Theorizing Feminism
Politics, Morals, and Emotions

What does it mean to theorize feminism as a political and moral project in the context of public debates that, in the name of gender equality, have fueled nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and Islamophobia? These policy debates have led, in many contexts in Europe, to the dismantling of former alliances and solidarities among some women’s rights organizations, as well as spurred new configurations of antagonistic feminist politics. The development and consolidation of what Sara Farris has termed femonationalism has restructured the political landscape and imposed new grammars to voice women’s rights claims. This is not the only development transforming feminist mobilizations in Europe, but it is a worrying one. This context urges us to develop a critical discourse on feminism and its claims, a critical discourse that must recapture feminism’s promise. To do so, I argue, we must be attuned to the morality, or the ethical drive, that characterizes feminism. Finding ways forward to forge critical discourses to dismantle femonationalism demands that we consider jointly the political and moral dimensions of the feminist project.

In this chapter, I argue that to capture both the political and the moral dimensions of feminism we must explore feminists’ political subjectivations. Such an approach places at the center of its inquiry the moral dispositions that feminists cultivate toward other feminists, taking into account the power inequalities—particularly, but not only, along axes of race and religion—that shape these relations between feminists. This perspective is indebted to specific genealogies of intersectional feminist theory that have insisted that social locations and hierarchies of power shape feminist subjectivities through emotions, affects, and moral sentiments. I argue that such a perspective, taking into account both hierarchies of power and the ethical drive that characterizes feminism, can provide a new and productive way to rethink the “question of differences” that has animated feminist theory. Theorizing feminism in this way also offers important insights on intersectionality theory.
when it comes to analyzing feminist movements and how they address power hierarchies of race and religion.

In a first section, I argue that the recent history of theorizing feminism is a history of theorizing differences within feminism and between feminists. I elaborate on this insight about the centrality of differences to feminist theorizing to approach the nature of feminism as a political project to create a political community, that of feminists, sustained by relationships of equality between feminists. These relationships of equality also have a moral dimension, as treating the other equally is also treating her well. I develop this understanding of feminism as a project to create such a political community in the second section. To explore the politics of difference within feminism in the “postsecular” context, articulating both the political and the moral dimensions of the feminist project, I argue in the following section that we can draw on intersectionality theory. I then nuance this account in the fourth section, in which I situate my approach in an alternative genealogy of intersectionality, less focused on identity and more attentive to how experiences and emotions shape relations between feminists. I argue that such an approach captures both the moral and the political dimensions of the feminist project and, crucially, how power hierarchies structure both dimensions. In this vein, I propose in a last section the concept of feminist political subjectivation as a framework to understand how feminist subjectivities are produced, in a specific historical and political context, by a set of moral discourses about the “good” feminist subject, sustained by specific emotions. This concept helps tease out the relationship between ethics, emotions, and politics that shapes feminist practices and discourses. I argue that such an approach can help us understand the dynamics of feminist intersectional politics in “postsecular” times, in which some feminist subjects are heralded as “good” or to be saved, while others are cast out and denigrated.

Theorizing Feminism / Theorizing Differences between Women

Exploring the nature of the trouble within feminism is an exercise in theorizing feminism. No normative investigation of feminist conflicts can evade theorizing feminism. However, this is no small task. Feminism is historically and contextually variegated, as many sociological works on feminist movements have underscored. For scholars of feminist movements, the
challenge has long been to delimit the borders of such a protean practice and identity: who counts as a feminist? Interestingly, for feminists who theorize feminism, the question of who may or may not count as a feminist seems much less problematic: the desire to be freed from sexism and patriarchy, the desire to “end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression,” to use bell hooks’s encompassing definition, will make one a feminist. Being a feminist is often presented as a set of dispositions that one has adopted and is attached to—“We are moved to become feminists,” as Sara Ahmed insists—without having to adhere to or define a specific set of values or to practice certain types of action. However, this does not mean that theorizing what feminism is is easy. This apparent lack of need for a normative foundation to define who can be a feminist is matched by an intense preoccupation with the differences among those who claim to be feminists. While the subject of feminism need not be predefined or confined to a specific foundation, its conflictual nature, its heterogeneity, and the power asymmetries it harbors have been causes for feminist theorists’ concerns.

Theorizing feminism has thus been equated to some extent with theorizing differences within feminism or, more to the point, theorizing differences—marked by power hierarchies—among feminist subjects and among women. Much of the most challenging and productive feminist theorizing of the past decades shares a common impulse and a common conundrum: thinking through the impossibility of a unified feminist subject while continuing to theorize and practice some kind of feminist politics, the very possibility of this thing called feminism. This tension has unfolded in distinctive ways as feminist theorists with diverse locations, immersed in different political struggles and deploying singular feminist imaginations, have tried to address the “difference” question within feminism. Judith Butler’s immensely influential Gender Trouble starts with the very question of the (im)possible unity of the feminist collective subject and proposes to rethink the subject itself as a way to escape what Linda Zerilli has presented as an unending dilemma for feminist theorists: “We nod to the importance of acknowledging difference among women, yet we persistently return to the idea that feminism demands a unified subject. Alternatively, we vigorously refuse such a subject, but are at a loss about how to say or claim anything beyond the particular case.”

This long history of feminist theorizing that engages with the “difference” question suggests that how feminists address issues of power and how they construe it is in fact central to defining the nature of feminism. The “difference” question has taken hold of feminist theory in different ways
since the second wave of the feminist movement, and various genealogies of the difference question can be traced and imagined. To name a few, and to chart the contours of this foundational dilemma, we can invoke black/Chicana feminist thought from Maria Stewart’s and Sojourner Truth’s initial formulation up to the development of intersectionality, which provided both a trenchant analysis of the political question of differences and power differentials among women and inside feminist movements, and a profound reflection on the relationship between political identity and subjectivity that debunked white feminists’ pretension to represent feminism both as a political movement and as a form of subjectivity.

The unfolding of the subject question within feminist theory at the beginning of the 1990s, be it through the work of Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, or Drucilla Cornell, also provided new articulations of subjectivity, sexual difference, and sexuality and attempted, often through theoretical use of Freud, of Wittgenstein, and of Jacques Derrida’s *différance*, to rethink the relationship between sameness and difference in the formation of subjectivity in a way that could untie gender identity—and feminist subjectivity—from sexual difference, and therefore open up the subject to transformation and differences. The poststructuralist theoretical turn in feminist theory and the debate on the “category of women” attempted to use the deconstruction of the gender dichotomy as an avenue to also address differences of race and sexuality. In doing so, it provided much of the fuel for the deconstruction of the feminist subject, individual and collective.

At the same moment, postcolonial feminist theorists provided a powerful critique of the feminist Western gaze on Third World women—motivated by her difference and by the status ascribed to her of an eternal victim in need of saving—a critique that would be revived and expanded a decade later during the multiculturalism versus feminism debate launched by Susan Moller Okin. Interestingly, differences were no longer located within feminism, among feminists, but within “women,” and attention was focused on the “Other” woman, her agency or complicity in her own oppression and how she might be recuperated, or not, for the feminist project. Finally, the success of the concept of intersectionality at the turn of the twenty-first century also testifies to the continuing need to think about differences among women. Indeed, as Kathy Davis has summarized, “‘intersectionality’ addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences among women,” and this is, in her opinion, the main reason for its academic success. These theoretical
debates that question the nature and boundaries of the feminist subject “have
proved to be among the most bitter and enduring within feminism.”

In all these instances of debates about differences and feminism, feminism
as a collective project of emancipation and as a political subjectivity has been
questioned, deconstructed, and sometimes revived in the name of acknowl-
edging “differences” to the point that, despite their richness, these debates
have also appeared to some as dangerously vexing for feminist theory be-
cause of their tendency to reify feminism(s), including black feminism, as
identity politics.

Feminism and the Constitution of Political and
Moral Relations

Why is theorizing differences so central to theorizing feminism? Why do
feminist theorists focus their theoretical energies on the question of how
to adequately acknowledge and act upon differences of power among them
and among women? What does this centrality of differences tells us about
the very nature of feminism that feminist theorists have tried to capture?
The insistence on theorizing differences reveals, I claim, a political and eth-
rical drive to account for differences that is central to the feminist project. It
informs us about the nature of feminism itself, as a project that requires that
inequalities among its participants be acknowledged and addressed, both
as a political endeavor and as a moral responsibility. Feminism therefore
constitutes relationships between feminists that are based on recognizing
other participants in this project as equals.

Linda Zerilli’s theorization of feminism as a political project that
constitutes a political community directs our attention precisely to this di-
mension of feminism, as creating relationships. Indeed, Zerilli theorizes
feminism following Hannah Arendt’s conception of political action, as a
practice of freedom that creates a political “we.” To sustain this “we,” what
we have are promises we make to other participants, and the recognition of
the “world between us,” to use Arendt’s words. That is, the recognition that
we share the world, but also that we are all positioned differently toward it.
This world is therefore defined by plurality. Zerilli’s conception of feminism
thus emphasizes the political nature of the feminist project that creates a “we”
not based on a shared identity but rather, for Zerilli, on the project of creating
free relationships between its participants. Zerilli focuses her analysis of
feminism as a practice of freedom, understood in its Arendtian dimension—that is, in relation to world-building activities such as founding, promising, judging—as a way to refute any foundationalist account of feminism based on identity. Her insistence on freedom also shuns the tendency to focus on individual subjectivities—considering the self as the locus of politics and transformation—that she associates with poststructuralist accounts of feminism, which she argues are misguided in their concern with the self.

While Zerilli’s account of feminism as a project of creating free relations between women is inspiring, my argument in this book is slightly different. I take from Zerilli the important notion that feminism creates relationships that are political (as in world-building), but I depart from her analysis when I state that the relationships that feminists create by calling themselves feminists and appropriating feminism are also—and may be chiefly—about treating the other equally, which is also treating the other well. Hence, while she focuses on freedom, I argue that equality, in both its political and its moral dimensions, is also central to feminism. What is more, as I will argue in this book, Zerilli’s claim that feminism creates free relations among women is, I contend, too broad. Rather, I argue that feminists’ ethical drive is primarily directed toward other feminists, or other subjects enrolled in the feminist project.

To consider the ethical drive and the moral dimension of the feminist subject is not a way to divert attention away from politics and power. Theoretical reflections on the formation of an ethical self (and of the self) as relational, dependent on the other, which characterize, for example, authors in the perspective of the ethics of care but also the work of Judith Butler, are deeply political. Indeed, they interrogate in various ways how moral boundaries are drawn within political communities and with others. Butler’s reflections on ethical violence as it is displayed when some lives are considered not worthy of being grieved is clearly articulated with a critique of nationalism as a way to delimit the political community, and to calls for a global ethics. Tenants of an ethics of care have also ventured into proposal for a global ethics that address asymmetries of power between global South and North, and ecofeminist political proposals. In a similar vein, I argue here that we must scrutinize our feminist ethical drive and its affective grounds if we are to reimagine the feminist political community and address issues of difference and power that are at the heart of its political project.

But how are we to keep our promise as feminists while recognizing the differences that characterize the world and “we” feminists? Because her focus
is on freedom, the question of differences for Zerilli is resolved by a normative proposal about differences that is indebted to Hannah Arendt. Indeed, for Zerilli, what matters are not social or identity differences, but rather plurality. Plurality, a concept introduced by Arendt, refers to differences in perspectives, differences in judgments, in our points of views on the world. Plurality is, like uncertainty, inherent to political life and to the world, and is what makes freedom so central as a political practice of world-building. Because we share the world between us, and because it is a world marked by plurality, the way to create a political community is to exercise one’s freedom by judging the world, expressing one’s point of view—and putting oneself in the place of others.28 This perspective reminds us that differences that cut across the political community that feminism seeks to create are not only differences linked to identities and power asymmetries, but also differences in judgment and values. However, if we consider, as I do, that feminism is also and mainly about treating other feminists well and equally, we must engage with the question of differences with other theoretical insights, to address the question of what it means to treat the other well in a context of power asymmetries. This question, I think, is to be solved empirically and normatively by reflecting on feminists’ practical engagements with differences of power.

Feminist theories offer much thought about these issues. In the next section I review two bodies of literature that have addressed differences within feminism, and I explain how they can be put to use to analyze current feminist disputes about Islamic veiling debates. The first one refers to the dominant understanding of intersectionality theory, and the second one is an alternative genealogy of intersectionality that focuses on the moral and emotional dimensions of feminism.

Theorizing Difference in Feminism: Identity and Intersectionality

With its long history of theoretical engagement with the question of differences within feminism, the concept of intersectionality has become a favored tool to approach conflicts within feminism and to address power asymmetries related to race and class in particular. Intersectionality, defined as the theoretical approach and political critique that aims at making visible the identities and interests of women of color who have been marginalized, has been a tremendously important conceptual tool to analyze divides, make
visible power relations, and challenge white hegemony within feminism in various Western contexts. I explore here what this specific approach can bring to a theorization of feminism in the context of Islamic veiling debates and femonationalism, and its limits.

A prominent field of studies of intersectionality in feminist movements focuses on the relationship between unequal power relations and racial/ethnic identity and divisions in women’s movements. This approach is epitomized by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s analysis showing that single-identity movements sideline and render invisible the interests and identities of women situated at the intersection of other axes of domination than gender alone. Indeed, Crenshaw proposed two different meanings of the term intersectionality. First, intersectionality is structural. This term refers to the intersection of two axes of domination such as race and gender, which constitutes a social category with a specific experience of social life. This first understanding stresses the unique experience that characterizes the subjectivity and the social positioning of individuals situated at the intersection of multiple axes of power relations. The second meaning is political. It refers, for Crenshaw, to the fact that the political interests of intersectional groups, such as Black women, will most likely differ from the political interests of nonintersectional groups, such as Black men or white women, and that consequently these interests are being misrepresented or ignored by some social movement organizations: Black women are “sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated upon a discrete set of experiences” that does not accurately describe their intersectional experience. For Crenshaw, there is an intimate connection between structural and political intersectionality: structural relations of oppression, domination, and marginalization constitute intersectional, multiply-marginalized groups that have a specific social experience, and its theoretical and political misrecognition leads to the political marginalization of the group.

The underlining logic is, of course, that the specific social experience of intersectional groups implies necessarily specific political interests, which happen to be denied, underrepresented, or misrepresented by current theories and policies. Intersectional theory hence offers a new semantic and political platform to represent and promote those interests that have been misrecognized and those experiences that have been inadequately represented. The political answer to this situation is more identity politics; that is, the recognition that Black women have specific interests that they
should be able to voice and have recognized by the single-issue movements. At the heart of Crenshaw’s theorization of intersectionality is an analysis of power and its intimate link with identities and political interests. There is also the conviction that identity politics is the right—and most efficient—way to promote black women’s interests and that recognition of their specific needs is required to tackle their political and social marginalization.

This approach, rooted in the genealogy of black feminism and the theorization of the “double oppression” or the “triple jeopardy” that women of color face in the context of the US second-wave women’s movement, has inspired several important studies of intersectionality in women’s movements that stress how unequal power relations between women based on racial/ethnic identities structure women’s mobilization in various contexts. Studies on the US context have shown that women from minoritized ethnic/racial groups have followed “different roads to feminism,” to borrow the illustrative wording of Benita Roth, both on account of structural racism and unequal power relations with white women, and on account of their desire to “organize one’s own” on the basis of their shared identity and experience. The tendency for most privileged subgroups in a constituency based on a shared identity (such as gender, race, or class) to impose their agendas and define their interests as “universal” for their whole group has been documented beyond feminism. Because the privilege of whiteness includes the ability to see oneself as “unmarked” by race, and to understand one’s interests as universal, studies have shown that coalitions or daily work across racial boundaries in US women’s organizations have met with resistance and obstacles.

While white women may acknowledge the pervasiveness of racism in society, they are often unwilling to apply this analysis to their own organization and their own behavior. Similar findings have been found for women’s movements in locations as diverse as Uruguay, Norway, Spain, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and France.

This important body of work focuses on how social relations of power structure inequalities, marginalization, and identities within women’s movements. It shows how power asymmetries fuel identity politics within feminism, and the need for more identity politics in order to place women of color’s interests at the center of analysis and at the center of policymaking processes, thereby redressing the epistemic erasure of women of color. Thanks to their emphasis on power and inequalities, these studies contribute to explaining the pervasive divides among women’s organizations along racial and ethnic identities. They also document how coalitions might emerge and
how “strategic sisterhood” may at times build bridges across these divides. Intersectionality in that sense brings to the fore the conditions under which coalitions across racial differences, for example, may be envisioned and sustained; among these conditions, the politics of representation—who can speak for whom—is of particular importance. Interestingly, while the politics of difference and representation is potentially an issue for any social movement, since, as studies on social movements have shown, identity is an important element of movement politics and of the ability to coalesce individuals around a cause, it has been particularly divisive and conflictual in the feminist movement. This is due in no small part to the forceful focus on the collective dimension of the feminist subject and of feminist politics. The insistence on collective rather than individual emancipation in recent Western (white majority) feminist movements fuels a suspicion about diversity, because differences are intrinsically perceived as divisive if they are not overcome by a common political project that, more often than not, implies a unitary vision of identity.

Debates on Islamic forms of veiling show that race, class, coloniality, and sexuality—to name a few—continue to delineate tensions, fractures, and alliances within feminist movements—in France and Quebec and beyond. Logically, intersectionality must be put to use to critically assess the claims by liberal, secular, or multicultural feminists regarding the headscarf debates to unveil the racialization, erasure, and hypervisibilization of women of color that they convey. In this perspective, while the public debates, and some feminist theorists, frame the issues as pertaining to religion, culture, and gender, they are in fact new instances of the “haunting of Europe’s silent racializations and ethnicizations,” to borrow Fatima El-Tayeb’s illustrative metaphor. The concept of intersectionality is therefore crucial to analyze current disputes in the sense that it provides an account of the operations of power that structure relationships between feminists: it makes manifest the continuities between colonial racial politics and current prohibitive political and legal regulations of Muslim religious practices, especially in France but also in Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, where the presence of racialized migrant/Muslim women within the nation is continuously questioned and their identities and interests are excluded from mainstream/dominant feminist agendas.

This book is thus indebted to intersectionality methodologically and theoretically, and situates itself within this wide field of research and political project by making visible in the analysis the experiences and discourses
of women of color. However, I also argue that the political critique that is leveraged by intersectionality must cast a wider net, looking beyond identity politics. Indeed, there is a risk in this approach of conflating identities and interests, or identities and values and judgments. If we draw on Zerilli’s account of feminism and her focus on freedom, we are reminded that differences may also be differences in judgments, and not only in identities and power. What is more, and as critiques of this approach to intersectionality have underscored, it provides a trenchant critique of power asymmetries and marginalization, but less exploration of relations between feminists based on other grounds than identity, such as solidarity, shared ideals, recognition, or even love.

We are reminded by Sara Ahmed of the complexity of how power shapes feminist practices and ideals when she writes: “We need to take care not to install feminist ideals as ideals that others must embody if they are to pass into feminism. Such a reification of political ideals would position some feminists as ‘hosts,’ who would decide which others would receive the hospitality of love and recognition, and would hence remain predicated on a differentiation between natives and strangers.” Hence, while a strand of intersectionality research on feminist movements focuses on marginalization and invisibility, and associates closely identities and interests, Ahmed’s reflection suggests that feminism is also about moral relations of hospitality and foreignness, about love, recognition and distance, and indifference, and that power expresses itself through the dynamic process of hosting or being hosted. Feminism is thus also about relationships that engage our moral responsibilities to treat the other well, relationships that are therefore also grounded in affects.

In this vein, I argue that theorizing feminism, in general and in particular in the context of the “post-secular condition” that characterizes most Western liberal democracies, demands that we complexify our understanding of the politics of identity, exclusion, and visibility within feminism with an account of how emotions and moral dispositions support those dynamics of marginalization, and of how they may also support other political and moral relations based on equality. As religious difference has emerged alongside race and migration as a ground for difference politics and a topic for antagonism within feminism, we must reflect on whether the conflicts around Islamic veiling are only conflicts about power asymmetries along racial identities. In the 1980s, migrant women and women of migrant descent were seen in countries such as France as a legitimate concern for feminist
action and as potential feminist subjects, and dominant strands of French feminism defined themselves as antiracist, as they still do today.\textsuperscript{59} Once veiled, however, the same girls and women became an impossible or ambivalent subject for many of the same white French feminists.\textsuperscript{60} From subjects of care, even though distant and marginalized, Muslim women and girls became subjects of conflict and of exclusion as these feminists claimed to save pious Muslim women from their religion for their own good. Racial and religious identities have thus not been perceived in similar ways by many white, and some nonwhite, feminists.

Another important nuance to bring to an intersectional analysis based on postcolonial and racialized identities is that it tends to underestimate the differences within each group and the plurality of positions and identities that characterize these public discussions.\textsuperscript{61} An intersectional approach reveals how these debates perform processes of racialization, political marginalization, and the preserving of white privilege. Nevertheless, as I detail in the next chapters, in both contexts I study closely, France and Quebec, not all women's organizations representing racialized women agree; far from it. Different types of racialized feminists voice their claims in various national contexts, and while they might all be critical of the dominantly white women's rights organizations, they do not all advocate the same policies when it comes to veiling, although they aim at representing the same constituency. While some women who identify as Muslim and feminist have politicized the veil as an issue of racial and postcolonial politics, others have criticized the veil as potentially oppressive, and others have stated that it should not be the focus of their politics.\textsuperscript{62}

Islamic veiling debates bring to the fore feminists' moral claims to save subjects, to establish moral relations between feminist subjects, and to define “good” and “bad” feminist subjects, drawing moral boundaries between those deserving of feminists' attention and care, and those who must be cast away or reformed for the sake of feminism’s endeavor to transform the world. Hence, the deep moral overtones of feminist debates about the regulation of forms of Islamic veiling remind us of the deeply moral nature of feminism. This realization urges us to complexify accounts of intersectionality focused on identity politics within feminism to also recapture other dimensions of the feminist project and its conflictual nature that revolve around morality, emotions, and relations. Debates on Islamic forms of veiling thus make apparent how the contentious feminist politics of racialization, marginalization, deprivation, and silencing of the voices of women living at the
intersection of several axes of domination, which include religion, race, and citizenship status, \(^{63}\) is articulated with moral ambitions to define and patrol the borders of “good” feminist subjects, worthy of feminists’ care and attention. Reciprocally, a feminist politics that fights racialization and marginalization of women of color and pious Muslim women also expands and challenges moral ideas about the feminist subject, thriving not only for epistemic justice, \(^{64}\) but, I argue, also for the moral duty to keep a promise: a promise to create relationships that are more equal, a promise “to find ways to support those who are not supported,” to borrow Sara Ahmed’s formulation. \(^{65}\) To capture these complexities of the moral and emotional stakes of the politics of difference within feminism, I suggest we turn to an alternative genealogy of intersectionality, one that has problematized identities and feminism’s emotional dimension.

**Theorizing Feminism: Experience and Affective Politics**

An alternative genealogy of intersectionality, not always included under the label of intersectionality despite its kinship and simultaneity with the first, \(^{66}\) looks at differences and power within feminism in conjunction with the emotional and psychic dynamics they trigger. \(^{67}\) Rather than theorizing identity politics within feminist movements, this body of work is more interested in theorizing affective politics and the delicate invocation of solidarity and crafting of relationship between feminists. This approach considers that identities are being constructed in the very process of alliancing, coalescing, or separating. They are not a given that would predetermine possibilities of coalitions or conflicts between opposite interests. This approach is illustrated by Chandra Mohanty’s theorization of the politics of location within feminism and its critical take on identities and identifications. \(^{68}\) For Mohanty, a politics of location implies more than a geographical or historical location, although it starts from there. It also implies “psychic and imaginative boundaries,” \(^{69}\) and it involves a conception of experience as shaped by politics, rather than only the reverse. In other words, while of course any project of feminist coalition should necessarily recognize differences and inequalities based on ethnic, racial, sexuality, or class inequalities, Mohanty underlines that feminist politics also construct gender, sexual, and racial identities: “It is the kind of interpretive frame we use to analyze experiences anchored in gender, race, class, and sexual oppression that matters.” \(^{70}\) Political consciousness and
praxis shape experiences and identities; thus, in the words of Mohanty, “We cannot avoid the challenge of theorizing experience.”

While it may be tempting to read feminist movements’ intersectional politics as the pure product of identity politics based on “experiences” produced by social structures of power, I suggest with others that we need to approach the processes that lead to intersectional conflicts, divisions, and coalitions with more caution toward “experience” and “identity.” To borrow Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin’s words, we must question “the all too common conflation of experience, identity and political perspective.” Joan Scott has similarly emphasized that we must historicize experience and identity and beware of the immediacy or “authenticity” of experience, because “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience.” As she insists: “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political.”

In the realm of feminist politics, I join here Sara Ahmed and her coauthors’ call “to think of ‘identity’ as an effect of the deployment of feminist strategies, tactics and rhetoric, rather than its origin or cause.” In this perspective, feminist discourses elaborated and deployed in specific contexts produce feminist identities rather than reflect them. These feminist discourses provide interpretations of experiences and identities that lead to inclusions, exclusions, coalitions, divisions, and solidarities. Identities such as Afro-feminist, Muslim-feminist, or white-feminist are not givens but are produced and are to be interpreted. Rather than considering the subject of feminist politics as a pregiven, we must try to understand, in the words of Joan Scott, the “complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced.” By considering identities as always in construction and intimately articulated with experiences always in need of interpretation, we open the analysis of feminist subjectivities and identities to more complexity, and we can make sense of the wide range of differences within minority/racialized and ethnic majority/white feminist groups, and represent the plurality of voices and positions that have been expressed during these debates. In this perspective, debates on Islamic veils should not be understood as only revealing a preexisting social location of white privilege on the part of white/ethnic majority feminists in European countries. These debates actually also produce the experience and identity of white feminists in both contexts. They shape instances of
what I call in chapter 4 feminist whiteness. They fuel processes that lead to new feminist identities.

A second characteristic of this alternative genealogy to intersectionality theory is its interest in and account of emotions as an important part of feminist politics and feminist subjectivities. Writings of Black feminists that explore the conflicts between feminists of color and white feminists in the context of the US second-wave movement display and theorize a wide range of affects that appear as symptoms of politicization and as fueling processes of feminist subjectivation. Emotions are symptoms of political and moral wrongs, or of political and moral care and, at the same time, fuel feminists’ perception of themselves as part of the political community that feminism creates. The rich emotional vocabulary and poetry used by Cherríe Moraga illustrates the importance of emotions as deeply (feminist) political affects. Writing about the completion of This Bridge Called My Back, she stresses the “pain and shock of difference, the joy of commonness, the exhilaration of meeting through incredible odds against it.” Talking about racism within the movement, she evokes how the “dread and terror in the room lay like a thick immovable paste above all our shoulders, white and colored alike” and how her feelings were “dark with anger.” Moraga also offers a powerful illustration of the politicization of experience and identity when she writes in the next paragraph: “My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack?” These analyses prompt us to analyze the role that emotions play in sustaining or destroying feminist projects but also in shaping feminist subjectivities.

The articulation between emotions and moral disposition is not specific to feminist politics. Didier Fassin reminds us in his studies on resentment and inequalities that emotions are tightly linked to processes of subjectivation and therefore to politics. Political theorists, from Adam Smith to Sigmund Freud, have recognized the role played by emotions in forging, securing, or destabilizing the political community and the social contract. Sympathy, envy, anger, resentment, love—to name a few—are emotions that constitute the grammar of our relationship to the other members of the political community we belong to, as well as of our relationship to the values that organize the forms of governing this community—equality, freedom, injustice, and so on. Emotional attachments are necessary to sustain political communities. Political passions are not only affective, they are also deeply moral.
These feelings produce political subjects and convey a moral dimension to their relationship to the political community. Public passions therefore convey moral values and moral relations. While many political theorists have investigated the role played by passions in our attachments to a political community and our self-fashioning as good (or bad) liberal or republican subjects, less attention has been devoted by political theorists to understanding the role played by moral emotions in political projects that are not attached to the national political community, such as feminism. What are the moral emotions involved in the becoming feminist? What forms of political subjectivation sustain, or erode, this individual and collective project?

Social movement studies have recently given more attention to the role of emotions in social movements, stressing in particular the emotional satisfaction that individuals retain from being part of a collective political identity. However, in this literature emotions are often treated as a means toward collective action, not as symptoms of moral and political dilemmas or as contributing to processes of identification with collective projects and identities that impact moral dispositions and subjectivities. Only a few studies look at how emotions sustain political projects and shape political subjectivities in social movements or “counterpublics.” Some social movement studies do look at how emotions denote and produce disidentification among, for example, micro-cohorts of feminist activists, explaining variations in forms of expressive politics over generations—such as when sociologist Jo Reger analyzes “old” feminists’ feelings of being displaced in a slut walk. These studies are generally focused on differences in collective identities and how emotions contribute to shape collective feminist identities. They more rarely address the issue of how emotions sustain moral values that shape specific feminist political projects and subjectivities.

An exception is Sarita Srivastava’s work on the display of emotions by white feminists and how it can prevent and block antiracist work within women’s rights organizations. Indeed, Srivastava notes that exchanges within feminist organizations over racism are rife with “moral undertones, undertones with roots in feminist community, imperial history, and national imaginings.” In the context of her fieldwork in Canada, she argues that “in the face of antiracist challenges many white feminists may feel that it is their self-image—as good, implicitly nonracist people—and particularly their shared moral identity as feminists that is under siege. In other words, we can see that the typical pattern of emotional responses to antiracist challenges—anger, fear, and tears—is in part produced by implied challenges to what counts
as a good feminist, a good person, a good woman, and a good national citizen.”

Srivastava’s analysis leads us to focus on how emotions sustain moral dispositions as feminists, our ability to see ourselves as “good feminists,” and how these moral dispositions are closely articulated with operations of power. What counts as a good woman and a good citizen is intimately intertwined with the historical formation of the liberal modern subject as bourgeois and white, and therefore respectable, allowing white feminists to secure their position as “good” national subjects and “good” feminist subjects through self-righteousness.

In this perspective, feminists’ emotions and feminist emotions are understood as laden with moral values, which shape different feminist political projects and feminist political subjectivities. We can explore with such an approach how politics, morals, and emotions are articulated in feminists’ discourse and practice, and how feminist discourses police the boundaries of the good subject of feminism, regulate feminist subjectivities, and also define how to treat well other participants in this project. We must therefore investigate the politics of emotion that characterize contemporary feminist politics of difference, describing the various attitudes toward different differences, the emotions and moral dispositions they carry with them, and how they produce different feminist subjects. How are feminists’ moral dispositions to treat the other well supported by, conveyed through or diverted by specific emotions? What are the types of emotions that have characterized Islamic veiling debates? What are the moral and emotional boundaries that are being drawn or displaced during these debates?

**Feminists’ Political Subjectivations**

To explore these questions, I focus on what I call feminists’ political subjectivations. The concept of political subjectivation that I propose captures how feminist subjects are constituted through these intersectional debates that give meaning to and politicize some of their experiences as feminists. It allows us to observe how feminism is mobilized in different contexts through particular emotions and feelings. I argue that feminist discourses elaborated and deployed during these contentious debates over Islamic veiling produce and politicize feminist identities and feelings, and that they provide interpretations of experiences and identities that lead to inclusions, exclusions, coalitions, and divisions.
The process of feminist political subjectivation is the process by which feminist political and moral issues become personal ones, through a set of experiences and engagement with a collective subject and a historical and fantasized collective identity. The concept of subjectivation refers to Michel Foucault’s understanding of subjectivation as “the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself qua subject.” Drawing on Foucault’s conception of subjectivation, Judith Butler notes the “indistinguishability” between the moral and political dimensions of subjectivation. She observes: “The formation of the subject is the institution of the very reflexivity that indistinguishably assumes the burden of formation. The ‘indistinguishability’ of this line is precisely the juncture where social norms intersect with ethical demands, and where both are produced in the context of a self-making which is never fully self-inaugurated.” In other words, self-formation and ethical deliberation are always bound up with the political context and norms that shape the subject, and moral judgment and social and political critique cannot be dissociated.

However, here my interest is not in the constitution of the subject qua subject, but in the production of a political subjectivity, a political and moral relationship to oneself, which entails a process of political identification with and an attachment to a collective subject. I am interested here in describing the moral dispositions displayed by a variety of feminists toward feminism, that is, toward a political project, and toward other feminists, across relations of power and privilege, difference and identity. To borrow anthropologist Didier Fassin’s words, “The sort of subjectivity I try to analyze is not so much psychological as political. I am interested in the formation of subjects engaged in actions they justify on moral grounds rather than in the depths of their unconscious.” Hence, my endeavor is not to provide an anthropological account of the ethical practices shaping a feminist ethical self, or a psychoanalytical account of feminist identifications—although these would be fascinating to pursue. In the perspective I adopt, self-formation as a feminist is indistinguishable from processes of ethical deliberation that are historical and contextual. Hence analyzing feminist political subjectivations will require that I engage with the politics of feminist values as well as with ethical questions about how to treat the subject(s) of feminism. Indeed, as I give an account of myself as a feminist, I become engaged in ethical relations with others who also claim to participate in this political project. The concept of feminist political subjectivation thus allows us to understand feminists’ moral arguments in their political, social, and historical context.
with its inherent power asymmetries. Indeed, as Joan Tronto insists, we must understand moral arguments in their political context, and any normative inquiry into feminist ethics must place hierarchies of power at the center of its attention and theoretical care.

However, this process is not only one of ethical deliberation that deploys itself in a specific historical context. It is also a social and psychic process, involving emotions, subjectivity, and affects, since, as Teresa de Lauretis notes, “The constitution of the social subject depends on the nexus language/subjectivity/consciousness—. . . in other words, the personal is political because the political becomes personal by way of its subjective effects through the subject’s experience.” The importance of emotions in political subjectivation has been underlined by many queer and feminist cultural theorists who are part of the “affective turn” and who explore how affects are enmeshed with ethics and politics, looking at how affects contribute to subjectivation, our sense of belonging, and the formation of historical subjectivities. In particular, Sara Ahmed and José Muñoz have insisted on the role that emotions perform in forging our sense of self and our ability to align with and participate in collective feminist/queer identities. Affects are sometimes presented as first and foremost located in the body and less formed and structured than emotions. I do not share the overemphasis on bodily reactions that seems to subtract affects from critique and from the individual’s reflexivity. For this reason, I mostly use the term emotions. However, I do share with these approaches the idea that our relationship to belonging and norms is sustained by emotions and that we may channel and cultivate affective practices that are also ethical practices.

I thus consider processes of political subjectivation as processes that link the moral and the political in individuals’ practices, self-understanding, and self-fashioning, processes that do not unfold only through rational behavior but also through emotions, memories, drives, and desires. The concept of feminist political subjectivation thus aims to capture how political positions voiced in the name of feminist values are also intimately articulated with feminist subjectivities that imply affects, memories, and political emotions that often do not lead to political inclusion of a variety of feminist subjects, but rather fuel a drive to reenact injury or its denial. It helps us to describe how, in specific contexts, power relations along racial and religious identities, political structures and organizations within women’s movements, individual histories of activism and encounters with feminism, and moral dispositions as feminist are connected and produce specific feminist political
subjectivations that carry specific ethical or moral dispositions, sustained by a set of emotions. By looking at what feminists care for, when and why they self-identify as feminists, and how specific emotions secure these moral dispositions, we may capture the nature of the promise that feminism holds, as well as what stands in the way of this promise.

Focusing on processes of subjectivation allows us to articulate the political, moral, and emotional dimensions of contemporary feminist politics in a productive and heuristic way. Indeed, by understanding how a variety of feminist political subjectivations are formed in the current context of femonationalism, we can understand how the moral dimension of feminism is appropriated and acted upon by a variety of feminists, and how these appropriations may lead to conflict, separatism, disidentification, or coalition, all processes that shape the present and the future of the feminist project. Investigating the various moral and political relationships that a variety of feminists entertain and develop with what they identify as the feminist project and with other feminists, one can attempt to answer the questions put forth by Jonathan Dean and Kristin Aune in their mapping of contemporary European feminism: “How are the boundaries of the feminist subject demarcated and maintained? Which forms of feminist identity and subjectivity are valued and affirmed, and which are erased or cast to the margins?”

Exploring feminist political subjectivations is not only important for social movement scholars trying to make sense of the dynamics of divisions or coalitions among feminist organizations, or for intersectionality scholars who want to show how intersectional social and political processes unfold in the specific context of secularism debates, and how they transform feminist movements, leading to the visibility of new identities. It is also important, I argue, for feminist theory. As Teresa de Lauretis has aptly noted, conflicts over feminism—and I would add, over the good feminist subject—are the very flesh and the history of feminist theory. As she writes, “It would be difficult to explain, otherwise, why thinkers or writers with political and personal histories, projects, needs, and desires as different as those of white women and women of color, of lesbians and heterosexuals, of differently abled women, and of successive generations of women, would all claim feminism as a major—if not the only—ground of difference; why they would address both their critiques or accusations and their demands for recognition to other
women, feminist in particular; why the emotional and political stakes in feminist theorizing should be so high, dialogue so charged and confrontation so impassioned.”

De Lauretis’s point encourages us to understand the complexity of the relationship that feminists entertain with the political project that defines their political and moral identity, and to capture simultaneously both the profound social and political divisions that cut across this political community, and the deep attachments, claims for recognition, and drives toward commonality that feminism awakens. Understood in this perspective, feminism is a project of creating a political community and relationships among feminists. These relationships are both political and moral and are sustained and conveyed through affective politics. In each context, these relationships will take particular forms. For example, Jennifer Nash interprets second-wave black feminism as based on love-politics among women and among black women in particular. Contrastingly, in many contexts, the feminist community created by white feminists is based on caring for distant others so abstract that their concrete needs and interests are misrepresented and the relationship is characterized by asymmetry rather than equality.

I propose therefore to explore emotions as crucial features in the processes of political subjectivation that characterize contemporary feminist politics. This approach directs our attention to the moral and affective nature of the feminist project, allowing us to explore how feminists make promises to each other, create a community, and intend to build relationships based on equality. It allows us to consider the range of moral dispositions that feminists can hold and deploy: the claim to represent others and to improve their condition, the claim to treat others well or to treat them equally, the claim to care for distant others or for concrete and proximate others; and how these moral dispositions are sustained by emotions such as benevolence, self-righteousness, anger, or resentment.

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In this chapter, I have argued that Islamic veiling debates not only reveal in a singular light the moral nature of feminism, but also enjoin us to take into account the ethical drive that characterizes feminism in our endeavor to elaborate normative proposals when reflecting on feminism’s continuing relevance and ability to transform the world. To do so, I have drawn on a genealogy of intersectionality theory that takes into account feminist subjectivities, memories, and emotions, not only identity politics, and therefore that orients our
inquiry toward an exploration of the moral dilemmas, political conflicts, and emotional stakes in feminist intersectional politics. In this vein, I propose an approach focused on the processes of political subjectivation that are triggered by debates over veiling and about Islam, race, and gender, which aims at grasping simultaneously the political, emotional, and moral dimensions of feminists’ engagement—through separatism, coalition, or exclusion—with their collective political project. I argue that feminist debates and conflicts—sustained by specific emotions—are political, but they are also moral: they help define what is a “good” feminist subject and what is the right type of feminism to adopt. Because feminism is both a political and a moral project, our analysis of feminist divisions must explore both dimensions and their articulation. The moral dimension of these debates is all the more important in that, in fact, it is connected with the political and sociological dimensions of these issues. We must thus ask: how does the context of recurring crises over veiling and postcolonial issues shape specific forms of feminist political subjectivations in Europe? The following chapters explore this question by investigating the political subjectivations of white and nonwhite feminists in different contexts.