

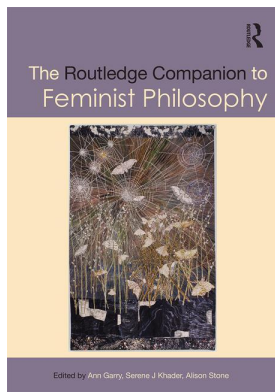
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## **The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy**

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### **Feminism and Freedom**

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## FEMINISM AND FREEDOM

*Allison Weir*

In New York harbor, at the entrance to the United States of America, stands the Statue of Liberty: *Liberty Enlightening the World*. Liberty stands as a beacon welcoming all to the land of the free, holding a torch and a tablet inscribed with the date of American Declaration of Independence. At her feet lies a broken chain. The Statue of Liberty, like the statue of *Freedom* on top of the Capitol in Washington, is modeled on the Roman goddess *Libertas*, who was also a symbol of the French Revolution: Delacroix's painting of the 1830 July Revolution, *Liberty Leading the People*, shows her holding the French flag and a bayonet. Through the history of Western civilization, freedom, like other abstract ideals, has been personified as a woman. This is ironic, given the status of actual women in these societies. Though women in Rome who were "freeborn" were classed as citizens, they could not vote or hold public office. Neither the Declaration of the Rights of Man in France nor the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights in America granted full citizenship or equal rights to women. Today the Equal Rights Amendment to the American Constitution, which would accord equal rights to women, still has not been ratified. Many are excluded from the ideal of freedom: the American Declaration of Independence was signed by slave owners, and the land that was declared independent was stolen from indigenous peoples; America has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world, and more than 60 percent of the prison population is Black or Hispanic; Indigenous peoples around the world struggle for freedom from colonization; and the land of the free, like other "developed" nations, polices its borders to keep out unwanted foreigners. Worldwide, the freedom of some depends on the exploitation and oppression of most of the world's people.

None of this should be surprising: throughout the history of Western civilization and Western philosophy, freedom has been defined through opposition to the unfreedom of slaves, barbarians, foreigners, and women. The concept of freedom in ancient Greek and Roman societies was defined in opposition to slavery. The fathers of modern Western philosophy—Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill—all defined human freedom through explicit opposition to the "savage peoples" of the Americas and Africa, thus legitimizing colonization and slavery by constructing raced others as not fully human (Gordon 1995; Tully 1995; Mills 1997). And as many feminist theorists have pointed out, the freedom of men in the public realm has been enabled by the imprisonment of women, as housewives, and as servants and slaves, in the private realm: women have done the work of caring for children and households so that free men could be free (Pateman 1988; Okin 1989; Folbre 1994). Thus, as Nancy Hirschmann writes, there is a

tension in modern theories of freedom between “the theoretical need to define freedom as a universal concept and the political need to exclude most people, including laborers and women, from its expression and enactment” (Hirschmann 2003: 70).

These are arguably constitutive exclusions: in other words, these exclusions are not contingent or secondary to a prior concept of freedom, but have shaped the ways in which we define what freedom is. If our modern Western conception of freedom has been produced through the explicit exclusion of women and raced others, then it will not be enough to just add those who have been excluded. Feminist philosophers and activists thus face a challenge: when we struggle for freedom, we need to reimagine what freedom might be. To do this we can draw critically on the history of philosophies of freedom, but we also need to draw on histories of local and global struggles for and practices of freedom.

In her provocative 1986 essay, “Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism,” Paula Gunn Allen argued that the power and agency of Indigenous women in Indigenous communities served as a model of freedom for the white suffragist feminist movement in America. She also argues that Indigenous practices of freedom, and in particular the role of women in Indigenous communities, served as a model for American and European ideals of freedom, and influenced the work of philosophers including Michel de Montaigne and Frederick Engels (Allen 1986). While many of her claims are unsubstantiated, some are supported by scholars who argue that American ideals of freedom, and the American constitution, were influenced by the settlers’ encounter with Indigenous peoples, who were seen as exemplars of freedom (Grinde and Johansen 1991). This is just one example of the ways in which concepts and philosophies of freedom are influenced by struggles for and practices of freedom.

Struggles for freedom have historically been central to feminist movements and activism. The “second wave” of the feminist movement in Europe and North America was referred to as the “women’s liberation movement,” and while the ideal and possibility of liberty are subjects of controversy, feminist activists continue to struggle for individual and collective freedoms, including freedom from male domination and violence and from many forms of oppression, including heterosexism, racism, capitalism, colonization, and imperialism.

Feminists struggle for freedom of choice and autonomy, freedom of movement, freedom of expression and assembly, and freedom of participation in the public realm and in political governance. The ideal of freedom is central to feminism. But what is freedom?

### **Freedom in Theory and Practice: Rights and Privacy, Interdependence and Solidarity**

The ancient Greeks and Romans understood freedom as the capacity to participate in the public realm, in collective self-government. The Roman conception of republicanism—freedom as popular sovereignty, or freedom of collective self-government—strongly influenced modern European and North American conceptions of freedom as collective resistance to tyranny, in particular the tyranny of monarchies, through the establishment of democratic governments. But in modern Western philosophies, the ideal of freedom took on a new emphasis: individual freedom, understood as freedom from constraint, not only by tyrannical governments but by other individuals.

In the social contract theories of Hobbes and Locke, freedom was understood to be an individual’s capacity to act without constraint, to own private property, to own

oneself as property, and to exercise rational self-interest, through freely entering into contracts with other men. Hobbes imagined a state of nature in which every individual lived in fear of attack. To alleviate this fear, men agree to submit to government and laws to protect themselves: thus society is born of the rational self-interest of individuals, men who freely enter into social contracts to avoid being killed. (Though whether any action taken to avoid being killed is an act of freedom is an interesting question.) The image of the state of nature driving men to form society, understood as a set of legal contracts among individuals, proved to be an enduring fantasy. Thus the social contract theories of the early modern Anglo-European philosophers conceptualized modern society through an explicit contrast with an imagined state of nature populated by savages and barbarians who lived either in a condition of abject unfreedom or in a state of primitive natural freedom, which is in turn either feared as lawless and chaotic, as in Hobbes, or romanticized as idyllic, as in Rousseau. As Charles Mills has argued, these images were not just imagined but were inspired by perceptions of what Hobbes termed “the savage people in many places in America” and in Africa (Mills 1997).

The civilized freedom of the modern Western world was thus understood to be founded on rational agreements to respect individual rights, and the imagined freedom as absolute lack of constraint was traded for freedom within the security of law, as a contracting bearer of rights. Thus in the tradition of liberal individual freedom, freedom is often privatized as a circumscribed area within which a man can be free from interference by others. While the public freedom of participation in democracy is highly valued, it is also treated with suspicion: J. S. Mill criticized democracy as the tyranny of the majority over the individual; Isaiah Berlin argued that what he called “positive freedoms” in the tradition of Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx—freedom to align one’s will with an ideal, and with the general will—supported totalitarian rule. Berlin held that the only freedom worthy of the name was “negative freedom”—an individual’s freedom to act without constraint (Berlin 2008). Mill, on the other hand, argued for the importance of the “positive freedoms” of the individual to engage in a project of self-realization and self-determination, through exploring the world, and through freedom of expression and debate. Neither had much interest in what has been called a third form of freedom: freedom in solidarity (the French *fraternité*), and in collective resistance to colonization. (Note that the term “positive freedom” is used to refer to many different kinds of freedom; I discuss some of these below. While some theorists distinguish between individual liberty and a broader conception of freedom, many use the terms interchangeably to refer to individual freedom.)

As critics of liberal individualism since Hegel have pointed out, the social contract theories are based on a strange conception of history: society is born of freely contracting individuals, who are fundamentally atomistic, independent, and competitive. Drawing on ancient philosophy, and especially Aristotle, Hegel and Marx argued that human beings are essentially social beings, and that individuals develop through social relations. Marx argued that the liberal conception of the self as private property, and of freedom as the right of individuals to compete with each other in the marketplace, is produced through the capitalist system: thus this ideal of freedom is founded on class exploitation and inequality. Because capitalism values individuals only insofar as they produce commodities for the private profit of the owners of factories and corporations, individuals are themselves reduced to commodities. Individuals come to define their very selves as private property (as in Locke) rather than as humans—as social beings. True individual freedom, for both Hegel and Marx, could only be found in

self-realization in social relations. For Marx, freedom would be possible only through solidarity to resist class exploitation and alienated labour (Marx 1963).

Feminist philosophers have taken this critique of atomistic individualism further. All of the social contract theories imagine a society founded by men who have, as Hobbes puts it, sprung up like mushrooms, separate and independent. This, as feminist philosophers have pointed out, is a gross distortion of history. The reality, of course, is that all are born of mothers, into human groups. We are born dependent, and remain interdependent through our lives. Thus our freedom can be understood only in the context of this interdependence (Jaggar 1983; Benhabib 1992; Held 1993; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Irigaray 1985; Kittay 1999; Weir 2013). If the freedom of elite men in the social contract was founded on the exclusion of women (Pateman 1988) and raced others (Mills 1997) and the freedom of the atomistic individual is founded on defensive denial of connection to others, then real freedom can only be found through solidarity struggles attentive to all forms of interlocking oppressions (Mohanty 2003).

It remains true, however, that many feminist struggles for freedom are struggles for liberal individual freedoms. In modern Western philosophical and legal traditions, individual freedom is most often construed in terms of rights. And Western feminism has a long history of struggles for equal rights.

Yet the legacy of rights is problematic for feminists. In the modern liberal tradition, individual rights were conceived as rights to *privacy*, and specifically as the rights and freedoms of male household heads to exercise authority, over their private property, which was understood to include women, children, and servants—household chattel. One way of dealing with this is to argue that the rights and freedoms historically accorded to white propertied males should be extended to all individuals. Moreover, this inclusion of those formerly excluded can transform the nature of rights. Susan Okin argues for a reconception of human rights to include specific women's rights, such as rights to protection from violence and abuse (Okin 2000). Thus the nature and scope of rights are transformed: whereas rights have traditionally protected men's right to privacy, construed as freedom from interference of the state in the private realm, once women's rights are recognized, the private realm, and men's authority within it, are no longer protected from legal intervention. Critics argue that this formulation of a global feminism fighting for universal women's rights fails to attend to transnational relations of power, taking elite Western women as the privileged subjects of feminist politics, "who [see] themselves as 'free' in comparison to their 'sisters' in the developing world" (Grewal 2005: 142).

It is important to note that many local, national and transnational struggles for women's rights have not focused on rights to privacy or rights to non-interference but have been directed toward public civil and political rights: feminist suffrage movements worldwide have fought for the right to participate in democratic political life, including rights to vote and run for public office, and feminist movements fight for rights to freedom of speech and assembly, freedom from involuntary servitude, and equality in public places, as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Yet women's legal rights in the United States are still often framed in the language of privacy and noninterference: the historic *Roe vs. Wade* ruling in 1973 granted the right to abortion on the basis of a woman's right to privacy. Catharine MacKinnon has argued that abortion is construed as a private privilege, not a public right, in the United States: the state has no obligation to provide access to abortion, or public funding (MacKinnon 1987). The focus on abortion rights has typically neglected the interests of poor women and women of color, who have been subject to programs of forced sterilization in the

United States and elsewhere. Activists have worked to shift the discourse to focus more broadly on reproductive freedom (Fried 1990). Still, rights to privacy are invoked and have been upheld in rulings that corporations and individuals are free to withhold access to contraception and to discriminate on the basis of sexuality. (In contrast, the Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that bans on gay marriage contravened constitutional guarantees of equality as well as liberty.) And the right to privacy is granted selectively: the power of the state to intervene in the private realm increases the vulnerability of the poor and oppressed to regulation of their private lives.

Many feminist theorists draw on socialist and Foucauldian theories to argue that the focus on individual rights problematically constructs individuals as free choosers unencumbered by social contexts and relations of power. Legal rights mask substantive inequalities and oppression. Many argue that the language of individual rights is specific to modern European cultures, and draw on postcolonial theory and critical legal studies to point out that the legacy of rights is entangled with the legacy of colonization. Focusing on cases in India, Nivedita Menon argues that the feminist focus on rights has achieved little in the way of substantive change (Menon 2004). Yet Patricia Williams asserts the importance of rights as the mark of citizenship for African Americans (Williams 1991).

Some feminist political theorists argue that theories and struggles for freedom need to shift from demands for individual rights to practices of participation—and hence from demands for protections of privacy and non-interference to agonistic practices of public freedom. Yet these arguments must also confront the legacy of the public/private split in republican arguments for public freedom. As has been noted, the freedom of male citizens to participate in the public realm has historically been dependent upon the labour of women and slaves in the private realm. The affirmation of the public/private split reappears in the work of republican theorists like Hannah Arendt, who argued that freedom can be found only in action free from necessity—and hence free from labour, as well as the private realm of the household (Arendt 1958).

Second-wave liberal and socialist feminists often located freedom in the public realm of work, calling for women's liberation through escape from the household into paid work (e.g., Friedan 1963). While they differ as to the location of the public realm (Arendt's argument was a pointed critique of the Marxist faith in freedom through work) both the call for freedom through participation in political life and the call for freedom through entering the workforce share a faith in freedom from the private realm that can leave women's exploitation in the household unchanged: women in the workforce and in political life still typically bear most of the responsibility for childcare and housework. And conversely, the belief that freedom can be found only in escape from the household perpetuates the repudiation of everything associated with femininity: the body, children and relationships, our animality and mortality (e.g., Beauvoir 2010 [1949]).

Working-class women have known all along that the workforce is not a realm of freedom. As bell hooks points out, for black women and for poor and working-class women working in factories or in white homes, paid work is not liberation.

Historically black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care . . . . In contrast to labor done in a caring environment inside the home, labor outside the home was most often seen as stressful, degrading, and dehumanizing.

(hooks 1984: 134)



Drawing on the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, on feminist theories of relational identity, and particularly on the “love and justice tradition of Black America” Patricia Hill Collins and Cynthia Willett offer accounts of freedom situated in relationship and rooted in home. Hill Collins draws on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: for the ex-slaves Sethe and Paul D, freedom is “a place where you could love anything you chose” (Collins 1990: 182). Willett draws on the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass to argue that this freedom is rooted in “home,” understood not as ownership of property but as a source of connection with others and a nurturing of spirit (Willett 2001).

Many first-wave and second-wave feminists argued that women’s liberation would require the socialist restructuring of households to eliminate the public/private split (Firestone 1970; Gilman 1996 [1898]), but this argument has generally been ignored in practice. Increasingly, the work of care for children and households, along with care for the elderly, sick, and disabled, is “passed on” from capitalist economies to private households, from private households to contracted labor, from men to women, and from women to other, poorer women. Thus “global care chains” are part of a system of interlocking oppressions in which migrants and women of color do most of the world’s care work and domestic work for little or no pay, so that a privileged few can be “free” (Hochschild 2002; Weir 2005). Real freedom, then, would require transnational feminist solidarity to resist interlocking oppressions, with the recognition that no one is free when others are enslaved.

### **The Subject of Freedom and Its Discontents: Contemporary Feminist Philosophies of Freedom**

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that the “drama of woman” lies in the contradiction between each woman’s aspiration to be a free subject and the demand that she conform to social ideals of womanhood. Women in this situation oscillate between two opposed ideals: as human individuals, we aspire to freedom; as women, we are expected to fulfil the conventions peculiar to the second sex. What would it mean then for women to be free? Is being a woman fundamentally opposed to being free?

For Beauvoir, freedom required self-transcendence. “Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, thorough projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing towards other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion towards an indefinitely open future” (Beauvoir 2010 [1949]: 17). Beauvoir linked individual freedom to a universal struggle for liberation, arguing that freedom is the aim of human existence, and that the freedom of the individual is bound up with the freedom of all. “To will oneself free is to will others free” (Beauvoir 2010 [1949]: 73). Thus Sally Scholz notes that for Beauvoir an individual’s freedom presumes solidarity with others (Scholz 2005: 51). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argued that if women are to liberate themselves from their situation as the second sex, they must commit themselves to the collective struggle for women’s liberation. They must “posit themselves authentically as Subjects,” both individually and collectively as a “we” (Beauvoir 2010 [1949]: 8).

Thus Beauvoir points feminist philosophies of freedom in two directions: individual freedom and women’s collective freedom. In what follows I shall discuss critical responses to these two directions and articulations of other possibilities for freedom in feminist philosophy.

### Individual Freedom

Many feminist theorists continue to frame individual freedom in liberal terms as capacity for choice. For bell hooks “Being oppressed means the absence of choices” (hooks 1984: 5). But feminist theorists situate and contextualize this capacity within social relations of power. Nancy Hirschmann argues for a conception of feminist freedom that prioritizes the capacity for choice, but argues that such a conception must address both the external and internal conditions of choice, and the relations between them, in patriarchal societies stratified by systems of race and class, and further argues that feminist freedom requires the capacity to participate in reshaping those conditions: in order to formulate choices women must have meaningful power in the construction of contexts of choice (Hirschmann 2003). Shay Welch argues for a feminist theory of social freedom as the freedom “to choose and act with and through other community members” and “to partake in the construction of the community’s values, norms, and institutions that shape one’s own daily life” (Welch 2012: 23).

In their focus on choice, these theorists follow Isaiah Berlin’s argument that the essence of freedom is negative freedom: the capacity to act without constraint or interference. Thus freedom requires the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice (Berlin 2008). But they also contend that freedom cannot be only negative. Hirschmann argues that her attention to contexts of choice to address the issue of power relations distinguishes her approach from models of negative freedom.

Like classic negative-liberty theorists, I maintain that the ability to make choices and act on them is the basic condition for freedom. However, like positive-liberty theorists, I maintain that choice needs to be understood in terms of the desiring subject, of her preferences, her will, and identity. For subjectivity exists in social contexts of relations, practices, policies, and institutions that affect and shape desires, will, and identity.

(Hirschmann 2003: 30)

For Hirschmann, there are three ways in which theories of positive freedom challenge or expand the negative conception of freedom: (1) they are concerned with the “positive” provision of the conditions necessary to take advantage of negative liberties; (2) they focus on “internal barriers” to realizing my true or higher self; (3) they focus on the social construction of the choosing subject (Hirschmann 2003: 6–14). Charles Taylor argues that positive freedom is an “exercise concept,” focusing on self-realization, and the achievement of a substantive end or condition of freedom, whereas negative freedom is an “opportunity concept,” focusing on unconstrained action with no specification of an end (Taylor 1985). Kantians argue that positive freedom or autonomy is a proceduralist principle according to which one follows one’s own will or law, in relation to an ideal. Other theorists argue that positive freedoms identify specific substantive rights. Berlin’s account of positive freedom ranges among a number of different conceptions of freedom, including self-mastery, rational alignment with an ideal and with a general will, substantive freedom, and collective participation in democratic governance. Amartya Sen proposes a model of “development as freedom,” emphasizing the ways in which poverty and oppression limit human freedom, and focusing on the role of specific rights and opportunities that foster human capabilities to achieve substantive freedoms (Sen 1999). Martha Nussbaum draws on Sen’s work to argue that freedom



requires the ability to exercise a specific substantive set of capabilities, and argues that specifying these capabilities as normative ideals is essential for advancing global women's freedom (Nussbaum 2000). Republican theorists including Hannah Arendt point out that all of these are liberal individual freedoms, and argue that positive freedom is participation in public life and democratic governance, while postcolonial and anticolonial theorists argue for collective resistance to colonization.

Poststructuralist theorists argue that even when liberal theories of individual freedom attend to the contexts of individual choice, they do not adequately address Foucauldian critiques of the individual as the subject of power. If the individual is deeply constituted through relations of power, then it makes no sense to advocate the liberation of the individual. Our desires, ideals, and choices, and the very concept of the individual, are all produced through regimes of power. This produces the paradox of the subject:

Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency. . . .  
 "Subjection" signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject.

(Butler 1997: 1–2)

Thus any call for the liberation of the subject, or the freedom of the individual, confronts the paradox of freedom: the individual who is supposed to be liberated is itself an effect of relations of power. How then can poststructuralist feminist theorists advocate individual agency and resistance to oppression?

Poststructuralist and queer theorists draw on Michel Foucault's distinction between liberation and freedom. For Foucault, the call for liberation of individuals and their desires relies on the repressive hypothesis, the belief that "all that is required is to break these repressive deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origins, and re-establish a full and positive relationship with himself" (Foucault 1997: 282). Freedom, Foucault argues, is possible only in and through relations of power. He does affirm the struggles of colonized peoples for liberation from domination by their colonizers, but argues that this practice of liberation will not be enough to define "the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society" (Foucault 1997: 282).

Foucault thematizes multiple conceptions of freedom: agonistic politics of contestation and struggle; practices of critique, questioning, experiment, testing of limits; ethics of care of the self and aesthetics of existence, emphasizing bodies and their pleasures rather than individuals and their desires, in relations of humans with themselves and with each other.

Judith Butler argues that resistant agency can be exercised through subversive citations of norms, through performances that, intentionally or not, question and transform social norms. For example, drag performances expose the fact that all gender performances are forms of drag, that gender is not an essence but a social construct, constituted through repetitive citations of gender norms. Thus gender norms can be denaturalized and displaced by citations that invariably fall short of or challenge those norms (Butler 1990).

Postcolonial feminist theorists agree that the liberal individual is a specific historical and cultural production, but emphasize the imposition of this ideal on colonized

peoples. While some believe that some ideal of individual freedom will be found in all societies, others argue that it is inappropriate to generalize this provincial ideal beyond modern European cultures. Saba Mahmood argues that poststructuralist feminists' affirmations of agency as resistance and subversion of norms actually reassert the liberal ideal of individual freedom. Like liberals, poststructuralist feminist theorists and cultural anthropologists conceive of agency only within the binary terms of subordination or resistance to norms. Mahmood argues, then, for a conception of agency entailed "not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (Mahmood 2005:15). Drawing on Foucault's ethics of the care of the self, Mahmood analyzes Islamic women's piety movements in Cairo to show how the agency of the participants is produced through practices of inhabiting norms.

Though she draws on Foucault, Mahmood does not distinguish between individual liberation and freedom. And not all liberal theories construe individual freedom as resistance to norms. While Mahmood articulates it in terms of embodied practice, the conception of agency as a practice of inhabiting norms is actually indebted to Kant, and aligns with Taylor's conception of positive freedom as realizing an ideal. Thus we can understand feminists to be oriented toward realizing an ideal of freedom. Serene Khader argues that Mahmood fails to distinguish between those practices that entail sexist oppression and those that do not: a transnational feminism does not depend on identifying freedom with individual critical agency, but must focus on the content of the practices (Khader 2016). Weir argues that the women in the piety movement are engaged in practices of freedom as practices of belonging—a conception of freedom that can be found in many religious and spiritual practices, both Western and non-Western, and exemplified in Islamic and Indigenous feminisms (Weir 2013). There are many diverse practices and conceptions of freedom, and not all are reducible to dominant Western conceptions of individual freedom. We need to beware of the assumption that all struggles for and practices of freedom are attempts to realize the kinds of freedom with which Western Europeans are already familiar.

### From Women's Liberation to Feminist Practices of Freedom

While first- and second-wave feminists identified with a women's liberation movement, the claim to a collective social identity of "women" has been extensively criticized. Critics point out that theories and movements for women's liberation have failed to acknowledge differences and power relations among women (hooks 1984; Anzaldúa 1987; Mohanty 2003). Others argue that the identity "women" depends on a claim to sameness or essence constituted through a hetero-patriarchal binary logic of exclusion (Rubin 1975; Riley 1988; Butler 1990). Thus the identity politics of women's liberation are regarded not as a politics of freedom but a politics of oppression, and as self-defeating affirmations of the very identities that colonize us (Brown 1995). Many advocate shifting our collective struggles to coalitions that do not rely on any claims to identity (Reagon 1983). As Chandra Mohanty writes, "the unity of women is best understood not as a given . . . it is something that has to be worked for, struggled toward—in history" (2003: 116). Nivedita Menon echoes this argument: "the creation of 'women' as subject should be understood to be the *goal* of feminist politics, not its starting point" (2004: 21). Transnational feminist theorists avoid making universal claims about women, arguing that feminists must collectively address sexism in the context of critiques of imperialism and interlocking oppressions (Mohanty 2003; Jaggar 2014; Khader 2016).

Linda Zerilli argues that feminist theorists have been overly preoccupied with what she calls the “subject question,” which includes both questions about individual subjects and their agency, and questions about the category of women as the subject of feminism. Zerilli argues that feminists need to follow Arendt in shifting the question of freedom outside its current subject-centered frame, as a way to escape “our current entanglement in the paradoxes of subject formation and the vicious circle of agency” (Zerilli 2005: 12). To avoid these paradoxes and entanglements, we need to shift to a practice of freedom that focuses on the “who”—the “unique disclosure of human action,” in contrast to the “what”—the identity or substance (Zerilli 2005: 13). According to Arendt, freedom is action in the context of plurality: we act always in relation to different and diverse others in a common world (Arendt 1958). Feminists, Zerilli argues, need to shift from our introspective preoccupation with our subjectivity and agency and step into what Arendt calls the “abyss of freedom”—to practice political freedom through practices of world-building. Thus Zerilli, with Bonnie Honig, affirms an agonistic performative feminism that involves critique and contestation, and participation in practices of freedom in collective and public spaces (Honig 1992). Zerilli takes the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective as an example of this practice: the women in the collective are creating feminist space to practice free relations among women. This involves the free practice of affirming community with and accountability to other women—in Beauvoir’s words, of saying “we”—through engaging in struggle with each other in a politics of sexual difference directed toward transforming the given reality.

Queer theory and practice has opened up new possibilities for freedom, questioning and destabilizing fixed identities of sex, gender, and sexuality, and engaging the imagination to create techniques for thinking and acting differently. Butler’s conception of gender as performance has inspired arguments for performing genders differently, and for transforming gender.

As Shannon Winnubst writes: “to queer is to create”—to practice freedom in a space of endless contestation and excessive possibilities. To inhabit and confront this space requires, as bell hooks writes, decolonizing our imaginations. “To live in the world queerly is then to live in the world transformatively, with an eye always toward how relations of bodies and pleasures can be multiplied and intensified . . . to veer off the rails of utility and reason” (Winnubst 2006: 148). Thus queer politics are techniques for transformation “from the pain of anxiety to the exuberance of joy” (Winnubst 2006: 200).

Jana Sawicki argues for a queer feminism: “an eccentric, provocative and unruly feminist practice, one able to risk, challenge, and transform itself, any static sense of its beloved objects and self-understandings, its sense of temporal and spatial orders” (Sawicki 2013: 75). Queer feminisms draw on Foucault’s understanding of thought as a “critical (and ethical) practice designed to loosen our attachment to present ways of thinking and doing” and thus to open up possibilities for experiment, for thinking and living otherwise (Sawicki 2013: 75). As Sawicki notes, Eve Sedgwick offers a methodology: a shift from “paranoid readings” that obsessively unmask and expose systems of domination to “reparative readings” that depend on curiosity, creativity, and imagination, attending to the ways in which selves and communities flourish, to open up possibilities for pleasure, joy, excitement. While paranoid readings are focused on the binary of desire and lack, reparative readings open up “other ways of knowing, ways less oriented around suspicion, that are actually being practiced” provoking and sustaining

affects of surprise and hope (Sedgwick 2003: 144). While some see these strategies as insufficiently political, Sawicki suggests that a political practice needs to create something to be free *for* (2013: 85). And to the critiques that reparative motives are merely about pleasure (merely aesthetic) and are frankly ameliorative (merely reformist) Sedgwick responds, “What makes pleasure and amelioration so ‘mere’?” (2003: 144) In fact queer and feminist political activism, from Emma Goldman to Act Up to PussyRiot, has often worked through creative practices that engage the imagination and that multiply and intensify relations of bodies and pleasures.

In this spirit of openness and curiosity, Western feminist philosophers need to learn more about non-Western and Southern conceptions and practices of freedom. By attending to diverse Indigenous, African, Asian, Middle Eastern philosophies and practices of freedom, we might detach from our habits of thinking about what freedom is, and create new connections and alliances.

For example, Indigenous anticolonial struggles draw on traditions of freedom in connection to “all my relations,” including other humans, the ancestors, and nonhuman persons, and on practices of freedom as collective joy and love enacted in danced rituals as sources of solidarity and resistance to colonization. How might these be connected to queer practices of freedom of bodies and pleasures, Islamic feminist struggles for gender equality within an ideal of freedom in union with the divine, African American freedom songs, and Buddhist practices of cultivating joy? All of these diverse practices pursue freedom from oppression within a theory and practice of freedom in relationship, rather than negative freedom from interference. How might connections with all such diverse movements and practices of freedom change feminist politics and philosophies of freedom in the twenty-first century?

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### Related Topics

Feminism, philosophy and culture in Africa (Chapter 4); feminist engagements with social contract theory (Chapter 7); feminism and the enlightenment (Chapter 8); introducing black feminist philosophy (Chapter 10); Native American chaos theory and politics of difference (Chapter 30); feminist theory, lesbian theory, and queer theory (Chapter 31); through the looking glass (Chapter 32); feminist and queer intersections with disability studies (Chapter 33); feminist intersections with environmental and ecological thought (Chapter 35); feminist conceptions of autonomy (Chapter 41); Latin American feminist ethics (Chapter 52); feminism and liberalism (Chapter 52).

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