effective within democratic feminism.

This is an important part of the story of feminism and democracy to tell because it is one that is not often heard. More frequently, feminist community is described in two ways, either as home communities which are created through the ways in which we are similar and that produce loving, yet uncritical, relationships, and coalition communities which are created in the midst of our struggles with individuals who may only connect

with us because they feel they must in order to survive. In contrast, the alliance community is a community that, although not guaranteed, could allow us to develop lasting and loving relationships through difference.

Fifth, the story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism is a story about hope and survival. It is a story in which we remember those individuals who were able to survive within the difficult, risky and uncertain practices of feminist democracy and who effectively resisted the system in many different ways. This is not a story exclusively about how those individuals were successful, but also about how they failed, yet kept persisting in their practices.² In telling this story, we have the potential to claim “a legacy of defiance, will, of courage,” a legacy that affirms our “link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech” (hooks 1990b, 210) and that provides us with the evidence that we need to keep our hope about better futures alive.

Finally, the story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism is a story that must be passed onto others. Because democracy is only realized briefly in specific moments, it is fleeting and fragile. Too soon after it is created, it can lose its potency. Moreover, as Sharon Welch argues in *Sweet Dreams in America*, it is difficult to maintain. Other values, “held with equal or greater force, [can] counter the practice of democracy: the desire for security, the certainty of being right in regard to important issues, and wanting to silence permanently those who hold different views” (87-88). To ensure that the spirit and character of democracy remain alive, we must remember and

² Cornel West writes: “And if we lose our precious democratic experiment, let it be said that we went down swinging like Ella Fitzgerald and Muhammad Ali—with style, grace, and a smile that signifies that the seeds of democracy matters will flower and flourish somewhere and somehow and remember our gallant efforts” (West 2004, 218).

tell its story, a story that is always being transformed and recreated, to those who come after us. The telling and retelling of the story of democracy within twenty-first feminism is not easy to do. The process of working with others to weave our meanings together is demanding, exhausting and risky. But, it is our best hope for envisioning and creating vital, meaningful and compelling feminist futures.