

Feminist Philosophy

Time, history and the
transformation of thought

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Chapter 14

Emancipatory Engagement with Oppression

– The Perils of Identity in Feminist and Anti-Racist Politics

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You never change anything by fighting the existing.

To change something, build a new model and make the existing obsolete!

– Buckminster Fuller

Am I that name?

– Denise Riley

bell hooks has written extensively about feminism in the U.S. and its lip service inclusion of black women and non-white women in both classist and racist ways. hooks has also criticized the black power movement for a non-revolutionary vision of emancipation that imitates the power structure of white patriarchy.¹ She articulates the interplay of axes of oppression with her concept *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*. Here, axes of oppression follow identity category lines such as gender or race. In this chapter, I will engage with and evaluate arguments for and against basing emancipatory politics on identity qualifiers such as race and gender. I will argue that thinking about oppression as operating along the axes of identity signifiers makes it difficult to overcome racism and sexism – even within emancipatory movements themselves. The difficulty arises when emancipatory movements attempt to change society while tacitly accepting so much of its structure, even as part of its emancipatory endeavor, and by reproducing oppressive

¹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), pp. 15–16.

mechanisms (sexist anti-racism and racist feminism). Why rely on identity categories for emancipatory politics at all? Can reinforcing the identity given to you in society liberate you from the oppression you experience as a consequence of that identity?

I will provide a reading of bell hooks that both invokes and challenges the axis theory of oppression. I engage hooks post-structurally, where the production of a subject norm necessitates the production of peripheral deviants to uphold it and where language plays a vital role in cognition and, by extension, emancipatory politics. This reading justifies a solidarity that does not base itself on identity signifiers. Next, I respond to objections to my stance against founding a politics of emancipation on identity. Lastly, I look toward a post-structurally inspired *politics of alienated desire* beyond well-established identity-based solidarity. I conclude that to radically dismantle feminist and racist systems of oppression, any emancipatory politics must go beyond mechanisms of resistance that engage with the very conceptual premises that uphold the same systems of oppression they oppose.

Differentiated and Devalued Identities

We tend to think of oppression as restrictive social structures that unjustly inhibit people's freedom.² However, we also separate forms of oppression conceptually into different *axes* of oppression, such as sexism, racism, imperialism, capitalism and class struggle, and even ageism, discrimination against disability, sexuality, and so forth. Judith Butler denoted the embarrassing "etc." at the end of the list.³ But this conceptual separation is helpful to see how oppression takes many forms and affects people differently (see Figure 1).

² See: Marilyn Frye, "Oppression" in Ann E. Cudd & Robin O. Andreasen (Eds.), *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 84–90.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2007 [1990]), p. 143.

14. EMANCIPATORY ENGAGEMENT

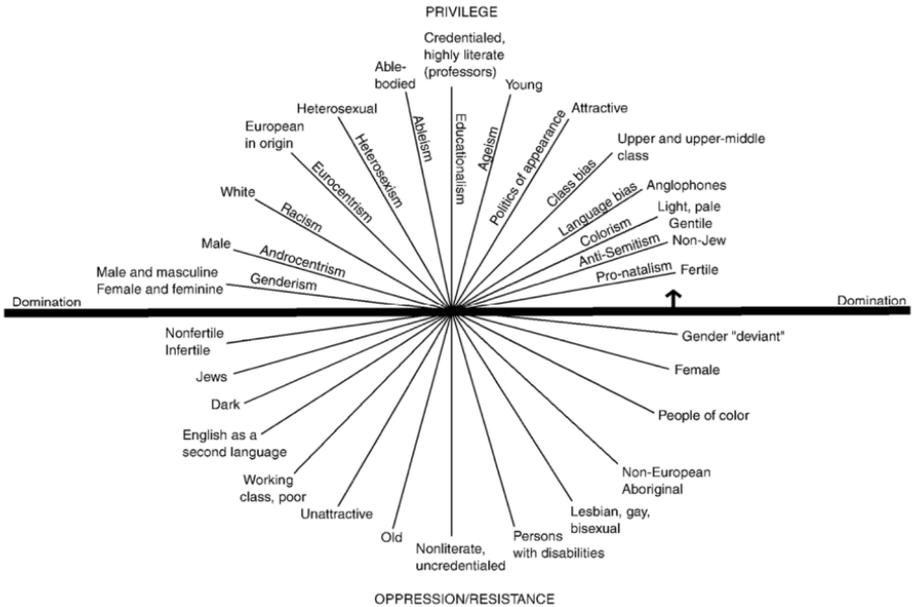


Figure 1: Intersecting Axes of Privilege, Domination, and Oppression.⁴

However, it may also preclude us from seeing the shared origins of oppression. As Butler argues, accepting the premises that have been used to oppress women perpetuates foundational principles of patriarchy:

If there is a fear that, by no longer being able to take for granted the subject, its gender, its sex, or its materiality, feminism will founder, it might be wise to consider the political consequences of keeping in their place the very premises that have tried to secure our subordination from the start.⁵

⁴ Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Describing the Emperor's New Clothes: Three Myths of Educational (In-)Equity" in Ann Diller, et. al. (eds.), *The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy, And Politics* (New York: Routledge; 2018), p. 107.

⁵ Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations" in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge; 1995), p. 54.

Thus, we do not come very far by adopting the same conceptions used in the oppression we are trying to resist. Like Audre Lorde wrote, it is “an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns.”⁶

In post-structuralist theory, the fixity of meaning is constantly evaded by the presence of the absence of its *others*. Meaning is dependent upon its network of denials and its *others* and thus cannot be fixed or fully present. By including those others it excludes, the meaning of the sign can never exist independently of its *others*.⁷ Positive understanding is impossible because the negation of the *other* is always implied therein. The separation of the axes of oppression is made possible by differences from the norm – which is the white male of means – such as woman and non-white. Sabina Lovibond argues that this differentiation is marked in a lower hierarchical relation to sameness and to the male (see Figure 2).⁸ Although feminism has long been critical of this devaluation of difference, hooks is not convinced that feminism has managed to overcome this philosophical heritage.⁹ Feminism generally opposes the devaluation of feminine difference vis-à-vis the norm. To a lesser degree, it also opposes the devaluation of other forms of identity categories against the norm of the white male or devaluation of difference itself.

⁶ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in Reina Lewis & Sara Mills (Eds.), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, (2003 [1983]), p. 27.

⁷ Lena Petrović, “Remembering and Dismembering: Derrida’s Reading of Levi-Strauss”, *Linguistics and Literature* 3:1 (2004), p. 89.

⁸ Sabina Lovibond, “An Ancient Theory of Gender: Plato and the Pythagorean Table” in L. J. Archer, et al. (Eds.) *Women in Ancient Societies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), p. 97.

⁹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed., (London: Pluto Press, 2000 [1984]), p. 33.

Limit (πέρας)	Unlimited (ἄπειρον)
Odd (περιττόν)	Even (ἄρτιον)
Unity (ἕν)	Plurality (πλήθος)
Right (δεξιόν)	Left (ἀριστερόν)
Male (ἄρρεν)	Female (θῆλυ)
Rest (ἡρεμοῦν)	Motion (κινούμενον)
Straight (εὐθύ)	Crooked (καμπύλον)
Light (φῶς)	Darkness (σκοτός)
Good (ἀγαθόν)	Evil (κακόν)
Square (τετράγωνον)	Oblong (ἑτερόμηκες)

Figure 2: Pythagorean Table of Opposites¹⁰

In my reading of hooks, the conceptual separation into separate axes of oppression is a dangerous master's tool that obscures the interlocking structure of these axes under the "ideology of domination."¹¹ Each axis of oppression is a devalued difference from the norm, much like in Pythagoras' table of opposites.

One of hooks' main and recurring arguments is that conceptually dividing oppression into axes mistakenly leads to the thought that they can or should be treated separately. She writes, "[...] challenging patriarchy will not bring an end to dominator culture as long as the other interlocking systems remain in place."¹² In my reading of hooks, the metaphysical division of the axes affects how we think of oppression in ways that do not serve the purposes of feminism. For example, although feminism is concerned with sexism as a form of oppression, hooks argues that this understanding of feminism as *primarily* concerned with sexist oppression is ethnocentric. It is ethnocentric because it first and foremost pertains to the experiences of white women,

¹⁰ Aristoteles, *Metaphysics* in Hugh Tredennick (trans.), *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vols. 17, 18*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989 [1933]), 1.988a23–27.

¹¹ bell hooks, *Ain't I a woman, Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1981), pp. 194–195.

¹² bell hooks, *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 36.

who can more easily isolate gender as a singular axis of oppression. According to hooks, “ethnocentric white values” have constructed within feminism a “priority of sexism over racism,” which does not reflect the reality of lived experience for women suffering from racist and sexist oppression.¹³ As such, the language that separates racism from sexism is misleading to most of the women feminism fights for. The uncritical conceptual acceptance of different axes of oppression inhibits an understanding of the overall interlocking oppressive structure, making it more difficult to dismantle, since conception and language precede and inform political and strategic efforts.

Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy by Divide and Conquer

The ‘system of domination’ is based on upholding the norm and, by extension, the othering of those who differ from the norm. Therefore, any feminist struggle to eradicate sexism will be limited as long as this basic structure is maintained. Firstly, the norm cannot be dismantled by achieving gender or racial equality alone. Secondly, as long as the ideal of freedom aspired to by feminism is provided by the freedom currently enjoyed by the norm, this freedom will also be built upon the differentiation and devaluation of others, which is inconsistent with feminist values such as ‘equality for all’.¹⁴ In this section, I will account for these two aspects in more detail.

For the first point, I want to emphasize hooks’ term *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* that she coins to describe the ‘ideology of domination’. Encompassing multiple axes of oppression in this concept is an attempt to provide “a way to think about the interlocking systems that work together to uphold and maintain cultures of domination”.¹⁵ The crux of my argument is the following: Emancipation strategies that conceptually separate the axes will support the status quo of supre-

¹³ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p. 53.

¹⁴ hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p. 36.

¹⁵ hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p. 4.

macy. These axes of domination – including, but not limited to, imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy – depend on and sustain one another to uphold the norm. hooks argues that *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* benefits from the division of axes of oppression and seeks to obscure the mechanisms of oppression by letting aspects of the system be challenged separately, conceptually and temporally, but never all at once.¹⁶ She writes,

Since dominator culture relies on interlocking systems [...] to sustain itself, it seeks to cover up the connections between these systems. Or it allows for only one aspect of the system to be challenged at a time: for example, allowing anti-racist critiques while silencing anti-capitalist or anti-sexist voices.¹⁷

I find it helpful to think of this ideology of domination as a many-legged stool. Imagine a stool with the ability to regrow new legs, each leg represents an axis of oppression, and the stool's seat represents the established norm. If this stool had three legs, attacking one sole leg – say, sexism, would be enough to topple the stool for good. Since the stool has as many legs as there are axes of oppression, the stool will have many other legs to stand on while the one is under siege. Because the language of this epistemological framework takes these axes as given, it shapes our conception and affects the formation of emancipation politics, instead of simply articulating our understanding. This feminism plays by rules of hierarchy and domination, striking only one leg of the many-legged stool. But to think and act differently, we need to speak and conceive differently.

The second point is that feminist ideology looks to the status of the norm for an idea of what liberation is. If feminism takes the norm – white men (of means) – as the standard for freedom or equality, then feminism's vision of emancipation is oppressive. The *difference-identity* dyad upholds one identity as the

¹⁶ hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p. 24.

¹⁷ hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, p. 34.

norm over and above others. Therefore, having the norm inform visions of emancipation, freedom, and equality for feminism and anti-racism complicates matters. According to hooks, it is a mistake to think that sexism can be eradicated by a “movement that aims to make women the social equals of men”¹⁸ because men are not equal either. There is no ‘liberation’ for black women to become the equals of black men because black men are also oppressed. If feminism is about making women equal to (white) men, feminists have made a goal for themselves that involves the domination of *others*. Instead, emancipation without domination requires the production of a new epistemological framework that is not reliant on the master’s tools.

Finally, it is important to differentiate between resistance struggle, on the one hand, which may be subversive and destabilizing, and actual substantive change, on the other, which dismantles and supersedes an overarching system. Resistance can be done within the confines of the mechanisms of oppression. In contrast, substantive change entails risking what you have (identity qualifiers of difference) for what you do not (political equality). Therefore, I suggest that political identity signifiers should not be the foundation of emancipation movements. In the next section, I explore and respond to objections to abandoning political strategies *based on* identity qualifiers.¹⁹

Objections to Discarding Identities

(1) Several feminist theorists argue that coming together around the lived experience of being gendered or racialized is necessary for political agency. This position fears, according to hooks, that without a common, unified notion of identity – blackness for anti-racist struggle or womanhood for feminist struggle – the ground for organized resistance is unstable.²⁰ For example, Lois

¹⁸ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p. 19.

¹⁹ By ‘identity qualifiers,’ I am referring to ‘forced’ political identities of difference that people are immediately categorized as, such as sex or race, rather than personal identities.

²⁰ hooks, *Yearning*, p. 249.

McNay argues that the phenomenology of gender is central to feminism's ability to analyze oppression, which is necessary for building political consciousness and agency.²¹ Phenomenological accounts of similar experiences of oppression lead McNay to hold that the "critique of identity is overstated".²² Instead, my position risks what McNay calls "social weightlessness"²³, where theory fails to reflect the phenomenological and material reality of the oppressed.

Granted, it is the collective experience of oppression that leads to its coordinated resistance. It does not, however, follow that resistance must tread the path laid out for it by the system of that oppression. One might as well say that oppression is what is necessary for a politics of emancipation. But not all political agency is equally effective. Although consciousness-raising and finding collective oppression along identity lines is useful for understanding mechanisms of oppression, it does not follow that emancipatory politics should be based on those identity axes. As Chandra Mohanty argues, one of the problems with basing an emancipatory politics on political identity qualifiers is that it binds a group together by a "sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression".²⁴ Shared phenomenology also becomes a way of "characterizing and defining groups in terms of their victim status".²⁵

But identity politics as coordinated resistance can also assert forced or oppressive identities. The celebration of difference as a valuable political principle requires categorizing identity into groups that suppress internal differences, reproducing the epistemological models that justified identity-based oppression in the first place. For example, the homogenization of cultures justified colonialism, and the homogenization and dichotomiza-

²¹ Lois McNay, "Feminism and Post-Identity Politics: The Problem of Agency", *Constellations* 17:4 (2010), pp. 522–523.

²² McNay, "Feminism and Post-Identity Politics", p. 512.

²³ See: Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for The Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Malden: Polity Press, 2014).

²⁴ Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), p. 65.

²⁵ Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes", p. 67.

tion of gendered identities are similarly used to justify sexism. We also see these mechanisms at work within anti-racism and sexism, where anti-racist movements can be sexist and feminist movements racist because the resistance is centered around one identity axis. Raewyn Connell articulates this homogenization in the following way: “the problem here is that a claim to identity, instead of simply being a liberatory act, may be buying into a system of social control”.²⁶ Whether it is the dominators or the resisters that do so, a homogenizing identity is not without grave risk of oppression. The use of identities inherited from systems of oppression continues to be implicated in those very systems. Writing on racial embodiment, Sekimoto argues that ‘racial identity’ exists within an ideology that subjectifies and subjectivizes the subject *as* raced (or, I add, as sexed), here exemplified by Louis Althusser’s idea of *interpellation*:

For racialized subjects, there are specific moments that require them to turn around – both literally and figuratively – and acknowledge the ideologies that mark their bodies as illegal, illicit, or inferior. In this case, racialization is not simply about significations of bodies of color, but more fundamentally, it is about how the body is co-opted – or recruited – into a particular ideology.²⁷

Assertion by reclaiming one’s devalued identity is undoubtedly an important remedy for the racialized subject. But the point is, as Mohanty articulates, that our “analytic strategies and principles carry political implications.”²⁸ When using these identity categories of difference for solidarity in emancipatory politics, one neglects that this subjectivation is the enactment of an oppressive paradigm more so than a shared identity and can,

²⁶ Raewyn Connell, “Identity” in Catharine R. Stimpson & Gilbert Herdt (Eds.), *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 167.

²⁷ Sachi Sekimoto, “A Multimodal Approach to Identity: Theorizing the Self through Embodiment, Spatiality, and Temporality”, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 5:3 (2012), p. 234.

²⁸ Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes”, p. 64.

unfortunately, impede political agency because it does not separate from the subjectivizing ideology.

(2) The second objection to dismissing emancipatory politics based on identity qualifiers emphasizes the risk that emancipatory strategies might become irrelevant to those it aims to help. According to this position, political identity frames embodied experiences of oppression. Therefore, a political strategy that prematurely seeks to overcome the identity that frames those experiences is futile.²⁹ For example, this position holds that the fact of the matter is that women are already divided into groups based on identity qualifiers such as race and visible class markers. Not acknowledging this fact perpetuates the harm these divisions make possible. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away.

Kathryn T. Gines has argued that there is value in “race and ethnic based communities—even in the absence of racism and ethnocentrism”, and that it is not necessarily pathological to have a willful attachment to racial identities.³⁰ Shared identity qualifiers form these communities, and theory should be relevant to these experiences. Critical race theorists like Gines are often skeptical of denouncing subjecthood when it seems integral to justice claims from racial minorities. On this view, eliminating identity qualifiers obscures the analysis of oppression rather than removing it. Gines distinguishes between post-racialism and post-racism to reject the thought that “the long-term goal must be the end of the concept of race” in the struggle against institutional racism.³¹ Criticizing what she regards as the racial eliminativism underlying postracialism, she argues,

Denying that races exist on a physical, metaphysical, and/or ontological level disempowers people who are targets of systematic institutional racism by denying them not only a

²⁹ McNay, “Feminism and Post-Identity Politics”, p. 520.

³⁰ Kathryn T. Gines, “Conserving Race and Complicating Blackness Beyond the Black-white Binary”, *Du Bois Review* 11:1 (2014), p. 84.

³¹ Gines, “Conserving Race”, p. 76.

framework in which to articulate the experience of oppression, but also a means to express solidarity to defend against such oppression. [...] [Racism is] thriving unchecked because many have bought into the false assumption that there can be no racism without races.³²

The same argument can be made for the sexist axis of oppression and other political identity qualifiers. Gines' concern is that the rubric of supposed neutral humanism includes "political structures that continue to disenfranchise under the guise of inclusion," and that the road to post-racism involves "identifying and dismantling systems of racial oppression, especially institutionalised racism."³³ For Gines, politics that seek to overcome identity will not only risk the irrelevance of theory but will also further enable oppression by leaving it unchecked.

My response to this objection is not to dispute that community and shared experiences are empowering, nor that theory should acknowledge these important features. However, although one may find empowerment from willful attachment to one's forced identity, an emancipatory politics should not hinge on the fact that one does. Otherwise, one accepts that these groups are, in Mohanty's words, "somehow socially constituted as a homogenous group identifiable prior to the process of analysis."³⁴ Organizing emancipatory politics around identity means accepting and not resisting the identities created to uphold an oppressive system. This is so even for 'take-back' initiatives such as affirming and reevaluating traditionally feminine qualities or the non-exoticizing aesthetic revaluation of non-white bodies. These initiatives are undoubtedly important measures in resisting racist and sexist values. However, these attempts to counter the devaluation of differentiation are not enough to dismantle *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*. A re-valuation of devalued feminized traits and

³² Gines, "Conserving Race", p. 83.

³³ Gines, "Conserving Race", p. 79.

³⁴ Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes", p. 65.

values, for example, care work or emotional labor, does little to challenge the very gendering of these values. Even the positive acclamation of one's designed identity is still an acceptance of the identity that fortifies the norm. This is so even if accepting and celebrating one's forced identity brings moments of personal relief from oppression and permits one to live a life that is not solely about resistance.

Even when these identities are experienced in empowering ways, basing an emancipatory politics on identity reproduces the very *political logic* it resists. *Political logic* is inherited from the previous political system. For instance, Uma Narayan argues that in India, the colonial discourse has become part of what shapes nationalist agendas:

The position of 'the Indian woman' as someone to be 'spoken for,' in both British feminist and Indian nationalist discourse, provides a clear example of how challenges to the political status quo often repeat and replicate *aspects* of its political logic.³⁵

When Indian nationalism reiterates colonial discourse, it partakes in the system of domination it sets out to resist. Elements of the inherited *political logic* resound in the obsessive focus on homogeneous national identity, which is based on an anti-western attitude that results in a reinforcement of patriarchy. hooks likewise writes that when black liberation is defined by measuring access to opportunities and privileges that many white people enjoy – as it was defined by much of the civil rights movement – this vision of equality conflated black liberation with the imitation of white subject positions. Even the more radical 1960s Black Power movement, which disagreed with this vision of liberation, was not particularly “distinctive or revolutionary” in so far as they connoted authority and power with masculinity.³⁶

³⁵ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, And Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 19.

³⁶ hooks, *Yearning*, pp. 15–16.

Gines' concern about political logic is evident in her skepticism toward universal humanism. In feminist and anti-racist scholarship, the humanist genderless, race-less, ageless, classless, body-less subject is revealed to be a masculinized and white subject under the guise of neutrality. I share Gines' concern about humanism and her aims to "identif[y] and dismantl[e] systems of racial oppression".³⁷ However, contrary to Gines, I am concerned about the cost of using political identity qualifiers as grounds for solidarity in emancipatory politics. In post-structuralism, the idea is not to assert a neutral subject 'beneath' identity qualifiers, but to seriously question and disturb the identity markers that are imposed upon the subject, in order to lessen their political and societal significance. If the goal of emancipation is dismantling oppression, it is actually in the business of making something new. Suppose the concern is that a politics of emancipation without a focus on identity will commit the same errors as universal humanism. In that case, it is important to note that experiences of oppression are still vital to any emancipatory politics. Different oppressions give rise to different needs, wherein lies the politics. Gines seems either to conflate the idea of eliminating racial categories with ignoring racism or that the former necessitates the latter. It must be acknowledged, however, that identity in emancipatory politics is suitable for measuring and calling out manifestations of oppression. But I maintain that these efforts can only go so far. They express resistance in the form of mitigation to increase the valuation of an identity, but do not dismantle the system of domination that works along axes upholding a norm. Emancipatory movements would do well to recognize this.

(3) The third objection holds that the identity categories used in sexism and racism can serve as tools to improve the life condition of gendered and racialized people. This objection holds that identity can be used to give political rights to marginalized groups. For example, groups resist oppression by

³⁷ Gines, "Conserving Race", p. 79.

embracing their allocated identity qualifiers while asserting dignity, pride, and demanding respect.³⁸ As such, identity can be at one and the same time emancipatory and empowering, on the one hand, and constraining and oppressive, on the other. Michel Foucault, for instance, argued that power is not only repressive but also available to the marginalized – that the naming of the oppressed, such as black and woman, gave them a place from which to resist.³⁹ Judith Butler similarly argues that the term ‘lesbian’ can be *both* oppressive *and* a form of resistance against hegemony due to the plurality of the signifier, which may suggest that although power is oppressive, it can also (perhaps simultaneously) be subversive.⁴⁰

To respond to this third objection, I want to elaborate on an example of identity politics in the legal framework of rights. Although identity may be a place from which to resist and has provided marginalized groups tools with which to claim rights, the politics based on identity are limited in scope. The price to pay, so to speak, for identity-based rights is that the claimant of equality must assert itself *qua* subordinated. Elizabeth Kiss finds that instead of dismantling structures of domination, identity-based rights have simply altered them.⁴¹ She writes, “ours is an age less of rights triumphant than of continuing and massive wrongs”.⁴² Issues with gaining formal rights are that they leave “underlying social inequalities intact” and “obscure[s] women’s continuing subordination by appearing to grant women a dramatic moral victory”.⁴³ The feminist appeals to rights are a way of using the masters’ tools to do their own bidding with mixed

³⁸ Connell, “Identity”, pp. 162–164.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982) pp. 777–795.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in Henry Abelove, et al. (Eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 307.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Kiss, “Alchemy or Fool’s Gold? Assessing Feminist Doubts About Rights” in Uma Narayan & Mary Lyndon Shanley (Eds.), *Reconstructing Political Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997), p. 19 n1.

⁴² Kiss, “Alchemy or Fool’s Gold?”, p. 1.

⁴³ Kiss, “Alchemy or Fool’s Gold?”, p. 14.

successes. Feminists have most often succeeded in mitigating rather than dismantling.

Likewise, Wendy Brown argues that identity-specific rights presume *a priori* subordinated identities, paradoxically necessitating a perpetuation of subordination to claim equal rights.⁴⁴ The subjectivated may have the same rights as the subject-norm, but far from the same access to those rights. That is not to say that Brown invalidates the importance of rights, but she concludes that rights do not serve as a resolution: They “vanquish neither the regime nor its mechanisms of oppression”.⁴⁵ The validation of the feminized or the racialized identity is an altogether different project from dismantling entirely these othered and peripheral categories that function to uphold a standard norm. Is it possible to do both at once? Perhaps not – perhaps we are at a crossroads between ideal and non-ideal theory.

(4) The final objection to relying on identity signifiers in emancipatory politics concerns intersectionality as a feminist solution to the essentializing risks of identity politics. Even when identity signifiers such as ‘woman’ and ‘black’ are used to end sexist oppression, hooks argues that black women fail to be adequately represented in this language.⁴⁶ Feminism can be ethnocentric and anti-racism can be misogynistic. Intersectionality provides feminist analysis a way to recognize how oppression may take different forms along different axes, even simultaneously. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term, thinks intersectionality as a provisional concept. She admits that her theory employs a model where race and gender are separate categories but hopes that the categories will be destabilized by focusing on the intersections of these axes.⁴⁷ By taking issue with homogenizing views on identity, intersectionality has been a

⁴⁴ Wendy Brown, “Suffering Rights as Paradoxes”, *Constellations* 7:2 (2000), pp. 208–229.

⁴⁵ Brown, “Suffering Rights”, p. 231.

⁴⁶ hooks, *Ain’t I a woman*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Learning from Violence Against Women of Color” in Uma Narayan & Mary Lyndon Shanley (Eds.), *Reconstructing Political Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997 [1995]), pp. 178–180.

remedy for identity politics by emphasizing that many kinds of oppression are not adequately represented in the false categorization of multifaceted identities.

Despite these improvements, intersectionality does not stray far from identity politics. Rather than seriously challenge the axes of oppression, queer-theorist Jasbir Puar argues that intersectionality's reverse effects revert the focus back onto white women: "Despite the decades of feminist theorising on the question of difference, difference continues to be a 'difference from', that is, the difference from 'white woman.'"⁴⁸ The focus on varieties of difference implies a center from which there is a difference and that the center is reinforced as the 'neutral' white woman, similarly to how the *female* may be construed as a variant to the 'neutral' male. Because of this, an *other* is unintentionally (re)produced. Puar argues that this *other* is the woman of color, which is ironic because intersectionality is "meant to alleviate such othering."⁴⁹ Unfortunately, intersectional theory does not delve into how these identity categories mutually construct one another. Intersectionality falters as a cure for feminism's racism issues because it is an attempt to include women of color in an epistemological system that is already ethnocentric without serious attempts to change the system that bases itself on exclusions of the *other*. Neither does it replace any emancipatory politics' focus on identity. As such, intersectionality attempts to include women of color in a mechanism that devalues the non-norm (whether the norm is whiteness or maleness), without serious challenges to that system.

These four objections reveal an underlying tension in a politics of emancipation. On the one hand, we can assert our identity as something to be respected and represented on equal par with the norm-identity, i.e., the revaluation of difference. On the other hand, we can abandon the identity that is tied up in systems of oppression, i.e., rejecting the differential and axio-

⁴⁸ Jasbir Puar, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess' Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics", *Meritum* 8:2 (2013), p. 375.

⁴⁹ Puar, "I would rather be a cyborg," p. 388.

matic system of valuation altogether. The former option risks buying into the structure of the hegemonic norm, which may end up perpetuating one's identity as other to the norm. In addition, this option risks subjugating *its others* to an internal norm. The latter risks relinquishing claims to respect and representation in a way that must look elsewhere than the Foucauldian place from where to resist. My point is that resistance can either bring about substantive change or bring about some change without actually dismantling the system of domination. In this way, *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* is still intact but comes to fruition in alternative ways that we then work to identify and analyze anew.⁵⁰ My argument is not directed against affirmative action, reparations, or movements such as Black Lives Matter or #MeToo, which are justified reactions and counter-initiatives to oppression along identity axes. But what I fear are inverse politics that do not go further in building the society we *do* want but stop at providing a counterforce to oppressions. hooks articulates this aspiration when she writes that it is “one of the most significant forms of power held by the weak” to deny the identity that one receives from the oppressor.⁵¹

The Risk of Mirroring: “The Pin Game”

Like a pin game, resistance movements risk mirroring and reaffirming the oppressive power they oppose. Gender scholar Jorunn Økland has observed that feminists,

[...] make ourselves dependent on the same foundation that we criticize. But exactly this shows that women – feminists included – do not have a different language and other thought

⁵⁰ For the racial axis, Ibram X. Kendi coins the term ‘racist progress’ to denote this alternative fruition in *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2017), p. xi.

⁵¹ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p. 92.

structures to speak in and from than those given us by contemporary discourse.⁵²

Herein exists an inevitable bind: The discourse that challenges *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* depends, in part, on that framework to make the same criticism. The pin game works by pressing your hand or another object into the frame so the pins that are pressed out form an imprint of the object. The force of the hand leaves an inverted imprint of the preceding force. In this case, the hand is anti-oppression resistance, and the pins are the *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*. When using identity qualifiers in resistance, emancipation movements change the image, but ultimately remain a mirror-image that does nothing to change the box or the rules of the game. A liberation movement that accepts the terms laid down by the forces of oppression is limited because its counterforce depends on the primary force itself and can only ever do resistance (subversion), not substantial change (dismantling).

The metaphysical presumptions of the division of the axes of oppression into sexism, racism, etc., affect how we think of oppression and, thereby, how feminist political efforts are organized in ways that do not serve feminist purposes. Because the system in its entirety is based on upholding the norm, as long as that basic structure is maintained, any feminist struggle for eradicating sexism will be limited. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

[...] it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and

⁵² Jorunn Økland, "Feminist Reception of the New Testament: A Critical Reception" in Mogens Müller & Henrik Tronier (Eds.), *The New Testament as Reception* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p. 153.

oppressed; locked in mortal combat [...] All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reaching against.⁵³

I have argued that although identity is crucial for phenomenologically understanding one another's lived experiences and analyzing how oppression inherent in *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* takes different forms, it does not follow that identity should be the rubric for an emancipatory politics. On the contrary, to avoid the oppositional lockage illustrated by Anzaldúa and to prevent the reproduction of oppression within (typically racist feminism and sexist anti-racism), emancipatory politics should strive to remove the condition – not only the symptoms – of the structure of the axes of oppression. In the next section, I venture 'another route' of the numerous possibilities Anzaldúa promises "once we decide to act and not react."⁵⁴

Alienated Desire

Some may find my caution toward identity-based solidarity an attack on something personal and dear, but it is not. Like hooks, I hold that feminism needs to be "based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression." Otherwise, "no feminist reforms will have long-range impact."⁵⁵ My stance is not an insensitivity toward racism or sexism, but rather, in the name of an emancipatory politics, it is an injunction to forge solidaristic ties on shared desires rather than shared identifications.

Although hooks is skeptical about "forgetting identity", she is not particularly loyal to the preconceived notions of identity that exist in the system of domination either.⁵⁶ Political solidarity, she finds, cannot be achieved by adhering to the terms set

⁵³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), p. 78.

⁵⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 78.

⁵⁵ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p. 33.

⁵⁶ hooks, *Yearning*, p. 15.

by the ideology of domination.⁵⁷ Sara Edenheim has already argued that feminism should shift its focus away from identity and create a politics of desire. Feminist politics of desire asks the question, “what do we *want* rather than who we *are*” and find solidarity on those grounds.⁵⁸ A politics of desire does not take self-interest as its objective, but a common desire for a common world without oppression. This desire must be an abstract and alienated desire. By that, I mean firstly a desire abstract enough that no matter one’s personal experience with oppression, one can partake in the desire for a world without oppression systematized along the axes of identity signifiers. However, it cannot be so general that feminism can easily be co-opted by other political agendas, whether neo-liberal, capitalist, racist or even sexist.⁵⁹ Second, by alienation, I agree with Slavoj Žižek that the right kind of alienation can be a good thing.⁶⁰ For feminist solidarity, alienated solidarity is not based on a community of similar experiences of oppression, nor identity or allyship, but rather on the shared idea that we seek to replace the *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* and its axis model. This desire should be alienated because we do not rely on a feeling of shared identity or experience, but a recognition of a common desire. Remember: “Eyes on the Prize”. When Ibram X. Kendi argues that altruism, exceptionalism, and education will not resolve racism,⁶¹ he articulates something like my vision of alienated desire: We need policies as a basis for emancipatory solidarity.

What is, then, the role of identity? I propose to use identity as a tool to measure whether emancipatory politics have been substantially impactful enough to dismantle or thoroughly change structures of domination, but not as what unites or pro-

⁵⁷ bell hooks, “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women”, *Feminist Review* 23 (1986), p. 129.

⁵⁸ Sara Edenheim, “Performativity as a Symptom, The Trembling Body in the Works of Butler”, *lambda nordica* 2:3 (2015), p. 143.

⁵⁹ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p. 25.

⁶⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Holberg Lecture* 2019, University of Bergen.

⁶¹ Kendi, “Epilogue” in *Stamped*, pp. 497–511.

vides the foundation for an emancipatory project. A unifying factor here is a general desire to eliminate not just one's own oppression, but also the possibility of one's oppression. What we relinquish are identities given to us by an oppressive system that has used these identities in our subjugation. For these identities are, we do well to remember, forced upon us. We desire to change that.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I hope to have shown that emancipation movements risk becoming 'mere' counter-movements that mirror oppression inward and become stuck in an inverse counter-force against societal oppression. An emancipatory politics that employs identities of difference as the basis for solidarity risks reaffirming the very *differenced* functions of those identities. Alienated desire as the common basis for solidarity can address two problems for emancipatory politics. First, the problem of the many-legged stool (the external enemy of a politics of emancipation) illustrates the issue of resistance not acquiring substantive change. Second, the problem of the pin game (the internal enemy of an emancipatory politics) illustrates the issue of stalemate that happens when accepting conditions of axis oppression while simultaneously trying to dismantle it. These two issues together often lead to an emancipatory politics that bases the vision of freedom on a norm that oppresses its *others*, resulting in ethnocentric feminism and misogynistic anti-racism.

Therefore, feminism and anti-racism should ask not *who* you are but *what* you desire. This can be a foundation for solidarity that, in lesser terms, risks reproducing the same identity signifiers that uphold an identity norm used in identity-based oppression. Stuart Hall argues that because race must be seen in a Eurocentric context, de-racifying identity is to decolonize thinking.⁶² Similarly, I find solidarity not in the personal connection to our imposed political identities, or similarities in experiences,

⁶² Stuart Hall, et al., *The Fateful Triangle: Race Ethnicity Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2017).

but rather by finding freedom in the expression of what we desire, not what we are told that we are. Through politics based on this abstract and alienated desire, we can form solidarity with the potential to dismantle beyond resistance. It is based not on *feeling* solidarity but on a *vision toward the new* around which solidarity can form.

There is, however, cause for caution. My argument does not support post-racial or colorblind approaches to racism, nor a gender equality primarily based on masculinist values. Upholding the phenomenological experiences of those with identity signifiers such as non-white skin, gendered bodies, etc., is vital for resistance movements. But I wish to distinguish between movements of resistance and those that eliminate the historical-political significance of the identity sign. Serene Khader convincingly argues that reaching an ideal situation from non-ideal conditions requires the use of non-ideal tools, even tools that are useful for racist or sexist practices.⁶³ While I wholeheartedly agree with her analysis on negotiating oppression in life and context, her argument concerns resistance. Dismantling-oriented solidarity, however, must build on premises that do not resist *and fortify imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*. My argument may indicate a more significant contention between phenomenological and post-structuralist philosophies of emancipation.

⁶³ Serene Khader, "Transnational Feminisms, Nonideal Theory, and "Other" Women's Power", *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3:1 (2017), pp. 1–23.