

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 1

Within current feminist theories and discourses on identity, much emphasis is placed on the ways in which identity categories are problematic. The traditional understanding of the identity “woman” as the singular foundation for feminist theories and politics has been critically assessed to expose the ways in which it can both be exclusive and totalizing. Critics of the identity “woman” claim that it is not a mere description or stable foundation for feminist theory or politics, but a politicized category that cannot be unproblematically accepted but must instead be critically examined to uncover the underlying power matrices that have produced it.

As a result of these challenges to the identity “woman,” identity is now understood as a dangerous category—one that cannot easily or safely be asserted. In such a way, the emphasis within feminist theory and politics has shifted from exploring ways in which to define “woman” to critically exposing the ways in which “woman” has been[^] and continues to be exclusive and totalizing. Fundamentally, for many feminist theorists, identity, namely the identity “woman,” is understood as a negative category.

In light of its problems, it would seem that identity categories should no longer be used. However, even as they critique identity categories, many feminists recognize the necessity for identity claims and assertions. In order for women to have representation, both culturally and politically, they must assert themselves in terms of specific identities.

The understanding that identity categories and claims are frequently negative and exclusive coupled with the recognition that identity claims are necessary for representation has created a tension within feminist theory and politics. This tension has raised the question: How do we reconcile the need to assert identity claims with the need to critique those identity claims? Recognizing this tension, this essay will

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 2

explore ways in which to navigate between the need for identity and the need to critique and be suspicious of that identity. Specifically, I will explore how this tension within feminist theory and politics has been addressed in the works of two contemporary feminist theorists, Judith Butler and Carol Boyce Davies. I choose these two theorists because I feel that their different discussions on identity and its problems provide a good representation of the varied understandings of identity claims within feminist theory and politics.

In her writings, Judith Butler focuses on gendered identity and the process of intelligibility that dictates what counts as an acceptable identity. One of the founding members of queer theory, she examines how identity claims such as “I am a woman” are founded on a system of compulsory heterosexuality which simultaneously draws upon and excludes other identity claims, such as “I am a lesbian.” Her work on identity is drawn from critical theory, psychoanalysis and poststructuralist theory. In contrast, Carol Boyce Davies, in her writings, focuses on identity as expressed through the autobiographical writings of Black women. She critiques the understood notions of identity for these Black women while attempting to negotiate the multiple levels of experience that constitute Black women’s actual identities. Her work on identity is drawn from the theories of many women of color and the stories of Black women writers from around the world.

To explore this tension, first I will examine Butler and Boyce Davies’ understandings of the problem with identity claims, the need for identity claims and the method for asserting identity claims. Then, I will offer my critical analysis of their re...

spective theories. Finally, I will indicate the direction for future discussions of identity and its problems.

I. Judith Butler and the risk of identity

According to Judith Butler, the concept of identity is problematic. Drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault and his tracings of the processes and regulatory practices that have functioned to shape us as individuals and as subjects, she argues that the traditional understanding of identity as “a coherent, unifying description attributed to a stable, ready-made subject, fails to recognize the ways in which identity regulates and produces subjects. It is her contention that identity is not just a descriptive feature of experience, but a normative ideal, one that dictates which behaviors are deemed intelligible (that is, recognizable and identifiable) within discourse and therefore legitimate and which behaviors are deemed unintelligible and illegitimate. For her, asserting identity is a task that includes more than unproblematically appealing to certain labels to describe oneself, like “I am a woman” or “I am a lesbian.” Instead, it involves the regulation and production of an ideal identity promoted and controlled by a process of intelligibility.

This process is regulated by a specific set of rules that all subjects must follow in order for their identity to be recognized within discourse. As a process of intelligibility, Butler understands identity and the specific set of rules to be involved in an elaborate and unending sign-chain in which individuals’ identities have their own history of “interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion.” In contrast to a traditional understanding of identity that

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 4

suggests that identity is a label that gains meaning through the subject it identifies, Butler's understanding of identity as part of a sign-chain suggests that identity has its own meaning and significance apart from any subject and that, when an individual asserts a certain identity that identity actually shapes and creates the individual and the type of meaning it will be granted within discourse. As a result of this, individuals do not have complete control over the effects of the identities they claim.

For Butler, 'this process of intelligibility and the elaborate sign-chain of identity is problematic because the rules and regulations that shape identity and the rich and varied history of its meanings are not readily visible. In fact, these rules are not explicitly stated within discourses on identity, but are instead implicitly accepted, hidden behind the seemingly coherent and a priori 'I' that is understood to be asserted, not produced. In other words, identity is understood to be a natural and absolute truth in order to conceal the actual ways in which it is produced through a complex system of regulatory practices. As Butler states it in *Gender Trouble*, "'I' only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own markings and to naturalize its effects."

As a result of this, when we assume that identity is an unproblematic description of an individual and their behavior and experiences, we fail to see the ways in which identity claims are involved in reinforcing certain rules and (re)producing certain hegemonic ideologies. According to Butler, if we recognize that the actual process of identity has been concealed by this false naturalization, we can begin to question identity, exploring the ways in which identity is shaped and regulated and how the

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 5

various ideologies are perpetuated through the acceptance of certain identities over others.

In exploring and critically questioning identity, Butler focuses, both in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, on the ways in which individuals gain intelligibility through the process of gender identity. It is her contention that the overarching structure (or hegemony) that establishes the rules of gendered intelligibility is based on a system that excludes and abjects all individuals that do not follow the rules of heterosexuality. As she states in *Gender Trouble*, "'intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire." In other words in order to have an intelligibly gendered identity, a subject must follow the supposedly natural patterns of desire and sexual behavior dictated by heterosexuality. Either one must be (1) a male who desires a female or (2) a female who desires a male. No variations are recognized as intelligible. Because certain identities do not follow these established set of rules, they are labeled abject beings who exist in locations that are "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" and represent identities that are illegitimate and unintelligible by the dominant discourse.

Butler argues that this failure to recognize certain identities and the resulting understanding of them as abject beings is more than just an exclusion of these certain identities. In this process of intelligibility and identification, acceptable identities require the existence of these abject beings. Existing on the fringes of normal society, these abject beings serve as the boundaries for subjects, representing the limits of what is normal. They function as examples of what normal subjects are not and serve as a

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 6

constant threat of what normal subjects, if disobedient and deviant, could become. In the introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes the status of these abject beings and their necessity.

The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life. . . This zone of 'uninhabitability' will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life.

If we take the example of heterosexuality and its rules, this description is suggesting that subjects are produced through the threat, "the dreaded identification," that they will become what homosexuals are—non-subjects. This constant threat works to regulate subjects' behaviors. By looking to the unacceptable behavior of abject beings, that is, their failures to follow the rules of only linking certain genders with certain desires, and their resulting punishments, that is, their banishment to the fringes of representation and the stripping of their power, figured as castration, subjects can learn what boundaries to never cross. If they wish to have intelligible identities and to be properly recognized within discourse, they must follow the rules of heterosexuality, that is, if they are a woman they must desire men and if they are a man they must desire women.

This recognition of identity as a complex process that works to shape and reinforce identities through exclusion and abjection is particularly important for political discourses such as feminism. As suggested by Butler in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, feminist politics are typically based on the model of identity politics, where a singular and unifying identity serves as the foundation of political theorizing and action. In the case of feminism, this foundational identity is woman, where 'woman' becomes a

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 7

“rallying point for political mobilization” and as such “appear[s] to hold out the promise of unity, solidarity, universality” for women within feminism.

One readily apparent problem with this understanding of woman is that woman has traditionally been defined in very narrow, limiting terms that fail to recognize women’s varied and complex experiences of race, class or sexuality. Attempting to respond to this, feminists have tried to offer more inclusive definitions that account for all different types of experiences. For Butler, this emphasis on inclusivity does not ameliorate the problem, but in fact aggravates it because all of the descriptions of woman fall short of fully accounting for women’s varied experiences. “The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class and ablebodiedness,” Butler claims, “invariably close with an embarrassed ‘etc’ at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete.”

According to Butler, this inevitable “etc.” indicates that the problem with feminist identity politics is not one that can be solved by changing or expanding the definition of woman. This solution is still based on an unproblematic acceptance of identity_ as a descriptive foundation. Instead, feminists must examine the ways in which identity is itself a political term that is involved in an elaborate sign-chain process that does not merely describe individuals but creates and regulates them. Feminists must recognize that as a part of a sign-chain process, identity categories are not just willed into existence by the individuals who claim them but are instead situated within a series of signifiers that are linked together through a historical process that continually recreates itself in different and unexpected ways. As a result of this sign-chain, identity claims can

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 8

never fully be under the control of those individuals who claim them and they can never provide final or definitive descriptions of subjects.

In understanding the problems with identity and identity politics, feminists must also recognize that not only is an emphasis on establishing a unified, coherent identity 'woman' impossible, but it is also created at the expense of those individuals that do not fit into the system of intelligibility that is perpetuated by the dominant hegemony. Moreover, such an emphasis on "fixing" women into one singular identity of 'woman' or multiple unified categories of 'women,' forecloses the potential for finding future ways in which women, in all of their varied experiences, can relate to one another. In lamenting this, Butler suggests that the understanding that different experiences of race, class or sexuality are merely separate categories to be added to an ever-growing list "produce[s] a greater factionalization, a proliferation of difference without any means of negotiating among them." The presentation of different identities as coherent and discrete "fails to understand that the very subject-positions in question are themselves a kind of 'crossing,' are themselves the lived scene of coalition's difficulty." In doing so, identity politics forecloses the possibility for future, democratic contestations and coalitional alliances between various subordinated groups. In other words, by continuing to perpetuate the idea that identity can fully describe individuals, identity politics is closing off politics to the future possibilities of democratizing new identities.

It would seem that if identity is so problematic, involving a process of regulation where certain identities are excluded and abjected and others are reinforced in order to perpetuate the dominant hegemony, that identity should be rejected. However, this is not the goal of Butler's critical inquiry of the process of identity. As she argues in

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 9

“Contingent Foundations,” “to call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it: rather, it is to free it up from its metaphysical lodgings in order to occupy and to serve very different political aims.” In other words, in her critical examination of identity and the revealing of the processes that create it, Butler does not reject identity, she only wishes to engage it more critically in the hopes of opening it up to new possibilities and meanings. She does not believe identity to be a solely debilitating category but, in fact, feels that “it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used.”

Butler offers several reasons for continuing to use categories of identity. First, identity is a necessary category for existence. Looking to the theories of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, Butler argues that it is through the process and regulations of identity that we become represented within discourse and gain the ability to speak as an ‘I.’ In fact, it is through the processes of identity that we are created as intelligible subjects. The rules and regulations that dictate those identities shape and influence us and our behaviors. In such a way, to reject identity categories, is to reject ourselves. According to Butler, such a rejection is not possible because “none of us can fully answer to the demand to ‘get over yourself!’” We need identity to exist within discourse.

In connection with this first reason for continuing to promote identity, Butler contends that identity is necessary because it is the way in which we are politically recognized. Speaking specifically about feminism and the promotion of the identity ‘woman,’ Butler states that

Surely, that is the way in which representational politics operates, and in this country, lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics. So we agree that demonstrations and radical movements need to make claims in the name of women.

Ultimately, the political system is based on granting rights and privileges to individuals who are recognized within social discourse. Therefore, for Butler, without recognition within political discourse, individuals cannot “become recipients of health care” or “have partnerships legally recognized. . . .” Due to the political structure, the ability to be recognized as individuals with specific identities within political discourse is absolutely necessary in order to effect political change, such as abolishing oppressive policies or extending rights to more individuals.

Recognizing this necessity for identity but also recognizing the harmful and injurious ways in which identity shapes and regulates individuals, Butler’s theory on identity is tenuous. According to these theories, individuals are in the dangerous position of having been formed and brought into social existence by the very powers that injure them and which they wish to resist.

In light of such a situation, several important questions come to mind: How will we reconcile this need for identity with its harmful effects? How will we ensure that the identity claims we politically assert do not reinforce the regulations that have negatively produced us and have created the very need for political assertions? In terms of power and its negative and positive effects, “How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?”

It is in context of all of these questions that Butler discusses the idea of risk. Although she never explicitly theorizes this risk, her repeated discussion of it and frequent appeal to it offers an implicit theory that suggests that identity claims are a

necessary risk. Throughout several of her discussions of identity, Butler uses the word risk to describe the way in which to approach identity claims. Because she believes that we must use identity categories, but must also be cautious of the exclusionary practices of these identity categories, she argues that risking identity is our only option. We must risk the claiming of identities regardless of the possible costs.

For Butler, these possible costs are centered on the fact that the identity claims we make are not completely under our control. We can assert them with specific political goals in mind, but the identity categories will take on meanings and purposes that extend beyond our intentions. When we risk claiming an identity, we become vulnerable, leaving ourselves open to the multiple ways in which our identity can be harmful. For example, the identity claims we make may actually exclude other individuals that we wish to include under the identity we have claimed. The identity claims we make could be used against us, allowing us only to be recognized under a negative sign. Or, the identity claims we make now may be ineffective or actually injurious to future generations.

Although Butler recognizes that these possible costs could have very negative effects on those claiming identity, she still wishes to promote identity as a necessary risk because she believes that the ambiguous and risky nature of identity categories allows for a type of radical democracy in which the identities we claim are left open and continuously challenged and reassessed for future (and possibly better) use. By leaving them open, categories can be more flexible and able to respond effectively to critique.

This critique, which Butler calls a “democratizing contestation,” is a process in which “exclusionary conditions of their [identity categories] production are perpetually

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 12

reworked (even though they may never be fully overcome) in the direction of a more complex coalitional framework.” The goal of this coalitional framework is to account more effectively for differences and to bring individuals together through an exploration of the various ways in which their experiences intersect at crossroads.

Ultimately for Butler, the goal of risking identity is to ensure that sites of identity, such as “woman” or “queer,” are never promoted as final or totalized. Instead, they are understood to be provisional identities, ones that temporarily serve to assert certain claims but are involved in a constant tension with the dangerous potentials of identity. As Butler states it in *Bodies That Matter*, “the necessary error [or risk] of identity (Spivak’s term) will always be in tension with the democratic contestation of the term. . . .” Due to this tension, identity claims are under a constant critique, one that allows for them consistently to be reconfigured and redeployed so that they will not foreclose future political discussions. Using the example of the identity “queer,” Butler argues that in order for identity to remain an open category, those who claim the identity “queer” must

let it [queer] be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments.

In offering this theory of risk, Butler is responding to the questions that were posed earlier in this paper. To the question: “How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose,” Butler responds that we don’t. It is not possible for us to foresee all of the ways in which the identities we assert will be used. To deal with such uncertainty, we must risk identity, that is, we must make identity

Qclaims, but we must consistently critique those claims and leave them open for new reconfigurations and meanings.

II. Carol Boyce Davies and the migration of identity

Similar to Butler, Boyce Davies argues that identity, which is frequently presented as a singular, monolithic category, is exclusive and totalizing and is offered at the expense of certain individuals whose voices are silenced and experiences are marginalized. But, unlike Butler, who in her writings focuses on theories of gender and sexuality and looks to the work of critical and postmodern theorists, Boyce Davies focuses on the lived spaces and locations of Black women writers as expressed in their autobiographical writings. In particular, her discussions of these lived spaces and locations involves a critical examination and rearticulation of the notion of home. Reading identity as both one's theoretical and physical home, Boyce Davies describes the ways in which the traditional understanding of identity has served as a "principal site of domination and conflict for women."

In reading identity as a theoretical home, Boyce Davies contends that the identities of "woman" or "Black" or "African" have been exclusive and oppressive. For example, Davies recognizes that the notion of woman, within feminist theory and discourse, is often understood as a universal category that, while claiming to represent and speak for all women, frequently fails to give many Black women, of various geographical locations and class positions, the right to speak. Instead of speaking for all women, the category woman has often been implicitly understood as White woman.

Similarly, in examining the notion of African as understood in the movement of Pan-Africanism, Boyce Davies claims that it serves—just like many nationalist

discourses—as a totalizing discourse, one which creates “a singularly monolithic construction of an African theoretical homeland” at the expense of Black women.

According to her,

what is asked of women in some of these nationalist discourses is that they accept their own oppression as a given (using some examples from the US), accept commodification (2 Live Crew), abuse (Shaharazad Ali), death (Suti in India), silencing (Anita Hill), rape (Desiree Washington), to allow race-based discourses, i.e., Black/male discourses to exist.

Boyce Davies argues that Black women must, for the sake of Pan-African/nationalist discourse, deny their specific gendered/sexual identities in order to be subsumed under the monolithic and male-gendered identity of “Black” or “African.” Citing Cynthia Enloe, Boyce Davies argues that nationalism is a male discourse, coming out of “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.” What counts as the experience of Black or African and what is represented as Afro-centric culture is determined by men. In such a way, just like feminist discourses exclude the voices of Black women, masculinized nationalist discourses exclude the voices of women who are black.

In arguing these points, Boyce Davies is not suggesting that all nationalist or feminist discourses are totalizing, but instead that both can be excluding to Black women. Looking to the work of several US Black feminists, such as the collection *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us are Brave* and *Ain't I A Woman*. Black Women and Feminism, Boyce Davies suggests that there has been a gap between “feminist assertion and Black nationalist assertion into which Black women disappeared.”

Fundamentally, Boyce Davies believes that there is a gap because Black women do not exist as stable, unified and singular identities. And, as such, they do not fit into the accepted system of identities/identification. In contrast to the accepted system, as dictated by feminist and Pan-African nationalist discourses, Black women exist as migratory subjects that are constantly traveling to different locations of race, gender, class, age, sexuality or geography. The failure of the accepted system to recognize these migratory experiences serves to marginalize the different experiences of Black women and denies them the right to speak from their own multiple and fluctuating positions.

In addition to reading identity as a theoretical home, Boyce Davies also reads it as a physical location of residence. She argues that in contrast to the traditional understanding of one's home as a safe and comfortable shelter from the world and its problems, for Black women the notion of home is often seen as a place of alienation and a site of oppression. In the autobiographical writings of many Black women, "the mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways."

This idea of oppression and alienation is further explored in Boyce Davies' discussion of Ana Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa*. In this play, Anowa understands her homes, both where she grew up and where she eventually lived with her husband, to be "place[s] of disorientation and social conformity." For Anowa, the home where she grew up was the location where her gendered role as woman was enforced. At this location, her parents repeatedly dictated to her how a "proper" woman must behave, emphasizing her need to marry and bear children. These rules were oppressive and

alienating to Anowa because she did not wish to conform to this standard feminine role. She did not wish to be a “good” wife or a “good” daughter, as dictated by the village. Because of her rejection of these roles, she was shunned by her village and dominated by her family as they tried to force these feminine roles upon her.

For Anowa, the home where she lived with her husband was the location where her subservient role as oppressed and colonized woman was enforced. Calling this location the Big House, Boyce Davies describes it as “constricting walls with icons of empire and masculinity superimposed.” The Big House was the location where Anowa’s husband asserted his male power by oppressing and dominating her.

Involved in Anowa’s feelings of alienation and oppression were the feelings of rejection and condemnation as her experiences of who she really was or wanted to be were denied by her family and friends. This rejection led to feelings of danger because the location where Anowa should have felt the most safe and accepted, i.e. the home, was one the very locations that rejected and oppressed her. These feelings are echoed in the writings of many Black women and women of color. Describing her experience as a mestiza lesbian, Gloria Anzaldúa suggests that her feelings of rejection and alienation caused her to be frightened of going home. She reflects this in a new understanding of the term homophobia—[]the fear of going home.

In the understandings of identity as both one’s theoretical and physical home, Boyce Davies contends that Black women writers demystify the traditional romantic notions of home as stable/unifying and safe/comfortable. Through an articulation of their experiences as migratory subjects, that is as subjects who exist at multiple locations and maintain multiple identities, they question the value of identity by

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 17

demonstrating how it has been oppressive, exclusive and marginalizing. In doing so, Black women writers show how identity claims, such as “I am a Black woman,” must not be unproblematically or romantically accepted. Instead, they must be critically assessed to explore the various ways in which identity claims totalize and exclude certain experiences.

In recognizing all of these problems, Boyce Davies does not wish to do away with identity or identity claims. According to her, identity claims provide Black women with recognition in culture and politics. They also provide Black women with a position from which to view and assess theories and to articulate experiences. The lack of a “home” identity can cause theoretical and physical homelessness, where the rejection of identities (such as national identity or familial identity) leads to a sense of total displacement and disconnection.

In addition to the need for identity in order to be recognized, Boyce Davies emphasizes the strong desire, among Black women writers, to remember and reconnect with their heritage and their history. As she states it:

Because we were/are products of separations and dislocation and dis-memberings, people of African descent in the Americas historically have sought reconnection.

Fundamentally, for Boyce Davies the experiences of displacement and exile have created, among Black women, a strong desire for home and heritage. For these reasons, the question concerning identity is not: How do we get over it?, but How do we renegotiate it so that our experiences are recognized and our voices are heard?

In order to renegotiate identity/identity categories, Boyce Davies urges us to look at identity in a different way. Instead of understanding it as a singular, monolithic and fixed category, we should see it a

s fluid, existing at a variety of locations. Describing these multiple locations, Boyce Davies claims that Black women live at the borderlands where “different cultures, identities, sexualities, classes, geographies, races, genders and so on collide or interchange.” In offering such a description, Boyce Davies suggests that Black women’s experiences of identity (both as a theoretical and physical home) require them to navigate between different understandings of themselves and others. In doing so, Davies promotes identity as a complex notion, one that can encompass a wide range of possibilities and that requires careful attention to the potential for exclusion and marginalization.

In describing it in such a way, Davies believes that identity is a journey. For her, identity is not a fixed theoretical position nor any one physical location. Instead, it is a process in which Black women migrate to various locations and understandings. As the border metaphor mentioned above suggests, Black women live in fluid locations that are constantly shifting between different understandings of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.

These journeys and migrations include a re-negotiation of Black women’s relationships to their heritage in which a more complex understanding of how heritage is a fundamental part of Black women’s understanding of themselves and a fundamental source of Black women’s oppression is realized. As Davies understands it, the project of re-negotiation involves:

. . . finding ways to express the conflicted meaning of home in the experience of the formally colonized. It also demands a continual rewriting of the boundaries of what constitutes home.

Davies illustrates this idea in her discussion of Audre Lorde's novel *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*. This novel tells the story of one Caribbean woman and her journey to understand and accept her Caribbean heritage. Davies describes this journey as a painful, yet necessary, passage because,

[f]or the Caribbean woman, confronting racial discrimination and foreign bias, Caribbean male phallicism and American imperialism, the relationship to Caribbean identity has to be problematized.

Through this struggle to reject those experiences that confined her, such as living in her mother's house, and to recognize the positive elements of her heritage, such as the "legendary women of her excluded family," *Zami* is able to redefine her heritage in ways that allow her to embrace a new sense of home. Implicit in this redefinition is the understanding that it was only possible to redefine home because *Zami* distanced herself from home and began to journey.

This promotion of journeying and migration is further illustrated in the story of *Anowa*. As discussed earlier, *Anowa* is trapped between two homes—the home where she grew up and where her family dictated how she behaved and the home where she lived with her husband and where he dictated how she behaved. In assessing this situation, it is Boyce Davies's contention that it is only when *Anowa* is traveling between the houses that she is able to assert her own identity/identities. The highway running between the two houses serves as "the locus of potential negotiated gender and class locations."¹¹ It is the location where *Anowa* is freest. Referring back to Anzaldúa, the highway is the borderland, existing as the in-between and the elsewhere. *Anowa* is the "wayfarer" who stays on the highway, resisting the fixed definitions of either houses and

claiming her own multiple identities through a process of negotiating between shifting experiences.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa claims “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back.” Such a statement reflects the redefinitions of home and identity that Boyce Davies is illustrating in the stories of *Zami* and *Anowa*. For Boyce Davies, home and identity involve the ability to be “elsewhere,” to never be trapped in any of the definitions assigned by others or to be trapped in any of the locations where oppression occurs. Furthermore, identity is not something that Black women can reject. Instead, it must be taken with them wherever they go and engaged with in a number of different ways.

III. An Assessment and Analysis of Judith Butler and Carol Boyce Davies

Both Butler and Boyce Davies provide effective ways in which to understand the complexities and problems of identity and suggest fruitful ways in which to negotiate the ambiguities and vulnerabilities of identity claims. In presenting identity as a risk, Butler offers an incredibly rich method for describing how individuals do relate and prescribing how individuals should relate to their claims of identity.

First, by suggesting that identity claims involve risk, Butler is providing an accurate description of the tenuous process of identity formation. As mentioned earlier, identity claims are situated within a sign-chain in which their meanings and significations have different and unpredictable histories. Therefore, identity is precarious because there is no way in which to fully predict or fully describe what an identity can come to mean in any situation. Butler’s emphasis on identity as a risk serves to highlight this dangerous, yet significant element of identity. It recognizes that we are no longer able

to make claims with total confidence and certainty because those claims can be exclusive and are beyond our control. It also recognizes that identity claims are not unproblematic assertions that can easily be made. Instead, they are filled with complexity and uncertainty.

Second, Butler's theory of risk also provides for a good prescription, indicating how to reconcile the need for identity claims with the dangerous implications of those identity claims. In emphasizing risk, Butler suggests that the only method for dealing with the tenuous position of identity claims is to recognize the dangers involved in identity claims and still assert them. In this way, the understanding that identity is a risk does not just offer a description of identities being risky because they are complicated and uncertain, it also offers advice on how best to approach these problematic identity claims. Specifically, it suggests that we must make identity claims even though we recognize that these claims can gain negative meanings that exclude and abject or these claims can be rendered obsolete by future generations. Ultimately, making identity claims is a risk because individuals must situate themselves in the process of identification and become involved in the process of critique and democratic contestation, where identities are always being investigated for new meanings and significations.

In addition to effectively describing and prescribing identity, Butler's theory of risk allows for a very flexible understanding of identity—one that accounts for a variety of different experiences— and a flexible understanding of the relationships and strands of connection that exist between different individuals. This flexible and critical model of identity extends the solution to the problem of exclusion among identity politics beyond

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 22

the simple and continuous enumeration of different identities to the complicated and detailed process of critically examining different experiences to find the locations in which these different experiences intersect and relate.

In the case of feminism and the term “woman,” this more flexible understanding of identity enables feminists to critically examine the ways in which women are diverse without just merely listing off the varying levels of that difference, such as race, class, sexual preference, age, by viewing woman as an open-ended “permanent site of contest.” As a site of contest, the identity “woman” is flexible and open to how experiences of race and gender, for example, intersect and influence each other. As a result, “woman” is recognized to be more than the unproblematic foundation for a feminist identity politics. It is, itself, political and therefore must be critically explored.

Boyce Davies’ articulation of the migratory identities of Black women is also an important contribution to the discussion/s of identity. By defining Black women writers as migratory subjects, Davies provides for an excellent way in which to discuss their lives and their understandings of identity. “Migratory” aptly describes Black women writers’ experiences of displacement, due to slavery, colonization and White European hegemony and their experiences of multiple identities, due to intersecting lines of race, class, gender, age, etc. . “Migratory” also effectively describes the particular type of agency that Black women use to resist their marginalized and oppressed positions within the dominant hegemony. For these reasons, “migratory” is a rich term that can be examined in myriad ways.

Second, by relating her discussion of identity and migratory subjects to the concept of home, Davies allows for a more complex understanding of both home as

identity and home in relation to identity. Moreover, she demonstrates,} through the notion of home, the particular ways in which the understanding of Black women's identity is problematized by these more complex notions. By critically examining the notion of home, Davies effectively identifies how it cannot be understood in any singular, monolithic way, but instead must be engaged on a number of levels and must be analyzed to determine both its helpful and harmful effects.

In addition to effectively destabilizing our understandings of identity through a discussion of Black women and their migratory subjectivity, Davies' project is also valuable because it opens up a new discussion on the notion of home. It raises questions about how we have defined home and how these definitions have been exclusive and oppressive. It also raises questions about how we can redefine home in ways that enable us to reconnect with our heritage and our identities.

For all of these reasons mentioned above, Butler and Boyce Davies' projects of destabilizing and redefining identity are compelling and valuable. Together, they provide a rich analysis of both the abstract theories of identity formation (Butler) and the concrete, lived experiences of the effects of those identities (Boyce Davies). However, both projects still raise some troubling questions for me. In her discussion of risk, Butler contends that identity is a necessary error. It is something that must be risked in order to gain representation, both culturally and politically. In describing it in this way, Butler presents identity as a solely negative process. But, such an understanding of identity, as a dangerous risk and negative process, can lead to a lack of responsibility and accountability for the identities we claim. Because risking identity is so uncertain and unpredictable, the danger is that one could use this risk as a way to justify any behavior.

Discussing the risk of essence in *Men in Feminism*, Peggy Kamuf suggests that the logic of risk implies that “if you fall into ‘essence’ you can always say it was an accident.” This logic of risk also applies to identity—if you make a totalizing identity claim, you can always say it was an accident. In both cases by claiming it was an accident, you can deny your responsibility for its effects. In light of this, I would like to know what type of accountability Butler suggests in her project. I think that Butler’s idea of identity as risk is exciting and compelling, but it must include an examination of the ways in which individuals have at least some responsibility to the identity claims that they make.

In addition to the issue of responsibility, another, and perhaps more difficult problem with Butler’s discussion of identity as risk is its sole focus on identity as exclusive and repressive. According to her, identity is not something to be desired, it is something merely to accept. In *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity*, Alison Weir describes this negative understanding as “a sacrificial logic, a logic of domination,” where identity is “always and only the product of a repression of domination.” To this understanding of identity I ask: What are the positive elements of identity? Identity is not just something we need (that is, to be recognized), it is something we desire. As Cornel West argues in an essay entitled “A Matter of Life and Death,” identity involves a deep desire for association and a longing to belong. In her work, how does Butler account for these deep desires to belong and to connect with others through the assertion of identities?

In her discussion of migratory subjectivity, Boyce Davies argues that identity is created while traveling, through the process of shifting from location to location. Home (which is also read as one’s identity/identities) is never in one place, but travels with

black women on their journeys. In defending her position, Boyce Davies contends that “the common approach is to stay and accept subordination. A more interesting option is to locate oneself in the struggle for social transformation.” In this way, she identifies Black women’s need to continue to struggle and destabilize notions of identity and home. To this emphasis I ask, where and when is one able to stop and rest, to find comfort and safety? Although the struggle to resist totalizing and exclusive identities is necessary, there is also a need to find a homespace that allows Black women to restore and revitalize themselves for continued struggle.

In addition to this, I am also concerned with the amount of emphasis that Davies places on migration in terms of identity and agency. It is her continued contention that Black women find agency in their ability to always be “elsewhere.” This agency “cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and ties, constantly eluding the terms of discussion.” To this definition of agency I ask, What about the times when one must assert a particular identity? Or, when one wants to assert a particular identity? Are such occasions always negative and essentializing? Are they void of agency? It seems that at certain times, we must assert identity (for political reasons, in order to be recognized) or we want to assert identity (to be included in a community). Does Boyce Davies’ project allow for such assertions? Can Boyce Davies’ project support more than a permanent site of elsewhere?

In asking these questions to Butler and Boyce Davies, my primary concern is to explore ways in which we can reconcile the problems of identity claims with the desire for identity. In such a way, I am envisioning identity as including more than exclusion or destabilization. This is not to deny the value of the discussions of identity that Butler

and Boyce Davies offer. Attention must be given to the negative and harmful effects of identity claims. But, if we are to seriously engage with theories on identity and identity claims, we need to recognize and critically assess the strong connections we have with certain identities and the process of identification. In articulating these positive elements of identity there is a danger of falling back into a romantic, nostalgic and unproblematic understanding of identity. But, in not articulating them there is a danger of failing to see how we are attached to identity.

According to Cornel West, identity and identity claims involve:

the desire for recognition; quest for visibility; the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association—what Edward Said would call affiliation. It's the longing to belong, a deep, visceral need that most linguistically conscious animals who transact with an environment (that's us) participate in. And then there is a profound desire for protection, for security, for safety, for surety.

Such a compelling description of identity and the desire for identity extends beyond the descriptions of the necessity of identity offered by either Butler or Boyce Davies. For me, it is true that identity must be left open to new reconfigurations and can never be definitively asserted, but it is also true that the assertion of particular identities can provide us with a rich sense of connection and protection. In contrast to Butler, I believe that the assertion of identity involves more than the committing of a necessary error, where identity assertions are understood only as something that must, at times unwillingly, be made. And, in contrast to Boyce Davies, identity involves more than the constant migration to elsewhere, where identity claims are not asserted but subverted in order to displace existing understandings of identity. Returning to the definition offered by West, I believe that the assertion of identity involves a strong desire to belong and to feel safe.

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity/ 27

When we assert certain identities, such as “I am a Black woman writer” or “I am a lesbian” we are not just asserting those identities for political recognition or to affect political change. Often times these identities are asserted because they position us in particular communities and provide us with connections to other individuals who identify themselves similarly. For example, when Judith Butler identifies herself as a lesbian, she is placing herself, at least on some level, in solidarity with other lesbians. She is also locating herself within a particular community to which she belongs. Although this assertion has the potential to be limiting and totalizing to Butler, it also has the potential to give her a sense of connection and belonging with other individuals. In asserting the identity, “I am ay lesbian,” she has provided herself with a home—a place where she fits in and can share the friendship and company of others. Moreover, when she asserts this identity, she is allowing herself to be recognized. She becomes known and identified through her assertion. Fundamentally, she belongs to a community (connection) and she belongs within a culture (recognition). I agree with West when he contends that these feelings of connection and recognition are deep, visceral needs that most individuals, at least on some level, desire.

Another way in which asserting identity involves creating a sense of belonging is the ability of identity claims to link us to (a) particular herstory/herstories. For example, when Carol Boyce Davies identifies herself as a Black woman writer, she is invoking the rich herstory of Black women and their writings. She is re-connecting and re-membering the voices and experiences of her past. And, she is positioning herself within a particular context. In this way, identity as belonging involves the desire to be part of a particular heritage. In her claim, “I am a Black woman writer,” Boyce Davies is

expressing her desire to be connected and associated with a specific set of experiences and values that the community has come to represent. She is also honoring the past individuals and past events of that community. Fundamentally, she is claiming that she belongs to a certain tradition and as such, has a specific herstory and heritage.

In connection with the desire for belonging, identity assertions also involve the desire for safety and security. The assertion of identity and the resulting “home” that it provides within a particular community can offer a safe space in which individuals can experience rest and recuperation from the exhausting rigors of their struggles against the dominant hegemony. Just as identity claims provide affirmation and the recognition that you “fit in,” they also provide support and comfort. This is especially evident when we link the notion of identity with the notion of home. Home represents the place in which we feel comfortable, as the phrase “feel at home” suggests. It also represents the place that we retreat to when we need to restore our energies and reinvigorate ourselves. It provides us with nurturing and strength. And, it represents the place that protects us from the unsafe spaces/places that threaten to physically or verbally harm us. When Butler claims that she is a lesbian and when Boyce Davies claims that she is a Black woman writer, they are doing so in the hopes of creating a safe site and conjuring up a community of support that will enable them to resist and be restored.

In offering these two different understandings of the desire for identity, that is the desire to belong and the desire to feel safe, I wish to be very cautious. I am not claiming that the assertion of identities always achieves these desired goals of belonging and safety. It is true that identity claims can force us to “fit in” to certain

definitions and understandings that we do not wish to accept or embrace. Additionally, it is true that an overemphasis on identity as a homespace of comfort and security can allow us to become complacent and to fail to engage in the dangerous and exhausting process of struggle, where we are constantly threatened and forced to be uncomfortable. But, when we discuss identity and identity claims, we need to recognize that although identity can be exclusive and totalizing and can never fully be achieved in any stable, definitive way, it is still strongly desired. Individuals do have an attachment to identity and they do continue to claim identities in order to achieve that sense of belonging and security. This recognition needs to be reconciled with the numerous problems, as articulated by Butler and Boyce Davies, that identity claims present. As a result, new discussions on identity must be offered. Instead of focusing solely on the tension between the totalizing gestures of certain identities and the political/cultural need to assert them, we must also discuss the tension between the desire to belong, connect and to find safety in certain identities with the need to struggle to subvert identities and their creation of a false security. Both Butler and Boyce Davies' discussions indicate this desire—Butler, in her brief discussion of the need for recognition and Boyce Davies, in her more detailed account of the desire for home. But, neither author explicitly engages with the potentially positive and advantageous elements of identity claims and how we can reconcile them with the dangerous and negative elements of identity claims.

IV. Conclusion

The assertion of identity/identities is important. As Butler indicates, “none of us can fully answer to the demandj to ‘get over yourself!’” Additionally, as I have indicated,

none of us want to fully answer this demand. Due to the current system of representation, both politically and culturally, we need to assert identities in order to be recognized. And, due to our strong desires to belong and feel safe, we want to assert identities. Yet, even though we need and desire identity, it is essential for us to critically examine the effects of identity claims and to recognize that we do not have total control over how the identity claims we assert are understood or what they come to mean. In this essay, I have discussed these tensions, both with the need and the desire for identity, through my critical assessment of Butler and Boyce Davies' analyses of identity categories. However, my discussion is only preliminary. The notion of identity and identity claims, specifically from the vantage point of feminist theory and politics, must be further explored.

For me, the most important exploration involves the question of how we reconcile the desire to belong and feel safe with the need to be subversive and to resist totalizing identities. Simply put, how do we distinguish between when we must rest and when we must resist? An overemphasis on either rest or resistance is dangerous. If you devote all of your time to resisting identities and identifications, you can become too exhausted to continue your struggle. In "Homeplace," bell hooks discusses how the effort of functioning in a white dominated world necessitated the creation of a safe space, a homeplace, where "all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where [they] could be affirmed in [their] minds and hearts. . . ." Safe spaces are needed to restore us and to shelter us from the dangers of dominant discourses. However, contrastly, if you devote all of your time to asserting and embracing identities, you can become too comfortable to critically assess and challenge identity claims. In "Coalition Politics:

Turning the Century,” Bernice Johnson Reagon discusses the problem of being too comfortable. Likening this type of identity to a womb, Reagon suggests that it can weaken our ability to critically respond and resist, to develop coalitions that fight totalizing discourses.

You don’t do no coalition building in a womb. It’s just like trying to get a baby used to taking a drink when they’re in your womb. It just don’t work too well. Inside the womb you generally are very soft and unshelled. You have no covering. And you have no ability to handle what happens if you start to let folks in who are not like you.

In contrast to this, Reagon argues that coalition politics is not comfortable—“You don’t go into a coalition because you just like it.” Instead, she argues, “The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that is the only way you can figure to stay alive.” In articulating it in this way, Reagon is showing how, for her, the need to resist certain identities is ultimately about survival.

When viewed from my perspective, the tension between rest and resistance can be seen in a different way than either hooks or Reagon. Whereas both hooks and Reagon articulate the position of Black women who have not easily been granted the safe, comfortable place of rest, but have instead had to struggle to create it out of seemingly impossible situations, I have, as a White, middle-class, educated woman, had access to the comfort and security of white privilege. This is not to say that my experiences have always been ones of comfort and safety. Instead, it is to suggest that when exploring the tension between rest and resistance, I must address the fact that creating a safe space in which to rest and be restored varies according to one’s experiences and privilege within the dominant hegemony. In my future exploration of identity and 2identity categories, I will work to develop strategies that enable me to deal with the complexities of rest and resistance from my privileged perspective as I struggle

to find a balance between my desire to belong and to feel safe and comfortable and my strong need to actively resist identities that exclude and totalize women.

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