

What Happens After Identity Politics? Radical Democracy and the Future of Feminism

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Prospectus Outline:

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For roughly the past thirty years, contemporary feminism has understood its role to be that of an identity politics, one in which the identity “woman” serves as both the object and subject of feminism and where all political and theoretical feminist projects are done in the name of woman and by women. Early on in this formulation, critics from both inside and outside feminism challenged the notion of woman as the unproblematic foundation of feminism. Starting in the late 1970s, a variety of feminist theorists, particularly women of color and lesbians, argued that “woman” was frequently defined in very narrow and limiting terms (as white, middle-class, heterosexual) that failed to recognize women’s varied and complex experiences as raced, classed and sexed and not simply gendered.¹ In the mid 1980s, postmodern feminists added their own challenge to the identity “woman,” arguing that “woman” should not be accepted as a mere description of who one is, but must instead be interrogated (deconstructed) to uncover the regulatory practices and the underlying power structures that have served to dictate what one must become.²

Responding to these challenges, many feminists have debated the usefulness of woman as a foundation and the efficacy of political and theoretical projects coming out of feminism as identity politics. An early version of this debate led to an identity crisis within feminism and resulted in the impasse: either we rely on woman as a foundation and an unproblematic identity *or* we reject woman as a stable identity and thereby reject feminism and its policies. Since this early impasse, many feminists have struggled to articulate new ways in which to understand the problem of feminism as identity politics. Over the past ten years, one promising alternative for feminism has been developed by some feminists who promote the simultaneous critical interrogation of identity—both the motivations for it and how it is lived and practiced by feminists—and the cautious use of provisional, contingent identities. Feminists promoting this alternative do not envision any stable or essential notion of woman as a foundation for their theory and/or politics. Instead, they understand the “ungrounded ground” of feminism to develop out of the radical questioning of how woman is defined and who does and does not get to claim

the identity woman. This alternative method for understanding (and employing) identities has shifted the nature of feminism from a politics of identity to a politics of radical democracy.

This dissertation will explore the effects of this shift and the transformative potential of radical democracy's emphasis on provisional, contestational identities for feminist theory, politics and ethics. This exploration will involve an examination of the notion of subjectivity that accompanies such a radical democracy, the role of communities and the relationship between subjects and their community/ies within feminism, and the type of vision of transformation such a method provides. In this prospectus, I offer (I) a general description of the project—including its assumptions, goals and methods—and (II) a descriptive outline of the dissertation chapters.

I.

Identity politics has a rich, well-documented history coming out of a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary sources. This dissertation will not rehearse the multiple ways in which this type of politics has been utilized and/or criticized in these varied movements.³ Nor will this dissertation focus on the specific ways in which feminism has adopted identity politics and the limitations that have developed out of that adoption. Instead, it will look to the shift *away* from identity politics to radical democracy by some feminists as its starting point, asking the question: what happens to feminism after identity politics? In order to understand the impact of this shift, however, it is necessary to be familiar with the terms at stake. Therefore, for the purposes of this prospectus, I will briefly trace some main ideas concerning feminism and its turn away from identity politics to radical democracy.

Although articulated in a number of ways and used in a variety of contexts, identity politics is, in its most basic sense, a form of politics based on a certain identity. This identity, whether it be in terms of race, class, gender, sexual preference or ethnicity, serves as the organizing force of the movement. Two major goals of the movement are (1) the recognition of that identity as unique and worthy of respect because of its difference (often articulated in terms of gaining a “voice”) and (2) the redistribution of resources/rights to account for that difference.⁴ Over the past thirty years, feminism has been considered an identity politics because feminists

have based much of their work on the identity woman, struggling to gain both a voice (recognition) and equal rights for women. In many ways, these struggles have been successful. However, from very early on in the movement, feminism was criticized for its limitations as an identity politics.

One helpful resource for understanding these limitations is Linda Alcoff's 1988 article, "Cultural Feminism versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." In this article, Alcoff sums up the problem with feminism and its reliance on the concept of woman:

...the concept of woman is the central concept for feminist theory and yet it is a concept that is impossible to formulate precisely for feminists... [it] is the necessary point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics, predicated as these are on the transformation of women's lived experience in contemporary culture and the reevaluation of social theory and practice from women's point of view... [but] it is crowded with the overdetermination of male supremacy, invoking in every formulation the limit, the contrasting Other, or mediated self-reflection built on the control of females (405).

Alcoff argues that feminists have offered two solutions to this problem: either (1) the promotion of female and/or feminist understandings of woman in place of the traditional, male-dominated definitions of her (cultural feminism) or (2) the replacing of feminist definitions with feminist deconstructions centered around the ultimate impossibility of ever fixing *women* into one definition of *woman* (poststructuralism).

Neither of these solutions has been fully satisfying for feminism. As many feminists (including Alcoff) have suggested, cultural feminists frequently promote definitions of woman that posit an essential identity, one that either reduces women to their biology or certain inherent characteristics or is based on a limited perspective, most often that of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, that excludes a wide range of women from the category of woman. Poststructuralist feminists offer their own set of limitations. Based solely on deconstruction, these feminists offer a negative understanding of woman as a pure fiction.⁵ According to Alcoff, this move to perpetually deconstruct woman "threatens to wipe out feminism itself" (419) because it offers no positive vision of a better future and leads to the ultimate denial of gender difference (if woman is always only a fiction, then she doesn't exist).

This crisis within feminism raised some productive questions concerning the category of woman, questions that resulted in important work on essentialism and the problem of difference.⁶ But this crisis also resulted in an impasse, one in which feminists were left with unsatisfying answers to the questions, what is woman? and what is the future of the feminist movement? Although many feminists worked to overcome this impasse, the question of women (and the inability to answer it) continued to haunt feminist politics and theory throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

In her 1997 essay “Multiculturalism, Antiessentialism, and Radical Democracy: A Genealogy of the Current Impasse in Feminist Theory,” Nancy Fraser revisited the crisis over identity, arguing that identity politics continues to produce two seemingly incompatible understandings of identity: (1) multiculturalism and (2) antiessentialism. On the one hand, feminists have worked to overcome the essentializing and exclusionary tendencies of cultural feminism by expanding the category of woman to include a wide range of different experiences of women. This multiculturalist approach embraces diversity and inclusivity, offering a purely positive celebration of identities. On the other hand, feminists have responded to the essentialism of early feminism by developing a highly skeptical attitude toward any and all identity claims on behalf of women. Drawing upon the work of poststructuralism, these feminists have adopted an anti-essentialism approach to feminist politics, one in which all identities are necessarily negative, exclusive and therefore suspicious.

According to Fraser, these two understandings have resulted in a continuation of the feminist impasse articulated by Alcoff. In this updated version, identity is understood as either purely good or purely bad. The problem with multicultural feminism is that it promotes a highly uncritical use of identities. Multiculturalist feminists valorize existing identities without interrogating the ways in which those identities could be troubling or problematic. The problem with anti-essentialism feminism is that it promotes a hypercritical use of identities. Anti-essentialist feminists fail to see the importance of any positive use of identity within feminist politics.

But, even as this debate was continuing in the 1990s, some feminists were developing a radical alternative to identity politics, one in which identity was no longer the given (and fixed) foundation of the feminist movement. One such feminist was Judith Butler, who in her 1990 groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble*, offered her own prescription for the future of feminism. If “politics was no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old” (149). Butler understood (and continues to understand) this new configuration of feminism to be a turn to a more critical examination of identity categories—how they are formed, practiced and desired—and a turn away from any pre-given foundations that would “fix” feminism in any one definition or description. This turn represents a shift away from identity politics to radical democracy.

As a type of politics, radical democracy is not exclusive to feminism. In fact, it is better known outside of feminism among leftist, post-marxist intellectuals who may or may not be invested in feminist concerns. Radical democracy is a term that was introduced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In this book, Laclau and Mouffe explore the possibility of applying the insights of poststructuralism (e.g. the critique of metanarratives and rejection of absolute subjects) to marxism and its categories in the hopes of transforming and revitalizing ailing leftist politics. This transformation moved leftist politics away from marxism and toward a radically plural democracy.

Since the writing of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, radical democracy has been taken up and debated by a variety of different disciplines and movements.⁷ Offering a comprehensive history or assessment of it would be difficult and is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, this dissertation will look only at how some feminists have adopted certain principles of radical democracy in order to rethink the process and practice of feminism. Not all of the feminists that I will be examining in this dissertation would call themselves radical democrats. Nor do all of the feminists, coming out of varied traditions and disciplines, easily fit together. What these feminists share is a commitment to some of the principles of radical democracy (whether explicitly or

implicitly articulated) and a desire to rescue feminism from its troubling role as an identity politics. These principles include, but are not limited to: (1) perpetual questioning and contestation, (2) uncertainty and (3) radical openness.

Perhaps the cornerstone of feminism as radical democracy is a continued emphasis on the radical interrogation and questioning of any and all categories—specifically identity categories—that are being employed within feminist politics and theory. This radical interrogation suggests that the meaning of categories, such as woman, can never be given or assumed as stable, unproblematic foundations for feminism. This emphasis on questioning and contestation (as it is often called) offers a direct challenge to identity politics and its acceptance of woman as a simple definition of women and their experiences. It also changes the terms of the debate over woman and how she should be defined within feminism. Instead of focusing on developing a comprehensive definition of woman, one that is wholly inclusive and not exclusive (as in multicultural feminism), or fully rejecting any claims to identity as women (as in anti-essentialism feminism), some “feminists are beginning to think through how politicized identities are lived, felt and practiced, and more precisely what animates the desire for a politics of identity.” They are also asking “who has (and hence who does not have) the possibility of claiming an identity” (Ahmed et al, 14-15).

For feminists like Butler, questioning feminism and radically contesting its terms is absolutely essential to the vitality of the movement. Feminism “proceeds precisely,” she argues, “by bringing critical attention to bear on its premises in an effort to become more clear about what it means, and to begin to negotiate the conflicting interpretations, the irrepressible democratic cacophony of its identity” (Butler 2001a, 415). In asking these questions and participating in the democratic cacophony, feminists are not rejecting the identity woman altogether, but, instead, leaving the category open to take on new, perhaps more inclusive meanings, in the future—meanings whose effects cannot be anticipated prior to their use within feminist politics and theory.

The recognition that feminism produces unanticipated (and therefore uncontrollable) results and this promotion of openness are two other key elements in this type of politics. Feminism as radical democracy is predicated on the understanding that there are no guarantees or “pure” answers within feminism and that all feminist goals (theoretical, political and/or ethical) are limited in their scope and potential for success. As a result, feminist goals can never be fully realized, but must be perpetually reassessed to determine their efficacy for feminism.

This unrealizability does not, however, suggest that feminism is ultimately doomed to failure. The inability for feminism to every fully realize and therefore fix its goals enables feminists to continue to push for different and possibly better goals. Moreover, this radical uncertainty emphasizes an openness that provides for the safeguarding of a “space in which [feminists] can speak of [their] uncertainties about what are or should be feminist agendas, rather than assuming that such uncertainty necessarily involves a loss of failure of collectivity” (Ahmed et al, 12-13). This enables feminists to offer more than a mere assertion of a certain program or agenda, but an exploration of how agendas are established and how they can be “questioned by the very transformations that are made in [feminists’] name” (Ahmed et al, 12-13).

This shift away from identity politics and its emphasis on the stable foundation of woman to a radical democracy that takes the democratic process of interrogating (and debating) categories such as woman as its “groundless ground” has significant consequences for feminism. To date, these consequences have not been fully explored by feminists. Even as feminists are promoting this new type of feminism, they are failing to examine many of the implications of this radical shift on some of the basic terms that they rely upon in their theory, politics and ethics—terms like subjectivity, community, and visions of transformation. Many of these feminists have devoted considerable attention to these terms in their work. However, most of the attention has been figured in terms of a *reaction* to identity politics as opposed to a *replacing* of identity politics with an alternative vision. As a result, feminist radical democracy leaves many unanswered questions. What *kind* of subject participates in radical democracy, what capacity for action and resistance does that subject have and what motivates them to act in face of such an

uncertain and unstable movement? What resources do these unstable subjects have for sustaining themselves and their work? What *kind* of community fosters and nurtures their activities?

For radical democracy to be a viable alternative to identity politics, these questions need to be taken seriously and explored in a more comprehensive way than has yet to be offered by feminists. What is needed is a more in-depth examination of what happens to feminism *after* identity politics. This dissertation will attempt this examination through an exploration of new forms of subjectivity, community, and vision based on a politics of radical questioning, openendedness and uncertainty. My first chapter will serve as an introduction, tracing the use of radical democracy within the work of several feminists, including Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, bell hooks, Chantal Mouffe, Sharon Welch and Iris Marion Young. Through this tracing, I will pay particular attention to how the key principles of radical democracy get adopted in an explicitly feminist way. The remainder of the dissertation will be divided into three sections: (I) Subjectivity, (II) Community and (III) Visions of Transformation.

In section I, I will examine and assess a variety of different understandings of postmodern subjectivity to determine both what is the most effective model for feminist radical democracy (chapter 2) and what types of skills must be practiced by that subject (chapter 3). This discussion of subjectivity will depart from the usual exploration of the woman as subject to embark on a critical investigation of the feminist (and in particular the theorizing feminist) as subject. This change in subjects results in a whole new set of questions concerning the subject/subjectivity; questions that center around the feminist and her relation to feminist theories, terms and texts.

In section II, I will explore the possibility of redefining community in light of radical democracy. Drawing upon the work of Janet Jakobsen, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Judith Butler, María Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa and Drucilla Cornell, I will work to develop a notion of community that helps to support those participating in the uncertainty and openendedness that feminism as radical democracy requires. This section will include a discussion of the role of difference within community and will compare the roles of community, alliance and coalition (chapter 4). It will also include an examination of one type of community—the community that

exists between feminist academic authors and their audiences (both real and imagined)—and how this community could (and/or should) be redefined in feminist radical democracy (chapter 5).

In section III, I will conclude this dissertation with an exploration of the important questions: Why bother? What motivates the practice of radical democracy? And, what is the goal of radical democracy? I will attempt to answer these questions by looking to several contemporary feminists and their work on the role of love, belonging and connection within feminism.

Before turning to a detailed description of the chapters, I would like to make a few comments about method. First, in this dissertation, I will draw upon the insights of critical theory and postmodernism/poststructuralism as they have been developed within feminist theory, politics and ethics. Although I will read some non-feminist texts for background purposes, my primary intent will be to examine the specific issues that are raised when these methods are taken up and critically assessed and employed by feminists.

Second, taking the radical democratic principle of contestation seriously, I will be cautious and critical in my use of certain key terms, such as postmodernism/poststructuralism and radical democracy, and be attentive to the ways in which these theoretical/political methods can become pejorative labels that reduce the complexity of feminist thought to one limited (and frequently limiting) interpretation of that method. With this in mind, I will not be referring to feminists as representatives of one certain position, such as the postmodern position or the radical democratic position. The wide range of feminists that I will examine in this dissertation employ an equally wide range of theoretical methods. And, as the collection *Feminist Contentions* demonstrates, limiting feminist theorists' thought to one particular method can result in a battle between positions, where feminists are pitted against each other in order to defend their territory. In contrast to this "position-taking" model, I am interested in developing connections across methods and disciplines between feminists who may or may not agree with all of the principles of postmodernism/poststructuralism or radical democracy, but who (implicitly or explicitly) use certain insights of these methods to develop their own work.

Third, the purpose of this dissertation will not be to fully adopt and promote the principles of radical democracy in any uncritical way. Although I see much value in the work of radical democracy, I am not beginning my research with the assumption that it is *the* answer. Instead, this dissertation is motivated by the question: How viable is radical democracy for feminism? Keeping this question in mind, I will work to find (and push) the limits of feminist radical democracy through my examination of its implications for subjectivity, community and vision.

Fourth and finally, I will position this study explicitly, although not exclusively, within ethics. My explorations of subjectivity, community and vision will be motivated by ethical questions of responsibility, accountability and moral agency. These questions, although not divorced from the political realm,⁸ offer a different approach to the critical assessment of radical democracy, an approach that has frequently been slighted within discussions of postmodern feminism. As Ewa Ziarek laments in *An Ethics of Dissensus*, feminist ethics maintains an uneasy position within postmodernism. Discussions devoted to the connection between postmodernism and ethics often fail to address feminist concerns. And, discussions concerning the connection between feminism and postmodernism spend little, if any, time on ethics. Recognizing this absence, this study will place ethics at the center of my investigation in order to explore the possibility for an *ethics* of radical democracy as opposed to a *politics* of radical democracy.

II.

Chapter One. What's So Feminist About Radical Democracy? (Introduction)

In this first chapter, I will begin by introducing (in greater detail than offered in this prospectus) the three key principles of radical democracy that are being adopted and cultivated by some feminists: (1) perpetual questioning and contestation, (2) uncertainty and (3) radical openness. This introduction will rely heavily on the work of Judith Butler, who I see as one the primary proponents of this type of radical democracy, but will be supplemented by the work of other important feminists, including Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, bell hooks, Chantal Mouffe, Sharon Welch and Iris Marion Young.

After providing a detailed account of these principles, I will move to an exploration of the ways in which this type of radical democracy could be considered explicitly feminist. To accomplish this task, I will focus my discussion on the principle of perpetual questioning and contestation. Within various understandings of radical democracy, this principle is frequently linked with the tradition of antagonism and its emphasis on conflict and violence. This dissertation will offer a very brief genealogy of the tradition of antagonism, both how it has been used inside and outside of feminism.⁹ Then, I will look to the work of some feminists, like María Lugones and bell hooks, for an alternate understanding of questioning, one that does not draw on warlike metaphors (e.g. battle of wills) to describe how debates occur, but instead looks to notions of play and creative curiosity to describe the process of questioning.

Finally, at the end of this chapter, I will return to the primary questions motivating this dissertation: What happens *after* identity politics? And, what are the implications of the shift to radical democracy for feminist understandings of subjectivity, community and vision? This return will serve as a set up for the remainder of the dissertation, which will be divided into three sections.

SECTION I: SUBJECTIVITY

Chapter Two. Tricksters, Troublemakers, Banditas and Dissidents: The Feminist Subject in Radical Democracy

This chapter will begin with a brief discussion of the shift away from *woman* as subject, which is the primary concern of feminist identity politics, to theorizing/questioning *feminist* as subject, which is the primary concern of feminist radical democracy. In suggesting this shift, I will offer a new set of questions that must be explored concerning the feminist subject. In contrast to feminist identity politics, which focused on the questions, what is woman? or what is the essential quality that connects all women?, feminist radical democracy focuses on the questions,

what does it mean to be a feminist theorizing subject?, who counts as one? and what is the connection between a feminist subject and her theories?

Following this discussion, I will move to the primary goal of the chapter: to develop the most effective model for the questioning feminist subject. I will examine four promising types of feminist subjectivity: (1) trickster (Sandoval, Anzaldúa), (2) troublemaker (Butler), (3) bandita (Singer, Young) and (4) dissident (Mouffe, Bickford). All four of these types offer a different approach to how a subject should question and contest the terms and texts of dominant culture. Yet, all four of these types also offer some striking similarities. Through an examination of both the similarities and differences between these four types, I hope to develop an effective model of subjectivity for feminist radical democracy. This examination will center on a number of important issues concerning the subject: her positioning within culture/society and her relationship to/with power, her ability to resist (agency) and the source of her capacity for questioning.

Chapter Three. The Courage to Question: Radical Democracy and the Skills of the Questioning Subject

This chapter will move from a critical assessment of several different models of feminist subjectivity to an investigation of how this feminist subject practices radical democracy. This investigation will be framed in terms of the skills that are required of any subject who must work within a feminist movement based on contestation, openendedness and uncertainty. Before examining any specific skills, I will offer a discussion of what is meant by the term skill through a critical comparison between (1) Michel Foucault, his understanding of tactics and Chela Sandoval's connection between tactics and skills and (2) Aristotle and his notion of virtues. It is my initial contention that skills, which are tactics taken up and used by subjects, offer a better model for feminist radical democracy than virtues, which are characteristics that serve to define the quality of who (or what) one is. Through more in-depth reading of both traditions (Foucault and Aristotle) I will explore the viability of this claim.

In the second part of the chapter, I will look to a number of different feminists and their development of the important skills that are required of feminist subjects. Each of the skills discussed in this section will offer a distinctly feminist articulation of that skill and its value for feminist radical democracy. This examination may include discussions of courage (Brown, Reagon), anger (Lorde), creativity/imagination (Cornell), playfulness (Butler, Lugones), strength (Reagon), grace (Nicholson, Sandoval) and flexibility (Sandoval).

SECTION II: COMMUNITY

Chapter Four. Who Supports Feminist Subjects? The Role of Feminist Critical Communities in Radical Democracy.

Having discussed models of subjectivity in the previous section, this section will focus on redefining feminist community for feminist radical democracy. Chapter four will address the questions: What does a community that is based on uncertainty, openness and contestation look like? What *kind* of community supports the questioning feminist subject? What *kind* of support does that community offer? And, finally, from where does that community operate?

To explore these questions, I will critically examine a number of types of connections between women that have been proposed by feminists (particularly Judith Butler, Janet Jakobsen and Bernice Johnson Reagon), including coalitions, alliances and communities, to determine which type best supports a feminism based on the principles of radical democracy. With each type of connection, I will discuss the role that difference plays, particularly how difference is understood and how differences between, within and among women are negotiated. In concluding this part of the chapter, I will propose my own type of connection: the feminist critical community.

In the second part of the chapter, I will turn to an investigation of both the function of these feminist critical communities and the spaces from which they operate. Drawing from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, María Lugones, Drucilla Cornell, bell hooks and Toni Morrison, this investigation will address and assess the various functions that such a community could or should perform and the needs that it could or should meet for feminist

subjects, such as nurturing, belonging, connection, survival and/or critical inspiration. This investigation will also address the possible spaces from which these communities act, exploring the questions: Do these communities exist in marginal spaces (hooks) or at the borderlands (Anzaldúa)? Are they real or imagined spaces (Cornell)? Do they exist inside the very power structures they are wishing to resist, subverting from within (Butler)?

Chapter Five. Confessing Feminists: The Role of Experience in Building Feminist Critical Communities

While chapter four will offer a general exploration of community for feminist radical democracy, this chapter will explore one specific type of community—the community that exists between feminist academic authors and their audiences—both real and imagined—and how that community comes together through the sharing of personal experience. Feminist authors frequently write about their own experiences within their work in order to establish both their authority within a community and their connection with members of that community. In the tradition of feminism as identity politics, this use of experience is often performed in a confessional mode, where feminist authors reveal, in an uncritical way, experiences about their lives that serve as a foundation or grounding for their own theories and place them in solidarity with their readers who have had similar experiences.

As many feminists suggest, the uncritical confessing of experience has troubling implications for feminism, particularly for feminism as radical democracy. In the postmodern context, confessing feminists have often been critiqued in terms of the problematic claims they are making concerning the subject, the “I”, who is able to confess. This chapter will address the problem of confessional feminism from a different perspective, that of the community and the relationship between the confessing feminist and her community and will take as its premise the idea that the shift from feminist identity politics to feminist radical democracy requires that this method of using and frequently confessing experience be reevaluated. Using the principles of radical democracy, I will ask and investigate the questions: Is it possible for feminist authors to offer their own experiences while simultaneously being critical of those experiences? How would

such a move alter the relationship between an author and her reading community? What kind of community could develop from this move?

To accomplish this task, I will first look to a number of important sources on the topic including (but not limited to): (1) Michel Foucault and his genealogy of confession, (2) Wendy Brown and Ladelle McWhorter and their placing of Foucault's work on confession in a feminist context, (3) Susan Bernstein and Susan Friedman and their discussion of the rhetoric of confessing experience in feminist texts and (4) the history of consciousness raising within feminism and its connection to confessional performance. Then, I will assess a wide range of examples of how feminists have used experience to position themselves in their texts and make connections with their communities. These examples will not be limited to those in which feminists confess experience, but will include other methods of articulating experience, in the hopes of developing alternative methods to confession.

SECTION III: VISIONS OF TRANSFORMATION

Chapter Six. Why Practice Feminist Radical Democracy? Feminist Explorations of Love, Belonging and Connection (Conclusion)

In light of its emphasis on critical interrogation, uncertainty and openendedness, what motivates feminists to practice feminist radical democracy? Why should they bother to offer challenges when those challenges are never guaranteed to be effective and could actually produce harmful results? And, what bonds a feminist critical community of difference together when unity and solidarity are never givens? Why should feminists work together to negotiate their differences? These important questions must be explored if feminist radical democracy is to be an effective alternative to feminist identity politics.

This chapter will take up these questions through an examination of an important set of themes currently being discussed within feminist ethics: love, belonging and connection. This set of themes is frequently linked with black feminist pragmatism and the work of Patricia Hill

Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison. But, these themes can also be evidenced in other feminists' work, including Dorothy Allison, Judith Butler, Maria Lúgonés and Chela Sandoval. Drawing upon all of these thinkers, I will look to love, belonging and connection in order to develop an answer to the troubling question that is frequently leveled at feminism as radical democracy, the question of why we should bother.

In *Fighting Words*, Patricia Hill Collins provides an excellent starting point for my discussion with her definition of the deep love of visionary pragmatism. Talking specifically about the love she was given from her mother and other women in her community while growing up, Collins argues for a “proclaimed, actively struggled-for, passionate love ethic,” one that recognizes the “power of intense connectedness and of the way that caring deeply for someone can foster a revolutionary politics” (Collins, 200). In starting with this definition, I am particularly interested in Collins' emphasis both on the active struggle for this love ethic, as opposed to assuming that is given, and on the importance of intense connectedness for any revolutionary politics. Fundamentally, for radical democracy to be an effective method for practicing feminism, it must begin from the recognition that feminist subjects are purely social beings and not autonomous individuals.

Collins' definition of love will not be the only one which I draw upon in this chapter. As mentioned above, a wide range of feminists have taken up this issue and I will be looking to many of them to help clarify what the terms love, belonging and connection suggest for feminism and how these terms can or perhaps cannot offer some compelling reasons for why feminism as radical democracy is important.¹⁰

¹ For more on this critique, see *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center*; Paula Giddings, *Where and When I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*; and Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

² Within feminism, there is much debate over the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism and what they represent. For more on this, see Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in *Feminist Contentions* and Linda Nicholson, "Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism," in *Feminism and Postmodernism*, edited by Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke. For the purposes of this prospectus, I will refer to the movement as postmodernism. For more on postmodern feminism, see *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson and *Feminism and Postmodernism*, edited by Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke.

³ The question of identity and identity politics has been important for a number of different political movements, including movements centered on racial and ethnic identities. For more on how identity is used and/or criticized in these movements, see *The Identity in Question*, edited by Johan Rajchman; *Is There Life After Identity Politics?*, special issue of *New Literary History*, and *Identities*, edited by Henry Louis Gates and Anthony Kwame Appiah.

⁴ Many theorists argue that the first goal, that of recognition, often overshadows the second goal, that of redistribution. For more on the importance of recognition in identity politics, see Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, edited by Amy Guttmann and Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age," in *Justice Interruptus*.

⁵ In her discussion, Alcoff offers Mary Day and Adrienne Rich as representatives of cultural feminism and Julia Kristeva as a representative of poststructuralist feminism.

⁶ See *The Essential Difference*, edited by Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed and Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*.

⁷ See *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State*, edited by David Trend and *Identity in Question*, edited by John Rajchman.

⁸ For a discussion of the split between politics and ethics, see the introduction to *Daring to Be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics*, edited by Bat-Ami On and Ann Ferguson; Janet Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*; and Ewa Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus*.

⁹ See Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence. Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* for a discussion of the tradition of antagonism within political and philosophical theory. See Gallop, Jane, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy K. Miller. "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," in *Conflicts in Feminism* for a discussion of feminist critique and its connection between feminist critique and the trashing of feminist works.

¹⁰ Included in this clarification will be an exploration of the limitations of these terms, particularly how these terms have been taken up in troubling ways for feminism. One example of this limitation involves an overemphasis on cultural recognition at the expense of economic redistribution (see Fraser 1997).