BEYOND THE IDENTITY QUANDARY: A RELATIONAL THEORY OF SUBJECTIVITY

by

BRITTANY RAE LEACH

(Under the Direction of ALEXANDER KAUFMAN)

ABSTRACT

I attempt to resolve the identity quandary, which asks whether feminism is still possible given the destabilization of identity categories. I argue that hooks's intersectionality has progressed the goal of achieving greater diversity within feminism, but is ultimately self-defeating because it reinforces problematic identity-based divisions. I endorse Brown's argument that egalitarian politics must fundamentally transform oppressive power dynamics rather than simply inverting them, yet find her alternative too fragmented. I adopt Zerilli's conceptualization of subjectivity as a contingent byproduct of collective political action. I propose that we can avoid the pitfalls of identity politics if we treat political action as the fundamental subject of feminist political analysis and intersubjective consensus as the primary standard of reference for feminist political judgment. The incoherency of agent-based subjects like "women" poses no problems for my theory, because it posits that politics requires only the existence of collective action, not uniformity among political participants.

INDEX WORDS: subjectivity, feminism, identity, activism, theory, politics, gender

BEYOND THE IDENTITY QUANDARY: A RELATIONAL THEORY OF SUBJECTIVITY

by

BRITTANY RAE LEACH

B.A., University of Texas-Dallas, 2012

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

BEYOND THE IDENTITY QUANDARY: A RELATIONAL THEORY OF SUBJECTIVITY

by

BRITTANY RAE LEACH

Major Professor:	ALEXANDER KAUFMAN	
Committee:	SEAN INGHAM	
	CAS MUDDE	

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

The dilemma of how to define "woman" in a way that can provide a foundation for feminist theory and practice has long plagued scholarship on gender. On the one hand, the category of "woman" appears inherently unstable, and any definition which attempts to pin down the meaning of this term risks essentialism and homogenization. On the other hand, jettisoning identity altogether seems to preclude the claim that gendered injustices have occurred historically and continue to occur in the present day. In sum, the issue is that the very terms upon which feminist politics seem to depend appear to re-inscribe problematic assumptions about identity that perpetuate the inequalities feminists seek to combat. In this essay, I discuss how the debate over identity and difference has been formulated by bell hooks, Wendy Brown, and Linda Zerilli. Drawing on their work, I attempt to resolve the conceptual knot surrounding subjectivity. I argue that viewing the subject of feminism as a contingent product of political activity instead of a pre-defined identity category enables us to highlight common ground while fostering pluralism within feminism. My conception of subjectivity is relational, in that I consider the primary agent of politics and unit of analysis to be the interactions between individuals, groups, and objects rather than any of these in isolation from the others. My conception is also intersubjective, because I posit that the authority to render judgments about feminist subjectivity belongs to those who purportedly comprise this collective subject of "feminism." In short, I argue that a relational, action-centered, and intersubjective theory of subjectivity is sufficiently distinct from the identity-centered theory of subjectivity that it avoids the dilemmas posed by the latter conception.

In the first section, I discuss the idea of intersectionality, particularly as it is theorized by bell hooks. I argue that hook's work on intersectionality has made important contributions to the

project of building a fully egalitarian feminism by critiquing inequalities within the feminist movement and biases within feminist theory. However, I contend that placing identity at the center of feminist political thought has begun to undermine efforts to further advance this project. In the next section, I respond to Wendy Brown's Nietzschean critique of identity politics. While I accept the general thrust of her argument that politicized identity in late modernity often functions as a form of *ressentiment* that unintentionally reinforces status quo power relations, I conclude that her brief suggestions for rethinking feminist politics fall short of providing a viable alternative. In pursuit of such an alternative, I turn in the third section to Linda Zerilli's theory of feminism as a practice of freedom. I adopt her accounts of subject formation and judgment in large part, albeit with a few minor modifications. In the final section, I lay out my theory of subjectivity and explain how this alternative formulation shows the way out of the identity/difference trap. In doing so, I compare my theory of subjectivity to the identitiarian theory of subjectivity.

II. BELL HOOKS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The problems of identity and difference are recurring themes in bell hooks's writing. In particular, she focuses on how inattention to race and class distorts feminist theory and practice. On the one hand, the work of hooks and other black feminists have enriched feminist discourse by bringing in important perspectives that were erased by race-neutral and class-neutral feminisms. The challenge of better understanding the relationships between gender, race, and class has generated an extensive body of innovative scholarship. On the other hand, the focus on identity categories as the main axes of difference between women runs the risk of reifying the very barriers hooks seeks to break down. This framing reduces the diversity of women's

experiences to merely the result of interactions between different forms of oppression, leaving little room for purely political disagreement between women. Although hooks makes some arguments which are directed at mitigating these possible problems, her uncritical reliance on an identity-centric view of the subject occludes possibilities for radically reframing the problem of difference in a way that might alleviate these internal tensions within her work.

A. *Intersectionality and the Problem of Difference*

One of hooks's biggest contributions is her demonstration of how prominent feminists intentionally and unintentionally exclude many women who are not young, white, or economically secure. She presents abundant examples of this phenomenon in feminist theory as well as its practice in academic and activist settings. For instance, she argues that Betty Freidan's exploration of the plight of white middle-class housewives centered an issue that was not shared by working-class women, many of whom were women of color (hooks [1984] 2000, 2). Similarly, hooks ([1984] 2000) argues that Germain Greer's advocacy of sexual liberation was primarily relevant to young women who were unencumbered by adult responsibilities like childcare (148). She points to dozens of times in her own life that she witnessed white feminists assuming that black women were ignorant of their own oppression, presuming expertise on race when this was unwarranted, ignoring points made by black women in consciousness-raising groups, stereotyping black women, and expressing hostility towards black women in authority (hooks [1984] 2000, ix-ixi & 11-15).

Although I focus on hooks, she was not the only one pointing out the problem of racism within feminism or the interrelatedness of different forms of oppression. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, activists such as Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells drew attention to the tensions and

3

interconnections between the movements for abolition and civil rights on the one hand and women's suffrage on the other (Gines 2011). More recently, thinkers such as Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and Leslie McCall have developed theories and methods for analyzing the points at which power hierarchies that are attached to different subordinated identities converge or traverse one another (Lorde 1984; Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 1998; McCall 2005). Although there are some disjunctures between the perspectives of each of these theorists, they share a generally intersectional approach. While this approach arose primarily out of the effort to understand the interactions between race and gender in the United States, some subsequent scholarship on intersectionality also addresses other axes of oppression such as class, nationality, sexual orientation, age, and disability status (Hill Collins 1998, 62; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 787; Erevelles and Minear 2010).

Intersectionality has been defined in a number of different ways. Historically, the term grew out of Black Women's Studies and Critical Race Theory (Hill Collins 1998, 63; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 787). For Hill Collins (1998), intersectionality refers to investigating how systems of oppression such as "gender, race, class, and nation" are not separate but rather "mutually construct…or 'articulate' with one another" (63). Similarly, intersectionality for Brah and Pheonix (2004) "signifi[es] the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts" and "emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands" (75). More simply, McCall (2005) defines intersectionality as "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (1771). From a different angle, Cho et. al. (2013) argue that "intersectionality is best framed as an analytic sensibility" that involves "conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and

changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power" (795). They argue that this intersectional sensibility manifests in three primary types of inquiry: analysis of specific contexts, methodological theory, and praxis (Cho et. al. 2013, 785-6). The common core shared by all of these definitions is the imperative to address the interactions between two or more forms of oppression. To distill the broad strokes of this literature, I define intersectionality as a theoretical perspective holding that societal power relations are produced through the interacting effects of power hierarchies which consist of dominant and subordinate positions. For hooks and others, these positions within the power structure correspond to as identities such as "man" or "woman."

The intersectionality paradigm as articulated by hooks is in some ways a useful heuristic for representing the interactions between different forms of identity-based oppression which shape the lives of particular groups. However, this seemingly parsimonious model of power relations breaks down upon closer examination because it lacks an overarching account of how intersectional power dynamics generally function, how they are structured, or how they are implemented. Hooks *does* give examples of unique stereotypes and forms of deprivation faced only by black women and not by black men or white women, suggesting that the combined effect of two hierarchies is multiplicative rather than additive and that the techniques of subordination may be specific to a particular point of intersection between these hierarchies. However, at no point does she explain in detail the interaction effects, methods of domination, or techniques for enforcing hierarchal relations between identity groups. Moreover, reconstructing the implicit structure of power relations becomes much more difficult in cases where there are multiple subordinate identities. For instance, hooks does not compare the subordination of black women to other groups of non-white women. It is therefore unclear where women who are neither white

nor black are located within this hierarchy. Do they occupy a position in between the two groups on the same axis of racial oppression? Or are they positioned on a different axis of racial oppression which specifies the relationship between the dominant white identity and a subordinate Asian or Latina identity? How do we situate a biracial person in this matrix? As these questions illustrate, while hooks's theory is rooted in the insight that the confluence of multiple power dynamics can change the nature as well as the degree of oppression, it does not explain *how* this transformation of oppressive power relations at the interstices actually functions or *why* it happens.

A more fundamental problem with intersectionality is that it reduces difference to one-dimensional identity categories, albeit categories that are understood as qualitatively different from one another. The result is that the theory cannot account for differences between people who share the same set of identities, except by postulating additional identity categories or attributing disagreement to false consciousness. The endless proliferation of new identities based on minor differences is checked only by capricious assertions of an imaginary line between "real" differences which correspond to "real" identities and false or petty differences that are not ultimately counted as differences at all. Similarly, the false consciousness argument arbitrarily designates some women as deceived about their "true" interests while others are recognized as having the "true" feminist perspective. The power to designate the "real" differences or "true" opinions is vulnerable to self-interested manipulation by influential feminists, and the exercise of this epistemological maneuver even in an unofficial capacity seems likely to drive away women with minority opinions. Neither the dismissal of some women's grievances as unimportant, nor the condescending proclamation that certain women's opinions are just a product of unawareness, acknowledges the possibility of reasonable disagreement between women. In this

way, intersectionality leads us to falsely homogenize women's beliefs, desires, and experiences, because we lack a theory of difference other than the difference between identities. This leaves no room for women to differ in our practices, judgments, dispositions, personalities, or character.

This analytic shortcoming is at least in part due to intersectionality's basis in standpoint theory. Standpoint theory refers to the idea that "it is women's unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for the truth claims of feminism while also providing it with a method with which to analyze reality" (Hekman 1997, 341). More broadly, standpoint theory argues that a person's knowledge of the world is determined by the view from their own social location. For most standpoint theorists, it is marginalized knowledges that provide the greatest insight into the truth of social life, because their perspective challenges or completes the dominant perspective. When standpoint theory is understood through the lens of intersectionality, all aspects of human life become a function of identity: everything including truth is determined by one's social location, and since one's social location is defined solely in terms of interacting identities, everything including truth is ultimately determined by identity. As a result, the more marginalization one suffers as a result of one's interlocking identities, the more privileged one's access to the truth of society. Hooks (1984] 2000) endorses this explicitly, stating that the "most visionary" knowledge "will emerge from individuals who have knowledge of both margin and center" (xvii). The question of difference in feminism for standpoint theorists thus becomes whose "perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group" (hooks [1984] 2000, 3). For hooks, the experience of womanhood from which the most valid or politically fruitful knowledge emerges is that of black women:

> "As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been

7

socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we are allowed no institutionalized "other" that we can exploit or oppress." (hooks [1984] 2000, 16)

The quest for social justice at this point risks collapsing into uncritical deference to the figure of the most completely marginalized person, who is oppressed through the devaluation of every meaningful attribute they possess (all of which are interpreted in terms of identity). This creates a competition in which every dispute between activists must be adjudicated in favor of whoever is most oppressed.

As Brown (1995) argues, it is precisely this kind of wallowing in the righteousness of one's suffering and corresponding repudiation of the power to change one's circumstances that Nietszche referred to in his critique of *ressentiment*. Brown (1995) explains that in such circumstances, "powerlessness is implicitly invested in the Truth, while power inherently distorts. Truth is always on the side of the damned or the excluded; hence Truth is always clean of power, but therefore also always positioned to reproach power" (46). Because maintaining one's privileged access to truth is therefore dependent upon remaining marginalized, any seizure of power must be understood as sullying one's pure epistemological insight. Not only that, but since the validity of one's ethical positions depends upon this privileged access to truth, gaining power is also equated with the degradation of one's ethical credibility. In this frame, success for activist movements is self-defeating, because effectively advancing the interests of one's identity group demolishes the basis for investing that identity with meaning. As a result, standpoint theory and intersectionality create a paradoxical condition in which marginalized activists become invested in maintaining their own marginalization (Brown 1995, 70).

Moreover, the entire edifice of identity upon which this theory of standpoint intersectionality relies is built upon a faulty premise. The only way identity can conceivably explain every aspect of social reality is if it is prior to the societal power dynamics it is purported

8

to explain. However, as Brown (1995) notes, this view of identity can only be sustained by selectively "suspending recognition that women's 'experience' is thoroughly constructed, historically and culturally varied, and interpreted without end" (41). The ostensible truth that is visible from the most marginalized standpoint can only be valid if "feelings" and "experiences" are granted an ontological status which precludes questioning their validity or generalizability (Brown 1995, 42). Because this experience of reality is always mediated by language and culture, there is no privileged identity-location from which the world can be accurately viewed. Even ignoring the fact that there is always someone who is more oppressed than the marginalized prophet of the moment, "experience" is itself the result of a person's interpretation of the other agents, objects, and occurrences he or she encounters (Wedeen 2004, 720-3). This means that there can be no singular account of "black women's experience" any more than there can be a singular account of "women's experience," because the very categories of womanhood and blackness are intelligible only through interpretation (Wedeen 2004, 720-3).

Even more radically, Zerilli (2005) argues that the problem with standpoint theory lies in defining feminist politics in epistemological terms (25). She claims that this creates a binary in which "political claims are either grounded (and therefore not contestable) or ungrounded (and therefore not persuasive)" (Zerilli 2005, 38-39). In her view, the debates over feminist knowledge have subsumed all other considerations, such as discussions of freedom or practical goals, by treating them as either irrelevant or secondary to epistemology (Zerilli 2005, 39). If we must first definitively resolve what we know, how we know, and who knows what, feminists will never be able move on to anything else, because there is no answer to these questions that all feminists will accept. At bottom, the problem with standpoint theory or any other epistemological theory of feminism is that it presumes that there is a "sharp distinction between

9

our everyday practices and the practice of critical thought" and that "our words and acts are rational [only] insofar as we can give grounds for them" (Zerilli 2005, 39). Instead, Zerilli (2005) suggests that we should accept that even when thinking critically, we will always make some assumptions, and this is not necessarily a problem because taking some things for granted is an inevitable part of thinking and acting in the world (39).

Applying this argument to the case at hand, we can see that standpoint intersectionality's identity-centric theory of knowledge is inconsistent with its ostensible vow to link theory and practice; the proclaimed desire to connect critical thinking to everyday life gets short-circuited by the conflict between its epistemological and political commitments. While theorists of intersectionality such as hooks frequently give examples of how their thought applies to ordinary circumstances, the epistemological question of which narrative (or *whose* narrative) about daily life best represents the conglomerate experience of a group like "women" inevitably rears its head. However this interpretive dilemma is resolved in a particular case, its emergence reveals the disjuncture between the epistemological world of theory and the phenomenological world of practice. In theory, "women" constitutes a unified group, or at least an intelligible group composed of predictable factions; in any event, it constitutes a group that can be represented as such. Yet, in practice, these simplified representations can only be sustained by discounting members with inconvenient perspectives that threaten the coherence of representing the group in question as a group in the first place. In short, the problem is that intersectionality theory responds to the gap between theory and practice by seeking to paper over it. Using standpoint epistemology to discriminate between "true" and "false" experiences of womanhood does indeed allow intersectionality theory to ignore the messiness of actual women's lived experiences, but this is precisely the harm of such a move.

To return to hooks, we can now see that her contention that black women (or any particular group of women) have the most epistemologically valid speaking position is untenable. Even without the above critiques, this particular argument would be undermined by the wide range of social positions now recognized within the intersectional framework. Locating the most marginalized position is practically impossible if intersectionality is understood to encompass all races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, ages, disabilities, and immigration statuses, just to name a few. Supposing that one were to create a list of all axes of oppression and find one woman who is subjected to all of them, there is still no guarantee that this woman's perspective would be any more universal than that of the middle-class white woman hooks critiques. The obvious response is to include the voices of all different kinds of women in the cacophony of feminist discourse, but this leads us back to where we began with the problem of difference. If all women's voices are valid, who can speak on behalf of feminism? How do we account for disagreement between these equally valid perspectives? There is no clear way to aggregate these diverse experiences into a universal women's experience, even assuming it was possible to consult every woman. Restricting feminism to those positions on which we can achieve universal consensus limits the feminist agenda to an empty set. Relying on some sort of majority vote reproduces the same problem of excluding minorities that intersectionality was proposed to combat. If there is no universal experience of womanhood or prioritized account of womanhood which can substitute for the universal point of view, the only option is to seek another basis which can ground feminist politics. We must therefore ask what it means to advocate feminism when it is impossible to formulate a coherent female subject, either individually or collectively.

B. Feminism and the Problem of Identity

Despite the above critique, there are a few places where hooks begins to think outside the strictures of identity. In some places, at least, she cautions against the most dangerous tendencies of identity politics and starts to sketch a substantive vision of feminist community. Furthermore, her commitment to continually checking her theory against the reality of women's experiences, however incoherent this position may turn out to be and whatever theoretical baggage it may carry, provokes her to think deeply about issues often neglected by other theorists. One of the tensions in hooks's writing is that, although she generally accepts intersectional standpoint theory, which encourages evaluating the validity of speakers based on the extent of the oppression that they have suffered, she explicitly rejects this kind of competition amongst women. On the one hand she proclaims the unique importance of black women's experiences; on the other, she relates a story about how one of her classes came to recognize that it is possible to "acknowledge that we all suffer in some way, but that we are not all oppressed nor equally oppressed" (hooks [1984] 2000, 59). She describes how "many of us feared that our experiences were irrelevant because they were not as oppressive or as exploited as the experiences of others" and how a solution was reached when they "discovered that we had a greater feeling of unity when people focused truthfully on their own experiences without comparing them with those of others in a competitive way" (hooks [1984] 2000, 59). As she articulates it, this experience suggests that it is possible to affirm one another's experiences without devolving into competition over whose suffering comes first. Here, hooks walks a fine line between relative and objective assessments of validity when she simultaneously affirms the diversity women's experiences and the truth of the statement that not everyone is oppressed or equally oppressed. This seemingly contradictory yet also intuitively correct assessment illustrates the limits of both

relativism and objectivity as tools for assessing the validity of political claims. This strand of hooks' thought that endeavors to find a third way of judging validity resonates with my advocacy of intersubjectivity, a notion I endorse in a later section precisely because it suggests an alternative to both relative and objective theories of judgment.

A similar area of tension exists with respect to bonding based on shared victimhood, although the resolution is clearer in this case. Yet again, the intersectional standpoint approach opens the path towards glorifying abjection as the basis for making feminist claims. However, hooks presents a relatively convincing case for why shared oppression should not be the foundation of feminism. She contends that staking commonality on collective victimization ignores the fact that women experience different kinds and degrees of oppression, thus mystifying the differences between women (hooks [1984] 2000, 4). This also drives away "assertive, self-affirming women," who are the very people that would be well-suited to leadership within the feminist movement (hooks [1984] 2000, 46). Her alternative is to correct for the partiality of any given woman's experience by "encourage[ing] women to develop keen, comprehensive understanding of women's political reality" (hooks [1984] 2000, 26-27). However, it is unclear how this comprehensive understanding might be attained or what its content might be. Furthermore, even in these passages, she continues to state that it is primarily white women who perpetuate the problem by identifying with victimhood despite being "more privileged and powerful than the vast majority of women in our society" in order to evade responsibility (hooks [1984] 2000, 46). The reiteration of what white women are like in contrast to black women homogenizes both groups and reinforces the divisions between them, making it even harder to see how "comprehensive" agreement over women's political reality might be

reached. Rendering "white women" or "black women" intelligible groups is no more straightforward than doing so with "women" in general.

One specific area where hooks posits a positive vision of what feminist community might look like is in her defense of kinship networks. She argues that "in most societies, family is an important kinship structure: a common ground for people who are linked by blood ties, heredity, or emotive bonds; an environment of care and affirmation, especially for the very young and the very old, who may be unable to care for themselves; a space for communal sharing of resources" (hooks [1984] 2000, 37). She acknowledges that patriarchal social norms "pervert" the family, so that it operates as "a space wherein we are socialized from birth to accept and support forms of oppression" (hooks [1984] 2000, 38). Yet she proposes that feminism can undo this by transforming relationships within the family structure (hooks [1984] 2000, 39). Setting this as a goal has the potential to open the feminist movement to women who value their families despite their frustration with the sexist encounters they may have within that setting (hooks [1984] 2000, 39). Hooks ([1984] 2000) argues that the way forward is to "affirm the importance of the family as a kinship structure that can sustain and nourish people; to graphically address links between sexist oppression and family disintegration; and to give examples, both actual and visionary, of the way family life is and can be when unjust authoritarian rule is replaced with an ethic of communalism, shared responsibility, and mutuality" (41). Reforming our understanding of kinship in non-patriarchal terms requires revolutionary parenting and the inclusion of men as potential allies in feminist struggle (hooks [1984] 2000, 68-83 & 133-147). It is this combination of big-picture goals and specific strategies for using feminism to equalize and deepen valuable interpersonal relationships, and therefore communities, that makes this one of the richest areas of her thought.

Another potentially productive area of hook's theory is her rejection of defining feminists in terms of *who they are as people* in favor of defining them by *what they advocate*. Moving from "I am a feminist" to "I advocate feminism" cuts off the infinite debates over the traits of the speaker and instead opens a much more fruitful discussion of what feminism should advocate (hooks [1984] 2000, 31). This line of thinking resonates strikingly with the writings of Brown and Zerilli, who seem to support the same goal of reformulating feminism in terms of practice instead of identity in their respective discussions of Arendt (Brown 1995, 8; Zerilli 2005, 11, 13, & 97; Zerilli 2009, 91). Both favorably cite Arendt's argument that freedom cannot simply refer to free will, but must refer to the coincidence of the I-will and the I-can (Brown 1995, 8; Zerilli 2005, 11, 13, & 97; Zerilli 2009, 91). Although hooks still portrays the decision to advocate feminism as a choice and an act of will, a framing Zerilli seeks to avoid, there is significant common ground to be found here. In at least some sense, all three of these theorists displace the conception of feminism as an identity in favor of feminism as political persuasion. This unlikely instance of consensus suggests the fundamental importance of the idea that feminism is not an identity but an advocacy. However, converting this single idea into a more comprehensive theory of feminist politics requires confronting the problem of subjectivity. I discuss this issue more fully in subsequent sections, but in brief, my argument is that shifting the focus of feminism from identity to advocacy requires replacing concepts and methods that emphasize the individual with ones that emphasize the relationships between individuals, groups, and objects.

To conclude, hooks attempts to constitute a harmonious feminist community in which all women's voices can be heard and all women's perspectives can be merged into a consensus on what "women's political reality" looks like. This would entail recognizing the truth of who is oppressed and who is most oppressed, without devolving into competition. However, this very

commitment to intersectionality is confounded by hooks's reliance on framing her theory in terms of identity. Intersectionality thus appears internally contradictory insofar as it calls for a unified conception of women's political reality *and* an appreciation of each woman's unique perspective without proposing a tenable means for resolving the tension between these two goals. Despite this apparent contradiction, it may be possible to read hooks's call for feminist community in a more constructive light by viewing her substantive commitments and practical recommendations from an alternative theoretical perspective that does not emphasize identity so strongly. Read through Zerilli's political thought, hooks's work can be seen as a political act proclaiming a feminist collectivity which does not yet exist, in order to bring it into existence. From this point of view, hooks's depiction of a feminism that is for everyone can be seen as an attempt to knit together such a feminism, an attempt which may yet succeed and which risks back-talk from women who refuse her offering. In this sense, hooks's feminism where "women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity" because we are all bound by the "great wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another" is a picture of community worth holding on to.

III. WENDY BROWN AND WOUNDED ATTACHMENTS

Wendy Brown's essential contribution to resolving the identity quandary is found in her sympathetic critique of identity politics from a Nietzschean perspective. Brown (1995) argues that politicized identity in late modernity is caught up in *ressentiment*, which she defines as "the moralizing revenge of the powerless" (66). *Ressentiment* functions in three ways according to Brown (1995): "it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to

inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt)" (68). The result is the anaesthetization of the "otherwise unendurable" pain experienced by the sufferer, but at the cost of reinforcing the power relations that produce the very situation that provokes the *ressentiment* (Brown 1995, 68). In such a scenario, *ressentiment* "substitute[s] for action, for power, for self-affirmation…reinscrib[ing] incapacity, powerlessness, and rejection" (Brown 1995, 68). In short, *ressentiment* is a means of alleviating pain by finding someone or something to blame without changing the conditions which give rise to suffering. Acceptance of the situation as currently defined is implicit in this decision to blame rather than resist. In relations of *ressentiment*, the sufferer simply inverts the moral poles of a situation, reifying the relative power positions of the actors rather than seeking the power to redefine the relationship between them.

Applied to identity politics, *ressentiment* functions by demonizing the dominant identity and valorizing the subordinate identity, without questioning these identities themselves or transforming the conditions which produce this domination (Brown 1995, 70). For example, consider a situation in which men have power over women due to widespread acceptance of the belief that men are rational and women are irrational. Redefining rationality as soulless calculation and emotion as an admirable ethic of care seems at first glance to challenge the relative valuation of men and women. However, this response reinforces the belief that men are rational and women are irrational, and leaves unquestioned the binary between "men" and "women." The predicted outcome is that male rationality continues to be valued over female emotionality, only now the discourse legitimating this situation is strengthened, since even feminists admit that men are rightly characterized as rational and women as emotional. In this situation, women might even become attached to their identity as carers, fighting to maintain the very opposition that subordinates them out of a belief that it makes them morally superior. This

sanctification of weakness is what Nietzsche calls slave morality (Brown 1995, 70). Even if this inversion successfully gained cultural acceptance, it would not fundamentally change the relation of domination; instead, it would simply replace one mode of oppression with another.

Although this example is somewhat of a simplification, it is easy to see how this phenomenon of *ressentiment* maps onto the politics of identity in the contemporary late modern era. For instance, it is apparent in the way standpoint intersectionality grants the mantle of truth to the perspectives of those who are maximally oppressed. From this perspective, the greater one's suffering, the greater one's claim to ethical purity, even if this means foregoing power on the grounds that it is morally corrupting. In Brown's analysis, this leads activists to pursue self-defeating political projects like lesbian separatism or engage in quasi-political feel-good activities like cussing out blog commenters who make sexist remarks. Consoled by the righteousness of their position within an oppressive system, activists who fall prey to *ressentiment* reproduce the conditions that give rise to their suffering. For instance, separatism accepts that equality is impossible within mixed-gender spaces and that women's experiences are fundamentally incommensurable with men's, while venting feminist anger by ridiculing sexist participants in online feminist spaces can foreclose the opportunity to raise the awareness of ignorant yet open-minded people. In such *ressentiment*-laden politics, an activist or theorist can justify avoiding the hard work of enacting alternative gender relations which break free of binary relations of domination.

A. *An Alternative to the Politics of Ressentiment*?

Even if one rejects the comforts of *ressentiment*, formulating a new positive vision of feminist politics is still difficult work. The first step, Brown (1995) seems to suggest, is giving

up the investment in oppressive identities and the historical wounds which underpin them (73). "The past cannot be redeemed *unless* the identity ceases to be invested in it, and it cannot cease to be invested in it without giving up its identity as such, thus giving up its economy of avenging and at the same time perpetuating its hurt," Brown (1995) argues (73). If she is correct, this means that feminists must be willing to relinquish the very identity of woman and psychological investment in the history of women's subordination which is for many the *raison d'être* of feminist politics. However, this does not mean the end of feminist politics *per se*, because the identity of victimhood is not in fact the only possible justification for feminism. It is letting go of the rectitude of victimization that clears the way for rethinking gender in a way that enables equality and difference to coexist. In Brown's (1995) terms, one must "formulat[e] oneself as a creator of the future and a bridge to the future…in order to redeem the past by lifting the weight of it, by reducing the scope of its determinations" (72). In other words, escaping oppressive power relations requires abstaining from reliving historical traumas as if they were one's own, pouring the energy spent contemplating past horrors into imagining a better future instead. This re-orientation enables one to lead others out of painful reminiscence and into the project of building a new world in which the traumas of past injustices have receded into the realm of historical curiosities.

Although Brown takes up her own challenge of attempting to construct a vision of a future beyond *ressentiment* and the politics of identity, and she generates some tantalizing hints of what this future may look like, complete success on this front remains elusive. One of the most promising wisps of a feminist future harkens back to hooks's distinction between identity and advocacy. Brown (1995) calls for a politics that "argue[s] from a vision about the common ('what I want for us') rather than from identity ('who I am') and from explicitly postulated

19

norms and potential common values rather than from false essentialism or unreconstructed

private interest" (51). The call to couch political claims in terms of "what I want for us" rather

than "who I am" closely echoes hooks's ([1984] 2000) distinction between "I advocate

feminism" and "I am a feminist" (31). Likewise, her turn towards framing politics in terms of

common interest rather than individual interests mirrors hooks's ([1984] 2000) strongly-worded

demand that feminists forgo selfish opportunism in favor of committing to collective struggle

(7). In both cases, these two theorists seem to presume the reader's pre-existing rejection of

liberal individualism in favor some formulation of collective interest. This conflict between

individualist and collectivist points of view will be interrogated in greater depth in the next

section where I question Zerilli's critique of social welfare as a basis for egalitarian claims.

However, regardless of one's position on collective agency, one can endorse the notion that

politics should be conceived in action-oriented rather than identity-oriented terms. The benefit of

avoiding unproductive debates over who is a real feminist or a real woman that have plagued

scholarly and activist circles alike accrues whether one views politics as a pursuit of "what I

want for *us*" or "what I want for *me*." The important shift that avoids the ills of the identity-

centric theories is from what one *is* to what one *wants* or *advocates*. This framing focuses

political debate on *what should be done* rather than *who gets to be a part of the team that is*

doing it.

Despite this overlap with hooks, there are a couple of unique elements of Brown's vision.

The first is her rejection of "false essentialism," which I take to mean false representations of

identity-based groups like "women." This contention is supported by her critique of standpoint

epistemology (discussed in the first section), which argues that the experience of one's identity

cannot be independent of the discursive construction of identity categories or our interpretations

of particular experiences (Brown 1995, 41-42). The second and more original proposal is her suggestion that "potential common values" should be elevated over "explicitly postulated norms." This statement is more ambiguous, but seems to refer to de-prioritizing institutional reform in favor of attempting to change the background culture of society. This reading seems to be consistent with her extreme skepticism towards disciplinary power and institutional politics. These two trends can be further explored by examining the specific features that Brown attributes to politics in her alternative future.

In describing the particulars of this new form of politics Brown advocates, two of the central features she outlines include robust public argument and flexible but existing community boundaries. In the first place, political conversations would be "oriented toward diversity and the common, toward the world rather than the self, and involv[e] conversion of one's knowledge of the world from a situated (subject) position into a public idiom, offer[ing] us the greatest possibility of countering postmodern social fragmentations and political disintegrations" (Brown 1995, 51). Public argument would serve to "discern structures of dominance within diffused and disorienting orders of power," and "assume responsibility for our situations and to mobilize a collective discourse that will expand them" (Brown 1995, 51). In this form of pluralism, contingent common values would be articulated by disparate actors whose political perspectives are informed by social constructivism and a Foucaultian theory of power relations. As Brown (1995) describes it, this entails "a formulation of power as productive rather than repressive, as discursive rather than commodity-like, as *irrigating* social life in a 'capillary' mode rather than residing in particular sites or objects" (16). These societal values are always envisioned as subject to challenge, even in the minds of those who promulgate them, because Brown (1995) holds that there is no universal or timeless foundation for truth or morality to be erected upon

(48). Political activism would consist of taking responsibility for the reconfiguring the situations in which we find ourselves and convincing others to abandon problematic arrangements. In short, political decisions would be made through a type of public debate that is both highly pluralist and moored to a shared desire to expose power relations.

This image of public debate is appealing because it combines robust deliberation with explicit attention to power relations, but it lacks a clear account of how some of the central issues of democratic politics would be navigated. For instance, what reason is there to believe that this democratic process would affirm the outcomes Brown finds desirable, and what happens if the result is what she considers to be bad or even unjust policies? How would we know when a decision had been reached through public argument, and how would these decisions be translated into implementation? Would decisions be made by consensus, compromise, majority rule, or some other system? How would Brown suggest resolving the conflict between democracy and pluralism, or more concretely, between the collective and dissenters or minorities or marginalized groups? More concretely and disturbingly, how is the vast pluralistic debate she envisions at all consistent with a shared political commitment by the collective to Foucaultian theories of power and subjectivity among the polity at large or even activist or scholarly sub-cultures? What would be the foundation for political commitments, if not morality? Most likely, addressing these questions would require trade-offs between values Brown seems to view as central to her alternative political society. For instance, there is tension between pluralism and the acceptance of her preferred theoretical and political views. Even if some of these tensions can be resolved with innovative, revolutionary new ways of thinking, what would these new ways of thinking look like? Furthermore, many important practical details are glossed over in this account. For instance, how large or small would the political communities in this future be? How

could any particular community size be ensured if the boundaries of the community are so amorphous?

This ambiguity about the borders of community membership is another important feature of Brown's political dream. She states that community boundaries "while requiring some definition and protection, cannot be clean, sharply bounded, disembodied, or permanent: to engage postmodern modes of power *and* honor specifically feminist knowledges, they must be heterogeneous, roving, relatively noninstitutionalized, and democratic to the point of exhaustion" (Brown 1995, 50). In this view, the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups would remain, but in a more ambiguous and negotiable form that respects diversity and counters disparate power relations. The demarcation between who belongs and who does not belong would be a matter of continual fluctuation, perhaps primarily in the direction of greater inclusion. Although I concur that flexible community boundaries are generally preferable to absolutely rigid ones and completely open ones, it is again unclear what exactly is meant by Brown's description. Again, although the community as Brown describes it seems to have some appealing aspects to it, we are left with many unanswered questions. Who would decide who gets to be a part of a given community and who doesn't? How do these communities form in the first place? If membership is not "clean" or "sharply bounded," would there be gradations of membership? If the decisions about inclusion and exclusion are non-institutionalized, would these decisions be arbitrary or vulnerable to abuse of power? Would they be enforceable? If they are not permanent, does that mean communities do not have the right to permanently exclude someone who commits a truly horrific act of violence, even if allowing the presence of that individual would de facto exclude others who refuse to share a community with a person they fear and despise? Would insular cultural communities like the Amish be forced to open up? How could one exit a community

they no longer want to be a part of? Could an individual be genuinely uncertain about their membership status?

B. *Governmentality, Subjectivity, and Disciplinary Power*

An additional feature of Brown's alternative formulation of politics is that it requires a specific view of the subject. Before delving into her theory of subjectivity, it is important to clarify what exactly is meant by the term "the subject" in this context. To do so, it is necessary to grasp the notion of governmentality, since Brown's (1995) understanding of subjectivity is primarily drawn from Foucault, whose conceptions of subjectivity and governmentality are closely linked (19). In Foucault's (2008) words, governmentality is "the rationalization of governmental practice in the exercise of political sovereignty," or how the government understands itself (2). In Brown's (1995) account, the study of governmentality involves discerning the discourses which justify the state, the practices of implementation enacted through the law or regulations or administrative agencies, and the conception of the body politic which undergirds these discourses and practices (17). For example, 20th century American neoliberalism is a form of governmentality defined by a logic in which government is limited and managed according to economic principles such as efficiency (Foucault 2008). Another example of a particular governmentality is what Foucault calls *raison d'etat*, which refers to the 17th century European logic of classical sovereignty that combines the maximization of state power domestically with the limitation of state power internationally (Foucault 2007; Foucault 2008). In essence, governmentality refers to the characteristic logic and practical implementation of a particular way of governing.

For each identifiable kind of governmentality, there is a corresponding type of subjectivity. At a basic level, the subject is a figure of those who are ruled that is associated with a particular type of governmentality. However, as Brown (1995) explains, Foucault's theory of power "steer[s] hard away from the state in order to disrupt and displace an intellectual preoccupation with the state as *the* center or source of the power producing subjects" (199). Thus, Foucault sees power as diffused throughout society and not as limited to government institutions. His theory of the subject can also be understood more broadly as any significant figure produced by power relations. A primary mechanism through which power operates is what Foucault (2008) calls regimes of truth, or our systems for distinguishing between truth and falsehood, classifying statements as true or false, and empowering those notions designated as "true" (132-3). From the Foucaultian perspective, subjects are constructed through these powerful discourses of knowledge and the practices that accompany them. In sum, Brown's Foucaultian conception of the subject can be described as a figure that is produced by the discourses and practices associated with a particular set of power relations.

Deepening our understanding of Brown's alternative to wounded attachments requires investigating the notions of freedom and subjectivity upon which it depends. Because Brown (1995) contends that we can best understand freedom by considering the vision of unfreedom it is opposed to, a good starting point for understanding her own conception of freedom is to consider what kinds of unfreedom her own analysis is constructed against (8). In this case, there are two figures of unfreedom which Brown explicitly clashes with. The first and primary figure is the wounded foe of oppression who seeks autonomy in self-defeating ways, ultimately reinforcing their own domination. This form of unfreedom "perform[s] mirror reversals of suffering without transforming the organization of the activity through which the suffering is

produced and without addressing the subject constitution that domination effects, that is, the constitution of the social categories" (Brown 1995, 7). These inversions are then calcified in institutions, "dominat[ing] political life with its specter long after it has been vanquished and preempt[ing] appreciation of new dangers to freedom posed by institutions designed to hold the past in check" (Brown 1995, 8).

The second image of unfreedom to which Brown opposes her own conception of subjectivity is the docile subject produced by disciplinary power. Disciplinary power refers to a particular form of domination that uses the individual's self-mastery to maximize utility through the totalizing and immediate yet simultaneously subtle control of bodily functions (Foucault 1977, 137-8 & 167). An example of disciplinary power in everyday life would be, for instance, a company's efforts to maximize the output of sandwich shop workers by training them to skillfully replicate a precisely prescribed set of motions for the purpose of optimizing the speed and quality of sandwich production during the lunch hour. A more insidious example would be training soldiers in the optimal series of motions for piloting drones in a way that maximizes the destructiveness of the bombing. Brown (1995) seems particularly concerned about this disciplined subject, which she depicts as having been rendered so obedient by regulatory institutions and discourses that he or she "cease[s] to desire freedom" and actually begins to desire his or her own regimentation (19).

In her analysis, disciplinary power is the means through which contemporary liberal democratic forms of government neutralize rights claims that are articulated in terms of identity, regardless of whether these claims are articulated in terms of individual rights or identity-based group rights (Brown 1995, 59). In the first place, the identities to which such activist groups appeal are not natural or independent of the system of power relations within society; rather,

these identities themselves are the result of disciplinary power (Brown 1995, 59). While proudly

affirming these disciplinary identities may improve individual self-esteem, accepting these labels

and the discourses that produce them as central to who we are effectively means we are inviting

the implantation of cultural constraints into our fundamental conceptions of ourselves. Secondly,

when identity movements seek inclusion within contemporary disciplinary society, they are

functionally requesting entry into the disciplinary apparatus, and this willing submission to

normalization undermines the radical potential of their claims to disrupt the system of

disciplinary power itself (Brown 1995, 66-7; Brown 2009, 75). Finally, claims for inclusion

within the system of liberal rights either neuters an identity group's difference and consequently

their ability to destabilize existing power relations, or it marks them as essentially different and

thus as an irrelevant exception to the overall well-functioning system of liberal individual rights

(Brown 2009, 73-5). Brown (1995) describes the paradoxical relationship between identity and

rights within liberalism:

> "A strong commitment to freedom vitiates the fulfillment of the equality promise and
> breeds ressentiment as welfare state liberalism – attenuations of the unmitigated license
> of the rich and powerful on behalf of the "disadvantaged." Conversely, a strong
> commitment to equality, requiring heavy state interventionism and economic
> redistribution, attenuates the commitment to freedom and breeds ressentiment expressed
> as neoconservative anti-statistm, racism, charges of reverse racism, and so forth." (67)

In sum, Brown argues that working within the framework of liberal rights is a double-

edged sword that risks welcoming the manipulation of our self-conceptions by and for economic

elites, reinforcing the current system of increasing economic inequality, and depleting activist

energy and creativity for minor reform campaigns instead of directing these resources towards

radical change. Then, even once one has made these sacrifices, it remains probable that one will

still be denied one's liberal individual rights, either because of an institutional failure to follow

through on the promised expansion of rights or because minor legal changes are insufficient to overcome engrained cultural and economic inequality.

One example Brown uses in passing to illustrate these problems with liberal rights in a society permeated with disciplinary power is the gay marriage movement. In this case, identity labels like "LGBT" effectively constrain the fluid spectrum of sexuality and gender by converting mercurial human drives into regimented subject categories that can be admitted into disciplinary institutions such as marriage without fundamentally transforming these institutions. The result of this normalization of previously deviant populations is the strengthening of the white masculine middle class ideal into which they are at least nominally integrated, which in turn strengthens the system of economic inequality this ideal supports (Brown 1995, 60-61). Gone are the Stonewall Riots and the queer communists, replaced with placid gay corporate lawyer dads pushing their baby in a stroller; hidden from view is the infant's loving but hopelessly impoverished mother overseas. The incorporation of identity groups into the system creates the illusion of progress but leaves intact the trend of worsening economic conditions for workers, breathes new life into the myth of the American Dream which fools people into thinking that it's possible for most people to experience economic advancement, and convinces potential radicals to buy into the system that benefits them. This is not to say, of course, that it would be better to continue to oppress those groups who are presently marginalized in order to enflame their desire to fight the system. Brown simply asks us to consider how the apparent inclusion of an identity group in one way may unfortunately reinforce oppressive power relations in other ways. Most vitally, she invites us to join her in imagining how we might transform the system so that our pursuit of equality is not self-defeating.

Given this depressing account of self-defeating identity politics and equally glum portrait of the ubiquity of disciplinary power within society, we might well ask at this point whether there are any opportunities for resistance. Brown says yes, as long as societal power relationships are sufficiently fluid to ensure some modicum of freedom. She distinguishes between "lives whose terms are *relatively* controlled by their inhabitants and those that are less so, between conditions of coercion and conditions of action, between domination by history and participating in history, between the space for action and its relative absence" (Brown 1995, 5). Brown (1995) defends this minimalist definition of freedom by noting that freedom is "neither a philosophical absolute nor a tangible entity, but a relational and contextual practice that takes shape in opposition to whatever is locally and ideologically conceived as unfreedom" (6). But is this really all we can hope for?

The answer lies in the question of subjectivity. While Brown (1995) believes that the "decentering, disunifying, and denaturalizing" of the subject in late modernity has undermined feminist epistemology by disqualifying "women's experiences, feelings and voices as sources and certifications of postfoundational truth," she does not consider this a death knell for feminist politics as such (40). But despite this apparent optimism, Brown does not fully describe what a feminist politics without a centered, unified, naturalized subject might look like or how it might work. The closest she gets to outlining this is when she states that: "dispensing with the unified subject does not mean ceasing to be able to speak about our experiences as women, only that our words cannot be legitimately deployed or construed as larger or longer than the moments of the lives they speak from; they cannot be anointed as 'authentic' or 'true' since the experience they announce is linguistically contained, socially constructed, discursively mediated, and never just individually 'had'" (Brown 1995, 40-1). This suggests that, in her view, the voices of all subjects

are reduced to an equally low level. There is no legitimate political speech, except perhaps for a fleeting moment; there is no way to speak across the chasm of different experiences, no way to join together into something larger than our individual lives.

This view of subjectivity appears puzzling given Brown's ringing endorsements of democracy and collectivity elsewhere in the book. How could this disconnected and judgment-free vision of subjectivity correspond to collective action of any kind? How can the subject that has no authoritative speech be the same subject that she describes elsewhere as situated in the public sphere, outward-looking rather than inward-looking, engaging in political conversation about the common? Weaving these disparate threads of her thought into a cogent alternative is challenging. However, Brown's Nietzschean critique of politicized identity has undoubtedly made a groundbreaking contribution to feminist theory. Equipped with this essential analysis, it becomes much easier to discern dynamics in which movements seeking justice for marginalized groups may unwittingly accept the terms which enable their continued oppression. Yet, alternative ways of thinking remain tenuous.

IV. LINDA ZERILLI AND FREEDOM AS PRACTICE

Linda Zerilli's response to the debate over identity is important because she reframes the debate in several important ways. She begins by critiquing existing paradigms for understanding feminist political demands, and then proposes a theory of freedom which focuses on the enactment of freedom through the practices of collective action. She goes on to describe the process through which political action is proposed and judged. If a proposal attracts support, it is the coordinated actions themselves that instantiate the group of activists a contingent collective subject. In this section, I summarize the relevant aspects of Zerilli's argument. Then, I evaluate

her analysis of the two frameworks she repudiates. In both cases, I acknowledge that Zerilli identifies real difficulties, but suggest that these issues can be resolved short of abandoning these problematic conceptual lenses entirely. Subsequently, I consider her accounts of political action, judgment, and collectivity. Because I broadly agree with her formulations of these three concepts, I explore how her arguments help untie some of the knots in dominant theories of identity.

Before delving into particular components of Zerilli's argument, I will give a brief summary of her approach. She begins by rejecting two common perspectives from which one could analyze feminist freedom. The first is "the social question," which asks how the societal consequences of granting women's rights justify or undermine the rights claims in question (Zerilli 2005, 6). According to Zerilli (2005), this view devalues the goal of women's freedom by presenting it as secondary concern which gains force only by extrinsically benefiting other members of society (6). In contrast, Zerilli (2005) holds that feminist demands are more powerful when they are asserted without justification, because this places the emphasis on the primary and intrinsic importance of women's freedom (24 & 129). The second frame Zerilli (2005) rejects is that of the "the subject question," which addresses the notion of freedom by conducting inquiries into epistemological topics like subject formation (10). Because epistemic matters cannot be resolved with certainty or even settled through agreement on the most likely answer, she argues, the subject question leads us into a pointless theoretical quagmire. Rather than embarking on a self-defeating quest to link feminism to the common good or the truth, Zerilli seeks to develop a political conception of freedom. In her view, freedom is not an attribute of an abstract will alone; rather, it is an attribute of the will as it manifests through concrete practices (Zerilli 2005, 19). One exercises political freedom when one joins in the collaborative

process of building a world with others. This idea that freedom is expressed through collective action underpins Zerilli's account of other concepts such as political action, judgment, and collectivity. For example, she suggests that political action begins with an initial claim about what kind of world should be built (Zerilli 2005, 171-3). Then, other political actors express their judgment about whether the proposed vision is representative of their collective will or not by letting the project fail, critiquing it, or organizing themselves into a temporary collective dedicated to realizing it (Zerilli 2005, 159 & 172). Although each of these concepts will be explored further below, Zerilli's basic insight is that contingently formed political collectives exercise freedom when they jointly engage in practices that will shape how their shared futures unfold.

A. *The Social Question*

For Zerilli (2005), the primary problem with the social question as well as the subject question is that both are driven by an instrumentalist means-end logic that "minimizes the possibility of freedom as action" (10). In the logic of the social question specifically, women's freedom and equality are not intrinsically valued, but rather depend upon the social consequences of granting these rights (Zerilli 2005, 6). In this frame, women's rights are either extended solely because doing so has beneficial effects on society as a whole, or they are withheld due to projections of dire catastrophe (Zerilli 2005, 8). This perpetuates the classic dilemma in which women are forced to choose between the equality and difference arguments for women's freedom, which justify women's rights either by appealing to the sameness of the sexes or by requesting differential treatment (Zerilli 2005, 5). While either of these arguments may work in certain settings, this success comes at the cost of either forgoing arguments about the differential

32

impact of seemingly neutral policies (such as facing tenure requirements during the end of one's reproductive window) or over-emphasizing the differences between the sexes (thereby reinforcing sexist rationales for excluding women from certain sectors in public and private life). Even when women's rights are temporarily guaranteed, women are never figured as a powerful political collectivity in their own right; rather, they are viewed as merely a special interest group that is easily dismissed when the public interest demands it (Zerilli 2005, 6-7). Furthermore, Zerilli (2005) argues that the social question collapses the distinction between the social and the political, inexorably leading to the perpetual increase of state intrusion into all aspects of socio-political life (3). This is because making the state the "the sole addressee of political claims," with exclusive responsibility for the distribution of wealth and the overall quality of life, produces passive citizens who invite state management into an ever-expanding number of domains (Zerilli 2005, 3). Zerilli's (2005) alternative is to proclaim a "radically ungrounded" vision of women's freedom in which "its only *raison d'être* is itself" (97).

Zerilli makes an important point when she argues that defending women's freedom solely on the grounds that it is good for others in society devalues this freedom by failing to defend it as a good in and of itself. However, especially if her theory of feminist politics is supposed to be a prototype for thinking about democratic politics in general, her outright rejection of the social question goes too far. Jettisoning the notion of the common good destroys a central girder supporting the deliberative process of justifying one's political commitments to one's neighbors. The importance of this practice gets lost in Zerilli's theory because she mistakes the unique case of demanding recognition of one's fundamental humanity for the typical case of everyday political negotiation. Even if it is better to refuse to justify one's political claims when the alternative is making one's status as a person negotiable, not all issues involve such high-stakes

personal values. Most of the time, making the effort to justify oneself in terms of shared ends fosters the kind of good faith negotiating environment that helps prevent a community from developing blatantly disrespectful political norms. Common space is constructed through the repetition of practices such as appealing to common ends, judging based on common values, and acting based on mutual agreement. When Zerilli repudiates these deliberative practices, she invites the re-entrenchment of the very instrumentalist politics she seeks to avoid. The refusal to justify one's views to one's neighbors, which appeared courageous in the special case of feminist freedom, corrodes the foundations of community when used as a default strategy. The disappearance of meaningful political discourse, the expulsion of the shared values represented by the figure of the common good, and the breakup of the community into its atomic components leaves behind only isolated individuals with no source of political motivation beyond their own self-interest. In short, the likely result of abjuring the common good is the re-emergence of instrumental rationality.

The paucity of Zerilli's radically anti-foundationalist theory becomes even more evident when compared to the pro-social theoretical foundations of thinkers like hooks and Brown. Like Zerilli, both hooks and Brown reject the instrumentalist conception of the common interest as the mechanistic product of the strategic maximization of individual interests. Unlike her, they both seek to replace the instrumentalist conception of the public interest with one that reflects the interpersonal connections upon which communities are actually or at least potentially founded. For Brown (1995), prioritizing the common means sharing resources to redress economic inequality, learning to love forms of public argument that unite people, and cultivating a sense of interest that expands beyond the egoistic self (51). For hooks ([1984] 2000), it means building interpersonal bonds through a spirit of generosity arising from the practices of sharing resources

and labor (37). The underlying assumption of both is that the individual is inextricable from his or her social context, and that this interconnectedness creates mutual obligations. In neither case does the social benefit of economic equality or interpersonal closeness need to be calculated in a way that elevates efficiency over other values. When the common good is understood as mutual sharing amongst a community and not as self-abnegating subordination to the collective will, it is perfectly consistent with refusing to explain why one deserves the basic level of respect as a fellow participant in community life. Far from requiring the abandonment of justification as a political practice or the common good as a value, we could simply recognize that the extreme disrespect inherent in the refusal to treat women's equality as a self-justifying value warrants an exception to the norms of public argument.

The fact that some appeals to the common good are problematic does not imply that all such references are problematic. The concept of the common good is essential to the democratic practices that encourage community flourishing. Even minimalistic collectivities like the contingent political constituencies that Zerilli describes require some shared conception of the good, because without at least some level of agreement, there is no reason to collaborate politically. However, even if justifying political claims in terms of mutual good is integral to daily political life in democratic communities, there may be important exceptions. In the case of marginalized people asserting their equal status as political actors, Zerilli may have identified an exceptional circumstance in which it can be counterproductive to attempt to justify one's political claims in terms of the societal good. Insofar as an appeal to society's shared interests serves only as a cheap excuse to ignore what should be an axiomatic political claim, it should be dismissed. Likewise, one might be well advised to forgo appeals to societal welfare if it will diminish the self-evident power of asserting oneself as a political force worthy of due

consideration. In most cases, however, the social bonds which hold the community together are strengthened by the attempts of neighbors to justify their politics to one another, to build consensus, and to open new avenues for collaboration. Rather than rejecting the logic of the social question in all contexts, we should simply circumscribe the domain in which it is relevant.

B. *The Subject Question*

According to Zerilli, positioning the subject as the theoretical quandary around which feminist politics revolves precludes the seizure of radical freedom. Theory driven by the subject question "centers primarily on the subject's formation and on the external and internal forces that hinder its freedom" (Zerilli 2005, 10). Although there are many different theories of subjectivity, "what defines the frame [of the subject question] is not a certain *theory* of the subject (autonomous, dependent, or interdependent) but the fact that *the* subject (be it as a philosophical, linguistic, or psychoanalytic category) is the nodal point around which every political question of freedom gets posed" (Zerilli 2005, 10). This framework entraps us in irresolvable and ultimately unimportant debates, obscures the meaning of freedom, undermines the possibility of community, and occludes the avenues through which we could act politically (Zerilli 2005, 12-4). It is in response to this mess that Zerilli makes a striking breakthrough, by changing the central question from *what kind of subject* to *what kind of politics?* In her view, "the problem [of the subject in feminist theory] was not the loss of a unified subject for politics but a conception of politics that required such a subject" (Zerilli 2009, 90). By shifting our attention away from the overwrought question of what (if any) conception of the subject is necessary for feminist politics, Zerilli's formulation points us towards the more interesting question of what conception of politics is necessary for advocates of feminism.

In contrast to subject-centered theories which emphasize the importance of free will, Zerilli (2005) rejects the sovereign conception of freedom and the conception of the subject as the atomistic individual with which it is associated (9). Freedom, in the sovereign conception, refers to the state in which one possesses political liberty and suffers no interference with one's pre-existing independent will (Zerilli 2005, 9). Rooted in the means-ends logic of instrumental rationality, sovereign freedom reinstalls the liberal subject at the center of politics (Zerilli 2005, 9). As her alternative, Zerilli adopts Arendt's conception of nonsovereign freedom, which centers practice instead of the will. For these two theorists, true freedom occurs when the I-Will of desire and the I-Can of action coincide (Zerilli 2005, 16). From the perspective of nonsovereignty, it is precisely because the consequences of political action are unpredictable that the political is a domain of freedom (Zerilli 2005, 16-17). In this formulation, freedom can exist only under conditions of community and plurality, because it is the act of collaborating to build a world together that permits the exercise of agency (Zerilli 2005, 12-14).

Importantly, Zerilli de-emphasizes the subject, but she does not propose abandoning the notion entirely. In fact, she suggests that the quest to obliterate the subject is simply the flip side of the mission to preserve it. "Could it be that this critique marks a move not out of the subject-centered frame (which governed identity politics) but into its negative space? When Butler and others suggest that the subject can express its freedom by reiteration of the very norms and categories that constitute it as subject/ed, have we not so much left the space of the subject as entered into one of its deepest dramas?" she asks (Zerilli 2005, 12). In both cases, whether it is praised as the lynchpin upon which dominant theories of politics depend or simply granted excessive intellectual space by the critics it preoccupies, the subject is entrenched as the focal point of political thought. This double-bind reveals the continued importance of subjectivity even

in the work of theorists like Butler and Zerilli who seek to avoid this trap. If the subject problem cannot be resolved by repudiating or marginalizing the notion of subjectivity, perhaps the only way out is through. That is, the only way to remove the thorn of subjectivity may be to explicitly reformulate it in a way that finally resolves its paradoxes, drains away its theoretical salience, or at least projects it into new contexts so that the new problems it creates might at least spur more fruitful dilemmas.

Despite Zerilli's decision to place the subject question to the side for most of her analysis, she does ultimately consider what type of subject her theory produces. A collective subject such as "women" or "feminists" is called into being by the act of advocating a political claim on behalf of this imagined group (Zerilli 2005, 59-60). Because such claims anticipate a possible community to come, neither the political project itself nor the constitution of a political subject is guaranteed in advance (Zerilli 2005, 173). Every call to activism thus involves an act of speaking-for-others, in which one speaks for a "we" that does not exist yet, in hopes of creating it (Zerilli 2005, 172 & 180). The speaker predicts that her call will be met with agreement, but it could ultimately be met with rejection, because her audience has the opportunity to "speak back" (Zerilli 2005, 172 & 180). It is in this contingency inherent in collective action that grants Zerilli's (2005) potential collective subject of "women" a freedom that previous articulations of the subject of feminism could not attain (24). Unlike natural or sociological conceptions of the collective female subject, Zerilli's (2009) version of "women" does not exist until after it is knitted together by the act of "speaking in women's name" (91). As she puts it:

> "What if we thought of "women" not as a category to be applied like a rule in a determinate judgment, but as a claim to speak in someone's name and to be spoken for? If such a claim can only be anticipatory, then it is always in need of agreement and consent. This agreement is posited ...which means the agreement is not "there" from the start, given, say, in the very logic of concept application. Rather, the agreement is what

38

we at once take for granted and hope to achieve whenever we take the risk—and let us not forget that it is a risk—of speaking politically." (Zerilli 2009, 92)

Zerilli's (2009) formulation of feminist community as something which is continually recreated through political practice is immensely more appealing than an understanding of feminist community as something which must be founded on shared experience or identity (91).

C. *An Intersubjective Theory of Judgment*

Zerilli's theory of judgment underpins her understanding of community, her account of political claims-making, and her answer to both objective rationalism and irrational subjectivism. She defines judgment as "the faculty that allows us to order or make sense of our experience" (Zerilli 2005, 127). It is what allows us to affirm the unpredictability of life, discover what we do and don't have in common, and engage in political "world-building" (Zerilli 2005, 29-30, 59). It is both an individual capacity which can be cultivated and a collective capacity which determines the validity of political claims (Zerilli 2005, 159). Imagination, rather than "understanding" or "reason," is at the core of judgment for Zerilli (2005, 30). In fact, her theory of judgment is explicitly opposed to the analytic form of reasoning in which agreement "follows necessarily from our acceptance of certain principles of argumentation" (Zerilli 2005, 142). Because there is no guarantee that one's political propositions will be taken up by others even if they acknowledge the irrefutability of one's arguments, and because there is no place from which to judge our own commitments without the bias of our own culture and experience, judgment for Zerilli (2005) cannot be equated with the logical assessment of argumentation (129 & 143). Instead, the moment of judgment occurs when one discovers whether or not they have persuaded others (Zerilli 2005, 143).

Taken as a whole, Zerilli's theory of judgment posits how one should make political claims and how the validity of these claims can be judged as valid or invalid in the absence of an objective source of agreement and in the presence of others. For Zerilli (2005), the first step in the process of evaluating political claims occurs when an individual reaches the decision to put forth a particular political claim (131). This act is a risky one, because the agreement of others is not given in advance and the failure of one's claim to garner support smothers the possibility of finding a political community to which one can belong (Zerilli 2005, 159). Given the unpredictability of politics and the fact that one may always find that they have misjudged the degree of support for their new idea, the decision to posit a political claim is thus one of courage rather than logic (Zerilli 2005, 30 & 159). Despite beginning from a particular claim, then, the allusion of this claim to an unspoken universal is revealed by the presupposition that others will ultimately agree and the act of persuasion which attempts to enact this reality (Zerilli 2005, 134-5 & 159). Persuasion requires appealing to criteria which one thinks will be meaningful to others, and it succeeds not when it forces others to acknowledge the impeccability of one's reasoning, but rather when one manages to project an existing concept in a way that opens up new meanings that capture the political imagination of one's interlocutors (Zerilli 2005, 144 & 159). If one succeeds at persuasion, one's argument is judged as valid and a political community forms between the individual who made the initial claim and the people who were persuaded (Zerilli 2005, 159). If one fails at persuasion, the reverse occurs; the argument is found to be invalid and one is left standing alone (Zerilli 2005, 159).

The crucial turning point of political judgment, then, are individuals' decisions to stick their necks out for ideas they believe in and the decision of others to accept or reject the invitation to join in building a world based on this political vision. However, from the simplified

account above, it may be unclear what exactly this appeal to popular support has to do with the validity of one's argument. The simplest answer is that popular support is what grants legitimacy to political claims in democratic politics (Zerilli 2005, 131). But this answer alone fails to capture the careful points about subjectivity and persuasion upon which this rationale is based.

In the first place, positing a political claim on behalf of a group such as women is for Zerilli a predictive move, and thus the retroactive determination of whether this agreement was really present or falsely assumed is in fact a referendum on whether one's attempt at speaking for others was a fair representation of their interests and beliefs according to those one was trying to speak for. Because politics presumes a collective subject even though the members of this subject cannot be known in advance, the judgment of the potential members does provide a meaningful assessment of the validity of the subject that was predicted. Additionally, the process of attempting to persuade others exposes one's claim to scrutiny by a plurality of perspectives. In the act of imagining what criteria might appeal to others, one attempts to think from multiple perspectives and thoroughly evaluates one's own views from the standpoint of others. Once expressed to others, this idea is then subjected to deliberation and ultimately the free-standing question of whether others were convinced of one's point. [1] This judgment occurs according to a plurality of criteria which one's varied interlocutors believe to be meaningful (Zerilli 2005, 140). Argument does come into play here, but the key feature of arguments which determines their

---

[1] In fact, this account of validity as consisting of checking one's views through internal reflection plus external feedback is reminiscent of Rawls's reflective equilibrium, a commonality which likely arises due to their shared Kantian roots. The key difference, of course, is that Rawls applies Kant's practical theory of reasoning to politics while Zerilli instead applies Kant's aesthetic theory reasoning to politics. Additional differences include the fact that Zerilli objects to the notion that it is possible to sever the context in which one's judgments are made, claiming that there is no objective point of view one can assume to evaluate arguments without falling prey to one's own biases. She also endorses Arendt's view that freedom in politics inheres in the fact that collective action is always dependent upon the cooperation of others, which can never be known in advance. Furthermore, she theorizes that it is not the logical strength of one's justification that causes others to be persuaded, but rather the imaginativeness of one's vision. Finally, Zerilli rejects the idea of politics as a form of rule-following in which a general principle is applied to specific cases on Wittgensteinean grounds (see Chapter 1 in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*).

persuasive power is not logic but imagination for Zerilli. One's justifications are only persuasive insofar as they shift others' way of viewing the world in a way that motivates them to join one's political project. Taken together, this combination of the individual's attempt to see from others' points of view and the ultimate testing of their persuasive abilities through the actual judgment of others adds up to an intersubjective theory of validity. Situated between subjectivism which solipistically retreats into their own thoughts and experiences, on the one hand, and objective rationality in which abstract proofs can likewise be determined within one's own mind, on the other, intersubjective theories of validity center the interactions between people.

Zerilli's account of political judgment is appealing for several reasons. First, it accurately describes how validity is evaluated empirically, in actually existing politics. If feminism is first and foremost a praxis, a feminist theory which lacks a corresponding practice by fellow feminists can be said can be said to have been judged inadequate by the feminist collective subject, at least in a *de facto* sense. Second, it avoids the trap of endless feminist debate over epistemology because it does not base validity on truthfulness, avoiding the trap over whose experience of womanhood is the "real" experience. For this feature alone, it is preferable to standpoint epistemology's subjectivist conception of judgment that assigns uniform validity to all personal experiences without contestation. Third, it gives feminists a way out of the debates over universalism versus relativism. By offering a flexible intersubjective form of reasoning, Zerilli offers a middle ground between the rigidity of objective reasoning and the formlessness of purely subjective reasoning. In intersubjective reasoning, one can posit a universal feminist claim, but the validity of this claim must be tested against the experiences and viewpoints of others. A judgment can be reached, but only through deliberation and negotiation, not by a lone thinker. This type of validity is the most appropriate for a relational theory of subjectivity which holds

that both the individual and the group are constituted by their interactions with one another. Moreover, the centrality of community to this understanding of judgment provides important resources for constructing a new theory of feminist community which is not founded on identity politics.

V. A RELATIONAL THEORY OF SUBJECTIVITY

Each of the theorists discussed in the previous sections has made important contributions to my understanding of subjectivity. In this section, I attempt to make my own contribution to feminist conceptions of subjectivity. To do so, I first compile the insights from the preceding sections and explain how the pieces fit together. Then, I attempt my own potential contribution by outlining my conception of relational subjectivity. Third, I contrast my view with the identitarian perspective, and explain how my theory resolves the identity quandary. Finally, I distinguish my view from the liberal conception of subjectivity.

A. Synthesizing hooks, Brown, and Zerilli

The only idea that cuts across the three theorists is the suggestion that feminists be defined by their advocacies or activities rather than their identities. Hooks ([1984] 2000) proposes changing our language from "I am a feminist" to "I advocate feminism" in order to foster debate over political goals rather than personal habits (31). Similarly, Brown (1995) advocates a shift from the perspective of "who I am" to one that is focused on "what I want for us," in order to direct attention away from the tired discussion of identity and towards a fresher discussion of how we construct "explicitly postulated norms and potential common values" (51). By the same token, Zerilli (2005) argues in favor of concentrating on "who" people are as they

have expressed themselves over time through the practices of world-building rather than "what" people are in terms of their identities (19). Each in their own way, all three theorists push for rethinking subjectivity in terms of something other than identity. For hooks, it becomes a question of agency; for Brown, a question of desire; and for Zerilli, a question of practice. While I agree with all of them that identity is no longer the best concept through which to understand subjectivity, my view on what should replace it is most similar to Zerilli's, since I call for an action-oriented understanding of subjectivity that emphasizes events and processes.

Another important notion is commonality, which is a value that is affirmed by hooks and Brown. Hooks expresses her commitment to commonality in her endorsement of shared interests over individual interests. For her, shared interests are not simply the aggregation of individual interests but the transcendence of them. She holds that "individual opportunism" undermines collective struggles against oppressive social relations like "patriarchy, capitalism, classism, [and] racism" because it allows privileged individuals to engage in progressive politics only to the extent that it benefits them (hooks [1984] 2000, 7). For instance, white women are acting in their personal interest when they only challenge patriarchal power hierarchies and not racial power hierarchies, but this results in a form of feminism that leaves many women behind (hooks [1984] 2000, 7). Similarly, Brown argues that we should seek common ground by trying to see from the perspectives of others in addition to seeing from our own viewpoints. To do so, we must learn how to publically deliberate in a way that does not seek to "overcome our situatedness," but does "assume responsibility for our situations and…mobilize a collective discourse that will expand them" (Brown 1995, 51). In other words, she argues that we must try to "loosen" our own attachments enough that we can open ourselves to the perspectives of others (Brown 1995, 51). Zerilli (2005) agrees that we should join together with others, but she

distinguishes between caring for others and caring for the world (14). She contends that a view which emphasizes connecting with other subjects preserves individuality within the public sphere, undermining the attempt to join together as a collective body within public space to create the world together (Zerilli 2005, 14). Moreover, she challenges the idea of the societal good in her critique of the subject question, arguing that appeals to common ends preserve the instrumentalist logic which undermines the practice of collective political freedom (Zerilli 2005, 10).

Although a commitment to the common good is not inherent to my theory of subjectivity, it is compatible with it. My account of subjectivity is more descriptive than normative, because my goal is to establish a theoretical framework in which all kinds of political activities can be analyzed. Still, my inquiry into subjectivity arose out of a desire to move feminist analysis forward, and the kind of feminist politics I hope will replace identity-centric feminisms would indeed be one that is oriented towards commonality. As I argue in response to Zerilli, some degree of common ground is necessary for both contingent political collectives and democratic communities. Even though disagreement over the content of the public good is inevitable, this is not a reason to abandon the project of fostering a communal spirit by creating robust public spaces and engaging in democratic practices such as deliberation. In my view, the collective activities that Zerilli praises as fundamental to human freedom are also examples of the enactment of a vision of the common good. While the public good remains indeterminate in the abstract, it nonetheless becomes concrete in practice. After all, what is world-building if not a process through which a vision of the commons is realized?

The third concept I want to highlight is the idea of collectivity. Zerilli's (2005) theory of political action states that politics begins with the act of making a political claim (59-60). The

response to this claim is not guaranteed, but in the best case scenario it attracts a constituency (Zerilli 2005, 172 & 180). A political collectivity is born when this newfound constituency is bound together through the process of practicing politics with one another (Zerilli 2005, 59-60). This collectivity is contingent, because it emerges only in specific contexts, cannot be predicted in advance, and exists only insofar as it continues to be connected by mutual political action (Zerilli 2005, 173). It is this collectivity that constitutes the subject of politics for Zerilli. To the extent that Zerilli's contingent collective subject refers to a set of interactions rather than a group of people, her view is consistent with my action-centered view of subjectivity. Seen as a group of people, the only difference between her view and other theories of group subjectivity is that hers is explicitly understood as a contingent formation. However, if the collectivity is understood as a set of interactions, the resulting whole need not be reducible to its parts. Viewed in this way, Zerilli's collective subject disturbs one of the foundational assumptions of the identitarian perspective, which posits that all subjects must consist of an actor or group of actors. Understood in terms of my relational concept of subjectivity, Zerilli's collective subject provides an example of one way out of the identity quandary.

The final concept worthy of note is the idea of intersubjectivity, which I will mention only briefly since it is covered in detail in the prior and subsequent sections. In short, intersubjectivity is an approach to validation that locates authority in interactive processes involving multiple actors. It represents a middle ground between the subjective approach, which grants this authority to individuals with all their idiosyncrasies, and the objective approach, which grants authority to a hypothetical disinterested outsider. In the context of my theory, the role of intersubjectivity is to provide a guideline for answering questions about the boundaries of a particular subject. For instance, when determining whether an individual's connection with

other actors is sufficiently close that he or she should be seen as part of the collectivity in question, one might ask the individual and the other actors participating in the collective action in question. Concretely, if one wanted to determine whether the anarchist who broke store windows during a peaceful protest was a part of the protest itself, one would ask the anarchist and the other protestors. While this might not give a definitive answer if there is too much disagreement amongst the relevant actors, the fact that the intersubjective approach allows for nuanced answers about forms of political membership that are in fact ambiguous is a *strength* of the approach, not a weakness.

B. The Relational Subject: A New Conception

In this section, I endeavor to present a political conception of relational subjectivity. I started from the idea that the notion of "the subject" in general refers to the actor that is the object of analysis. This means that "the subject" can be both a theoretical concept that attributes agency to a particular actor and a methodological concept that designates the fundamental unit of study. Rather than attempting a comprehensive account of subjectivity in all its varied forms and contexts, my objective is to propose a workable theory of subjectivity that is conducive to the theoretical and empirical study of political activism, particularly feminist activism. Ideally, this framework would also be useful for generating new ideas that would enrich feminist praxis. In brief, I argue that the interaction or relationship should be considered the essential subject of interest in analyses of political activism, particularly feminist activism.

My theory of relational subjectivity borrows somewhat from Georg Simmel's (1971) theory of society, which holds that "society exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction" (23). Although expressed simply, there are layers of complexity beneath this basic

insight. Specifically, Simmel explains society in terms of the relationships between four basic types of human sociality: the elementary forms of social action that occur spontaneously in people's practical everyday interactions with one another, the institutionalization of these social forms into more visible and solid structures of praxis, the free-floating play of these forms when they are enacted for their own sake rather than for practical purposes, and the sedimentation of the three preceding elements into a cumulative whole called "society" (Levine 1971, xxv-xxviii). Simmel's method for making sense of this multifaceted jumble "is to select some bounded, finite phenomenon from the world of flux; to examine the multiplicity of elements which comprise it; and to ascertain the cause of their coherence by disclosing its form. Secondarily, he investigates the origins of this form and its structural implications" (Levine 1971, xxxi). In other words, he begins from the perspective of particular social phenomena, and then suggests how these findings might contribute to a general theory of human social structures. His theoretical precision and nested analysis of social dynamics produce a model of society that enables us to understand complex social relationships at many different levels of generality, without forcing a trade-off between detail and explanatory power.

Simmel (1971) focuses on the *relationships* between social forms, both *within* a given level of analysis and *between* each level (23-28). The result is a third way between methodological individualism, which reduces all social interactions to the behavior of individuals, and societal realism, which treats the social body as a naturally emerging organic whole (Levine 1995, 129 & 153). Instead, our unit of analysis could be social *relationships,* including those between individuals, between individuals and groups, between groups, between individuals and society, and between groups and society. Instead of treating the individual and society as separate and opposed, such a relational political theory would view them as co-

constitutive. Rather than understanding society-wide political phenomena by isolating their constituent parts and retrospectively explaining how they interact, one could begin by identifying a set of central dynamics, either between parts or between a particular part and the whole. Only later, once these primary elements are pinned down, would we slide up the "ladder of abstraction" to explain how these dynamics interact with one another (Sartori 2009, 22). In this way, political and social theorists could generate theories which avoid reductionist accounts of individuals or society.

The same benefits can be garnered by incorporating Simmel's insights into a theory of political subjectivity. Like Simmel's relational theory of society, a relational theory of subjectivity would create a middle ground between liberal theorists who treat the individual as the fundamental natural unit of politics and theorists in other traditions who totally subordinate the individual to mass subjects like "the general will," "the people," "the community," "the proletariat," or "women." A relational view of subjectivity treats both individual and collective subjectivity as a product of particular relationships. An individual subject would therefore be viewed as the outcome of a varied set of relations composed of interactions between: the individual in question and other individuals, the individual and groups, between groups, and between each of these components and the whole system of interactions they compose. Likewise, a collective subject would be the result of the complex interactions between individuals, between individuals and groups, between groups, and between the social whole and each of these constituent parts. This theory of subjectivity thus creates a framework in which the formation of any kind of subject can be explained, from the subjective self of a particular person, to the parallel subject locations inhabited by many individuals in isolation from one another, to collective subjectivities in which multiple people are welded into a group such that they become

49

more than just an assortment of individuals. By applying Simmel's method to studying these forms of subjectivity, we can explain how each of these subject types are constructed in opposition to or in alignment with an array of other subjects comprised of all three types. Beginning with a particular subject we would like to explain, we can then move up or down the ladder of generality.

For example, the project of this paper can be couched in terms of this relational theory and method of interrogating subjectivity. I begin by theorizing the relationships between the individual subjects of women, the individual subjects of feminism, the collective subject of women, the collective subjects of particular types of women such as black women and lesbian women, and the collective subject of feminism. On the basis of my analysis of the relationships between these particular forms of subjectivity, I attempt to generalize about the nature of political subjectivity in general. From there, I try to connect the abstract notion of political subjectivity to the praxis of feminist politics, politics more broadly, feminist communities, and political communities more broadly. Finally, having laid all of the relevant groundwork, I attempt to theorize the relationship between collective subjectivity and community itself.

Although my theory of relational subjectivity takes a distinctly Simmelian form, it shares important features with other relational theories of subjectivity. In particular, I concur with Sampson (2003) and Drewery (2005) that many human relationships are characterized by a fundamental interconnectedness that goes beyond the mere co-existence of separate individuals. As Sampson (2003) states, relational subjectivity entails the idea that "the interpersonal relationship is an emergent system that cannot be reduced to the operation of structures or processes found within any of its constituent parts" (149). Similarly, Drewery (2005) argues that the relational subject "is a concept that necessarily draws upon the collaborative (rather than

individual) production of forms of language as forms of life. Persons cannot be agentive on their

own, but only in relationship with others. Thus to be positioned agentively is to be an actor in a

web of relationships with others who are also engaged in co-producing the conditions of their

lives" (315). Additionally, I agree that the idea of relationality significantly reduces the tension

between difference and community. As Perpich (2003) argues, the idea that that subjects are

always already situated amongst difference is foundational to the relational theory of

subjectivity, but this is fully compatible with the recognition that subjects are embodied and thus

physically distinct from one another:

> "To say that subjects are inherently relational is to say that they exist within a field of
> differences. That is, the subject is not an isolated existent who has relationships as
> external associations or bonds that it can take on or give up as a matter of will; the subject
> is its relations in the sense of being constituted by them in ways that, while malleable, are
> not wholly up to it to control, either as a matter of fact or with respect to their personal
> and social significance. Moreover, singularity is not in tension with relationality but is
> part and parcel of relational subjectivity since it is my relations that constitute me as this
> singular subject rather than another…Singularity and relationality presuppose not just
> that the subject has a body but that body and subjectivity are non-reductively inseparable.
> To say that the subject is embodied is to say that it is an existent for whom the body is the
> lived site of subjective significations. Bodies singularize subjects in the double sense of
> individuating them and of being the locus whereat differences are produced." (407)

There are two ideas that are common to most definitions of relational subjectivity. First,

each of the relational theories I cite conceives of individual subjects as constituted by, and

therefore inextricably linked to, other people. Regardless of whether individual subjectivity is

seen as something that is created primarily through dialogues between individuals, small group

relationships such as kinship networks, or large group relationships like societal discourses, a

fundamental premise of relational subjectivity is that individual subjects cannot exist in isolation.

Most people share physical spaces with others on a daily basis for most of their lives, and the

more reclusive exceptions to this still typically spend lots of time interacting with media that was

created by others. Even in cases where an individual's body inhabits a space that is extremely

distant from the artistic creations as well as the bodies of other human beings, that individual's

self-conception can never be totally divorced from the influences exerted by the social

relationships they remember having prior to their seclusion. Nearly everyone is strongly

influenced by their childhood caretakers, their friends, their association with fellow members of

voluntary and involuntary groups, cultural norms, religious or philosophical belief systems

shared with others, and socially shared media that run the gamut from oral traditions and ancient

books to Hollywood movies, advertising, and Twitter. If this account of individual subjects as

distinct yet still profoundly influenced by social relationships is correct, this suggests that the

relational conception of subjectivity should be preferred over theories which depend on highly

independent depictions of individuals or exceedingly homogenous representations of groups.

The second commonality is that many theories of relational subjectivity make some

distinction between the subject as a "*what"* and the subject as a "*who*." For both Cavarero and

Zerilli, this distinction between "what" and "who" traces back to Arendt (Perpich 2003, 394;

Zerilli 2005, 13-14). Cavarero rejects the traditional masculine construction of the subject as a

"what" consisting of a "universal disembodied male figure" and the similarly empty universalist

view of politics it underwrites, and affirms an alternative feminine conception of the subject as a

"who" that "relates and interacts with other individuals" (Hanafin 2008, 83). Similarly, Zerilli

(2005) distinguishes between viewing a person as a "what" consisting of labelled attributes

applicable to many individuals and identities which categorize individuals into groups, as

opposed to seeing a "who" consisting of a person's character as demonstrably revealed through

their unique interactions with the world (11 & 13-14). As a "what," the subject can be artificially

separated from their embodied presence in the world, invoking a sovereign conception of

freedom in which the individual is reduced to an abstract will cut off from social influences

(Zerilli 2005; 11, 13-14, 97). As a "who," the nature of the subject is disclosed only through their actions within the social world, invoking a relational and inherently political form of subjectivity in which people only become themselves by interacting with others (Zerilli 2005; 11, 13-14, 97). Even hooks, who doesn't cite Arendt, echoes this sentiment when she opposes treating feminism as a subjective identity in favor of understanding feminism as an advocacy (hooks [1984] 2000, 31). The fundamental insight that is expressed through the theorization of the "what" and the "who" is that people's identities matter much less than the way they manifest their commitments through public action. In this way, the relational perspective shifts the focus from *being* to *doing*, from freedom as self-sovereignty to freedom as participation in collective action without a guaranteed outcome, and from the naturally independent self to the socially constructed and socially embedded self.

However, despite this common ground, my conception of relational subjectivity is different from those posited by other theorists. For instance, I diverge from Sampson's view of relational subjectivity in two ways. First, I do not view relationality as either binary dialogue or alternating monologues, which he presents as the two possible models of interaction (Sampson 2003, 164). Instead, I conceive of relationality as a multiplicity of intersecting relationship patterns emerging out of the interactions of diverse individual as well as collective agents. Second, I do not accept Sampson's (2003) argument that unconditional obligations are the foundations of human social life (149). Not only does such an argument overlook the complexity of society by claiming one type of relationship as fundamental, it also paints most political relationships as incompatible with human sociality. Beginning with the often conditional social connections which momentarily unite political coalitions allows me to trace how these initial attachments dissolve, stagnate, or evolve into the deeper, thicker bonds of community.

Moreover, the evidence for the presumed association between community and unconditional obligations is decidedly mixed. Even enduring communal relationships are not always or perhaps even usually unconditional; in many cases, such boundaries are frequently (re)negotiated. In fact, as Mouffe (2005) argues, it's this conditionality which justifies the temporary closure inherent to creating community boundaries in the first place (5). It is the continual re-evaluation of the rules of membership, the composition of the group, and the classification of particular individuals which mitigates the harms of designating who is a part of the collective subject and who is not (Mouffe 2005, 19-20). Despite the inherent risks, a guideline which at least loosely specifies the domain of group membership is a necessary component of constituting a group. Otherwise, without some baseline standard like "membership in the feminist collective is contingent upon advocating for gender equality," references to the "feminist collective subject" could mean literally anyone, including explicit defenders of patriarchy.

Additionally, although I recognize that there may be some contexts where gendering subjectivity as feminine is a useful strategy for exposing or displacing dominant views of the subject which are implicitly masculine, I argue that we should move away from this strategy. In my view, theories which explicitly gender subjectivity only reinscribe the identity paradigm within the very theory that I posited as an alternative to the identitarian perspective. Incorporating identities which are based on the "what" as well as the "who" of political agents necessarily results in exclusion, as those who do not identify with the relevant characteristics fail to join the movement. Responding to this critique, Perpich (2003) contends sexed theories of subjectivity carry the possibility to rupture the assumptions upon which entrenched theories of subjectivity depend, precisely because they occupy a liminal space between "what" and "who" (408-410). However, I dispute this conclusion. While positing a form of subjectivity which is

both feminine and purportedly universal may help open space for new visions of subjectivity at first, it will inevitably come to serve a more conservative purpose if we do not move on once the intellectual ground has been cleared. Despite their apparent complexity, the portraits of feminine subjectivity presented by Irigaray and Cavarero are ultimately just mirror images of the traditional masculine subject. As Brown (1995) argues, investing a subordinated identity with positive meanings not only fails to transform the conditions of possibility which give rise to gendered structures of domination, it also re-entrenches them (65 & 70). Some of the reversals these theorists defend, such as replacing uniformity with constituent diversity or rejecting the mind/body dualism in favor of theorizing subjectivity as embodied consciousness, might have positive effects outside the framework of gendered subjectivity. However, when couched in gendered terms, these inversions inevitably reinforce the link between femininity and other subordinated terms such as "difference" and "the body." Moreover, rejecting dichotomous thinking permits more nuanced, transformative ideas. For instance, the recognition of diversity among subjects can be tempered with the acknowledgement of their unified advocacies and separate embodiments; likewise, the notion of embodied consciousness gains greater lucidity when consciousness-formation is explicitly linked to social interactions and carefully assessed evidence of biological inclinations.

Having established the relationship between my view and that of other thinkers who theorize subjectivity in relational terms, I will now outline my specific conception of relational subjectivity. In my view, the subject of politics is an effect of political action. In a methodological sense, this means that the basic unit of analysis should be the interactions between individuals, groups, and objects in the world. Concretely, this means that one would begin a research project by selecting a particular political phenomenon and then identifying the

central dynamics that enabled the event in question to unfold. Specifically, one might examine important actors, objects, and background conditions. In a theoretical sense, I treat the action rather than the actor as the primary agent of politics. By "actions," I mean the set of relationships between actors, objects, and the world that combine to create a political event or series of political events. This perspective may seem strange at first, since actions are not agents, strictly speaking. However, although actions are not agents in the sense that they do not make decisions, treating them as agents for the purpose of political analysis fundamentally alters the analytic framework in a way that is significantly more conducive to focusing on practice rather than identity. If attributing agency to interactions rather than actors seems too strange, one could arrive at the same analytic viewpoint by attributing the combined effects of the relevant interactions to an abstract collective agent, as long as this imaginary collectivity remains an abstraction and does not get confused with any concrete group of people. In this sense, because the network of interactions that the subject is composed of can be viewed as a collectivity, my relational subject could also be described as a collective subject.

From this perspective, questions which were previously unanswerable become simple. For example, what is the subject of feminism, according to my relation view? In my view, the subject of feminism is feminist advocacy. It is not women or feminists, as actor-centric theories of subjectivity might reply. Not only does this successfully avoid the identity-related problems that have plagued other theories of subjectivity, it also makes intuitive sense. Forgetting the jargon, what is the central topic that is being studied when scholars research feminist movements? Feminist advocacy. While the precise implications of this conception of subjectivity might be difficult to grasp in theoretical terms, the big picture idea that analysis should focus on interactions rather than actors is perfectly intelligible.

I will give one more example before moving on. Imagine an individual getting up on a soap box on a college campus and proclaiming that she wants to hold a rally to protest the local police department's failure to test the thousands of rape kits that were sitting untested in the evidence storage room at the station. Imagine that a crowd starts to gather and members of the audience start to tweet about the incredible speech that the girl on the soap box is delivering, and imagine that one of the members of the audience is the police commissioner's daughter. By the time all the activity is over, information about the untested rape kits is all over the internet and local news. The combination of media heat and pressure from his daughter spur the police commissioner to order that the kits be tested. Who or what is the subject in this scenario? The answer is relatively simple to state, although analyzing such an event would be somewhat more complicated in practice. The subject is the sum total of all of the political activities that occurred that day. It is the collective actions of everyone who got involved that day. Specifically, the subject refers to this set of interactions: speaking on a soap box, listening to the speaker on the soap box, tweeting, reporting, ordering that the kits be tested, and talking to your dad. Put as simply as possible, the subject of this political event is the way the soap box girl's message got spread around and then translated into a policy change. To put a bit of an interpretive spin on it, the subject of this political event is how information about untested rape kits was transmitted through a variety of high- and low-tech communications technologies ranging from a bullhorn to twitter to TV cameras to a father-daughter chat, ultimately causing the kits to be tested.

Given the complexity of analyzing political events in this way, why should we adopt it? In the first place, it captures the rich detail of political life. The little things in politics matter in a world where a single cell phone picture of a cop nonchalantly pepper spraying a non-violent protestor can circulate internationally on the internet for years and eventually come to serve as a

symbol of casual police brutality. Even if we cannot always know all the details, it is useful to have an analytic tool for the situations where we have enough details to make good use of a fine-grained mode of analysis. Secondly, because feminist theory deals in abstractions to a certain extent, this tool is particularly useful for theorists. If one is discussing the ethics or strategic situation of a particular hypothetical, a thorough and dynamic mode of analysis can help one consider the situation from all of the relevant angles.

Thirdly, as I have argued throughout this paper, an action-centric conception of subjectivity avoids the theoretical and practical problems that are characteristic of identity politics. Feminist politics does not require a pre-defined enumeration of (all) women's interests, a consensus among gender critics on the relationship between sex and gender, an iron-clad standard for distinguishing women from non-women, a widely acceptable definition of female subjectivity, or a precise set of rules about what gender performances one can engage in while still rightfully claiming the label of "feminist." In fact, basing politics on these unstable grounds either requires strict policing to preserve ideological uniformity at the expense of pluralism, or it results in the collapse of the movement as disagreement over its basic foundations erupts. We do not need to choose between relying on these wobbly foundations or abandoning the feminist project altogether. It is possible and preferable to build feminist politics on a mutual commitment to collective action rather than a common identity. Identity becomes unimportant, while advocacy takes center stage. The tenor of interpersonal conflict in feminist settings could potentially undergo a radical change if feminists made a commitment to this view, which involves focusing the bulk of one's attention on what happened, a minor amount of attention on who did what, and very little attention at all on the identities inscribed upon any particular person.

Because the subject of feminism emerges from engaging in feminist work, it will inevitably be pluralist with respect to the identities and beliefs of the participants, except insofar as these identities or beliefs are actively hostile to feminism. Activists can call themselves feminist, womanist, or women's liberationist. Their activism can be motivated by their adherence to different philosophical belief systems such as anarchism, socialism, or liberalism. The group's membership can include women and men, trans and cis people, binary-identified and non-binary-identified people. What matters is not participants' self-identifications or philosophical disagreements but what political goals they are willing to join together to fight for. This is why my idea of the collective subject is a contingent one, because it reflects the dynamism of political activism. It is a political conception of subjectivity, in the sense that it describes the interactions between people actively working together to create a better world.

The idea that the subject is relational allows a number of binaries to be untangled. For instance, instead of viewing the individual or the group as the unit of politics, I argue that the only way to understand politics is through an analysis of the interaction between individuals and the groups they belong to. Although I also consider the interactions between actors and objects, it is the social relationships between people that are usually the most meaningful. With respect to interpersonal relationships in particular, I understand the collective subject as a product of a set of social relationships between members of a group, between members and non-members, between sub-cultural activist communities and the larger cultures in which they are situated. These larger cultures may be sub-national, national, transnational, or even global. Likewise, activist communities may consist of members in only one place or they may be geographically dispersed. In the case of feminism, the activist community consists of a network of groups which operate locally, within states or provinces, nationally, transnationally, and globally. To

understand feminist politics requires mapping the complex interactions between groups working

at all of these levels, and the collective subjects they produce. The collective subject of

"feminism" is composed of the sum total of all these interactions. "Feminism" should not be

understood as an identity or an ideology, but as a set of actions taken by various actors to bring

about a world of gender equality. Instead of asking "who are feminists?" we can ask "what

feminist activities are people engaging in?" In this way, "feminism" becomes a contingent

designation of activities which imply membership based on action, rather than a set of actions or

beliefs performed by a membership that is defined in advance.

C. *Resolving the Identity Quandary*

The fundamental problem with identity-centric theories of subjectivity is that they create

a deep philosophical link between identity and politics, thereby ensuring that all political theories

must directly confront the peculiar dilemmas of identity politics. This connection is established

by treating identity as the primary feature which distinguishes distinct political actors and unites

similar ones. This suggests that group identities significantly shape one's political agency,

perhaps to the extent that an agency is seen as largely or wholly determined by the actor's group

affiliations. In this way, identitarian conceptions of subjectivity position identity as a causal force

that impacts all political activity, or at least as a primary mechanism through which all causal

forces are mediated. For example, recall how intersectionality theory explained all difference in

terms of identity. Agreement between women was attributed to the shared experience of

womanhood, while disagreement between women was attributed to either false consciousness or

to other, unshared axes of identity. Such a totalizing view suffocates any effort to introduce

nuance, in the same way that hooks's caveats were overwhelmed by her bald generalizations about the opposition between black women and white women.

Still, this entanglement between politics and identity would not be concerning if the identitarian view was a theoretically or practically desirable one. Unfortunately, the identity-centric conception of subjectivity both reinforces traditionally intractable problems and adds a few dilemmas of its own. In the first place, defining subjectivity in terms of identity categories leads to static conceptions of political actors that lock in the current set of political relationships and potentially intensify ongoing political conflicts. The essentialist equation of one's subjectivity to one's identity encourages the interpretation of all political differences as fundamentally opposing interests rooted in essentially different selves. Because the disjunctures between two different subjects' experiences of the world are understood as stemming from irreconcilable ways of life, the gap between them cannot be sutured or even bridged. For similar reasons, the dispute between individualist and collectivist conceptions of subjectivity takes on an even nastier sheen in the context of identity, because individual identity and group identity are co-constitutive yet rarely identical in content. When an individual woman's experience of womanhood is pitted against the group consensus about the experience of womanhood, the self-conception of the group and all of the members that comprise it are threatened. Moreover, viewing all variation between subjects as variation in identities forecloses the possibility to think of differences in less essentialist terms or to find a source of common ground that is independent of whether one shares the same identity or not. For instance, there is no room for divergence or convergence in character, temperament, or practices. When these qualities are filtered through the lens of identity, a quiet temperament becomes "introversion," character becomes a function of one's childhood religious education or gender socialization, and practices are seen as the

product of one's essential identity. Additionally, identity is a poor basis upon which to erect a political collectivity, because activism will inevitably get sidetracked by conflicts over the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion or disputes over whose opinion represents the true group opinion. Finally, most identity-based conceptions of subjectivity do not take seriously the question of how these identities are formed, why they are so heavily invested with meaning, or how they might be loosened.

In sum, identity-centric conceptions heighten political conflict, perpetuate the status quo, widen interpersonal gulfs, erase non-identitarian forms of difference, neglect questions of subject formation, worsen the opposition between individualist and group conceptions of subjectivity, and provide very shaky grounds upon which to build political movements. All of these issues can be linked to the same basic error of identity-based conceptions of subjectivity. That is, identitarian subjectivity forecloses any consideration of events or practices unless they are aggregated into a subject's experience as a member of a particular identity group.

My conception of relational subjectivity has several important advantages compared to identity-based understandings of subjectivity. The two perspectives are linked to substantive differences in the flexibility of different types of commitments, the intractability of the problem of disagreement, and the relevance of identities other than gender to the feminist movement. First, my view of subjectivity is more flexible with respect to less important decisions while still preserving a common basis for political action. Defining political subjectivity in relation to static identities or even uniform membership criteria unnecessarily diminishes the adaptive potential of political movements by locking them into rigid conceptions of membership and group interests, even though these aspects of a political movement have only an empirical rather than a necessary relationship to political goals. For example, an identity-based definition of feminism as a

movement by women for women's interests would still be feminism regardless of whether it advocated *for* women's suffrage because women wanted to be treated as equal citizens or whether it advocated *against* women's suffrage because women considered the responsibility too overwhelming. Viewing subjectivity as the action which arises from a particular dynamic is conducive to rapid responses to new occurrences and thorough re-consideration of goals and methods. However, this flexibility is not total. While the relational subject is not locked into anachronistic membership criteria or tied to an apolitical purpose like advocating for the desires of a specific identity group, they are still anchored to the activist purpose which initially constituted the advocacy group. In this view, feminism would no longer be the same movement if it was started for the purpose of achieving gender equality but later reversed its stance and began to oppose gender equality, even if this shift reflected a mass change in women's views. This is because, in this perspective, the subject of feminism is not "women" but rather "advocates of gender equality."

Second, a focus on identity tends towards unnecessarily personal demarcations of who counts as one of "us" and who is really "one of them," while a focus on action keeps disagreement primarily political and thus more negotiable. Identity-based definitions of political subjectivity are likely lead to debates over who belongs to that identity group and which group members' issue preferences should be prioritized. For example, the debate whether trans women should be allowed in "women only" spaces is emotionally loaded, especially to trans women who were excluded both as individuals and as members in a marginalized group. In contrast, non-identitarian definitions of political subjectivity make such questions almost entirely irrelevant. Rather than dividing space by gender and proclaiming that only "women only" spaces as truly safe for women, a subject that is action-based rather than identity-based would decide

63

inclusion and exclusion in "safe space" events by a less personal, more practical standard such as adherence to a code of conduct. While the identity framing necessarily pits certain sub-groups against other-subgroups based purely on *who* belongs to the sub-group, my alternative framing would emphasize conflict over *what* members *do*. The personalization of disagreement that commonly arises within the identitarian view diminishes the possibility of reaching a compromise. In contrast, my relational view emphasizes individuals' relationships to their communities, rather than emphasizing individual experiences. This sets up a give-and-take between "just me" and "all of us together" from the outset, so no one has to feel like they're giving up something fundamental to their self-conception in order to compromise. Although an irresolvable difference in advocacies could potentially disrupt the practicing of collective subjectivity, insurmountable differences over actions will be more likely to be chalked up to genuine political disagreement and may not spillover to the next opportunity for activism. The perception that one's identity is being personalyl disrespected, however, may permanently poison the well.

Finally, my framing outlines a definition of intersectionality that is preferable to the identitarian one because it short-circuits attempts to statically define the internal dynamics between women or feminists. In the identitarian definition of intersectionality, there is an inclination to attribute commonalities and divergences between women or feminists *exclusively* to the influence of gender or the intersection of gender with other identity categories such as race or sexual orientation. My view of relational subjectivity would reject this deterministic view of individual/group relations in favor of acknowledging the fluidity of social relationships and the partiality of identity-based influences on an individual's whole person. Altering the notion of intersectionality in this way doesn't preclude the consideration of identity-related factors in terms

of specific theories or practices or communities, such as analyzing the gendered and racialized image of the welfare queen. On the contrary, my framing enriches our understanding of intersectionality by incorporating respect for the variety of individuals' experiences, expanding the set of potentially relevant social factors even when they do not rise to the level of constituting an identity, and rejecting one-dimensional characterizations of what a person is like based on either a single identity trait or the intersection of more than one such trait. Identity comes into my analysis at the stage where individuals and groups consider currently existing power relationships in relation to their dreams of a better society in order to make judgments about what to do.

The primary differences between these two perspectives pertain to their units of analysis, the extent of their adaptability to changing contexts, and the political priorities they tend to produce. My account of subjectivity treats relationships as the primary unit of analysis, attempts to balance core commitments with openness to change by appealing to intersubjectivity as the standard for validity, and directs attention to political praxis rather than political agents. In contrast, identitarian theories of subjectivity force a choice between the individual and the group as the primary unit of analysis, offers only purely subjective relativism or rigidly objective universalism for determining validity, and emphasizes essential identities over the unfolding process of practicing politics. Resulting from these differences are two distinct theoretical landscapes in which to consider the question of the feminist subject. In the current identitarian worldview, acrimonious debates over the prioritization of individual women in relation to other individual women or in relation women as a group continue to rage. Furthermore, in the identity-centric view, epistemological controversies relating to ethics and truth demand resolutions that are not forthcoming, and attempts to practically apply feminist theory are halted by the lack of

consensus over these questions of agency and knowledge. In my alternative proposition, the focus of analysis would be on the multifaceted *interactions* between the individuals and groups relevant to a particular research question. In my perspective, the validity of purportedly feminist theories and practices would be determined intersubjectively, and the turn towards praxis can proceed uninhibited by falsely dichotomized sides. In sum, I argue that my conception of subjectivity avoids the pitfalls of the identity quandary while providing a positive basis for understanding feminist politics.

Through these examples and comparisons, I have attempted to demonstrate that my theorization of feminist subjectivity as relational and action-centered provides a workable resolution of "the woman question" in a way that commonly accepted understandings that tie feminist subjectivity to identity cannot. I approach this task first by deconstructing the entrenched binaries (such as individual/group and subjective/objective) that lead feminists through avoidable areas of intellectual quicksand. Then, I try in each case to fuse the previously oppositional components of the given binary into a third conceptual option (such as relationality and intersubjectivity). Finally, I seek to transform our understanding of these new concepts so that they no longer appear as intermediate points on a simplistic spectrum, but rather as a new position from which to view complex configurations of particularities within loosely demarcated conceptual domains. My aims are to preserve the basic intuitions about specific relationships represented in simplified form as a dichotomy, create space to discern additional factors which were obscured by thinking in terms of opposing pairs, and most importantly transform our understanding of the dynamics in question from a one-dimensional opposition to a multiplicitous web of complex relations. [2]

---

[2]For example, the notion of "relationality" does not describe a middle ground where both the individual and the group as a whole must be considered in abstentia of each other. Rather, it refers to a process in which individuals

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have sought to resolve or at least avoid a few long-standing dilemmas within feminist theory by proposing a conception of subjectivity that is both relational and action-centered. Specifically, I have posited a relational view of subjectivity in which the subject of politics is the interactions between actors, objects, and their environment. One type of interaction that is of central interest to politics is the emergence of a contingent collectivity that is formed by the practice of collaborating in political advocacy. Both political claims in general and the question of whether such a collectivity has been constituted are judged intersubjectively. This means that these questions, along with any other question that involves a determination about specific political events and processes, are judged by the participants themselves. Rather than relying on any individual's subjective determination or seeking an unattainable Archimedean position from which political relations can be objectively judged, my theory depends upon the judgment of the collection of political actors whose practices are in question. My fundamental contention is that my relational conception of subjectivity escapes the problems of the identity quandary by shifting the focus from *who* is advocating a political position to *what* they are advocating. More precisely, I argue that the problems inherent to identity-centric approaches are inapplicable to my action-centric conception of subjectivity because it shifts the focus from political actors to political activity.

---

and groups are continually constituted and re-constituted through their interactions, which are seen as producing malleable albeit potentially entrenched identities, affective responses, patterns of behavior, bodies of knowledge, power dynamics, distributions of resources, etc. Instead of thinking only in terms of abstract individual or group, fundamentally same or essentially different, overall positive or negative, the idea of relationality emphasizes the process by which various individuals and groups are continually (re)defined and (re)related to one another. More concretely, a particular person can be ascribed multiple identities and affiliate with more than one group. These identities and group memberships may be contested by the individual in question, another individual, a disparate set of individuals who have no uniform relation to one another, a cohesive group, a coalition which involves dissenting members of two usually opposed groups, some combination of these, or any other configuration of agents you can conceive of. The important question is how the actors all relate to one another.

REFERENCES

Brah, Avtar, and Ann Pheonix. 2004. "Ain't I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5(3): 75-86.

Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Brown, Wendy. 2009. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241-1299.

Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. 2013. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." *Signs* 38(4): 785-810.

Drewery, Wendy. 2005. "Why We Should Watch What We Say: Position Calls, Everyday Speech and the Production of Relational Subjectivity." *Theory Psychology* 15(3): 305–324.

Erevelles, Nirmala, and Andrea Minear. 2010. "Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4(2): 127-145.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Trans. Adam Sheridan. New York, NY: Vintage Books/Random House.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977.* Ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978.* Ed. Michel Senellart, Francois Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Arnold I. Davidson. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan Press.

Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979.* Ed. Michel Senellart, Francois Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Arnold I. Davidson. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan Press.

Gines, Kathryn T. 2011. "Black Feminism and Intersectional Analyses: A Defense of Intersectionality." *Philosophy Today* 55(Supplement 2011): 275-284.

Glaeser, Andreas. 2009. "The Institutional Foundations of Free Action." *Sociological Theory* 27(1): 89-95.

Hanafin, Patrick. 2008. "Voicing embodiment, relating difference: towards a relational legal subjectivity." *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 29: 77-90.

Hartup, Willard W. and Nan Stevens. 1997. "Friendships and adaptation in the life course." *Psychological Bulletin* 121(3): 355.

Hekman, Susan. 1997. "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited." Signs 22(2): 341-365.

Hill Collins, Patricia. 1998. "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation." *Hypatia* 12(3): 62-82.

hooks, bell. [1984] 2000. *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center.* New York, NY: South End Press.

Jack, Gordon. 2000. "Ecological Influences on Parenting and Child Development." *British Journal of Social Work* 30(6): 703-720.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

Levine, Donald N. 1971. "Introduction." *In Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms (Selected Writings)*. Ed. Donald N. Levine. Trans. Donald N. Levine, Richard P. Alberes, Roberta Ash, Kurt H. Wolff, Everett C. Hughes, Claire Jacobson, David Kettler, Edward A. Shils, and K. Peter Etzkorn. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Levine, Donald N. 1995. *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

McCall, Leslie. 2005. "The Complexity of Intersectionality." *Signs* 30(3): 1771-1800.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *The Democratic Paradox*. New York, NY: Verso.

Perpich, Diane. 2003. "Subjectivity and sexual difference: New figures of the feminine in Irigaray and Cavarero." *Continental Philosophy Review* 36: 391–413.

Sampson, Edward E. 2003. "Unconditional Kindness to Strangers: Human Sociality and the Foundation for an Ethical Psychology." *Theory & Psychology* 13(2): 147–175

Sartori, Giovanni. 2009. "Concept misinformation in comparative politics." In *Concepts and Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*, eds. David Collier and John Gerring. London: Routledge.

Simmel, Georg. 1971. *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms (Selected Writings)*. Ed. Donald N. Levine. Trans. Donald N. Levine, Richard P. Alberes, Roberta Ash, Kurt H. Wolff, Everett C. Hughes, Claire Jacobson, David Kettler, Edward A. Shils, and K. Peter Etzkorn. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Wedeen, Lisa. 2002. "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science." *The American Political Science Review* 96(4): 713-728.

Zerilli, Linda. 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Zerilli, Linda. 2009. "Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom: Rejoinder to Ferree, Glaeser, and

Steinmetz." *Sociological Theory* 27(1): 89-95.