

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**WORKING TO BECOME ALLIES,**  
**WORKING FOR ALLIANCES**

In the conclusion to her book, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, Janet Jakobsen offers the following assessment of why alliances fail to work within movements like feminism. “Alliances fail,” she writes, “because the work required by this process, the work of constructing (our) selves as allies in the spaces in-between identifications, is not adequately theorized (Jakobsen 1999, 157). In this chapter I will explore the work feminists must do in order to make themselves into allies for others. In contrast to chapter three, which is primarily concerned with how *alliances* (as opposed to home or coalition communities) work for feminists and their project of democracy, this chapter will focus on how *feminists* work for alliances, that is, how feminists become allies to each other as they struggle to forge more democratic futures.

Jakobsen’s assessment of why alliances fail raises two key questions, both of which must be explored if we are to understand how to work within alliances. First, what kind of work do we do on our selves in order to become allies to others? And second, what kind of work do we do with others in order sustain our alliances?

The first question concerns how we make ourselves into allies for others. I will address this question by exploring what kind of selves we need to be and what type of character we need to have in order to become allies to others. Drawing upon Maria Lugones and her essay, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling and Loving Perception,” I argue that we can become allies to others by adopting a playful attitude, one in which we

remain open to different understandings of the world without reducing those different understandings to our own limited and often arrogant worldview. This attitude is not linked to any particular action designated as playful, but instead is a playful way of thinking and being that influences and shapes all of our practices. Maintaining this attitude is not simply a matter of choosing to be playful. It requires that we cultivate and continue to practice certain virtues, such as flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision.

The second question concerns what kind of work we need to perform as allies in order to develop, sustain and strengthen our alliances. As I suggested in chapter three, this work comes in many forms, all of which are important to our understanding of how to work in and for our alliances.<sup>1</sup> However, in this chapter I focus on a type of work that I did not mention in chapter three: the work that is needed to develop a collective vision of the livable life. Looking to Foucault and his understanding of the practice of critique, I argue that we can strengthen our alliances with others when we engage collectively in a process of critical thinking, debating and playfully experimenting with the limit question: What is the livable life and who gets to claim it? This question, perhaps more so than many other questions within feminism, speaks to our core values and touches upon the fundamental issues that drive our feminist practices. Moreover, this question resides at the center of a character-driven feminist ethics.<sup>2</sup> Through the process of attempting to

---

<sup>1</sup> In chapter three (pages 21-23), I discuss three types of labor: Listening and seriously engaging with each other's stories of pain and suffering (Lorde); participating in the physical and material struggles of others with whom we wish to make alliances (Welch, Reagon) and critically examining of the ways in which we are dependent upon and responsible to/for each other (Butler).

<sup>2</sup> As I indicated in the introduction (page 28), the question of the livable life, much more so than the question of the *good* life, should be the primary question for feminists who, while living under the constraints of oppressive systems, attempt to develop and practice a virtuous character.

collectively answer it, we could learn more about ourselves and each other. And we could practice those virtues (flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision) that enable us to develop and sustain a playful attitude.<sup>3</sup>

## MAKING OURSELVES INTO ALLIES

### *a. Playful Attitude*

Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred, and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight.

—Maria Lugones

In order to make ourselves into allies we must develop an ability to respect and appreciate others' ideas or experiences without appropriating, fetishizing or reducing those ideas or experiences to our own.<sup>4</sup> This task is a difficult one that requires more than a mere desire to get along with others or to tolerate their different perspectives for the sake of a more pluralistic movement. It requires that we make ourselves into persons who are willing to look beyond our own limited perspectives to other ways of being and who recognize and embrace the fact that we are all dependent on each other for survival

---

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Jakobsen's two central questions—how do we make ourselves into allies and what kind of work do we do to develop and sustain those alliances—are not fully distinctive questions. In fact, they work together. We make ourselves into allies by proving ourselves (by practicing the playful attitude/virtues) through the work of developing and sustaining our alliances (by collectively critically exploring the question of the livable life).

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler argues for the honoring of different ideas/experiences without "(1) assimilating difference to identity or (2) making difference an unthinkable fetish of alterity" (1995, 140).

(political, physical, social, spiritual).<sup>5</sup> To make ourselves into this type of person, we need to adopt and practice an open and playful attitude.

In “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling and Loving Perception,” Maria Lugones discusses the value and necessity of a playful attitude for women who are attempting to forge alliances with other women. Linking playfulness with “world”-traveling, she argues that in order for women to travel between the various “worlds” that they, and the other women they are attempting to connect with inhabit, they need to adopt a playful attitude.<sup>6</sup> This attitude is one in which they look beyond their own identity—their “own will and interests and fears and imagination”—and travel to other “worlds” in order to see and engage with other women as subjects who are independent of them and their perspectives yet interdependent with them in feminist critical projects of resistance and transformation (Lugones 2003, 85).

In describing this playfulness, Lugones rejects the traditional notion of play as agon—which she links with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Johan Huizinga, but could also be linked with Nietzsche—where individuals compete against each other in a contest that is constructed around a specific set of fixed rules and is based on “winning, losing [and]

---

<sup>5</sup> Lugones writes, “We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking” (2003, 86).

<sup>6</sup> Throughout her essay, Lugones places worlds in quotation marks because she does “not want the fixity of a definition at this point.” “The term is suggestive,” she adds, “and I do not want to close the suggestiveness of it too soon” (2003, 87). For more on her understanding of “worlds,” see the introduction to *Pilgrimages* (2003, 17).

battling” (Lugones 2003, 94).<sup>7</sup> Lugones believes that when this agonistic sense of play is applied to playfully traveling between “worlds,” it perpetuates an arrogance among its participants that is “tied to conquest, domination, reduction of what they [participants] meet to their own sense of order, and erasure of the other ‘world’” (Lugones 2003, 95). According to her, agonistic players do not travel to other “worlds” to understand, but to consume and assimilate with the aim of erasing and destroying those other “worlds” and other ways of being. Entering into other “worlds” with a fixed sense of self, they strive to keep that self intact. Their goal is not to be challenged by others or to stretch beyond their limits and understand themselves and their connection to others in new ways, but to conquer the other “worlds” that they visit.

In place of agon, Lugones promotes a different kind of playfulness, (1) that is focused on play as an attitude instead of a specific activity in which players battle each other for victory, (2) that emphasizes a fundamental openness to different ways of being and (3) that is based on loving not arrogant perception.

First, Lugones understands playfulness to be more than any one particular game or set of rules. For her, it is an attitude that “carries us through [an] activity” and that enables us to turn that activity into play (2003, 95). Lugones understands attitude in much

---

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche champions struggle (agon)—the battle of wills and the will to power—as the means and ends of existence and understands critique to be a contest in which individuals compete against each other in order to incite each other to act and inspire each other to push beyond and overcome their limits of knowing and acting. He envisions this limit pushing as productive—it enables us to transgress our limits and it produces within us a passion for challenging the status quo—but this productivity is explicitly and necessarily linked with violence. Throughout his work, Nietzsche argues that the purpose of a contest is to destroy one’s opponents (or oneself) in the hopes of overcoming them, that the role of the philosopher/critic is to adopt a warlike attitude, attacking others and challenging them to theoretical combat, and that the goal of critique is to violently sever all ties with past theories and understandings of truth. For more on this, see Nietzsche’s discussion of the value of agon and contest in ancient Greece in “Homer’s Contest” and Thiele (1990).

the same way as Foucault does in his description of it in “What is Enlightenment?” In this essay, Foucault argues that attitude (which he describes as an experimental limit-attitude) is a “mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people [and] a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving...” (Foucault 1997b, 309). This “mode of relating to contemporary reality,” suggests that alliances with others are not forged by following specific rules or methods for understanding and connecting with others, but by approaching those others with a certain kind of attitude.

Second, this playful attitude is one in which women “are not fixed in particular constructions of themselves” (Lugones 2003, 96) but are open to new ways of thinking and doing. Lugones understands this openness in several ways. It is an openness to surprise, that is, an openness to the idea that the world cannot be easily categorized or “neatly packaged” with rules because “rules may fail to explain what we are doing” (Lugones 2003, 95-96). It is an openness to self-construction and re-construction, that is, an openness to the activity of creatively (re)constructing and experimenting with other ways of being or acting instead of limiting ourselves to any one set of rules or way of doing things. And it is an openness to “being a fool,” that is, an openness to the belief that we are not self-important and that we should not be motivated by the goal of mastery and total control over our actions and understandings of ourselves and our relationships with other feminists.

Third, Lugones links this playful attitude of openness to loving perception. The feminist who engages in play should be motivated by a desire to engage, connect and

create *with* other feminists not to compete and battle *against* them.<sup>8</sup> Lugones' type of play requires that feminists perceive other feminists with love not arrogance by traveling lovingly to their worlds, to see and experience "*what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*" instead of traveling arrogantly by reducing those worlds to our own particular (and limited) visions or co-opting those worlds for our own purposes (Lugones 2003, 97).

By applying Lugones' vision of playfulness as an attitude of openness and loving perception to the difficult labor of forging democratic alliances between a diverse range of practicing feminists, we can begin to develop an understanding of how feminists can make themselves into allies for/to others. Fundamental to this understanding is the adoption of Lugones' attitude of openness. Openness is closely connected to movement, movement between positions, identities and "worlds." Instead of being fixed in any one "world" or any one identity, an emphasis on movement suggests that feminists must travel between identities without fully adopting any of them or travel between "worlds" without fully inhabiting any of them. The feminist who practices a playful attitude is open to new possibilities and to working and playing with a wide range of theories and theorists. She embraces the fact that there is no one right way in which to understand feminism and that her own experience and that of others within feminism is filled with "ambiguity and double edges" (Lugones 2003, 96). Instead of feeling a sense of defeat

---

<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that competition is anti-feminist or not valuable within feminist debate, but that competition as battle, where one opponent wishes to destroy the other, is not a healthy or productive model for feminists who are attempting to become allies to each other. For more on the value of competition for feminism, see Valerie Miner's and Helen E. Logino's *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?*

and cynicism because of the uncertainty of feminist practices, goals and relationships, she maintains a “sense of awe and wonder [at their] mystery and perplexity” (Morrison/West 2004, 19).

This playful openness does not indicate a refusal to take a stand or the failure to commit to and take responsibility for one’s beliefs or theories, where feminists who are working to become allies are merely engaged in “playing” around with theories.<sup>9</sup> Nor does it indicate a rejection of the value and validity of all claims. Playful openness involves a willingness to loosen our grip on certain positions and to engage with other feminists in the complicated and to and fro/back and forth process of developing and working through goals, theories and claims as an alliance.<sup>10</sup> This to and fro process requires that we maintain flexibility in our movement between theories and ideas so that we can remain limber enough to bend, twist and stretch our positions, both individually and collectively, in order to forge connections with others and to develop the most effective methods for addressing injustice.<sup>11</sup> It also requires that we exercise patience so that we do not rush to synthesize or assimilate each other’s ideas or experiences in order

---

<sup>9</sup> In defense of the value of play and openness, Janet Jakobsen writes that “Play does not mean a space of total freedom from constraint, but it is a site of struggle over norms and possibilities for change. Play is, thus, serious business, but it also materializes imagination and creativity” (1999, 169).

<sup>10</sup> In *Sweet Dreams in America*, Sharon Welch likens the playful, to and fro movement to jazz improvisation. Drawing upon the work of Toni Cade Bambara and others, she argues that jazz, and particularly jazz improvisation, provides feminists with a model for thinking about how to work with “obstacles, limits, ambiguity, and transience” that does not result in “violence, cynicism, or resignation” (1999, 16). For her, jazz involves spontaneity, innovation and creativity and is both joyful and challenging to those who participate in it.

<sup>11</sup> In *U.S. Third World Feminism: Differential Social Movement I*,” Sandoval argues for the necessity of flexibility, writing that feminists, in dealing with a wide range of theories and identities, need to have “enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic” (2000, 60).

to relieve ourselves of the discomfort and annoyance of juggling multiple claims, visions and experiences.<sup>12</sup> And, this to and fro process requires that we possess a great deal of curiosity so that we can continue to be motivated to raise important and provocative questions to our ideas and to each other.

Playful openness involves a willingness to be wrong, that is, a willingness to not take ourselves so seriously and to remain humble about our own power and control over any theory or idea that we promote. And it encourages us to laugh at ourselves and with others and to maintain a sense of humor and joy about the unpredictability and excitement of participating in feminist politics. For feminists like Luce Irigaray and Audre Lorde, the ability to laugh and experience joy is fundamental to what it means to be a healthy and vital subject. Quite frequently, they argue, these abilities have been either discouraged in women or denied them altogether.<sup>13</sup> Because of this denial, the reclaiming and promotion of play as joy must be a central project for feminists. We need to tap into “the *yes* within ourselves” and cultivate the deep capacity for joy which can

---

<sup>12</sup> Patience is an important skill for feminists to have, one that both Butler and Lugones write about in their work. Butler suggests that “it turns out that critique is a practice that requires a certain amount of patience in the same way that reading, according to Nietzsche, required that we act a bit more like cows than humans and learn the slow art of rumination” (2004, 307). Lugones invokes the poetry of Inez Hernandez Tovar and argues for the patient, painstaking and “calm refusal to assimilate”: In Tovar’s words: “And we will take our time/to make our time/count/clocks/do not intimidate us” (2003, 66).

<sup>13</sup> Luce Irigaray devotes much of *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One* and Audre Lorde focuses much of her essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” to exposing the ways in which male-dominated culture has denied women the ability to express their own pleasure (sexual and otherwise).

imbue all of our activities with a creative and inspiring energy and can enable us to connect and share in the feeling of joy with others (Lorde 1984, 56-57).<sup>14</sup>

Playful openness involves a willingness to take risks and to work through and with our fears and anxieties about the uncertainty of our claims without allowing those fears to make us feel like victims of the painfully ambiguous and uncertain process of the feminist project of democracy. This ability to take risks, to recognize the limitations of our understandings and goals and to act on them anyway, requires that we possess enough courage to commit to action without guarantees and to face and work with our fears, recognizing that the prospect of fully conquering those fears is never certain. And it requires that we are strong enough to engage in this difficult, dangerous and exhausting process of forging democratic alliances and persistent enough to continue engaging in the process indefinitely.

Finally, playful openness involves a willingness to cede some of our authority and ownership to others and to the process of feminist democracy by recognizing that forging alliances and creating a deeper and stronger feminist movement by working through our limits is greater than us, that we are never able to completely master particular ideas or positions or fully claim them as our own and that the feminist project of democracy can be a collaborative process between partners and allies and not just a competitive contest between enemies. For Chela Sandoval, this willingness requires that we have “enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race,

---

<sup>14</sup> Lorde believes that this experience is not limited to any one activity but can be present in anything she does, such as, “in the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” (1984, 56-57).

gender, sex, class, and social justice” even when those others have radically different understandings of how to realize equality and social justice (2000, 60).

The call for the demonstration of grace speaks to the importance of Lugones’ attitude of a loving perception for envisioning feminism as a movement of allies who respect and care for each other. This promotion of playfulness as a loving attitude is not suggesting that we can or should all get along and that we must downplay our differences and conflicts for the greater good of the movement. Nor is it suggesting that we should uncritically adopt each other’s ideas or uncritically embrace difference for the sake of difference. Finally, it is not suggesting that feminist collaboration requires that we must give up our positions and ideas to the movement to be uncritically appropriated, displaced or exploited by other feminists.<sup>15</sup>

For feminism, playfulness as a loving attitude suggests that we must recognize our fundamental dependence on each other for our survival and the survival of feminist projects of resistance. We must recognize the ethical obligation, the response-ability, that we have for acknowledging and valuing other feminists’ ideas and theories as unique and different from our own without that difference allowing us to distance ourselves from

---

<sup>15</sup> While it is true that feminists can never fully own the positions and ideas that they promote, it is possible for them to lay claim to their own labor within a particular tradition/movement and to charge others who appropriate it with stealing and exploitation. In her essay, “Transferences,” Deborah McDowell describes the exploitation/appropriation of the work of black women writers (McDowell, 1995).

these feminists by “othering” them.<sup>16</sup> And we must recognize other feminists as subjects and equal partners instead of obstacles and enemies.

In order to treat others as partners in the process of the feminist project of democracy, we cannot quickly move to dismiss their ideas because we do not understand the language or the context in which they were spoken or written. Nor should we immediately attempt to translate their words into our own language or place those words into the context of what it means for us. These actions only serve to reduce and limit others’ words and enable us to easily disengage from others’ theories. Instead, we must travel outside of ourselves and look beyond our own limits. This traveling is not one in which we visit other feminists’ “worlds” like tourists on holiday who go to gaze upon and be entertained by the exotic natives.<sup>17</sup> This traveling is one in which we are forced to step outside of our comfort zones—our “most sure ways of knowing” (Butler)—to connect with other feminists, not by entering into or invading their worlds but by stretching ourselves to our limits to meet them at theirs. On the road, between “worlds,” we meet at the limits (Anzaldúa’s borders) where we are uncomfortable and uncertain and where

---

<sup>16</sup> Janet Jakobsen argues that response-ability, as opposed to responsibility, is concerned with how we respond to others. For her, it is a language of interaction not a moral perspective. She writes: “Response-ability names the skill of working in relationships, of responding to moral claims made from various locations while also recognizing the normative power of one’s own (diverse and complex) commitments” (1998, 172). For an in-depth discussion of Jakobsen’s understanding of response-ability, see Jakobsen (1996).

<sup>17</sup> Lugones wishes to distinguish her notion of “world”-traveling from that of tourism and colonial exploration. “I think that it is precisely the case,” she writes, “that tourists and colonial explorers, missionaries, settlers, and conquerors do not travel in the sense that I have in mind. That is, there is no epistemic shift to other worlds of sense, precisely because they perceive/imagine only the “exotic,” the “Other,” the “primitive,” and the “savage,” and there is no world of sense of the exotic, the Other, the savage, and the “one in need of salvation” separate from the logic of domination. Those concepts of others are inextricably connected to epistemic imperialism and aggressive ignorance” (2003, 18).

there are no charters (Lorde), but where we can collectively forge and fight for more democratic futures.

Now that we have a working definition of the playful attitude as one that is both open and loving, we have a preliminary answer to the central question of this section: What kind of work do we do on our selves in order to become allies to others? We become allies to others by developing and practicing a playful attitude. However, this answer raises another important question: How do we develop and maintain this attitude? In the second part of this section, I argue that we develop and maintain a playful attitude of openness and loving perception by cultivating and practicing certain virtues, including: flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision.

*b. Virtues*

While the playful attitude is, as Foucault suggests earlier in this chapter, a voluntary choice, it is not an effortless one in which we can spontaneously or easily decide to become open and loving in our interactions with others.<sup>18</sup> We cannot simply wake up one morning and decide that we want to be playful. Nor can we merely perform a number of actions that are playful and assume that that establishes us as having a playful character. A playful attitude comes through the repeated and intentional practice of certain traits like the ones I will discuss shortly. For, we need to not only perform loving and open acts but also be seen as loving and open individuals. In repeatedly and intentionally practicing certain virtuous traits, like flexibility, vigilance, courage or

---

<sup>18</sup> In critiquing Lugones and her understanding of “world” traveling and the playful attitude for addressing the problem of difference and recognizing the “other” within feminism Kelly Oliver writes, “Lugones turns that problem into one of personal attitudes, as if changing one’s attitude could be enough” (Oliver 2001, 53).

vision, we demonstrate both to ourselves and others, that we are playful and that we have a playful character.

Moreover, we cannot easily maintain the playful attitude. The process of engaging with others playfully is very physically and mentally demanding. Being open to new understandings of ourselves and feminisms' future(s) can make us feel schizophrenic (Lugones 2003, 86) as we attempt to juggle a multiplicity of (sometimes) conflicting ideas and worlds. Letting go of our own rigid perspectives and interpretations of feminism, perspectives in which we have invested so much time and energy, can exhaust us. And, attempting to become allies with individuals who have understandings of what is to be done that are odds with our own can overwhelm us. In attempting to maintain a playful attitude, we must employ a variety of skills. In the discussion that follows, I argue that flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision serve as important virtues (as traits and skills) for maintaining the playful attitude and for making ourselves into allies for others.

The first important virtue that individuals must have in order to maintain a playful attitude and make themselves into allies is flexibility. As a virtue, flexibility involves being limber enough to stretch, bend, and twist our positions in order to forge connections with others and to develop the most effective methods for addressing injustice. First, flexibility is about being able to *stretch* beyond ourselves and our limited perspectives and being open to other ways of being and to the process of reconstructing ourselves and our ideas in light of those other ways of being. Second, flexibility is about not rigidly adhering to any one position but being willing to *bend* and to relent when other individuals demonstrate the limits of our position. It involves taking the ideas of

others seriously and being critical of our own ideas from the perspective of those others. And it involves being humble enough to admit and accept when we are wrong. Finally, flexibility is about being able to alter our positions, to *twist* them, when those positions do not work. It requires that we become pragmatic tinkerers who are able to experiment with and use a wide range of theories depending on what is needed at the moment.

Because it involves stretching, bending and twisting, being flexible enables us to juggle multiple positions and to entertain multiple possibilities, multiples truths and multiple strategies. This ability makes us into stronger and more democratic allies who can effectively respond to the needs of a wide range of individuals and can incorporate (not assimilate) those needs into the broader vision of feminisms' future(s).

Following Aristotle and his description of the virtues, I believe that flexibility (along with vigilance, courage and vision) is best understood in the context of its deficiency and excess.<sup>19</sup> To be deficient in flexibility is to be rigid in one's own ideas, to be unwilling to seriously consider others' perspectives and to be firmly rooted in a fixed sense of self, culture or community. To be deficient in flexibility is also to be convinced of one's own certainty and to rely on certainty (and complete Truth) as a prerequisite for effective and responsible action.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics*, particularly Book Two where he defines virtue.

<sup>20</sup> In the first presidential debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry, the issue of character and flexibility was featured prominently. In particular, Bush questioned the strength and quality of Kerry's character as a leader, claiming that he (Kerry) was too flexible (that he flip-flopped too much) and that Americans needed and wanted a leader who was certain and steadfast in his convictions. Kerry challenged Bush's assessment, responding that flexibility was a necessary part of being a good leader and that being too certain could be dangerous. "But this issue of certainty. It's one thing to be certain," Kerry argued, "but you can be certain and be wrong. And, certainty sometimes can get you in trouble."

Lack of flexibility has been a significant problem for the feminist movement, particularly the hegemonic (i.e. white, heterosexual, middle-class, Western) feminist movement and its attempts to deal with the ever-increasing number of different and often conflicting interpretations of what and who feminism is and what its future should be. Among hegemonic feminism there is a reluctance to seriously deal with difference and to be open to alternative ways of understanding feminism and its future(s). While these individuals have been willing to acknowledge differences between feminists, they have often failed to truly engage with those differences, to listen to the voices of others or to rethink themselves in terms of their differences with those others.<sup>21</sup> They have been unwilling to step outside of their own comfort zone of sameness and certainty, to let the uncertainty and unpredictability of feminism as a democratic movement revitalize and creatively transform them and their political projects.

If having a lack of flexibility is to be too rigid and too invested in one's self as fixed and certain, having an excess of flexibility is to be too open, too mobile and too fluid and to have no awareness of one's own culture or history, no clear and compelling sense of self and no overarching vision that guides and influences our actions and theories. To be too flexible is to become lost in the movement in-between differences or in-between worlds. It is to be so willing to stretch, bend and twist ourselves for the sake

---

<sup>21</sup> Maria Lugones describes this type of acknowledgement by hegemonic feminists as non-interactive. See Lugones (2003).

of others that we lose track of who we are and where we are going.<sup>22</sup> In becoming flexible, feminists need to find a balance between the extremes; they must be able to stretch, bend and twist their ideas and positions without losing their self and their own perspective in the process.

The second important virtue that individuals must have in order to maintain a playful attitude and make themselves into allies is vigilance. Ultimately vigilance is about remaining critical of ourselves and of feminism and its goals. We must be able to continuously critically reflect on our own theories and the theories of other feminists if feminism is to remain vital, relevant and democratic. Reflecting on the status of feminism at the end of the twentieth century, Judith Butler writes that what makes feminism a “democratic enterprise” is feminists’ ability to “embrace the notion that each of our most treasured values are under contestation and that they will remain contested zones of politics” (2001, 415).

Vigilance involves being alert and ever watchful of the limitations and problems with our ideas and actions.<sup>23</sup> And it involves maintaining a constant awareness of others and the ways in which our lives are implicated in theirs. As we practice vigilance, we learn how to maintain a certain level of discomfort and to be willing to live at the limits of our knowledge in order to connect with others. This discomfort is one in which we

---

<sup>22</sup> Many feminist theorists have linked the excess of flexibility with feminists who practice postmodernism/poststructuralism. In her critique of postmodern feminism, “Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Skepticism,” Susan Bordo describes the problem of too much flexibility as “the view from nowhere and the dream from everywhere” (1990).

<sup>23</sup> For more on vigilance, see Kelly Oliver’s chapter on it, “History, Transformation and Vigilance,” in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (133-143).

keep ourselves open (to new ways of being and to transforming ourselves and our relationships) and responsive to the needs and ideas of others. And vigilance requires that we be relentless in our attempts at safeguarding critique and at ensuring that the ideas and experiences of others are taken seriously instead of being reduced or assimilated to our own. It also requires that we continue to practice critique/critical theorizing even as we engage in feminist political action.

Finally, vigilance demands that we be committed to the difficult and exhausting labor of forging connections with others instead of assuming that those connections exist just because we identify as feminist or promote feminist principles. The ability to be ever-watchful, uncomfortable, relentless and committed to protecting difference as an important resource for feminism, makes us into effective allies to each other, allies who are sensitive to the differences between us, who are willing to submit to the perpetual process of critique and who are committed to engaging in the hard work that it takes to connect with other feminists.

To have a deficiency of vigilance is to be uncritical, inattentive to difference and too ready to assume that alliances between feminists automatically exist. To lack vigilance is to be unwilling to challenge our basic assumptions and to be unable to practice a persistent and perpetual critique of feminists' actions and their effectiveness. It is to be afraid of thinking seriously and critically about our ideas for fear that such thinking would require us to change the direction of our actions. And it is to shut down theorizing altogether in favor of (sometimes) blind political action. This reluctance and/or inability to think critically even as we engage in feminist politics, "keeps us from

learning, from being able to hear, and to read how it is that we might now live politically *in medias res*” (Butler 1995, 131).

To lack vigilance is also to ignore the differences that exist between individuals or to fail to take those differences seriously. Feminists who are unwilling to pay careful and persistent attention to difference often overemphasize the things that we, as feminists, may have in common (such as, a need for transformation, a passion for justice, visions of a better future) at the expense of those things that distinguish us from each other (specific cultural/social locations, competing loyalties, wide range of identities). When feminists are not vigilant in paying attention to difference, they can easily alienate other feminists and, in so doing, shut down the possibility for becoming allies for those feminists.

But, if a lack of vigilance makes us are uncritical and inattentive, too much vigilance causes us to be hyper-critical and to place too much emphasis on critique at the expense of ourselves and others. Having too much vigilance is just as damaging as not having enough. It can make us unable to commit to any particular position for any substantial length of time or to clearly outline our own positions. For Patricia Hill Collins, an excess of vigilance as hyper-critique is very damaging to feminism and its ability to be effective. She contends, “one can neither play at things nor keep them in play forever. At some point, we must each take a stand and be very clear about where we stand...Although critique remains valuable, without moving to the next step—taking a stand by constructing new knowledge—critique can become a predictable and decreasingly effective strategy ” (1997, 194). To be too vigilant in our critique of

ourselves and feminism is to be unwilling to move beyond critique to create new visions for a better future.

Having too much vigilance is not only damaging to the effectiveness of feminism as a movement aimed at social and cultural transformation, it is also damaging to feminists and their ability to take care of themselves in the midst of the difficult and dangerous politics of the feminist democratic project. As Kelly Oliver suggests, drawing upon Levinas and his work on the Other, vigilance is closely linked with insomnia and a lack of sleep. To be vigilant is to forgo one's own personal needs (in this case, the need for sleep) in order to watch over (keep vigil) someone or something else. In this way, to be too vigilant is to fail to take care of oneself—to consider one's own needs—at all. It is to be so concerned with critique and a persistent attention to others that we forget about ourselves, both who we are and what we need to survive.<sup>24</sup> To effectively practice the virtue of vigilance, feminist allies need to find a balance between being too critical and not critical enough and between paying attention to difference and losing oneself in that difference.

The third important virtue that feminists need to have in order to make themselves into allies for others is courage. Courage is about being able to act even when we are uncertain. This uncertainty, which has the potential to paralyze us, stems from our lack of complete control over the projects we promote and our inability to securely predict the

---

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler offers a critique of Levinas' promotion of "insomniac vigilance" (along with his notion of breathlessness) in her essay, "Ethical Ambivalence." She writes, "Given that the Levinasian subject also rehearses an 'insomniac vigilance' in relation to the Other, it may still be necessary to continue to call for 'good air' and to find a place for the value of self-preservation, if one wants, for instance, to breathe and to sleep" (27).

various effects that those projects will have in the future. To be courageous is to recognize this lack of control and predictability and to act anyway.

Courage is also about survival and “the willingness to sustain life [and] to fight for freedom as bearers of life” (Sparks 1997, 90). It is about being able to nourish ourselves and to commit to being around for the future of feminism, to not give up on the feminist project of democracy even when that project is difficult to maintain or nearly impossible to achieve.

Courage is about being able to effectively use—not suppress—the emotions (outrage, anger, grief, fear) that inspire us. To have courage is to be able to “sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors” or to express anger in forceful yet productive ways (Lorde 1984). And it is to be able to recognize that our fears will never go away and that we must act regardless. As Audre Lorde suggests in *Sister Outsider*, we must “learn to work and speak when we are afraid” for if “we wait in silence for the luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (Lorde 1984, 44).

Finally, courage is about the ability to testify and bear witness to the truth. It involves a willingness to risk humiliation or rejection by disclosing and exposing our selves to others (Bickford 1998, 68-69). And it involves making the commitment to listen, remember and pass on the stories of others.

To have a deficiency of courage is to be paralyzed by fear and uncertainty. It is to be unwilling to engage in the difficult and dangerous work of forging connections with others because of the vulnerability and self-critique that such work requires. Making ourselves vulnerable to others and being critical of ourselves by being willing to share

our stories and really listening to theirs is an uncomfortable and unsettling experience that can generate a lot of fear.

This fear comes in many forms. First, many feminists are afraid of being wrong. They are afraid that if the policies and politics that they have invested in so heavily are critiqued and challenged, that they will not be able to continue fighting. They are afraid that if they are wrong about one thing, they could be wrong about everything, that their entire world-view could be misguided. And, they are afraid that “if they think too hard about what it is that they are doing...that they will no longer do it” (Butler 2000, 264).

Second, feminists are afraid of the uncertainty that such wrongness produces. For many feminists, at least some sort of certainty or guarantee about their knowledge of the world is necessary. This need for certainty suggests that there are some feminist claims, terms or policies that cannot and should not be challenged if feminism is to continue functioning properly. “To act effectively,” Teresa Ebert writes in *Ludic Feminism and After*, “we need to know *what* we are acting on. In other words, we have to have reliable knowledge of the social relations and institutions we seek to change” (1996, 5). This uncertainty results in anxiety about the future and despair about our possibilities for changing the present.

Third and finally, feminists are afraid of being guilty; guilty of promoting policies that perpetuate the status quo, of participating in the very power structures that they wish to dismantle and of excluding and therefore harming other feminists with their claims. As Jane Flax suggests in her chapter, “The End of Innocence,” many feminists want to believe that they have access to innocent knowledge or “some sort of truth that can tell us

how to act in the world in ways that benefit or are for the (at least ultimate) good of all” (1993, 133). They want to believe that “they can do only good, not harm, to others” (1993, 133). And, they want to believe that they are innocent victims of the system, that their struggle is the struggle of those on the side of truth and justice, and that they are fighting the good fight.

For Flax in “The End of Innocence” and Robyn Wiegman in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, this illusion has a racial subtext. The feelings of guilt and the clinging to a belief in innocent knowledge are often experienced by white women who find it difficult to recognize (and own up to) the racism that exists within feminism. They are simultaneously embarrassed about their own complicity in this racism and “angry at the ‘others’ for disturbing the initial pleasure and comfort of ‘sisterhood’” (Flax 1993, 145). When their theories and/or claims are challenged for being racist and exclusionary, many white feminists frequently fail to address the important critique that is being leveled at their work. They either become dismissive of the critique, claiming that their critic is so angry and full of rage that they cannot really hear or understand the criticism<sup>25</sup> or they become profusely apologetic, repeatedly and publicly confessing their guilt without actually addressing and engaging with what the critic has to say.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> For more on anger and white women’s reaction to it/fear of it, see Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” in *Sister Outsider*, Maria Lugones’ “Hard-to-Handle Anger” in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* and Elizabeth V. Spelman’s “Anger and Insubordination” in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*

<sup>26</sup> Connected with this idea of confession and apology is the desire to be absolved of one’s sins and to be liked by those who one has slighted or ignored in the past. A good example of this can be found in “Criticizing Feminist Criticism” when white feminist critic Jane Gallop discusses how she looks to the black feminist critic Deborah McDowell for acceptance and reassurance. For an excellent critique of Gallop’s desire to be liked by McDowell, see McDowell (1995).

To have an excess of courage is to be too fearless and reckless in our actions. It is to ignore our deeper emotions, such as fear, for the sake of acting confidently and hiding any evidence of weakness from others. It is to believe that fear is something that holds us back, preventing us from taking the important risks that lead to resistance and transformation. And it is to believe that we must be able to put our fears aside, sacrificing safety and endangering our lives for the good of the movement or political cause. Ultimately, to have too much courage is to be willing to lay our life on the line—no matter what the costs—and become a martyr to our politics. It is about privileging the value of risking life (and the glory and honor that such a risk provides) over the difficult and risky work of *sustaining* life.<sup>27</sup>

The fourth and final virtue that feminists need to have in order to make themselves into allies for others is vision. Possessing and practicing vision is about being able to see beyond the various experiences and agendas of specific individuals and groups within the feminist movement in order to discern a broader (and less localized) understanding of feminism, both what it is and who and what it is fighting for. When we possess vision we do not reject the particular experiences of others, but instead are able to place those experiences in a larger context. In effect, we can provide feminists with a map, one that may not be comprehensive, but that can allow them to envision feminism as more than a fragmented and purely particularized movement. This map is not concerned with giving individuals a clear and complete picture of the feminist movement,

---

<sup>27</sup> The risking of life is frequently associated with masculine visions of courage. For more on masculinity and courage, see Bickford (1996, 1997), Brown (1989, 1995) and Sparks (1997).

but with charting the underlying, frequently unseen, connections and relationships that can or do exist between feminists who are very different from each other.

In addition to enabling us to see the bigger picture, having vision provides us with a form of perception that emanates from a deeper level of the psyche, a level that is beneath or beyond language. Describing it as “*la facultad*,” Gloria Anzaldúa claims this perception can produce a heightened awareness—a sensitivity—within us to the dangers surrounding us and the limitations of our perceptions of the world. This sensitivity is particularly acute when we allow ourselves to listen to the fear that warns us when something is not right or when someone wants to hurt us. It enables us to sense danger and the possibility of violence before it can happen. It also enables us to become more streetwise and pragmatic in our actions and theories. And it enables us to be open to new ways of understanding the world. When we take this heightened sensitivity seriously instead of ignoring or dismissing it, it can cause a shift in our perceptions and help us to see beyond the limited scope of everyday life to the “deeper realities [and] the deep structure below the surface” (Anzaldúa 1987, 38).

Finally, having vision is about being able to develop and express to others a compelling and hopeful story about feminism—past, present and future. When we tell this story to and with others, we are able to bear witness to the pain and oppression, in its many forms, that feminists have experienced in the past and present. In bearing witness to this pain, we ensure that it is not forgotten or ignored. And we are able to imaginatively construct a possible future for ourselves, one that can guide us in our present actions and

provide us with the hope that we need in order to continue participating in feminist democratic politics.

Possessing vision is essential for making ourselves into democratic allies for others. It enables us to see beyond our own limited perspective to discern the connections and relationships that could exist between us and other feminists. It enables us to have a deeper sensitivity to the dangers and difficulties of dealing with other feminists who may want to be our enemies instead of our allies. And it enables us to collectively develop a more hopeful and compelling understanding of feminism's past, present and future.

To have a deficiency of vision is to be too focused on the specific and particular details of our own experiences and agendas. It is to be unable to see any connections or relationships between us and other feminists who seem so different and distant from us.<sup>28</sup> It is also to be unable to perceive when we are in trouble and when those with whom we wish to make alliances do not wish to make alliances with us. And, to have a deficiency of vision is to lack hope and direction for the future. It is to be overwhelmed by the despair and uncertainty of ever successfully transforming the system and achieving justice.

In contrast to lacking vision, to have an excess of vision is to be so focused on imagined (and imaginary) possibilities for feminism and its futures that we fail to develop any specific and concrete strategies for realizing those futures. It is to have an unrealistic

---

<sup>28</sup> A lack of vision is particularly problematic within feminism for first world feminists who are unable to see or explore how their lives/experiences/identities are connected to and have an impact on feminists in the third world. As Chandra Mohanty suggests in "Under Western Eyes," many first world feminists do not (or refuse) to see how they have constructed a monolithic version of the "third world woman" as suffering victim in order to prove the existence of a universal patriarchy and in order to establish first world feminists as enlightened and empowered agents.

and overly romantic image of feminism's future, an image in which feminists are guaranteed to succeed in their dismantling of the system and their construction of a better, less oppressive and more just world.

To have an excess of vision is also to be too concerned with the connections and relationships between feminists and too *unconcerned* with the particular experiences and agendas of specific feminists. While developing connections between feminists is essential for the overall effectiveness of the movement, if these connections are done at the expense of attending to the distinctive identities, cultures and experiences of individuals within feminism, feminism cannot be successful or democratic.

In many ways, these virtues—flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision—are embodied by the trickster figures discussed in chapter two. Through her tactical subjectivity, the outlaw exemplifies flexibility. Through her repeated and persistent disruption and critique of the system, the troublemaker exemplifies vigilance. And, through her willingness to tell the truth about herself and others and her ability to create a meaningful story out of multiple fragments of meaning, the storyteller exemplifies courage and vision.<sup>29</sup> Their embodiment of the virtues demonstrates yet another way in which these three tricksters serve as feminist role models and moral exemplars. We are able to learn, from their examples, how to develop and practice a playful attitude/character/ethos.

---

<sup>29</sup> As discussed at the end of chapter two, these figures also exemplify the limits (the deficiencies and excesses) of these virtues.

But learning by example is not the only way in which to develop and cultivate our democratic character. As I indicated at the start of this section on virtues, we develop our playful, democratic attitude/character through the repeated and intentional practice of the virtues, such as flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision. This repeated and intentional practice takes place when we labor with others with and through our differences to create visions of better and more democratic futures. Through this labor, we are able to strengthen our connections with others and to develop long-lasting alliances instead of temporary coalitions. To reflect the ethical and political possibilities of this labor, we must expand our understanding of the practices that we engage in in order to make alliances work. Not only must we strive to make ourselves into allies but we must also strive to make our alliances into strong, long-lasting and meaningful communities of resistance and transformation.

### **WORKING FOR ALLIANCES**

In this second section, I argue that an important part of the collective labor for feminists in their project of democracy is critique in the form of critical questioning, debate and playful experimentation. It is through this particular type of labor that we are able to discover underlying relationships and connections, to learn how to critically and creatively negotiate the multiplicity of differences that exist between us and to develop the virtues that enable us to obtain a playful, democratic attitude.

In the introduction to their collection, *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, the editors argue that feminism “must constantly be challenged and transformed by the conflicts and divisions between women who identify with it” (Ahmed et al. 2001, 4). This challenge comes in the form “of asking troubling questions made possible by the multiple histories of feminist activism and thought” (2001, 19), questions that center on thinking through feminism, both its various claims and the investments—psychic, material, emotional—that feminists make in these claims.

In her essay, “The End of Sexual Difference?” Judith Butler agrees, arguing that feminism is a movement that achieves its vitality through its refusal to resolve its problems and contentious issues. For her, the goal of feminist theory and politics is not to resolve all disputes about what feminism stands for or who feminism represents but to create effective and productive ways in which to engage in critical disputes and to develop strategies for “how best to have [those disputes], how most productively to stage them, and how to act in ways that acknowledge the irreversible complexity of who we are” (Butler 2004c, 176).

The critical challenge and contestation of feminist politics and its goals that both the editors of *Transformations* and Butler promote is a move that, according to Butler, returns feminism to a “more fundamental meaning of critique” (2004a, 307) that focuses on those moments prior to judgment when critical thought and deliberation about how claims work or fail to work and who does and does not get to make those claims are permitted and even encouraged. This type of critique, which can be traced back through Foucault to the Frankfurt School, consists of two central practices.

First, it involves the tracing and analysis of “the limits of our most sure ways of knowing” (Butler 2004a, 307). This tracing includes an examination of the moments that have challenged our very ability to read or to discern meaning where “no discourse is adequate” (Butler 2004c, 179). Second, this type of critique involves experimenting with those limits and posing questions to them as a way to engage in public conversations and debates about how to think of them differently.

Experimenting with the limits and participating in public debates about those limits suggests that the process and practice of critique involves a difficult labor of working and thinking through the limits of feminism and feminists discourse. This labor is not done in isolation nor is it a contest in which feminists compete against each other for the best idea or theory; it is a collective democratic process in which a wide range of feminists work together to trace the limits of their claims and subject those claims to critical questioning, debate and experimentation. In order to understand this two-part project of critique, I turn to Michel Foucault and his description of it.

Foucault is a fitting place to start an exploration of critique. In his work, particularly his essays “What is Enlightenment?” and “What is Critique?,” Foucault outlines some potentially positive and productive aspects of critique. For him, critique is not only about identifying the limits of a given discourse or set of practices, but about examining how the tracing and questioning of those limits could lead us to new ways of thinking about ourselves and our relationships with others. This positive aspect of critique, which he describes as a critical ontology of ourselves, is not a theory but a type

of labor, one in which various critical reflections are experimented with and put to the “test of concrete practices” (1997b, 319).

*a. Michel Foucault and Critique*

The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life...

—Michel Foucault

According to Foucault, critique is an attitude, “a certain way of thinking, acting, speaking” (1997, 24) in which traditional notions of politics, truth, knowledge and power are called into question. It is a “philosophical ethos” which is dedicated to the practice of a perpetual contestation and “permanent critique of our historical era” (Foucault 1997b, 312). It is not aimed at uncovering or developing a set of general (formal) structures but at participating in a critical ontology of ourselves in which we investigate the specific historical events that have shaped how we understand the modern world and ourselves.

Foucault promotes this critical attitude as one of defiance. Those participating in the practice of critique do so “as a challenge, as a way of limiting [certain practices or claims] and sizing them up, transforming them, of finding a way to escape from them or, in any case, a way to displace them, with a basic distrust...” (Foucault 1997b, 28). This challenge does not serve as a wholesale rejection of these practices or claims. Foucault does not believe complete rejection is possible; it is not a simple matter of being “for” or

“against” a set of practices because those practices have shaped who we are.<sup>30</sup> Instead the defiant challenge of the critical attitude provides a way in which to open practices up to a critical examination of their “professed purpose, the means they employ, and the intended or unintended results these means may have” (Foucault 2000, 395). This challenge, which Foucault describes as a critical ontology of ourselves, takes place at the frontiers—neither inside nor outside, but at the edge where the limits of our knowledge of ourselves are examined, critiqued and potentially transformed. These limits are not understood negatively, that is as hindrances to our knowing, but positively as moments that, when analyzed, reflected upon and experimented with, could lead to new ways of “being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think” (Foucault 1997b, 316-317).<sup>31</sup>

For Foucault, one way in which this critical examination and ontology is achieved is through problematization, or the “development of a domain of acts, practices and thoughts that...pose problems for politics” (Foucault 1997b, 114). This posing of problems not only involves the questioning of certain practices, it also involves the development of “the conditions in which possible responses can be given [and] it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to” (Foucault 1989, 421). In other words, the problem that is posed (or the question that is

---

<sup>30</sup> In “What is Enlightenment?,” Foucault discusses the impossibility of being for or against the Enlightenment, arguing that because we are “beings who are historically determined by the Enlightenment,” we can never fully step outside of it or reject it (313).

<sup>31</sup> Foucault sums up the critical attitude at the end of his essay “What is Enlightenment?”: “The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time an historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them [*le feu franchissement possible*]” (319).

asked) serves as the locus of a number of different issues that, when critically examined, could result in the transformation of practices.

Foucault suggests that discourses on madness, discipline and sexuality all function as such problems and their further examination could enable us to better understand them and the complex (and multiple) ways in which they operate within our society and shape our understandings of the world and who we are. As an example of this, Foucault offers the problem of punishment, which he views as a centering point for a variety of questions concerning crime and prison reform. These questions include: “What [does] it mean to punish? What is being punished, why [is] there punishment and how [should] punishment be carried out” (2000, 398-399)? Foucault directs these questions specifically at the practice and development of imprisonment during the nineteenth century, arguing that an analysis of these questions through this lens enables us to see that imprisonment is part of “a historical episode” that could be understood differently.<sup>32</sup>

This ability to understand a discourse differently points to another key element of critique. Through its perpetual questioning and challenging, critique “reveals the precariousness, the nonnecessity, and the instability of things” (Foucault 2000, 399). For Foucault, discourses and practices are never fixed or stable. Instead, they are fragile and vulnerable to criticism. This fragility extends beyond the discourses themselves to

---

<sup>32</sup> Reflecting on his work in *Discipline and Punish* in an “Interview with Actes,” Foucault writes, “I meant to show that the systematic use of imprisonment as the main form of punishment constituted only a historical episode, and therefore other systems of punishment could be envisaged.” He continues this thought, rhetorically asking “In questioning penal institutions, did I not presuppose and affirm that one could get out of the impasse it represented by showing that it was a matter of forms that were historically constituted at a particular time and in a particular context, and wasn’t this a way of showing that these practices, in a different context, could be dismantled because they had become arbitrary and ineffective” (399)?

include the practice of critique, which is also unstable and precarious. As John Rajchman suggests in *Michel Foucault: the freedom of philosophy*, critique involves “risk; it is not guaranteed, backed up, or assured: it always remains without an end” (1985, 123). The riskiness and uncertainty of critique has implications for those who are collectively engaged in the practice of critique. It requires that they engage in the constant questioning of their practices and claims and that they never be fully secure in their assessments. In his essay, “For an Ethic of Discomfort,” Foucault argues (drawing upon Merleau-Ponty) that the “essential philosophical task [is] never to consent to being completely comfortable with one’s own presuppositions” (2000, 448).

In a certain sense, Foucault’s notion of critique is about safeguarding the ability to question, challenge and critically think about the systems of power that shape and control us. This is a point that Butler takes up and privileges in her discussion of feminism and its future as a democracy. Both of them believe that when individuals attempt to provide definitive answers for “what is to be done,” the ability to critically think about and challenge those answers and explore more effective solutions is shut down. They argue that when emphasis is placed on the right answer and right program of action, the result is often a “prohibition against inventing” (Foucault 1989, 312) new and creative ways in which to respond to problems. Such a move can “become a form of blackmailing serving to limit, reduce, or halt the exercise of criticism” and lead to the burying of political actors “under the weight of prescriptive, prophetic discourse” (Foucault 2000, 236). Criticism is essential for effective political action because it forces (or at least encourages) individuals within an alliance to rethink their actions; “making it so that

what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted” (Foucault 2000, 456). Criticism can create a sense of urgency as allies identify and interrogate the limits of their visions and search to find new, and possibly more effective, ways in which to address problems.

In their safeguarding of critical thought Foucault and Butler are not suggesting that all of our terms, beliefs, understandings are too limited to be of use. For example, in many of her writings, Butler defends her emphasis on critique and contestation by arguing that the critical questioning of feminism and its terms and claims is not a rejection of or a distancing from those terms or their use, but a call to take them seriously, to understand why these terms are used and the effects of their use. By continuing to question and critically explore their claims, feminists are compelled to give an account of them instead of being allowed to merely assert them as the “uninterrogated premise for political argument” (Butler 2004c, 178). This echoes Foucault’s earlier claim in “What is Enlightenment?” that critique is not about rejecting or dismissing the claims and ideas that we are critically exploring—such a move is not possible because these ideas have shaped us and brought us into existence—but about pushing at them to uncover and experiment or play with their limits.

Additionally in safeguarding thought, Foucault and Butler are not suggesting that we cannot develop any answers, but only that the answers we give are not definitive or final ones. While Foucault (and Butler even more so) devote most of their theoretical energy to safeguarding critical thought, they do suggest that critique can produce some answers, albeit tentative and experimental ones. As indicated earlier in this second section, Foucault’s notion of critique has two parts; it is not merely dedicated to pushing

our limits, but is also interested in the creative and imaginative process of exploring, experimenting and potentially moving beyond our limits. In describing critique as experiment, Foucault contrasts it with critique as war, arguing that critique should not be a battle in which individuals fight each other as enemies for the ultimate victory of their claims, ideas or theories, but an experimental game in which partners work together, trading questions and answers, in order to develop, as a collective, a more effective understanding of a given problem and its potential solutions (Foucault 2000, 112).

Foucault also contrasts critique as experiment with critique as judgment. For him, critique should not be concerned with identifying the limits or problems within a particular idea or theory and then offering a judgment on how to correct that theory, but with breathing new life into that theory by playing with its possibilities.<sup>33</sup>

Foucault's version of critique, with its emphasis on critical questioning, debate and experimentation, is an important practice for feminists who wish to maintain and strengthen their alliances. Through the collective process of pushing at and experimenting with the limits of feminism by critical questioning those limits, debating them and experimenting with new ways in which to understand them, feminists could develop stronger connections with each other, connections that are not created at the expense of or in spite of the important differences that exist between them. Moreover, through this practice, feminists can cultivate the virtues that are most needed in order to adopt and

---

<sup>33</sup> In "The Masked Philosopher," Foucault reflects on this different form of critique, writing: "I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep... Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination" (Foucault 1997, 323).

maintain the feminist democratic ethos. In order to understand the labor of critique and how it could enable feminists to forge deeper connections with each other, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to examining one particular limit question within feminism: What is the livable life and who gets to claim it?

*b. The Livable Life*

And so there are at least two senses of life, the one that refers to the minimum biological form of living, and another that intervenes at the start, which establishes minimum conditions for a livable life with regard to human life.

—Judith Butler

As Butler suggests in the above quotation, the livable life is somehow about more than basic, material survival. To have a livable life is not only about being able to eat, sleep or breathe (although those things are essential), it is about being acknowledged by others as valuable and being seen as a legitimate subject and a human who is worthy of a life. And it is about the resources and the institutional support we need to achieve and maintain that life. In this way, the livable life is concerned with the *quality* of one's life.

While feminists have long been concerned with the livable life and how to extend that life to as many individuals as possible, they have not always agreed on what the livable life is, who gets to claim it or how to go about extending that life to others. In fact, the idea of the livable life has been a source of heated debate and conflict within feminism. Drawing upon the idea of critique and the importance of a playful attitude (through flexibility, vigilance, courage and vision) towards others, I believe that the collective labor that must be done to sort through and critically examine the multiplicity

of interpretations of the livable life could enable feminists to develop strong, long-lasting and democratic alliances.

The question of the livable life is not the *only* question within feminism but it is a very significant one that, when explored from a myriad directions, helps to illuminate the complexity and richness of feminism and its members.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, because it is a central guiding question for a character-driven feminist ethics, its exploration helps us to better understand what an ethics of feminism democracy and a feminist democratic ethos should be.

Instead of weakening feminism and its effectiveness as a movement for social transformation and justice, these disagreements over the livable life and the debate that they produce can serve as a locus for important questions and collective discussions about what matters most to feminists in their political/theoretical/ethical projects. And through this process of discerning what matters most to us as feminists, we have the possibility to develop deep connections and meaningful alliances.

Indeed, questions about what constitutes the livable life and how to achieve and maintain that life are questions that speak to our core values and touch upon the fundamental issues that drive our political, theoretical and, most importantly, our ethical

---

<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler reflects on the importance of the question of life for feminists in her essay, "The Question of Social Transformation," arguing that the question is posed in a number of ways: "What is the good life? How has the good life been conceived such that women's lives have not been included in its conceptualization? What would the good life be for women?" or "Whose life is counted as a life? Whose prerogative is it to live? How do we decide when life beings and ends, and how do we think life against life? Under what conditions should life come into being, and through what means? Who cares for life as it emerges? Who tends for the life of the child? Who cares for life as it wanes? Who cares for the life of the mother, and of what value is it ultimately? And to what extent does gender, coherent gender, secure a life as livable? What threat of death is delivered to those who do not live gender according to its accepted norms" (205)?

practices. By exploring these questions collectively, we can begin to understand and appreciate each other better. For example, Butler is deeply concerned with enabling individuals to love and grieve who they want. As a queer theorist whose is very interested in the ways in which gays and lesbians are “produced, reproduced and deproduced” as illegitimate subjects, she believes that one’s quality of life is intimately connected to one’s ability to properly and publicly grieve for those that they have loved and lost (Butler 2004c, 222).

Bell hooks believes that a livable life requires that individuals be able to develop and express their own unique voice and have that voice acknowledged and valued by others. Drawing upon her own experiences as a poor black girl growing up in the South, she argues that it was essential for her to find ways in which to express herself—to talk back—to others in order to claim and assert her humanity and subjectivity (hooks 1989).

And, Dorothy Allison understands the livable life to involve the ability to tell the truth about herself, her family and their experiences as “poor white trash.” Her life became livable only when she was able to stop running from her despised identities and confront, accept and write about them as important parts of herself (Allison 1994, 1995).

Each of these descriptions of the livable life comes from a different perspective that, when taken together, can enrich our understanding of the multiple ways in which life can and should be valued within feminism. But any exploration of the livable life as a *limit* question requires that we do much more than simply appreciate or recognize the differences that exist between us. For it is not the case that we can create a list of the different ways in which we understand the livable life and expect that list to adequately or

effectively address all of our questions and concerns about how to make that livable life possible or how to negotiate between the various definitions of the livable life.

The livable life is a limit question because it is a question that brings out key and (sometimes) irresolvable conflicts between feminists on how to most effectively work for social transformation and a better world. If we, as feminists, are to be able to work through these conflicts and create some sort of common ground or basis for alliance between us, we need to participate in the collective critique (critical thinking, debate and playful experimentation) of this limit question.

On the surface, the question of the livable life and who gets to claim it appears to be fairly straightforward. The livable life is afforded to all humans and involves the ability to survive and flourish within the world. Indeed, this response resonates with some of the goals for feminism that I have articulated throughout (but particularly within chapter two) this dissertation. However, any easy response to this question breaks down when we begin to think critically about the key terms articulated in our response. When we do this, we find that the question of the livable life is difficult and contentious, raising many other questions, including: (1) What is human and who counts as such? and (2) Is the question of surviving and flourishing an ethical or political question—can it be both?

First, what is “human” and who counts as such? Theorists from a variety of perspectives have documented the ways in which a universal definition of the human excludes many on the basis of race, age, gender, class, sexual preference, able-bodiedness or geo-political positioning. Far from being universal, the category of “human” has been established with particular individuals (white, Western, middle-class, well-educated men)

in mind. But even more damaging than this critique is the charge that this universal definition of human not only excludes some individuals but is established as “human” and “universal” at the expense of those individuals and their humanity.<sup>35</sup> Because they do not fit the established definition of human (e.g. heterosexual or enlightened and empowered Westerner), certain (illegitimate) individuals function as the border (the boundary line) between the human and the inhuman. Recognizing these critiques and the ways in which the “human” has been exclusionary, many feminists argue that we must define “human” in more universal and inclusive ways. For example, Martha Nussbaum strongly contends that the establishment and assertion of a foundational and universal definition of the “human” and her capabilities is absolutely essential for achieving less oppressive and more just futures.<sup>36</sup> But, how can we assert a claim for the “human” while still taking into consideration the ways in which “human” has been exclusive or used to oppress others? And how can we negotiate between our different claims for the “human” without reducing those claims to a singular and globalizing vision?

Second, how can we ensure the survival and flourishing of individuals? Is this a political or ethical question? Can it be both? In the introduction to their collection, *Daring to be Good*, Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson describe the division that exists

---

<sup>35</sup> In her latest work, *Undoing Gender*, Butler devotes considerable attention to the question of the “human,” particularly how it relates to international gay and lesbian human rights. She argues that lesbian and gays have been excluded from the category of legitimate human. Describing this exclusion, she writes: “to be called unreal and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against whom (or against which) the human is made. It is to be the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality” (Butler 2004, 30).

<sup>36</sup> See her chapter, “Women and Cultural Universals” from *Sex and Social Justice*, in which she outlines a specific list of human functional capabilities (Nussbaum 1999, 29-54).

between politics and ethics within feminism. According to them, feminists approach questions of social transformation (in this case, the question of ensuring the livable life for as many as possible) in one of two ways. If they are part of the “politico” camp, they address the question by critiquing the state and liberal ideals of citizenship and by arguing for the redistribution of rights and resources. In this way, their primary concern is with establishing justice on the social, economic and state levels. If they are part of the “ethico” camp, they address the question by critiquing traditional (and masculinist) theories of morality and by developing new ethical and moral theories that recognize the experiences of women (as mothers, care-givers, relational beings). In this way, their primary concern is with ensuring the good life through the establishment of feminist-centered values and visions. As Bar On and Ferguson suggest, each side can critique the other for not effectively answering the question or addressing all of the central concerns (both political and ethical) of what it means to establish and sustain a livable life.

But, the problem here is not just about the division between those who practice politics and those who practice ethics. The problem is that many of those in the politico camp argue that ethics and morality are dangerous and damaging pursuits for feminists and that they frequently preempt or prevent discussions within feminism about power, democracy, conflict and difference. Operating from within the politico camp, Butler claims that she is reluctant to engage in explorations of ethics in relation to democracy because she believes that a turn to ethics is a turn away from the political. Ethics is, as she writes about it in “Ethical Ambivalence,” an escape from the political (2000b, 15).

Butler is not alone in her negative assessment of ethics. Indeed other politico thinkers, such as Wendy Brown and Chantal Mouffe, argue similar points about ethics and morality in their work on feminist democracy. Brown argues that feminist thinkers turn to morality in order to transcend power and the messiness and uncertainty of politics.<sup>37</sup> And Mouffe argues that democratic theorists turn to ethics in order to create a rational consensus in which differences and tensions between members are resolved for the purpose of creating a shared set of normative values. This consensus “erases the dimension of antagonism” within politics, a dimension that is essential to the development of political practice as democratic (Mouffe 2000, 89).

In her own description of ethics as the escape from the political, Butler is troubled by ethics for many of the same reasons that Brown and Mouffe are. Yet, she is also concerned by the restrictions that ethical norms place on her own freedom, as both a political subject and an individual (and private) self. In “Ethical Ambivalence,” Butler expresses her concerns about a turn to ethics: “I’ve worried that it has meant a certain heightening of moralism and this has made me cry out, as Nietzsche cried about Hegel, ‘Bad Air! Bad Air!’”(15). Fundamental to this cry out against bad air is Butler’s desire for room to breathe, a space in which she is not suffocated by the guilt that is generated from morality and a space in which she is free from those norms that necessarily require the violent exclusion of other ways of being and that impose restrictions on her own pursuit of the livable life.

---

<sup>37</sup> For more on Brown’s critique of morality/ethics, see (1995, 30-51 and 52-76) and (2001, 18-44).

For those on the other side of the division, those within the ethico camp, the establishment of ethical norms and normative visions of what is to be done and how we are to live ethically and politically within feminist democracy are essential for the future effectiveness of feminism. Many ethico feminists are concerned with social transformation as it relates to the construction and enactment of better futures for feminists, futures that enable individual feminists and communities of feminists to claim their humanity, to be acknowledged as valuable and valued subjects/selves and, in so doing, to obtain and sustain the livable life. In this way, for the ethico feminist, the question of the livable life is not about being free to live life as she desires, but is often about being included in the larger world and being acknowledged as a legitimate subject with an important and distinctive voice.

Even when many feminists are in agreement about what kind of question the livable life is (political or ethical), they still often disagree about what constitutes survival or flourishing. In terms of survival, what basic needs must be met for survival? Can we talk about these in any universal way? How do those needs get translated in different social, cultural, national contexts? In terms of flourishing, what constitutes the good life? Is this life about having freedom from restraint or is it about establishing norms that guarantee our livability? Can it be both?

So, how do we negotiate between these two conflicts? How do we create a compelling and guiding response to the question of the livable life without choosing one particular claim over the other or without developing a reductive synthesis of our multiple claims?

We do this by engaging in the difficult and collective labor of debating and experimenting with the limits of our individual claims. This labor requires that we practice all four of the virtues of the democratic/playful character. We must be flexible and open by not only submitting our own claims to critique but relenting those claims when they are proven to be exclusionary or ineffective. We must be vigilant in our efforts to not prematurely foreclose critical debates over our claims by definitively asserting a universal definition of the human and in our efforts to not reduce the conflict between politics and ethics to a matter of choosing between sides. We must be courageous in our willingness to critique the limits of our own claims and confront others with the limits of theirs. And, we must be visionary in our commitment to weaving together a compelling and cohesive (but not singular) response to the question of the livable life and how to achieve it.

In raising the question of the livable life, my intent is not to trace the multiplicity of (sometimes conflicting) feminist responses to the question. Nor, is it to describe what the end results of submitting this question to the process of critique could or would be. Instead, I raise this question of the livable life—what it is, who gets to claim it and how it is achieved—at the end of this dissertation as a way to think about the story of feminism’s future. In continuing to critically explore this question instead of prematurely resolving it, we are able to become clearer about what feminism is and 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, most importantly, we are able to collectively create a more compelling and cohesive story of feminism’s future as a

democracy. It is this story, the story of democracy within twenty-first feminism that I turn to now.