Toward a Feminist Ethic of Responsibility

“Solidarity” as an ideal of a political altruism is rooted in some degree of identification, which it will also transcend. But its invocation is immensely delicate.

— Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves*, 9

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.

— Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics Of Emotions*, 189

Already two and a half decades ago, Judith Butler reflected on the modern feminist project in the following terms:

Through what exclusions has the feminist subject been constructed, and how do those excluded domains return to haunt the “integrity” and “unity” of the feminist “we”? And how is it that the very category, the subject, the “we,” that is supposed to be presumed for the purpose of solidarity, produces the very factionalization it is supposed to quell? Do women want to become subjects on the model which requires and produces an anterior rejoin of abjection, or must feminism become a process which is self-critical about the processes that produce and destabilize identity categories?¹

Butler’s considerations find a profound echo in the current politics of feminism in a majority of Western countries. As I have documented in previous chapters, far from having rejected or critically reflected upon the false universalism and unity of the “we women,” numerous contemporary feminist organizations in Europe and beyond have been enrolled in an exclusionary
project contributing in many respects to the “rise of femonationalism”; that is, the enrollment of feminist values in nationalist far-right political projects. However, as Butler predicted, these excluded domains return to haunt, challenge, and disrupt this exclusionary discourse, also in the name of women’s rights, simultaneously shattering liberal categories of emancipation and agency.

In the previous chapters I have documented and analyzed these two processes—the exclusion and the haunting. I have first shown how feminist whiteness, in its many forms and incarnations, polices the boundaries of the feminist collective subject, performing the symbolic and practical exclusion of “bad” subjects and/or positing that nonwhite feminists’ political subjectivities must be regulated and put in line with feminist ideals historically and socially defined as white (and secular). This process can be critically read as the product of power relations within feminism based on race and religion. These discourses delineate the boundaries of feminist whiteness and secure for many white feminists their already privileged position within the movement. Moreover, and as Butler’s citation suggests, this process of political subjectivation is also profoundly intertwined with emotions and moral dispositions. Attachment to identity categories, to the unified “we,” is also the product of a psychic and emotional impulse. I have also shown how race especially comes back to haunt this feminist project, as Butler predicted. I have considered how racialized feminists reclaim the feminist subject on their own terms, contesting the boundaries drawn by white feminists, while, at the same time, seeking recognition of their belonging to the feminist project, first among themselves, but also in relation to white feminists. In that sense, racialized feminists’ discourse must also be heard as a moral address directed at white feminists.

The exploration of the political subjectivations of white and racialized feminists in the context of sexularism debates has therefore exposed the dyadic nature of feminism, as both a political and a moral project. Conflicts about what gender equality means, or what freedom means, and the impossibility of ever agreeing on this topic are, I maintain with Linda Zerilli and others, inherent to the feminist project. That those values are debated and contested is the very mark that feminism is a political project. As Zerilli notes: “There can no more be the final or conclusive argument for the equality of the sexes than there can be the final and conclusive argument for the beautiful. Every political or aesthetic argument must be articulated in relation to a set of particulars.” In this perspective, feminism is thus a political activity
that is defined neither by a shared identity nor by an agreement on political values such as gender equality or autonomy, but rather by its aim to create a political community. Hence, to critically think about the feminist project and its future, we should not be concerned with defining gender equality or female autonomy in a way that would assuage the conflicts within feminism sparked by sexularism debates, but rather reflect on the conditions that enable this political community to be sustained and define its nature (as a community of equals, for example). Instead of inquiring about the limits or the impossibility of a subject, a “we women,” that would found or embody feminism, we should then interrogate what political community feminism pretends to create, and on what moral bonds this community might be based, questions I explore in this chapter.

Indeed, feminism, I argue, is also a moral project. Debates over Islamic veiling reveal conflicts about what gender equality and female autonomy mean for feminists, but they also reveal that some subjects may be considered proper feminists subjects while others are considered improper subjects, outside the scope of the feminist project of emancipation. In that perspective, the future of the feminist project does not only depend on an ability to be critical about the “we” that it invokes in its claims, a subject that has fueled much of feminist theory’s inquiries. It also lies in our ability to critically reflect on the moral boundaries and moral relations that the feminist project creates. The moral relationships that characterize the political subjectivations of white and racialized feminists—from benevolence or indignation to resentment—indicate that moral relations between feminists are at the heart of feminism. Hence, I am concerned with the moral dimension of the feminist project, the bonds that enable feminism to be embodied in a political community.

In that sense, I argue that we need to be self-critical not only about the boundaries of the “we” that we intend to claim when we make claims as feminists, as Butler suggests, but that we also need to be self-critical about the relationships we forge or imagine between those who might claim that “we” with us, in the very process of claiming it. Indeed, disagreeing on political outcomes should not lead to ignoring power asymmetries between feminists, and should not reinforce moral boundaries and exclusion. On the contrary, feminism should be an exercise in critique of moral boundaries. I argue that we must therefore concern ourselves with the moral dimension of the feminist project, the bonds that enable feminism to be embodied in a community, and that ensure that its claims will be picked up by others. This
is not a turn to morality as opposed to politics. Rather it is an attempt to elucidate what moral relations can create a political community of equals. How can feminism define a community that is not marked by hierarchies between “good” and “bad” feminist subjects? How can our feminist imagination define bonds between its members that do not reproduce exclusions, abjections, and privilege?

In this chapter, I argue that such a conception of feminism as a moral and political project, which creates bonds between those who declare themselves feminists, can reorient our critical inquiry. Grappling with sexularism debates, our attention has been fixated on the subject of feminism, debating who can be part of this project— with religious Muslim women being evaluated as proper or improper subjects of feminist consideration—and the type of agency these subjects should display to be included in a political project of emancipation. Rather, I suggest concentrating our attention not on the subject of feminism but on the relationships that feminists create among themselves, the nature of the bonds that a feminist project requires. Hence, what we must explore are the moral bonds we create when we invoke feminism. Can we imagine feminist moral bounds that sustain a community of equals?

While Butler is right to promote a nonfoundationalist account of feminism, one in which this political project does not rely on the belief of a “we” grounded in a common identity, this does not mean that feminism should not aim at creating a community, in the sense of creating and sustaining moral and political bonds between its participants. What I have described in the preceding chapters, thanks to the concept of political subjectivation, is not only a problematic passionate attachment to the category or identity of “women,” but also a passionate desire to name oneself a feminist and to be recognized by other feminists as a feminist. The passionate attachment to feminist ideals such as gender equality and autonomy is matched in intensity only by the affective and moral bonds created between feminists. Whether this community is based on an identity category or is self-critical about this identity, feminism as a political activity generates emotional attachment, not only to the identity category or to its destabilization (I can be as emotionally invested in the maintaining of the category “women” as I can be affectively engaged in its dislocation) but to the other participants in that project.

This chapter is an exercise in political imagination. As Amy Allen has emphasized, any critical analysis rests in fact on an anticipated future for the feminist project. This utopian dimension must be specified; otherwise it will necessarily create new exclusionary domains, as has been the case in the
past—for example, with feminism’s uncritical adhesion to liberal values and its attachment to modernity. I therefore here explore in normative terms the moral bonds that feminists may create among feminists, and that may avoid reproducing hierarchies, privileges, and exclusions.

The figure of the coalition is a good place to start such an inquiry. Coalitions have been repeatedly presented as a solution to the problem of differences and of power relations among women. Most of the literature has focused on the organizational modalities of coalitions, exploring what makes feminist coalitions succeed or fail as political endeavors. I argue that while indeed we learn important pragmatic feminist politics from these studies, coalitions are not only attempts at broader political inclusion or political alliances between minorities that may ally on tactical issues. They also constitute moral endeavors that necessitate forging specific moral bonds and developing a form of feminist ethics. I then explore different theoretical propositions of such a feminist ethics. In particular, I discuss how the concept of enlarged mentality, or enlarged thought, first elaborated by Hannah Arendt in her theory of judgment, has been used by feminist theorists such as Linda Zerilli and Iris Young to capture the type of moral disposition that could define a feminist ethics. In the last section, I propose to build on and nuance these insights into the ethical dispositions that can create a feminist political community. I argue that what I call a feminist ethic of responsibility may provide normative yardsticks that take into account the affects and moral dispositions that characterize feminists’ political subjectivations, and redirect them toward the aim of disestablishing the moral hierarchies and political exclusions within feminism. I show how such an ethics can address the pitfalls described at length in this book and by others, and help us conceive feminism as a political community of equals, while leaving open political disagreements about the values at the heart of this project, such as autonomy and equality.

Coalition as a Political and Moral Promise

Many feminist scholars have presented coalitions as the solution to the problem of the exclusionary domains created by the “we women,” a “we” too often appropriated by white and privileged feminists. Coalitions are said to offer a solution by acknowledging differences, especially differences in privilege and power, while at the same time creating a temporary united “we.”
I first review theoretical arguments in favor of this mode of feminist organizing, and I specify, using my fieldwork in France and Quebec, under which conditions coalitions are said to have reached their objective or to have been experienced as successful. These experiences of “successful” coalitions give us insights about their nature—as strategic, political alliances—but also about the ethical dispositions they require from their participants, a dimension rarely explored in the literature. Indeed, as the quotation from Sara Ahmed that opens this chapter suggests, solidarity, expressed through coalition building, requires that we recognize that “we live on common ground.” However, this requirement and its ethical implications are rarely fully articulated within coalition politics or in feminist theory.

Talking about Black feminist politics in the United States, Bernice Johnson Reagon famously opposed “home” and coalition: “You don’t go into coalition because you like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive.”8 To the safety and recognition of home, Reagon contrasted coalition politics as hard work, a place that is not safe but is a necessity. She emphasized that feminist work for the twenty-first century must be about coalescing, which entails a risk, and therefore carefulness because “you can’t know everything when you start to coalesce with these people who sorta look like you in just one aspect but really they belong to another group.”9 Hence, belonging is about home and people who look just like me in every aspect, while coalition is about not belonging, not looking alike, not recognizing myself in the others, and, however, working with them. Because coalition work is based on the premise that the participants do not share a similar identity, or a similar pain as Ahmed remarks, it supposedly quenches the question of differences and recognition. It proposes a self-critical understanding of the feminist “we” that has been upheld as the practical solution to the “problem” of the “we women” by many theorists from various theoretical traditions.10 Central among the reasons that explain the theoretical success of coalition as a viable figure for feminist politics is thus the idea that coalition is centered around work, action, or communication rather than identity.

This antiessentialist predicate supposedly offers a guarantee that calls for commonality and identity will not be used to mask power disparities nor to protect the privileged subjects of feminism at the expense of those who are multiply marginalized. Coalitions are supposed to avoid what María Lugones calls a logic of purity, a logic based on the “fundamental assumption that there is unity underlying multiplicity.”11 This assumption is misleading
for feminist practice or for any emancipatory politics because it rests on a longing for unity, community, and shared subjectivity as a premise and precondition for political action, whereas such a premise is always flawed and exclusionary, enacting a closure of the political subject, and whereas this premise ignores, or travesties, the fact that identity building is the product of political work. In fact, coalition may be the model to follow even for groups that present themselves as identity-based. Indeed, and as chapter 5 illustrated, identity-based feminist groups are not the product of an immediate, prepolitical identity. They also are the product of collective processes of political subjectivation that necessitate work to create a common identity, a feeling of security and a vocabulary to politicize the intersectional nature of their identity.

Hence, coalition may be a model for feminist practice not only to bridge across difference but for any type of feminist collective action. Coalition is thus favored by feminist theorists of recognition who value communicative ethics as a way to foster understanding across differences, as well as intersectional theorists who wish to ensure minoritized women’s inclusion in the feminist project as well as their self-organizing. Coalition can offer a figure of inclusive feminism, by multiplying the available and accepted feminist figures, like in the intersectional version of the Rosie the Riveter poster, an image with three racialized women posing as Rosie, used by racialized feminist groups in Paris (and in the United States) in 2015, or in material metaphors such as the quilt seamed by different women groups in over fifty countries for the World March of Women organized by Quebecois feminists in 2005. In both these visual and material metaphors the feminist subject is multiplied, embodied by a multiplicity of figures rather than by a univocal one.

Beyond the theoretical assumption that coalition is an adequate form for feminist practice, scholars of social movements have also documented under which conditions coalitions succeed, meaning that they manage to forge a short-term alliance on specific issues. Empirical studies show that for a coalition to sustain itself, despite difference in identities and power, there needs to be a recognition of the power differential and a specific representation for the disadvantaged group so that their viewpoint is not suppressed through the coalition building. The institutionalization of what Laurel Weldon calls “norms of inclusivity,” to secure the self-organizing of minorities within the coalition and their descriptive representation, provides the necessary safeguards to ensure minorities’ interests are taken into account and for the coalition to thus be sustainable.
However, both the theoretical account of coalition and empirical studies of successful coalitions tend to sideline important dimensions of coalition work. Here I explore further these affective and moral dimensions of coalition, both between racialized and nonracialized feminists and between differently racialized or marginalized feminist groups, in France and Quebec, to delineate when and why feminists experience a coalition as successful or as a failure, and what these moral and political evaluations tell us about the potential and the limits of coalition as a figure of inclusive feminism. I argue that while, as has been noted by other scholars, acknowledging power within a coalition is a prerequisite posited by racialized feminists for a coalition to be possible, coalition work—with other racialized feminists or with white feminists—also entails cultivating specific moral dispositions. I first document empirically this claim, and then elaborate theoretically its implications.

Discourses about coalitions across racial and religious divides vary depending on standpoint. While coalition is a leitmotiv of the narratives from racialized feminists in France and Quebec, showing the necessity of including their views if one is to reflect on this feminist practice, it is much less so for a majority of white feminists I interviewed, especially in France. In some cases, the failure of coalition, even for symbolic short-term events, such as the International Women's Day demonstration on March 8, is accounted for by white French feminists by underlining irreducible differences over feminist values and ideals (for example, on the Islamic veil or on sex work)—rather than power, privilege, and racism. In Quebec, the provincial umbrella organization for women's rights, the FFQ, mainly run by white women, has engaged reflexively on this issue since the beginning of this century, mainly through the institutionalization of a specific representation of racialized women inside the organization—an initiative welcomed by racialized feminists, but one that did not appease their concern about the organization's lack of diversity and continued implicit support for Quebecois nationalism. As Mani, an activist and volunteer in a South Asian women's center in Montreal underlines, descriptive representation does not mean inclusion, and the concerns of her organization remain marginalized in the coalition's agenda despite her continued presence there:

Of course, we were invited to go to the exceptional General Assembly again this September and I looked at their program and I said there is no way I have three days to listen to them all doing all that stuff again, and arguing
about nationalism probably. . . . So I don’t know, I don’t have the patience for it anymore.

Contrary to the relative lack of discourse about coalition from nonracialized feminists, racialized feminists in France and Quebec expose their disillusionment, but also the conditions that have been conducive to successful coalitions with white women. In line with the literature on feminist coalition, interviewees in Quebec and France underscore that a lack of acknowledgment of the power differential is an impediment to forging effective coalitions. Soraya, a Muslim feminist activist in her early forties who has been a member of the provincial federation for many years and cofounded a Muslim feminist group in Montreal, critically reflects on her experience of organizing with white Quebecois feminists and being included in the events they organize:

In fact, a real integration of intersectional practice would lead, I think, in this context, to take into account the vulnerabilities of different groups, but their attitude is to say, “It’s a level playing field, you just have to make your mark, it’s the same rules for everybody, and they apply to everyone fairly.” . . . The same women who said fifty years ago to men that they should favor women’s participation, and they cannot see the link.

Lack of awareness of power differentials, the very absence of a level playing field, makes coalition work impossible in this case. Acknowledging racism inside the movement and material power differentials is thus a precondition for a feasible coalition. However, examples of successful coalition—where power asymmetries are recognized—show that racialized feminists define this work as temporary, strategic, and on their own terms. Maleiha, who facilitates a group of lesbians of color in Paris, insists on both the temporal limit and the protection of her group’s autonomy in coalition work:

We have reflected on practices of strategic and short-term alliances. That is, we are a radical group, but we find it necessary and useful to have actions with others, we are not closed. . . . Why short term? Because we protect our autonomy, an autonomous organization, to produce our own reflections and analyses. This idea of temporariness enables us to circumscribe our alliances, so that we are not in the long term, so we’re safe. We won’t be assimilated, and our conditions will be very clear. With white lesbians, first we ally only with those we know well, and this affective side, this friendship
is very important because, in fact, political lesbians that fight racism, there's not a lot of them around.

As this long quotation makes clear, while the scope and dynamics of the coalition must ensure racialized feminists that their participation will be defined on their own terms, as already exemplified in chapter 5, coalition work is also rife with emotions and affects. Successful coalitions are based on trust, built over time, as well as on friendship and emotional bonds. Indeed, Maleiha emphasizes the need for trust and affective relations even to sustain strategic and temporary coalitions with carefully picked allies. While the literature often opposes identity groups, characterized by emotional safety and shared identity, and coalition work, this distinction seems, on some level, to be inadequate. It is clear that identity groups, such as the one founded by Maleiha, provide her with a collective sense of belonging and with political autonomy, as she often emphasizes in her interview. But this belonging does not suppress the need for affective and trustful relations in the coalition work she engages in as well. Coalition work does not render the affective and emotional dimensions of feminist political subjectivation irrelevant, as Soraya’s and Maleiha’s words suggest.

Reciprocally, failed coalitions display not only a lack of awareness of inequalities and racism within feminist movements, but also moral dispositions that prevent working together. The political recognition of power asymmetries—or its refusal—is intimately intertwined with moral and affective dispositions. This interweaving can be identified in the following example. When she mentions the organization of an event on Islamic feminism where no Muslim feminist was in fact invited, Soraya contrasts the theoretical commitment of white feminists toward diversity and intersectionality with the practical lack of financial solidarity:

I can’t believe there is no money to have [a Muslim feminist] come from Morocco. It’s impossible for me to imagine that there is no possibility of financing her. . . . But if I say this, it is presented as completely wacky on my part, emotional, as if I was asking for preferential treatment. But in theory if you ask them if it’s important to take into consideration race, sexual orientation, they will say yes.

Soraya’s critique goes beyond the lack of acknowledgment of economic asymmetries. Her demand to recognize power differentials, including financial
Toward a Feminist Ethic of Responsibility

ones, is met with a moral gaze that delegitimizes this demand and categorizes the one who utters it as “unfit” for proper feminist practice. What is more, and as Soraya develops her reflection, the ability to embody the “good” feminist subject is always disputed by white feminists, especially when it comes to acknowledging Muslim feminists as feminists:

There is often this, “Well, it would be nice to see you at a demonstration for abortion rights.” They put conditions on acceptance, on integration, criteria we are supposed to meet. . . . The answer is “prove yourself and you will be accepted.”

Hence the moral gaze of feminist whiteness that ascribes to racialized feminists a position of “bad” feminist subject, or of a subject who still needs to be regulated, to prove itself, makes coalition work with white feminists very problematic for racialized feminists. The emotional and moral implications of such coalition work also appear clearly in this quote. Beyond the recognition of power asymmetries, racialized feminists recognize coalition with white feminist organizations as also morally meaningful when, contrary to the example given by Soraya, a common belonging to the feminist project is fully acknowledged. Paola, who heads a South Asian women’s center in Montreal, reflects on the relationship of her organization with the mainstream umbrella feminist organization, the FFQ—after the latter proposed that racialized feminist organizations grouped under the banner of “women from diverse origins” would from now on organize the March 8 demonstration—in these terms: “The fact that the president [of the organization] sees us as allies too means there is a recognition that we have a common cause” (my emphasis). Importantly, the acknowledgment that feminists share a common cause, and live on common ground, implies a recognition not only of equal moral worth but also of relationality—which I will develop further.

The interweaving of political and moral disposition as a precondition for coalition is not limited to coalitions of racialized feminists with white feminists. Indeed, racialized feminists’ organizations also need to build coalitions among women of color, or with other oppressed categories. Paola, for example, explains the logic guiding the relationship that her organization tries to build with indigenous women’s groups in Quebec. While she states that they do not have a formal working relationship, she explains that they asked the head of the federation of indigenous women in Quebec
to come give a talk so that the members of her organization would inform themselves about indigenous women’s multiple discrimination and history of colonial oppression in Quebec.

The will to self-educate might therefore be one way to express solidarity. Another is apologizing to groups that one has sidelined in political work. Soraya relates an event that happened during the Estates General of feminism in Quebec, a wide gathering of all feminist organizations, organized by the FFQ but rallying beyond its usual membership. A long discussion occurred to decide if trans* and intersex women should be named as intersectional categories or subsumed under a “sexual diversity” label within the charter that was being drafted. Soraya’s group opted for the latter, a political and moral fault as she explains:

For her [a trans* activist] and another intersex activist it was really important to name them, because they have never been named, and, see, this was a big blunder on the part of racialized women, because we did not vote with them. It was a tragic moment. We thought we were doing the right thing by skipping the list [of sexual minorities]. . . . We really had a hard time. We apologized, but these women will not come back.

Here again, the issue is not only about the right political position to take in order to acknowledge the identities and the needs of multiply marginalized groups within the feminist coalition. It is also an issue of acknowledging relationality and a common moral ground between feminists. The fact that Soraya describes this event as tragic underlines both the passion with which she invests it as she recalls it, and the unspoken idea that exclusion is unavoidable, a fate that one tries to escape but that repeats itself, despite the best intentions. However, the fact that her group apologized suggests that, to use Hannah Arendt’s metaphor, even if promises of solidarity have not been kept, new promises may be made again, and coalition rebuilt. Hence, here again, political stakes, moral dispositions and emotions are intimately interwoven in Soraya’s understanding of what has been missed. The failure she expresses is both political and moral. Her moral dismay echoes, and illuminates, Linda Zerilli’s analysis, relating the story of a feminist collective in Milan, when she remarks that such collective is based on “a promise to make good a claim to community and acknowledge a debt.”

Reflecting on these examples, we see that coalition is not only strategic allying or the multiplication of figures that may embody or represent the
feminist subject. Coalitions are rife with emotional stakes and moral relations. Failed coalitions between racialized and nonracialized feminists reflect not only a cognitive and political failure on the part of some feminists—that of not acknowledging asymmetries in power along racial lines—they also result from a lack of moral reciprocity, the absence of an acknowledgment of common ground. Conversely, successful coalition work rests not only on institutionalizing norms of inclusivity but also on trust, emotional bonds, and the moral acknowledgment of relationality and, therefore, responsibility, between feminists—I will develop this point further in the following sections.

Hence, coalitions are not only strategic alliances, necessitating that the right norms of inclusivity be institutionalized in order to be successful. Coalitions are also moral endeavors, putting to the test the moral relations that unite—or separate—their participants. The examples of coalitions between minority groups illustrate as well this moral and emotional nature of coalition. Indeed, as the last example, Soraya’s tragic mistake, showed, communication between oppressed minorities is neither transparent nor obvious. As minorities, trans* feminists and racialized feminists shared a common critique of the dominant feminist discourse imposed by white cis-feminists; however, this shared critique did not automatically translate into adequate practices of solidarity. There might always be an intersecting power relation, or a logic of resistance, that one might omit. But, maybe more importantly, Soraya stressed the need to apologize, asking for forgiveness, thereby revealing the deeply moral nature of the bond she aimed to preserve. The vision of coalition as mostly strategic, resting upon communicative ethics or on institutionalized norms of inclusivity, thus falls short of capturing what is at stake in coalition work.

These examples of coalitions between racialized feminists and white feminists, as well as among differently marginalized feminists, indicate that coalition is also a promise, a promise one must want to make and that one must try to keep. I want to argue that for this reason, coalition should not be presented as the solution to the problem of differences among women. The foreshadowing of coalition as the future of feminism is not satisfactory, despite its endearing visual representation of feminism as a collective reuniting different identities in a common project. While coalition politics have proven to be, under the right circumstances, potent ways to organize across racial divides and across sexual orientation or class, I argue that coalitions are the product of already existing inclusive political practices, and of specific ethical
dispositions, rather than a mode of coalescing that could create new political and moral understandings. Indeed, in many contexts, coalition efforts fail, or, as the case of France suggests, a coalition is not even envisioned as a possible form for a common feminist subject. In a context in which representations of “good” and “bad” feminist subjects are radically entrenched and opposed, via processes of political subjectivation that reproduce feminist whiteness, coalition is not thinkable, nor desirable, and cannot therefore provide a productive site to imagine a common feminist future. While we know from political science that successful coalitions are built on specific practices of inclusion and representation of minoritized groups within the coalition, what is left untold by this account is that, before any inclusionary practice may be put in place, feminists have to desire coalition in the first place.

The question then becomes, What are the moral dispositions that must be nurtured, learned, and practiced so that coalition becomes desirable? So that promises might be made? In this perspective coalition is the result of a successful moral and political endeavor. It is a promise that has been made. But what are the feminist moral dispositions that can sustain a desire for feminism as a coalition, a recognition that feminists share common ground? This question directs us toward an investigation of the ethic of feminism. I now review different theoretical proposals that have attempted to delineate the ethical relations that should sustain the feminist project. A first proposal, elaborated by Brenda Lyshaug, is the development of “enlarged sympathy.” I argue that this proposal, centered on self-investigation and imaginary projections onto other women’s experiences, is flawed for several reasons. I then turn to proposals by Iris Young and Linda Zerilli that both use Hannah Arendt’s concept of “enlarged mentality” as a principle that could, with some alterations, be fit for the purpose of sustaining a feminist collective project. I argue that while those proposals point to important issues, they fall short of offering the fully-fledged feminist ethic of responsibility that postsecular times and intersectional feminism demand.

A Self-Involved Ethics: Enlarged Sympathy

The insight that coalition cannot only be envisioned as strategic, but needs to be based on ethical self-practice, has been developed by Brenda Lyshaug in her account of the ethic of coalition building. I first review here her proposal in favor of the cultivation of “enlarged sympathy” as a way to foster
coalition, and the feminist project more broadly. While I share Lyshaug’s argument that feminism is a moral project and therefore implies specific ethical dispositions, I argue that “enlarged sympathy” is not the right candidate because it remains focused on the feminist subject, on feminism as grounded in a (wounded) identity.

Lyshaug critiques the strategic orientation of coalition building as feminist practice, as well as the idea that what coalition building needs is more communicative action across differences. Indeed, Lyshaug argues that the question of coalition is not one of cognitive redress—that is, the need for more knowledge or for more equal and symmetrical communicative action of the type promoted by Seyla Benhabib in her account of the “enlarged mentality,” as a way to reverse perspectives and enable deliberation across asymmetries of power. For Lyshaug, the problem is not one of cognitive failure, but one of identification and, therefore, emotions. To ensure inclusion despite differences, Lyshaug contends that ethical self-practices promoting tolerance of ambiguity and receptivity to what may seem threatening must be nurtured among feminists.

She finds that what she calls “enlarged sympathy”—a disposition toward others that can sustain attentiveness and a sense of accountability and connection with others despite the fact that we do not identify with them—is an important complement to strategic accounts of coalition. For Lyshaug, reflecting on accounts of failed sisterhood alliances during the US second wave, the main issue is that of identifying, ensuring a connection, without ever falling into the trap of imagining that one’s feelings and experiences are similar to others’, or that one can fully understand and experience the feelings of others. This concern rises from accounts of appropriation of racialized women’s experience by white feminists, made possible not only by a cognitive failure—the lack of knowledge about racialized women’s concrete experiences—but also by a misplaced form of identification, for example, when white women believe they can understand and share racialized women’s suffering. Lyshaug’s aim is to make coalition possible without suppressing or denying differences; to promote sympathy and identification, which implies emotional relations, without pretending to abolish the distance that remains between one’s experience and others’.

This orientation shares some of the concerns raised by María Lugones that identities are not transparent but multiple, and thus that some degree of opacity always persists in any form of communication. Lyshaug’s concept of enlarged sympathy, borrowed from Sandra Bartky and George Kateb, is supposed to achieve this trick of promoting feelings of sympathy, finding
connections with others, recognizing some of their experiences as shared with mine, while at the same time recognizing that they are different and therefore avoiding the illusion of transparent sisterhood. Lyshaug's enlarged sympathy is therefore, first and foremost, an “introspective achievement.” If Lyshaug calls this disposition an ethical one, it revolves mostly around the cultivation of specific feeling—openness to threat and ambivalence—and a focus on one's identity, in order to learn to perceive it as multiple and changing rather than fixed. Indeed, only if identity is envisioned in this way can the “introjection of differences into the self,” which is necessary to find overlap with and sympathy toward others' experiences, be realized. Lyshaug elaborates this proposal in the context of thinking about what could sustain inclusive coalitions that respect differences. However, if we agree that even feminist identity groups are, by nature, coalitional, because they also entail work across differences to build a common identity, this proposal can in fact be understood more broadly as that of a feminist ethics that can sustain any feminist project that acknowledges differences.

While I agree with Lyshaug that a successful coalition, or an inclusive feminist project, needs more than an effort to ensure cognitive rectification, I remain unconvinced by her proposal to nurture “enlarged sympathy” as the solution to working across differences, especially in postsecular times. Indeed, while Lyshaug tries to find an ethical disposition, or rather emotional attitudes, that could ensure sympathy without suppressing differences, the challenge today for coalition building is rather to find common ground. Differences are not suppressed; they are rather often posited as irreconcilable. Lyshaug wants to emphasize attentiveness to difference, so that empathy and sisterhood do not, deceptively, mean feeling like the other. She aims at ensuring sisterhood while recognizing that differences in positions and identities—and one would add, more importantly, in power—matter and shape experience. In the context of sexularism debates, what prevents coalition building is rather the absence of acknowledgment that feminists might share common grounds. The discourses that police the borders of good and bad feminist subjects exclude from the feminist imagination specific figures with whom they do not particularly want to empathize. The exclusion of those abject subjects from the feminist imagination is often a premise of white feminists' political subjectivation, making it difficult to imagine that sympathy may be nurtured to promote identification with them. Hence, while Lyshaug's argument presupposes that one may desire to identify with other members of one's group (i.e., women), across some internal differences
within this group, I question this very assumption, both as a credible account of feminist practice, and as a normative goal to pursue. As I underlined, there may not be any desire for coalition in the first place because separation from abject figures, rather than coalition with them, sustains some processes of political subjectivation as feminist. In these conditions Lyshaug’s focus on emotions and “imaginative impersonation”—to imaginatively enter into sympathy with others—may prove misguided because it cannot account for, nor instill, the desire to identify with subjects that have been, precisely, defined as outside the perimeter of the good feminist subject.

Lyshaug uses the example of literature as a way to cultivate enlarged sympathy with people and groups that have different experiences of oppression. But if one thinks of the vast literature that summons the image of “the oppressed Muslim woman,” the ambivalent uses of this fictional vehicle to access experiences of oppression appear clearly. Indeed, this literature, based on the sharing of “authentic” narratives of oppression, reproduces stereotypes about Muslim women’s specific plight as victims of their religion and their culture and presents their agency in reified ways. Doing so, they present feminist ideals of emancipation as incompatible with cultural diversity and especially Islam. Rather than trouble the boundaries of “good” and “bad” feminist subjects, such a reading of the experience of oppression of “othered” women may indeed nurture enlarged sympathy, but only toward those Muslim women who fit the identity of absolute victim of patriarchy. Here enlarged sympathy might in fact reinforce the boundary between the good and the bad feminist subjects, instilling the conviction that Muslim women may either be absolute victims of their religion or adhere to Western feminist ideals and, if possible, reject their religious identities. More broadly, the strategy of enlarged sympathy poses the question of whose experience I shall try to enter into sympathy with. Are all experiences and all identities comparable and to be included in the feminist project? Are only experiences of oppression worth identifying with?

The ethical disposition proposed by Lyshaug is plagued with another problem, as it tends to suggest that, in fine, the feminist project revolves around an identity, that of women—and one might add, oppressed women. While it acknowledges that women may be oppressed in very different ways, the ethical disposition of enlarged sympathy is supposed to make possible connections between these experiences of oppression, without denying their different nature, degree, or content, as a precondition for feminist coalition. The focus on oppression as a prime locus of feminist
identity thus implicitly rests on a common identity; an imaginary sharing of experience that strives for commonality, defined as a partial overlap, fostered by enlarged sympathy, between a variety of experiences of oppression. This idea that the feminist project is in fact about sisterhood, forging a common identity and sharing a partial overlap in experiences of oppression—even while recognizing that there may be wide differences between these experiences—constitutes the feminist project mainly as an identity project. A last assumption central to this proposal seems misplaced. Indeed, Lyshaug presents these ethical dispositions as first and foremost an introspective achievement, that is, focused on a relationship of the self to the self. There are many good reasons to think that a feminist ethics based on such a form of solipsism cannot provide a fertile ground for a collective project in the postsecular context.

### Zerilli’s Enlarged Mentality: Judgment and Feminist Ethics

Insights from the theoretical perspective elaborated by Linda Zerilli on feminism as a political project can help us explore why an ethics based on self-investigation is misdirected. Indeed, Zerilli has provided a trenchant critique of the focus of feminist theory on the “subject” of feminism rather than on action.\(^{33}\) Promoting a conception of feminism that envisions it as a practice of freedom, rather than as an identity, Zerilli has argued convincingly that the wish to ground feminism in a common subject, “women,” comes with a cost of which we should be wary. This cost is, simply put, that of losing the potential of feminism as a project of world-building. Indeed, freedom, as Zerilli understands it following Hannah Arendt, is an I-can, rather than an I-am. The focus on identity and on the subject of feminism, a focus that implies that emancipation rests ultimately in a form of self-transformation of subjectivity (from oppressed victim to emancipated subject), is misleading because, for Zerilli, it ignores the fact that freedom is a relational creation, not the possession or property of the subject: “No subjective relation of the self to itself, freedom requires a certain kind of relation to others in the space defined by plurality that Arendt calls the ‘common world.’”\(^{34}\) Read in this light, Lyshaug’s proposal to direct ethical inquiry toward the self—to improve one’s ability for imaginative impersonation—is misguided because it suggests that what needs to be salvaged and championed is some form of
common identity, and that feminist practice is mostly a practice of the self, centered on the transformation of subjectivity.

Zerilli’s call for a shift away from the “subject” question in feminism—and from the feminist subject—to embrace a conception of feminism as a practice of freedom is powerful. It implies that what feminism needs is not an identity but the capacity to make and hold promises. Indeed, following Arendt’s argument presented in *The Human Condition*, Zerilli affirms that to address plurality, irreversibility, and the uncertainty of the world, what we have are promises and forgiveness. What makes possible and helps sustain a political we, a political action carried out as a collective entity, is the recognition of what Arendt calls our common world, or “the world between us.” Failing to honor this promise of political recognition of what unites and separates us, which is not a promise or illusion that we share a common identity, is what dooms the feminist project. In this perspective, it is not a common identity that grounds feminism as a political project, but the “world-building practice of publicly articulating matters of common concern.”

Zerilli’s account of feminism directs our attention away from identity to the question of “free relations” among feminist subjects. It defines feminism as a project of articulating claims in the public space, claims that will materialize a collective political subject. The capacity to articulate those claims, so that they can be picked up by others, depends on the ability to exercise imagination and judgment. Here Zerilli draws on Arendt’s concept of enlarged mentality that presupposes that one thinks and sees from the standpoint of others, thus viewing the world from different perspectives and, as a result, being able to make judgments. Hence, the ethical disposition that corresponds to Zerilli’s account of feminism is an enlarged mentality, understood as the ability that will ensure that my claims can materialize a political community. Indeed, if I do not engage in the exercise of enlarged mentality, in judging from the standpoint of others, then chances are that my claims will not be picked up by others. What is more, envisioning feminism as the political process by which political claims may be picked up by others means that those I might enroll, or exclude, can always “speak back to me.” Hence, the enlarged mentality also presupposes that I consider other feminists as my interlocutors, and that I cannot in advance decide who will or will not be part of that political project.

In this account of the feminist project, enlarged mentality is thus a feminist ethics in the service of building a political community. In Lyshaug’s account, enlarged sympathy is a feminist ethics in the service of changing my
own subjectivity, my relationship to myself, as a way to understand others, without identifying with them. Zerilli’s proposal, on the contrary, is about forging a collective subject in the public space. Her account of enlarged mentality revolves around Arendt’s conception of judgment. Rather than identification, or self-investigation, what she proposes is to develop an ability to judge differences between women. Indeed, Zerilli’s theoretical proposal is a response to the debate about “differences” between women and the threat those differences supposedly represent for the feminist project. Using Arendt’s vocabulary, Zerilli operates a shift from differences—understood as social differences—to plurality, which is both an ontological and a political concept. Indeed, for Arendt there is no such thing as two objects occupying the same position (ontological premise) and, for Zerilli, our points of view on the world will shape the political claims we make in the public space. With this shift, Zerilli denounces the idea that feminism is a project rooted in a common identity, which intersectional differences may put in peril. She argues on the contrary that plurality is the condition of any political community and that, at the same time, “plurality is a political relation that is irreducible to empirical differences.” Empirical, identity-based or social differences are objects, while the relations we establish between these differences, through judging, form the political relations that are the basis of a political community. Zerilli argues that the enlarged mentality enables us to learn how to acknowledge and judge such differences among women.

Judging politically is not deliberating in search of a rational argument that everyone will agree upon. For Zerilli, it is rather, as in aesthetic judgment, an act based in a subjective validity that implies quarreling with others. Judging is a rhetorical ability used to persuade others, a creative act that “projects words into a new context.” It is not the logic we use that will convince others and enable us to judge differences among us, but, rather, our ability to see from different perspectives. Seeing the world from different perspectives, we can imagine relations between objects, we can judge differences. Hence, recognizing or celebrating empirical differences is not what a feminist project requires. What feminism requires is the continuous building of a public space defined by equality. This space is constructed by the repeated acts of judging our political differences, or quarreling, because only through this activity can I discover with whom I am in community.
means that I cannot speak for others, and that I can always be spoken back to. There is, therefore, in Zerilli’s account a fundamental reciprocity in the political relationship that the act of judging establishes.

Zerilli’s account of feminism as an I-can, sustained by a community defined as a public space of equal participants, is invigorating. It proposes a radical alternative to the conception of feminism as a political project based on a shared identity, often reified to a politics of representation of othered women, being spoken for instead of spoken to. Zerilli’s approach echoes the discourses of racialized feminists in Quebec and France when they claim the recognition by white feminists that they share common ground. Being recognized as an interlocutor is a condition for feminist coalition politics. However, her account of enlarged mentality as a feminist ethics that can sustain this feminist project needs to be complemented. Indeed, while Zerilli argues that enlarged mentality enables me to judge politically, and that empirical differences do not matter, her insistence on discarding issues linked to identity or social differences—which, along with Arendt, she expels from the domain of the political—might prove problematic. Racialized feminists claim that common ground should be recognized, and they also demand that asymmetries of power, entrenched in social differences, be recognized as well. Zerilli seems to believe that a space of equals can be created by sheer political will, abstracting social differences from relationships. But this declaration of will might also obscure concrete asymmetries of power and how they shape the political space, delimiting the boundaries of the community I pretend to make appear. How can I make sure that judging differences will not mean reenacting exclusions or erecting boundaries between those I recognize as similar to me and those that I deem different from me? If I am indeed asking with whom I am in community, if I am tracing the boundaries of a community of equals to whom I speak, am I not also excluding some participants from my community because the claims I make they cannot take up, or because, while they speak back to me, I am deaf to their voices?

Zerilli seems to presuppose that social differences will not matter in determining who is part of my feminist political community, because what matters are the claims I make. If I develop an enlarged mentality, I will be able to make those claims in ways that make them resonate for others. This belief contrasts starkly with the description I have given of how white feminists’ claims may be emotionally attached to the preservation of white privilege, and therefore impossible to be picked up by racialized feminists. If a claim to gender equality is intimately linked to a claim that religious
belief or Islamic veiling practices are inherently oppressive to women and irreconcilable with gender equality, then it will not be picked up by religious women, who will be excluded from the political community these claims are supposed to create. While white feminists might develop an enlarged mentality when it comes to taking the standpoint of Muslim women as victims of their community’s patriarchy, they might be incapable of using an enlarged mentality to see the world from the points of view of Muslim feminists. As I have stated already, asymmetries of power structure feminists’ moral dispositions: whiteness consolidates the moral boundaries erected between “good” and “bad” feminist subjects, and claims by white feminists that they embody the “good” feminist subject will be impossible to pick up for those very subjects they define as “bad.” I remain unconvinced that the capacity for enlarged mentality, as defined by Zerilli, will translate into the necessary self-critique of experiences and claims that privileged feminists must engage in.

What is more, Zerilli’s defiance vis-à-vis social identity is problematic for racialized feminists, or any other minoritized group mobilizing for a voice in the public space and for emancipation. Indeed, as Bruno Perreau underlines, reflecting on queer politics in Europe, “Minorities do not have the luxury of disavowing, once and for all, their sense of belonging.” The symmetry that Zerilli suggests exists between all the participants that build, through their claims, a political community thus ignores that we are not positioned similarly toward our social identities, and evades the question of power asymmetries within the political community that is being formed. This inattentiveness toward our different social ascriptions and belonging make Zerilli’s conception of enlarged mentality insufficient for the project of forging and sustaining equal moral bonds within feminism. There is no guarantee that the enlarged mentality proposed by Zerilli will destabilize the boundary between “good” and “bad” feminist subjects and provide a feminist community that is more inclusive. While her approach rejects founding the feminist project on a common identity, it does not question the concrete conditions under which an enlarged mentality can avoid reproducing similar exclusions. How can an enlarged mentality be developed in the context of asymmetries of power? What does it mean to see the world from the others’ point of view when points of view are shaped by different and intersecting power relations? This question is all the more crucial to ask when it comes to the ability of those in positions of privilege to develop an enlarged mentality.
Iris Young addresses this issue in her reflection on enlarged thought. Indeed, she notes that there is no such thing as taking the standpoint of someone else in a context in which social asymmetries characterize my relationship with that person. What is missing in the account that Zerilli provides of the enlarged mentality is specifically the questioning of the relation that exists between the participants. While she defines this relationship as one of political equality, she glosses over the concrete inequalities that will also certainly define it. More careful to take into account the impact that social asymmetries might have on moral and political relations, Young states that an encounter carries me beyond my own standpoint but “does not carry me into the standpoint of the other person.” For Young, we cannot pretend to reverse position or to grasp the other’s position because such a claim “neglects to conceptualize the relation between us.” While Zerilli suggests a form of symmetry in the moral and political relation forged through enlarged mentality—speaking to and being spoken to, in a context in which both interlocutors are considered equals—Young insists that there are no symmetrical positions in the world. She insists that “this idea of a symmetry in our relation obscures the difference and particularity of the other position,” and risks misrepresenting its claims. Second, she continues, “It is ontologically impossible for people in one social position to adopt the perspective of those in the social positions with which they are related in social structures and interaction.” Hence, while Zerilli suggested that we make judgment by being outside of ourselves, seeing the world from others’ points of view, Young is more careful in her assessment of the conditions under which enlarged thought can flourish, and indicates that for our moral claims to be valid we must not only take into account one another’s interests and claims, but also consider “the collective social processes and relationships that lie between us.”

Young’s reflection on moral relations in the context of social asymmetries complicates Zerilli’s account of enlarged mentality. Young’s examples and her analysis suggest that her prime concern in critiquing the idea of symmetrical moral respect is her concern for asymmetries of power. She writes: “When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other’s situation.” To address this situation of social asymmetry, Young argues that in interactive communication with
less privileged individuals, privileged ones might refrain from identification, preserve a form of distance, and adopt an attitude of moral humility. Wary of identification with individuals situated in different social positions, Young argues that communication is not about identification but rather a creative act through which, by listening and remaining open to difference, I might transcend my own experience and point of view. For Young, such an ideal and practice of communication as asymmetrical reciprocity will make it possible to build relations of solidarity or similarity. It will foster possibilities of agreement by recognizing the plurality of experiences without presupposing that we must share similar experiences or positions to understand each other.

Hence, Young’s response to the acknowledgment of power asymmetries structuring social relations is to promote a form of enlarged thought that is based on “respectful distancing” and moral humility, as well as “wonder” and “gift giving.” Indeed, Young argues that communication is always a gift; it is an opening up to the other person, and all the more so when social asymmetries structure relationships. Gift giving is a way to recognize the creative dimension of communication, to enact the sense of wonder—pleasurable surprise in the face of difference—that Young is calling for to define communicative ethics. She complements this proposal in her book *Inclusion and Democracy*, where she argues that real democratic inclusion demands that social differentiation be acknowledged within theorization of communicative ethics and democratic deliberation. She underlines that despite formal presence, “internal exclusion” can affect minorities marked by social differences when they are formally participants in the debate, but in fact are not heard and feel excluded. She therefore proposes several types of communicative practices, such as greetings, that might counteract this informal exclusion. Hence, Young’s proposal for ensuring moral respect in the process of communication is both based on the nurturing of moral dispositions, such as wonder and humility, and on practical forms of address intended to reflect and nurture these moral dispositions, such as greetings or what she calls the “affirmative use of rhetoric,” which recognizes that emotions participate in communication and orient one toward her audience.

Several of Young’s insights about communicative ethics can be recaptured to define a feminist ethics. Her vision of enlarged thought—which acknowledges the asymmetries of positions—and the various modalities of communicating that she suggests can enhance it are, I think, more adequate than the enlarged mentality proposed by Zerilli, which tends to obscure power relations between feminists. Young elaborates her perspective on enlarged
thought in the context of reflecting on inclusive democratic deliberation. Deliberation within feminist movements could certainly benefit from Young’s insights. Indeed, Young’s proposal to define communicative ethics in a way that will not exclude the groups whose identities and interests have been historically represented as marginal, and who have been formally or informally excluded from deliberation, echoes important issues within contemporary feminist movements. Her insights on inclusive political communication are certainly useful to promote feminist coalition building across divides of race, class, or sexuality.

However, Young’s aim is to ensure democratic inclusion in order to reach fairer decisions. Hers is an issue of justice in societies marked by plurality, and she acknowledges that the style of communicative ethics she advocates will not make agreement easier to reach because it will multiply standpoints and enliven discussions. While feminism is also marked by plurality, and while many feminist organizations must reach decisions while ensuring the inclusion of the viewpoints of their internal minorities, the questions that have been raised in the context of sexularism debates are not mainly about reaching fair decisions. They rather point to the moral hierarchies and exclusions that are perpetrated in the name of feminism’s values, and to the challenge of sustaining a political community of equals in the name of feminism. Young’s proposals may seem unable to address these issues. In particular, while she acknowledges asymmetries of power, the enlarged thought and wonder for which she advocates may seem inadequate to disestablish whiteness and its corrosive effects.

There is a tension perceptible in Young’s Inclusion and Democracy between taking into account asymmetries of power and providing a theory of moral respect that, in fact, places all agents in equal moral positions. A tension thus emerges between recognizing how social injustices and inequalities shape our moral world, and recognizing that they position us in different moral positions. The communicative tactics that Young artfully describes to ensure ethical communication across differences and asymmetries, such as gift giving or storytelling, do take into account the asymmetrical positioning of the participants. Indeed, Young’s aim is to provide narrative spaces for the voiceless, and to dissociate the powerful from the belief that her experience can be made universal or that she embodies a “view from nowhere,” situated above the particular experiences of concrete others. Hence Young’s proposals demonstrate that she is keenly aware of how our positions of belonging to minority or majority groups—to groups historically discriminated against
or groups that have been considered to embody the universal standpoint—situate us on different moral grounds, or at least in different locations from where to engage in democratic deliberation.

However, she does not suggest that these positions may assign us different moral responsibilities. While she pays attention to the relation that defines asymmetrical positions, emphasizing that because of that very relation I cannot pretend to “put myself in the shoes” of someone else, she does not infer that this asymmetrical relation may place different moral responsibilities on its participants. For example, discussing asymmetrical reciprocity between white and Black American feminists in the context of the Anita Hill Supreme Court hearings in 1991, Young advises that white feminists should have approached the issue with caution and moral humility. She advocates a form of respectful distance, rather than moral responsibility, on the part of those who are privileged because of their lack of appreciation of the complexity of intersectional marginalization. Young considers differences in standpoints important because they produce a more democratic and inclusive discussion, because “having to be accountable to people from diverse social positions with different needs, interests, and experience helps transform discourse from self-regard to appeals to justice.” However, she disregards here the fact that these differences are the product of relations, placing some in positions of power over others. Those different needs and interests are relational and therefore antagonistic: the needs of the privileged are based on the denial of the needs of those who are oppressed by those very same privileges.

Both Zerilli and Young focus their ethical inquiry into enlarged thought on communication across difference. Zerilli addresses the issue from the perspective of political equality, insisting that, when making claims in the public space that can be picked up by others and act as bonds for a political community, I must accept being spoken back to and, importantly, that my claims convey this promise of hearing when spoken back to. Young argues, from the perspective of communicative ethics, that equal moral respect entails in fact moral wonder, moral humility, and a form of “gift” by opening up a conversation in which I am not sure the other will reciprocate. Here too, then, I will be spoken back to in terms I have not chosen and cannot anticipate.

But is a posture of wonder and gift enough to ensure moral bonds in a common political project? Can my agreement to be spoken back to prove sufficient in a context of deep asymmetries of power? How should the fact of being spoken back to actually affect me? Does my responsibility lie only in listening, or should I be responsible to act upon what has been said to me?
Feminist whiteness, understood as a position of privilege that sustains moral boundaries and exclusions from the feminist project, poses these questions with an acute intensity. Zerilli’s and Young’s proposals to develop enlarged mentality/thought remain unsatisfactory for reflecting on the types of moral bonds that can build and maintain a political community across differences, and, in particular, a community in which whiteness, as a site of privilege and moral superiority, is disestablished. Whiteness is no mere difference of perception or of position in the world. A property procuring rights and configuring expectations of entitlement, it structures privileges and dispossessions, supremacy and subjection.55 I explore now what a consideration of feminist whiteness as a form of political and moral wrong can bring to reflection on the features of a feminist ethic of responsibility.

Whiteness and the Denial of Relationality

I argue that asymmetries of power within feminism call not only for equal moral respect, or asymmetrical reciprocity, but also for a feminist ethic of responsibility, and that such an ethics may provide an important normative principle to foster moral bonds invigorating a critical feminist community. My argument here is twofold. I first argue that a feminist ethic of responsibility must acknowledge relationality between feminists. Such an acknowledgment provides an important lever to disestablish whiteness and the moral hierarchies it sustains. Second, in the next section I argue that a feminist ethic of responsibility must be understood not as a virtue or disposition one must nurture, a self-involved reflection, but rather as an activity, an instance of moral pragmatism.

First, let’s remember again the of racialized feminists in France and Quebec presented in the previous chapter. Their words aim to make white feminists both acknowledge common ground and recognize power inequalities and their privileges. However, they find in many cases resistance to their demands. In particular, what I have described as feminist whiteness—a propensity to universalize one’s experience and position of privilege and to draw moral boundaries between deserving and undeserving feminist subjects—presents a site of resistance to the claims made by racialized feminists. This resistance is all the more pervasive because emotions and moral dispositions, such as anger, self-righteousness, and benevolence, sustain many feminists’ attachment to feminist whiteness. Hence, despite voicing their discontent,
grievances, and resentment, despite formulating their moral address toward white feminists, racialized feminists rarely experience being spoken back to on equal terms or having their discourse picked up by others. This does not mean their moral address always fails and their discourses always remain unheard. As the various examples of coalition I have given in this chapter and the preceding one show, white feminists sometimes act upon—respond to—the discourses that are being spoken back to them by racialized feminists. However, I am interested here in challenging and dislocating the resistance entrenched in feminist whiteness, and in arguing for the necessity to acknowledge common ground as a prerequisite for a critical feminist project.

I analyze here feminist whiteness as driving a denial of the relationality that links white and nonwhite feminists, a denial of common ground. Feminist whiteness secures moral hierarchies between good and bad feminist subjects, as well as the privileged embodiment of feminism by white feminist subjects. In doing so, feminist whiteness also operates a denial of relationality between feminist subjects across racial or religious divides. Not only do some white feminists question the very possibility that pious Muslim women can be feminists, they also reject vehemently any possible ties, any common ground with them. This denial of relationality is not specific to feminist whiteness. Indeed, it is in fact an important feature of racial privilege. Reflecting on how racial privilege is based on an epistemology of ignorance, Sarah Lucia Hoagland argues that “epistemological and ethical practices of ignorance are strategic and involve a denial of relationality.”

Hence racial privilege is based upon, and secured, by practices of ignorance about the life and material conditions of those who are oppressed by racial subjection. In order to sustain this ignorance and the privileges it secures, whites have an interest in denying that their existence is interdependent with that of those who are oppressed by racism. While our subjectivities are relationally formed, whiteness performs an erasure of that relationality when it comes to acknowledging interdependence with people of color. As Hoagland surmises: “Whiteness doesn’t exist independently from engagements with people of color, even, or especially, if those engagements are white practices of erasure.”

I have described the practices of erasure and marginalization of racialized feminists that characterize the discourses of some white feminists, and their role in securing feminist whiteness. Understanding these practices as performing acts of denial of relationality helps us to characterize their profoundly moral implications. Different issues are at
stake in these accounts of whiteness that deny relationality with racialized feminists. One is ethical violence; the other is a moral posture that identifies feminism with whiteness and prevents the advent of an ethic of responsibility. One of the discursive repertoires sustaining feminist whiteness that I have described in chapter 4 uses the supposed universality of gender oppression to minimize the pervasiveness of racial oppression, or to justify ignoring it for the sake of political efficiency. This appropriation of universality can be defined, following Judith Butler’s reading of Adorno, as a form of ethical violence. Drawing on Adorno, who “uses the term violence in relation to ethics in the context of claims about universality,” she affirms that if an ethos based on universality “ignores the existing social conditions which are also the conditions under which any ethics might be appropriated, that ethos becomes violent.” In other words, violence resides in discursive operations that render it impossible for some groups to appropriate universality. While Butler is more concerned about individual ethical formation, her reflection illuminates some of the ethical stakes of feminist whiteness. By associating whiteness and gender universality, feminist whiteness performs a form of ethical violence. Furthermore, beyond the question of the appropriation of universality, there is, more broadly, ethical violence in the nonrecognition of race as a system of racial subjection and in the nonrecognition of white privilege.

However, as I described earlier, feminist whiteness is not always predicated upon the appropriation of universalism, or on the denial of racism as a structure of power. More often, feminist whiteness hinges on the drawing of moral boundaries that expel “bad subjects” from the feminist community. While some white feminists may define themselves as antiracist activists and act upon that political claim, they may simultaneously perform exclusions, denying other feminists—or other women—the possibility of claiming themselves feminists, portraying them as improper feminist subjects in need of regulation. Analyzing this moral impulse as a denial of relationality with racialized feminists can help us trace its moral implications and delineate an alternative moral account, based on a feminist ethic of responsibility.

Indeed, to borrow the words of psychologist Pascale Molinier, “Any of us can, if she wants to, understand,” meaning, here, be attentive to the language of the other: I can choose to know or not to know. I can decide to focus my sustained attention on what will become of the young girls wearing a veil who are expelled from public school, or not to do so. Of course, as Molinier underlines with others ethicists of care, “Our responsibility is always limited
or restricted by its context; but no position of exteriority is legitimate, we cannot leave the world.”61

Relationality and Responsibility

Relational accounts of morality, such as those developed by Veena Das62 or Joan Tronto,63 ground the moral character of our actions in the social and relational nature of our lives and humanity. All these approaches, whether they define themselves as theories of care or ethics of the ordinary, place (inter)dependency and vulnerability at the heart of human life, and therefore at the center of moral relations.64 Both Das and Tronto draw on an intellectual tradition, represented by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, that conceives morality as grounded in our concrete existence, our form of life. This tradition recognizes that our humanity and subjectivity exist only through the form of life to which they belong. Our voices, as subjects, exist because of language, which is “an inherited form of life.”65 Hence, as Sandra Laugier affirms, “The voice is both a subjective and a general expression: it is what makes it possible for my individual voice to become shared.”66 Here the interdependency between the individual and the context, a form of life, appears clearly. My very sense of being a subject depends on a language, a form of life, which is by definition collective. Theories of care and relational accounts of morality are thus attentive to ordinary life, to what makes possible the perpetuation of a life form, to concrete others and to their needs, always specific, and to the moral emotions and feelings they elicit in us. Far from grand theories of justice, an ethics of care concentrates on the moral implications of recognizing that we share a life form, that we share common ground.

In these relational and contextual accounts of morality,67 how I relate to otherness is central in defining the moral nature of my actions and feelings. Joan Tronto, for example, starts her reflection in Moral Boundaries by stressing that the question of “what our relationship with other people who are close and distant should be” and “the need to be attentive to viewing others’ circumstances in a whole context”68 are the crucial questions for moral inquiry. Such a statement is not a repetition of otherness as difference. Rather, to reflect on our moral relations with others is to reflect on the form of life we share with them. This appears clearly in Veena Das’s account of morality, which also places concrete others at the heart of moral inquiry.
Rejecting accounts of morality that place its locus inside the subject, Das explains: “If the ethical subject here is the set of relations rather than an individual who is the locus of decision, then a moral life is crafted as much out of the affective force of an attunement to this other who is not wholly other. . . . The paths to a moral life do not lie here in either rule following or in taking recourse to technologies of self-making but rather in the attentiveness through which one ties one’s own fate to that of the other.” For Das, our moral response to others—for example, to their pain—which we identify not primarily thanks to cognitive reasoning but rather through the feelings it elicits, this response that I observe in myself, “reveals what stakes I have in our lives together.” Moral feelings are therefore crucial because they remind me that I share common ground with others and that this common ground obliges me: I have stakes in this common life. Refusing to acknowledge this common ground, denying relationality, is therefore a form of moral wrong. It is a moral wrong in the broad or general sense that doing so is to refuse responsibility for my relationships with others, and to strip them of their voice. Das expresses this idea when she states: “Not trusting the words of the other is in effect a lack of trust in the other and in our mutual capacity to have a future together.”

Sandra Laugier suggests, in the same vein, that, since we share language as a life form, when I refuse to accept the words of others, I am also depriving them of their voice. She asks: “If my society is my expression it should also allow me to find my voice. But is this really the case? If others stifle my voice, speak for me, I will always seem to consent. One does not have a voice, one’s own voice. It must be found so as to speak in the name of others and to let others speak in one’s name. For if others do not accept my words, I lose more than language: I lose my voice.”

We hear echoes of Linda Zerilli’s analysis of the role of feminist claims in constituting a political community. Relying on Wittgenstein and the idea that we must always project words into new contexts, Zerilli also emphasizes that feminists make claims that must be picked up by others in order to constitute a community. For these claims to be picked up by others, she proposes that feminists nurture enlarged mentality so as to be able to see the world from others’ points of view. However, in her view, if my claims are not picked up by others, it is because I did not articulate them in a way that responds to their situation or that meets their judgment of the world. Laugier’s account differs here because she stresses that claims might not be picked up not only because our judgments of objects differ but also because my claim, as the expression of my voice, is not recognized,
because my words are not accepted. And this, she insists, constitutes a moral wrong, because I, or you, will be deprived of my/your voice. Hence, denying common ground, denying relationality, constitutes a moral harm.

Having said so, the question remains of how we should acknowledge relationality and common ground in the context of feminism. With whom am I in community in such a way that that person can lay claims on me and that I must acknowledge common ground with her? Because they focus on how we relate to others, and on how this relationality should shape our moral lives, relational accounts of morality seem to be a well-suited entry point into the question of how to delineate a feminist ethic of responsibility. Recognizing that we share common ground means that we let this common ground lay a claim on us, that of recognizing “what stakes I have in our lives together,” to use again Das’s words. Relationality implies here a reciprocal responsibility (which does not mean that it is symmetrical), of one toward another because we share common ground. If feminism is our common ground, because we have come to give an account of ourselves as feminists, therefore laying a claim on other feminists and accepting that they can lay claims on us, what type of responsibility does this political project, and the political community it proposes to constitute, imply?

In exploring this question, Joan Tronto’s ethic of care provides important insights. Indeed, it understands morality and moral responsibility as shaped by and embedded in a social and political context. It does not shy away from acknowledging power and, rather, proposes to conceptualize how the political context and the power asymmetries it produces must be incorporated into how we think about moral responsibility. This premise has two implications. For one, care is not only about our relationships with those we care for in an intimate and personal way. Care, as an “ethical practice of making complex moral judgment” that implies attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness, can—and Tronto claims, should—also be understood as a political idea. She argues that “the practice of care describes the qualities necessary for democratic citizens to live together well in a pluralistic society, and that only in a just, pluralistic, democratic society can care flourish.” This approach makes her ethic of care particularly suited for reflecting on a feminist ethic of responsibility.

The second implication of Tronto’s premise that the moral and the political cannot be separated is a proposal to acknowledge power asymmetries in terms of differential responsibilities. Similarly to Iris Young’s cautious reminder that we cannot put ourselves in the shoes of others, only meet them
halfway, Tronto insists that we cannot project our morality onto others without any consideration for the context in which they are situated. Hence, while her ethic of care recognizes, and is predicated upon, the fact that humans share an ontological position of interdependency—a premise shared also, for example, by Butler’s ethical proposal based on the precariousness of life—Tronto’s approach to the ethic of care is not confined to this ontological claim but articulates it with the political and social differences produced by the social world, differences that bring us closer together or further away, differences that give us power over others or place us in positions of vulnerability to others’ power.

This approach thus complexifies our understanding of the moral claims that an ethic of care lays on us, depending on the context in which we respond to the moral questions that our political relationship with others asks of us. In this vein, Tronto states: “To make simple applications of moral precepts to another’s situation as if none of the constraints of power within which people’s lives should affect our moral judgments, results in moral thought that is ultimately unresponsive to the genuine lives and moral concerns of ‘others.’” Power asymmetries therefore demand different types of responsiveness and attentiveness to others. While Tronto shares with Young the idea that we must be attentive to power asymmetries and, therefore, that we cannot assume that others will share our moral judgments, Tronto is not interested in remedying this social distance, and this power imbalance, thanks to enlarged thought or wonder. Rather than exploring how we must nurture certain moral and affective qualities in order to empathize with or understand others, she insists that what these asymmetries imply is rather a critical reflection toward our own position and what specific responsibility it entails. Indeed, she underscores that social privilege translates as “privileged irresponsibility,” that is, that those who are privileged usually don’t have to care: denial of relationality is also a denial of responsibility. On the contrary, she argues that privileges should entail more responsibility to care, a state of moral engagement rather than a condition of detachment or of denial of relationality and responsibility.

How and when should we be responsible to care? How and when do our relationships entail the responsibility for caring for others, or for working to redress injustices that affect them? Both Iris Young and Joan Tronto propose some reflections on this issue. Considering both that relationality entails responsibility, and that care—as a complex form of moral judgment—must be placed in its political and social context, means that, to borrow Tronto’s
expression, moral responsibility is relational.\textsuperscript{78} It will vary depending on the relations at stake. The relational conception of responsibility that Tronto advocates for shares important premises with Iris Young’s social connection model of responsibility, which argues that all agents who participate in one way or another in structural processes leading to injustice have a responsibility to work to remedy it.\textsuperscript{79} Indeed, both conceptions of responsibility rest on the idea that what connects us, the relationships we nurture with others—partial or extensive and through different mediums, such as kinship, practices, environment, institutions, projects—defines the type of responsibility that we will have to consider and the nature of the demands to which we must respond.\textsuperscript{80}

However, how can we find out what type of relation implies what type of responsibility? In order to do so, both theorists explore different venues. Young insists on analyzing and taking into account the position of the moral agent, in terms of power, resources, and capacities to contribute to social change and to redress injustice.\textsuperscript{81} For a feminist ethic of responsibility this is obviously a very important principle. Positions of power, within the movement and within organizations, imply access to resources, and therefore a privileged position to address situations of injustice within the movement. They should therefore also lead to a greater responsibility to do so. An example might be, in Quebec, the way that the province-wide federation for women’s rights (the FFQ) took responsibility for carrying out a survey of racialized women’s positions (their share and their status as officers or volunteers and the according salaries) within feminist organizations in the province. On the basis of this survey the federation suggested giving priority to racialized women in hiring processes in feminist organizations.

Joan Tronto provides another perspective on how to decide what type of relationship leads to what type of responsibility, which can complement Young’s proposal and help delineate a feminist ethic of responsibility. She proposes to “measure” responsibility by evaluating the harm done by irresponsibility. Indeed, she notes: “From a relational approach, it is not simply the agent’s voluntarism, or the strength of the causal chain, but the consequence of acting irresponsibly that determines the degree of harm that comes from irresponsibility. Some elements become more important in assessing the harm of irresponsibility. For example, the imbalances of power in relationships.”\textsuperscript{82} Assessing the nature of a relationship, and its concomitant responsibility, through the notion of the harm done by irresponsibility in the context of such a relationship draws attention to the fact that it is the
quality of the relationship that produces a moral obligation, not the formalistic nature of this relationship. Tronto here takes an example from Marilyn Friedman: kinship in itself may not entail responsibility; the quality of the relationship with a family member will determine the type of responsibility brought about by kinship. Of course, power impacts the quality of the relationship, in particular because it means that some actions might have different consequences for both parties to the relationship. The Islamic veil is a good example. Feminist discourses in favor of veiling bans claim to represent the interests of all women, thereby creating a moral relationship between them. Nevertheless, when non-Muslim women favor a ban on Muslim headscarves, they will not bear the direct consequences of their action, while Muslim women will. Hence, the harm that irresponsibility brings with our actions is an important guide, in that it is also an indication of the quality of the relationship. In particular, for Tronto, it indicates the power imbalances that structure this relation. Power brings privilege and the possibility of irresponsibility.

A Feminist Ethic of Responsibility: Caring for Feminist Subjects

Now, thinking about the quality of the relationship and the harm done by irresponsibility, and bringing this discussion back to the question of a feminist ethic of responsibility, I argue that we need to complement the accounts proposed by Iris Young and Joan Tronto if we want to characterize what in the nature of the feminist project creates a relationship, the nature of this relationship, and the responsibilities it entails. Critics of the relational account of responsibility argue that we do not choose the relationships we are drawn into, or at least most of them, especially those that connect us to distant others, such as markets, institutions, or national communities. This critique does not hold for the responsibilities that arise from our commitment to feminism. We choose to give an account of ourselves as feminists—and indeed many people choose not to do so. There is here a commitment not only to a political ideal, but also to the political community that may embody this ideal. By claiming to speak in the name of women, we might imagine that we are representing all women, and that the political relationship that defines our feminist commitment is one of political representation. Thus, the claim to speak “in the name of women” does carry some political and
moral responsibility. Indeed, imagining oneself as representing other women is, to a certain extent, to make a promise to care about other women. The promise to care can manifest itself in weak ways, such as feeling affected by other women’s plight, reacting to their pain, or voicing concern about them. It can take a deeper form if I see myself as representing the interests of other women; I need then to take an interest in their lives, and I make a promise that I will represent them—their identities and their interests. Hence, understood as a classic relationship of political representation, feminism already carries moral responsibilities to care about other women.

However, this conception of feminism—as producing relationships of political representation that would entail specific types of responsibilities, similar to those of a spokesperson or a political representative—is, I think, inadequate, both to describe the reality of the political community created by the feminist project, and to reflect on the type of moral relationships feminism gives rise to. While this conception may capture some types of feminist activism, especially in its encounter with institutions, bureaucracies, and international organizations, it does not apprehend the experiences of the grassroots feminist activists I encountered, nor the subjectivities and moral relations described in many well-known feminist narratives retracing solidarity and conflicts among feminists. I have argued that to give an account of oneself as a feminist is the result of a process of political subjectivation, which entails deep moral and political connections, both to the subject herself—identifying as a feminist, adhering to a set of beliefs and transforming one’s subjectivity according to them—and to the collective subject, the political community, created by feminism. The emotional attachment to feminism as a collective political project that I have described thoroughly in the preceding chapters suggests a specific quality of the relationship that feminists may entertain with feminism as a collective project, and with the political community that may embody it in the context in which they are situated. This quality is not adequately expressed by the understanding of this relationship as one of political representation. In claiming to speak in the name of women, or in adhering to feminism as a political community, I make a promise, a promise not only to care about other women, but also to care about other feminists, to care about the political community that defines itself through this project.

Relational accounts of morality distinguish relationships, and the moral obligations they give rise to, depending on their nature. Not all relations will imply moral obligations. Soran Reader cites various grounds for relationships
that give rise to moral obligations: presence (if some stranger collapses in front of me, I shall help), biology (as creating kinship), history (intertwining of lives over time), practices, environment, institutions, play, and conversation all provide grounds of different nature for different moral obligations. Reader also cites “shared projects” among the relationships creating some type of moral obligation. Feminism can be understood as a shared project, giving rise to moral obligations for its participants. How does a political community such as feminism qualify in specific ways the relationships among its members, and what are the responsibilities it may give rise to? While history and historical legacies, such as those of colonialism or historical feminist struggles, certainly qualify the relationships that feminists may sustain among themselves, the promise that binds them, the promise to care about feminism as a collective project, also gives to these relationships a specific quality. Hence, following Tronto, we must define the quality of the relationship that defines moral obligation. I argue that, with respect to feminists, it is the promise, a promise to care for other feminists as equals and for the collective project of feminism, that binds this political community together and that obligates feminists toward one another. Any discussion among feminists inevitably revolves around not only the right strategies to achieve specific goals, or the rights goods or ends to fight for (sexual safety or sexual freedom, equality or autonomy, etc.), but also the future of the feminist project. Feminists voice a care for the future of their project, which denotes or expresses the quality of feminism as a political community. This community is an exercise in political imagination. It can stretch to the size of the globe, but it is also always embodied in the very concrete relationships that feminists sustain among themselves in a specific context. Most importantly, this community matters for feminists, and connects them.

Caring for the feminist project is also expressed in the dismay, trouble, bitterness, or sorrow expressed by those feminists who feel that feminism is in peril, or that their political community, and the project it embodied, has disappeared. Hence the emotional attachment to feminism that I have described in the preceding chapters suggest that giving an account of oneself as a feminist is to claim to be part of a political community, to acknowledge that feminism matters to one’s life, and, subsequently, to make a promise that one will care about this community. Of course, as I have shown, who is supposed to be included in this community in practice, who can legitimately embody the feminist subject, is a site of conflicts and competing moral evaluations. Nevertheless, aside from these conflicts—to which I will
return promptly—there is a common drive, what de Lauretis called “the ethical drive in feminism,” to be recognized by others as a feminist and to recognize them as such. From this drive a relationship is constituted, which entails responsibilities: first and foremost the responsibility to care, not only for women, but also, and more importantly, for other feminists. I cannot decide in advance who will be part of this community, and I am morally obliged toward those whose claims relate them to me through feminism.

Is this care the one described by care theorists? I would like to defend the idea that the care that we can place at the center of a feminist ethic of responsibility has a strong family resemblance with the care that is traditionally the object of care theorists’ reflections. Tronto defines the values of caring as attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, and meeting others’ needs. In the context of feminism as the relationship that binds together a political community, attentiveness and responsibility certainly should be part of a feminist ethics. Nurturance and compassion may invoke sorority-like images that have been, for good reasons, criticized as the wrong metaphors to define relationships among feminists, metaphors which have erased power asymmetries within feminist communities. For Tronto, because an ethic of care should be attentive to particularity, it does not posit a “false sense of community or of identity among people within a community,” so that nurturing and compassion do not imply an emphasis on commonality over differences. However, attentiveness to particularity is difficult to enact in the context of relations defined by a common political project such as feminism, because these relations are, more often than not, relations with distant others, and the particularity of their situation will not always be properly grasped. What is more, defining a feminist ethic of responsibility as centered on compassion may miss the very political nature of the feminist project. Linda Zerilli has proposed a useful distinction—drawn from Hannah Arendt’s critique of the displacement of the political by the social—between feminism as a project of taking care of a social question (i.e., meeting women’s needs) and feminism articulated as a political community, which is the product of a world-building activity. While compassion may certainly be, in certain contexts, a moral force engaged in the building of a political community, I argue that it may not be the case for a feminist ethics. Feminism as a political project should not be defined around meeting needs, but rather should be defined from the perspective of the community it aims to create, the transformation it may bring to our lives.
How could this be translated in moral terms? I draw here a connection between Joan Tronto and Veena Das that can help specify the contours of a feminist ethic of responsibility. Indeed, Tronto comments that “caring requires that one starts from the standpoint of the one needing care or attention. It requires that we meet the other morally, adopt that person’s, or group’s, perspective and look at the world in those terms.” The question of adopting a person’s or group’s perspective, or meeting it halfway, has been discussed when I elaborated on the notion of “enlarged mentality.” It is often presented as an exercise of imagination, a demand to change one’s subjectivity. This subjective account is challenged by an analysis made by Soraya. She remarks about the FFQ, of which she is a member:

I am at pains to see more diversity than in this organization, but it does not mean that it translates into [changes in how the organization addresses racial issues] . . . The members have not integrated, in their institutions, in their . . . practices. There is great resistance and a big emotional charge linked to this idea that we are trying to make them feel guilty, that they have no lesson to learn from anybody. . . . They refuse the political consciousness that the movement is proposing to them, especially when it comes to Muslim women who continue to feel attachment to their culture of origin, their religion, their headscarf, etc.

Here we find several elements already discussed in previous chapters: the interweaving of political, moral, and emotional issues when it comes to defining the parameters of who should be included in the feminist project, and the perpetuation of white ignorance thanks to a posture of moral superiority, articulated with a rejection of responsibility through a rejection of guilt. Notable in this quotation is the nature of Soraya’s demand to white feminists who resist their own organization’s attempts to elaborate an inclusive discourse. She is critical about white feminists’ refusal to include, or to adopt, a certain political consciousness. She is not looking for compassion or for her needs to be understood. Rather, it is the very political nature of her claims, as claims that could foster and found a political community inclusive of Muslim women, that she wants to be heard and adopted by white feminists. In that sense, she is asking for what Veena Das describes as the ethical activity of “creating a space of possibility for the other.” I interpret Soraya’s words as a call to include in the life of the feminist political community “some aspects of the life of the other.” What is more, this space of possibility for the other
is one in which that other is considered an equal, a space that creates equal relationships, as Soraya’s rejection of the idea, latter in her interview, that she could join the “common table” as a “little sister” clearly states.

Creating this “space of possibility” should therefore be an important element of a feminist ethic of responsibility, one of the ethical activities through which caring for feminism as a political project and a political community is enacted, a way to make the promise that Hannah Arendt deems necessary for a political community to be constituted.

Caring for Women / Caring for Feminist Subjects: A Feminist Politics of Emotions

Thinking about a feminist ethic of responsibility as a moral obligation to create this space of possibility for the other in the political community created by feminism enables us to draw a distinction between a feminist ethic as caring for other women, and as caring for potential feminist subjects. This distinction encourages us, I contend, to critically examine common feminist politics of emotions, and to nurture specific emotions and moral dispositions. When discussing feminist whiteness in chapter 4, I contrasted the attitudes of some white feminist volunteers in women’s rights organizations toward racialized women when the latter are considered as benevolent objects of care, and when they are considered as potential feminist subjects. The distinction I want to draw now, from an ethical point of view, between caring for other women and caring for other feminists as members of a political community elaborates on the distinction between these two different moral dispositions. Indeed, I argue that caring for other women, a moral disposition that is prevalent in the relationship that many (white) feminist volunteers and activists create with women who benefit from the services of their organization, may prove misguided. Indeed, more often than not, that caring does not take into account that the women that feminists intend to care about are distant others who look like them, to borrow Joan Tronto’s words: the distance and the power asymmetries that structure the relationship with them tend to be ignored in the very name of the care that feminists want to express. Hence, distant “othered” women are made to embody specific qualities, often revolving around their need for help and vulnerability, that reproduce power asymmetries, as well as the injunction for the powerless to address the powerful in the terms set by the latter.
Caring for other women who are in fact more often than not distant others is a perilous exercise in some contexts: for example, when feminists do not know enough about the context of these distant others’ lives and moral concerns, or when they may have difficulty in discerning the terms in which the powerless express their claims, because the powerless might not have a recognized voice or access to public discourse. What is more, the emotions that sustain the moral disposition to care for distant other women may prove misguidedly for critical and reflexive feminist politics. Postcolonial feminist theorists have largely documented and criticized the posture of benevolence and the emotions that sustain it as deeply embedded in postcolonial representations of the “Other.” Indeed, distant others are imagined, rather than encountered, and emotions such as compassion and benevolence, not rooted in actual relations, may evaporate if and when distant others reveal themselves to be different from the “good” subject that was imagined.

The ability to properly care for other women, as a specific feminist moral responsibility, will therefore depend both on distance and on the capacity of feminists to reflect upon power asymmetries. This is evident when comparing the discourses of feminists who work in grassroots organizations that provide services to women and feminists who do mostly lobbying work and are more remote from the field. Indeed, feminists who, through their volunteering or work, actually encounter racialized and othered women display a texture of attentiveness to the context of the women they encounter that leads them to moral reasonings that are much more complex. They evaluate their own political beliefs in the light of the concrete situations of, for example, young girls asking for a certificate of virginity in order to satisfy their family’s inquiries or to be able to marry when in fact they are not virgins. In these instances of concrete encounters, feminists can care more appropriately in feminist terms because the distance has been reduced and a singular voice has been heard. What is more, the professional ethos of feminist volunteers and workers is also often characterized by a commitment to respect a woman’s choice. This ethical attitude can avoid, to a certain extent, reproducing power asymmetries.

However, to adequately care in these feminist interventions, one would also need to critically and systematically engage with whiteness in order to contribute to disestablish hierarchies. These moral dispositions that do enact a certain form of care within a relationship of service to women contrast with the discourses of feminist activists who have much fewer opportunities to encounter distant others. In the context of this type of lobbying, claims
to care for other women may display the pitfalls I have described—that is, relying on certain accounts that better fit their moral views, such as that of “oppressed Muslim women,” instead of relying on more complex accounts of distant others’ forms of life to elaborate their judgments. Feminists may then end up “caring” for other women by ignoring their moral perspectives altogether.

Another point that makes caring for other women an inadequate principle for a feminist ethic of responsibility is that it does reiterate a foundationalist perspective about feminism, reinscribing the subject of feminism in a shared identity, women. Defining a feminist ethic of responsibility as caring for women thus fails to take into account the call to remain critical about identity categories and their exclusionary effects.

For all these reasons, I argue in favor of shifting our moral focus away from caring for other women as the basis for a feminist ethic of responsibility. However, by critiquing the moral disposition of caring for women as central to a feminist ethics and to feminists’ political subjectivations, I do not want to suggest that feminists should be disengaged from other women. Especially with respect to privileged feminists, this would amount to a form of moral irresponsibility. However, I want to emphasize that in the case of feminism, caring must be specified and nuanced. It cannot be about meeting what are perceived to be the needs of other women, and it must be able to acknowledge that often women are distant others. The very category that is the object of care, women—perceived as distant others who look like us—must also always be critically appraised. Hence, I would rather scale down, in the case of a feminist ethics, the substantial content of care toward other women, defining it as a form of attention, interest, and responsibility toward other women (but not exclusively women), rather than as an ability to adopt other women’s perspectives and to meet their needs.

More importantly, I argue that the subject of attention for a feminist ethic of responsibility should not be first and foremost women, but rather other feminist subjects: those who give an account of themselves as such and claim their rights to participate equally in this political community, and those who we imagine could do so as well, those who are put in relation with us through feminism. Articulating the political and the ethical in the framework of feminism, I argue that creating a space of possibility for the other, within the political community created by feminism, is the appropriate way to care about other feminists, and a defining principle for a feminist ethic of responsibility that takes into account power asymmetries. Indeed, creating a space of possibility
does not imply that I can see the world from the other’s perspective. Rather, it is about finding room within one’s own moral and political space to accommodate the other’s perspectives and discourses, all the more so if the other is less privileged. Such a form of care, geared toward other feminists rather than other women, opens up a space for political action, without the need to found the feminist project on an identity category. I thus argue that we must distinguish between the responsibility that feminists must assume when they claim to politically represent women’s needs and interests (a duty for attentiveness and interest, and a responsibility to take into account power asymmetries and the limits of one’s ability to meet distant others’ needs), and the feminist ethic of responsibility that must preside over their relationships with other feminist subjects, and which aims at creating a space of possibility for these others within the feminist political community. I also argue that a political and moral focus on the first type of responsibility should be replaced by a focus on the second type of moral responsibility I have defined.

That the ethic of feminism is primarily oriented toward other feminists, understood as those women who are, in a certain context, at a certain time, put in relation with feminism and feminist claims, is beautifully illustrated by the name of a coalition in Turkey between LGBT feminists and religious Muslim women that formed in 2010 and is recounted by Eirini Avramopoulou. Indeed, this context-based coalition, which stretched way beyond the usual feminist politics to encompass pious Muslim women who did not define themselves as feminists, but considered themselves to be victims of state patriarchy, and radical feminist and LGBT groups, called itself We Care about One Another. Most of the coalition’s effort was then geared toward finding, in a pragmatic fashion, the right way to care for one another across the divide of political positions and religious identifications.95

I also illustrate the idea that a feminist ethic of responsibility is oriented toward caring for other feminist subjects/subjects put in relation with/by feminism with the question of abandonment. Reflecting upon the type of moral harm that results from irresponsibility, Tronto cites abandonment as maybe the worst possible moral harm, because it terminates the relationship without any possibility for the other party to negotiate its terms. The harm of abandonment is also an indication of the power imbalance in the relationship because abandonment is often decided upon by the most powerful in the relationship. I identify a moral regret resulting from having performed such a harm of abandonment in the following quote, again from Soraya. Reflecting on the stance taken by the umbrella organization for women’s rights in the
province, the FFQ—an organization she is a member of—opposing use of the niqab (full veil) in public offices or public services, but supporting the freedom to wear the headscarf, she states:

You know, for many Muslim women, we feel that in the end we allied with a position, we sacrificed the girls wearing the niqab. We willingly sacrificed them for the greater cause, the greater good, but in the end, it’s a lot of effort for not much.

Here the idea that some women have been sacrificed in the name of a greater cause—feminism—suggests that, in fact, in the name of feminism the harm of abandonment has been perpetrated. Women wearing the niqab have been abandoned, excluded from the feminist promise insofar as they have been considered as impossible feminist subjects, incapable of embodying the feminist community, of being part of that political project. This exclusion is abandonment because Soraya feels that, as feminists, they should have cared for niqab-wearing women. This care, the moral relation that is expressed through this feeling of moral wrong, is not linked to a specific, concrete social relationship with these women. They are “distant others,” to use Tronto’s vocabulary, and Soraya does not illustrate her feeling of moral wrong with specific cases of women she knows. However, she feels she should have cared more, because her promise to care for feminism as a political project should have made her care for those women, I argue, as possible feminist subjects, as women put in relation with her through feminist claims about Islamic veiling. By feeling a sense of moral failure, she manifests that there is indeed a relationship that binds her to these women, and that relationship is, I argue, feminism.

Just as I argued that Islamic veiling debates have reconfigured the moral and political features of feminist whiteness, these debates have put Muslim women in relation with feminists because claims have been made about them in the name of feminism. Being enrolled as subjects of feminist discourses, Muslim women become part of the moral horizon of feminism, and feminists thus carry a moral responsibility toward them. The abandonment of specific groups of Muslim women in both contexts (women wearing the niqab in Quebec, women wearing the full veil but also the Islamic headscarf in France) is therefore not only a political wrong—testifying to the lack of intersectional analysis of some feminists, their active ignorance of racism and Islamophobia and of their material consequences for Muslim women—but
also a moral wrong. Indeed, both from the perspective of the consequences of this irresponsibility (the impossibility for these women to go to public school or become civil servants or just find a job) and from the point of view of the relationships that the feminist project is based upon, the support for veiling bans has enacted a form of abandonment.

Our moral responsibility increases with the specificity or the proximity of our relationships. The quality of the relationship matters to explore what type of moral obligations it may give rise to. I argue that in the case of feminism, these moral responsibilities exist because we share a common political project, not because we share a common identity. In this perspective, we may not so much have to care specifically about women as women but to care about women, or any other subjects, as possible or actual feminist subjects, subjects put in relation with us through feminism. Not only should we desire a responsibility toward other women and other subjects of feminist attention for the sake of our political goal (to be an inclusive feminist movement, to be true to the political ambitions that animate this political community that claims to represent women), but we should also acknowledge that claiming to be a feminist, claiming to be part of this project, endows us with a specific moral responsibility, an attentiveness toward the other subjects who are part of this project or enrolled in it by feminist discourses.

This moral responsibility is not equally distributed among feminists. The preceding explorations into theories of moral responsibility and care have provided ample moral justifications of why asymmetries of power in relationships matter for moral responsibilities. A feminist ethic of responsibility must therefore consider the sets of harms that are produced by power asymmetries within relationships of responsibility. It must be not only attentive to, but also critical of, epistemologies of ignorance that characterize whiteness, and assess the consequences of feminist claims with respect to these power asymmetries. Are my feminist claims reinforcing and exploiting asymmetries? Or are they contributing to discursively undermining these asymmetries? One of the most important consequences of this approach is also that the powerless, or the one who is vulnerable, should not have to appeal to the powerful in the terms that they have had the power to set and impose. This assumption should certainly be part of a feminist ethic of responsibility and amounts to acknowledging responsibility in structures of power and agreeing on the importance of these structures within the feminist political community.
The project of caring for other subjects will, I argue, be based on other types of emotion than benevolence and compassion. Indeed, in the affective politics of caring for distant others, compassion is central. In a context of abstract relations, I will be moved to act, to claim a relation with a distant other, because I witness his or her suffering, a suffering with which I may identify. Caring for feminist subjects will entail other types of emotions, better captured by the affective politics of love. Let’s recall the words of Mani, a South-Asian feminist activist from Montreal. Addressing white Quebecois feminists, she exclaimed: “You have to accept that we are here, and you have to love us. Otherwise it’s not gonna work. You cannot just tolerate us!” Her injunction to go beyond tolerance, benevolence, and compassion recalls Jennifer Nash’s analysis of second-wave Black feminism’s “radical ethic of care.” Indeed, she argues that love for other Black women, as erotic, sexual, and nonsexual, was a powerful dimension of Black feminist politics, necessary to create and imagine a public sphere in which Black feminism could appear, as an affective community that provides a space to redress harms. In a similar vein, Mani’s call for love is a call to challenge the usual affective politics that structure white feminists’ relations to racialized feminists, a radical call to envision new forms of political and moral relations. Redirecting powerful emotional drives that are usually put in the service of claims to abstract relations with distant others might therefore be a crucial step in forging a feminist ethic of responsibility based on concrete relations with other feminists.

I have so far drawn the contours of a feminist ethic of responsibility that arises from our commitment to the feminist project as a project to create and sustain a political community. The drive that manifests itself in this ethic of responsibility is one of caring for this political community. Moral qualities that make this caring possible are attentiveness, responsibility (understood as a responsibility to act that varies depending on power asymmetries), and the practice of creating a space of possibility for others in this community. However, beyond the moral qualities that such an ethic presupposes, how can this ethic manifest itself? How do these concepts take life in the context of feminist activism? Inspired by the ethic of care, the feminist ethic of responsibility that I propose is a pragmatist ethic. I argue that we must focus on the consequences of our actions to reevaluate the moral quality of our intentions. Because a feminist ethic of responsibility is attentive to the political context in which it is enunciated, it must take into account the consequences of the judgments and actions that I propose to make. Acknowledging the
pragmatist nature of this ethic helps us see how what have been perceived as feminist dilemmas may in fact be approached through an analysis of the consequences of the actions and policies that are proposed, thereby breaking with feminist moral evaluations centered around values such as freedom or autonomy.

Pragmatism and Feminist Responsibility

Applying a feminist ethic of responsibility to navigate issues such as debates on Islamic veiling (but sex work is another domain to which we could apply such an ethic) means being guided by the responsibility to care for the feminist political community and creating a space of possibilities for others, including those so far considered by some as “bad” feminist subjects. Such an ethic is fundamentally grounded in a particular context, addressing particular problems, and it cannot rely only on abstract principles and values to guide actions. Indeed, more often than not, relying on abstract principles in a decision will in fact privilege those who are already privileged. Embedded in relations of responsibilities, a feminist ethic of responsibility is therefore contextual. I cannot rely on abstract values such as autonomy, freedom, or emancipation to guide my actions and shape my relationships of responsibility. Instead, to enact a feminist ethic of responsibility, I must take into consideration the consequences of my actions, because I cannot separate the moral impulse I wish to act upon from its concrete consequences. My decisions on how to respond to claims made by others upon me as a feminist will have to take into account the context in which these claims are made, and in particular the positions of power or disempowerment from where they are enunciated.

In the context of Islamic veiling debates, the question of the position of disempowerment at the intersection of race, religion, and gender would therefore pragmatically shape my response. While, as I documented in previous chapters, some French feminists, white and nonwhite, took a stand based on abstract principles—gender equality, secularism, female emancipation—that promoted the strict regulation or ban of forms of Islamic veiling, the context-based analysis of many feminist organizations in Quebec put at the center of the analysis, and of the decision, the impact that these policies would have on pious Muslim women. From that standpoint, a feminist ethic of responsibility demanded that restrictive policies be opposed, even while
some Quebecois feminists may have found that veiling was a patriarchal practice. Typically, here, we can see how—without entering the moral and political arguments that have characterized sexularism debates of whether religious practices such as (full) veiling are incompatible with agency or gender equality—an approach inspired by theories of care will first point to the need to address this issue from the point of view of the consequences that Muslim women, made vulnerable by potential bans on their practices, will bear. Placing the concrete needs and interests of those who are multiply marginalized at the center of the decision therefore responds to an imperative both to contextualize a moral judgment and to act upon asymmetries of power. Such a principle can therefore prove particularly helpful in debating intersectional issues.

Taking into account the needs and interests of others—in particular those who are disempowered in the context in which I am making a judgment—implies, I claim, that I engage in moral practices that are embedded in pragmatism. This is not pragmatism understood as a moral order defined by necessity instead of values, but pragmatism in its philosophical sense, as the art of evaluating morally the consequences of our actions. Because it makes the consequences of our actions as a central guide to define what is ethical and what is not, pragmatism proposes a conception of responsibility that is both political and moral, and is therefore suitable for a feminist ethic. In order to delineate types of ethical practices that can adequately enact forms of care for distant others—women or feminists or both—I take inspiration here from pragmatist environmental philosopher Emilie Hache. Indeed, in her exploration of the moral responsibilities that fall on us as we are relationally connected to the environment, and of how we can adequately respond to the calls that our environment is making, she suggests two types of moral practices that, I argue, can also orient a feminist ethic of responsibility. The first one consists in putting our ends (and values) in relation. The second enjoins us to rely on concrete experience to elaborate our moral responses.

A first important moral practice that will help me to sustain a feminist ethic of care for others is, following Hache’s insight, that of relating the moral values that animate our commitment to feminism with other values. This means putting feminist values—such as autonomy or equality—in relation with other moral values that might be important for others in a given context. Putting in relation these moral ends is a way to try to care for them, rather than introducing a hierarchy of values and moral ends or instrumentalizing one value to promote another one. In the context of sexularism debates, such
an ethical practice of putting moral ends in relation would, for example, draw attention to the fact that we should promote both gender equality and antiracism, avoiding the instrumentalization of gender equality in favor of nationalism and Islamophobia. It would also mean combining the goal of caring for disempowered pious Muslim women and girls and the goal of protecting secularism or gender equality, rather than opposing them. Lastly, it could mean putting the goal of respecting secularism in perspective with veiled Muslim girls’ right to education or pious Muslim women’s right to work, including in public services.

Such an exercise of putting our ends in relation to one another exposes us to a risk, that of discovering that our values, what we value, may not be equally valued by others. However, the fear that our values will be marginalized by others’ values (such as gender equality being marginalized by religious freedom or by the right to education) should not lead us to refuse this risk and impose our ends as superior to others’ ends. While I value my attachment to feminism, I cannot impose on others that they be attached in similar ways and with the same intensity to this political community. Hence, a pragmatist feminist ethic here requires that I put my commitment in perspective with that of others. I cannot ask others to share my values in the same ways as a prerequisite to enter the conversation, or their values might never be considered in my exercise of moral judgment. On the contrary, I must put my ends in perspective with those of others so that they may feel part of my project as well, so that I may interest them in sharing my values. Such an ethic would, for example, discourage Quebecois feminists from asking for gender equality to be enshrined as a more important right than the right to religious freedom in the Quebecois Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Creating a space of possibility for others in the feminist project, especially those others who have been often presented as “bad” feminist subjects, thus entails that I put my claims in relation with theirs. Such an exercise of putting my ends in relations with other ends—and other people—will certainly encourage me to make compromises. Here Hache understands making compromises not as sacrificing one’s moral values, but rather as the result of treating well the others who are part of my project, who are involved in the problem I seek to address. Acknowledging relationality means that I will have to accept being morally engaged with others, and this cannot happen on my moral grounds only; I must leave room for the moral ends of others. To care well about others, to create a space for them, I will have to make
compromises. Otherwise I will have imposed on them my moral ends and values as a prerequisite for our being in relation.

A second ethical practice identified by Emilie Hache, and which can apply to a feminist ethic of responsibility, is that of relying on others’ experiences to elaborate our moral response. While Iris Young and to a certain extent Linda Zerilli consider the capacity for enlarged thought as crucial for communicative ethics or feminist practice, this capacity relies mostly on moral imagination or wonder—or, for Zerilli, on the ability to make judgment, because I can thus take the point of view of others. Hence, both emphasize a supposed ability to imagine, envision, or adopt others’ viewpoints. Such a call to adopt others’ standpoints is always fraught with risks and limits. Young identifies these in the asymmetry that characterizes social relationships and thus insists that we can only meet others’ viewpoints “halfway.” Here, Hache’s proposal is to focus on experiences rather than viewpoints. What we should strive for is not to try to put ourselves in the shoes of others, trying to imagine or feel what others feel, but rather to make space for their experience—which remains, singularly, theirs and only theirs—in my moral and political space. Rather than projecting myself onto others to try to share their viewpoint, I must open up my moral space and judgment to the narratives of their experiences. This act implies a form of copresence, a sharing of moral space, and therefore an acknowledgment of common ground. Such an ethical practice radically shifts the grounds of our moral inquiry. Indeed, for example, as a white secular feminist, or as a liberal or critical feminist theorist, instead of reflecting upon how pious Muslim women may be attached to their religious beliefs, and trying to reconstruct their moral perspective from this attachment that I do not share, I should rather include in my moral space and moral inquiry their concrete experiences, such as the experience of being expelled from school, or being discriminated against on the job market, or harboring resentment and feeling betrayed by fellow citizens. When I make these experiences available and present in my moral space, I agree to share the space that harbors my moral universe, my form of life, with the narratives and experiences of others. The sharing of this space will make me morally responsive—to the pain and suffering of others or to their joy—and therefore in a better position to respond adequately to the moral claims that have been addressed to me.

I add to these two ethical practices described by Hache, putting ends in relation and taking into account experiences, a third ethical practice that
I believe should be central to a feminist ethic. This practice is that of translating. Indeed, while feminist philosophers have insisted on our need to see the world from others’ points of view, such an endeavor is based on the premise that my moral imagination or my ability for judgment—carried on through conversation and argument with others—will lead me to understand their moral viewpoint. For Iris Young, communicative ethics—if it takes into account the various practices she recommends, such as greetings and the affirmative use of rhetoric—should lead me to understand and morally respect the point of view of others, leading to deeper forms of agreements. For Linda Zerilli, arguing about my political claims with others, using persuasion to make them see the world from my viewpoint, and being persuaded by some others in similar ways will provide me with an ability to judge, to adopt different viewpoints on an object or on the world. I argue that the risk of both ethical practices proposed is that of promoting only a limited and partial understanding of others’ viewpoints and morality. Young’s communicative ethics might be appropriate to foster an inclusive democracy with a deeper form of deliberation, as she suggests, but will not be sufficient to enroll new and old subjects in a political community that wishes to transform the world. I need more than exposure to others’ narratives to engage with them in a project of creating or sustaining a political community. As I stated earlier, I need to care for them as well. In the case of Zerilli’s argument, the risk of founding a political community on unending discussion and persuasive arguments is that debates may never end, and I might never be convinced by others’ viewpoints. I may be insensible to their persuasive rhetoric because I do not wish to put my ends in relation with them. While Zerilli argues that an argument has force because it makes us “see” things differently, I may resist and stay blind. I may feel that compromising, for example, about what I believe “gender equality” should mean would endanger my claims, my convictions, and my very identity as a feminist. As I have documented, some white feminists are not persuaded by the arguments put forth by racialized or Muslim feminists, because those arguments seem to contradict radically what they have learned to believe is right for feminism, and therefore call into question their whole narrative of themselves as feminists committed to care for women.

For these reasons, I argue that we must also learn to translate others’ claims into claims that are recognizable for us and that will enroll us in others’ projects. I borrow here the term “translation” from Bruno Latour,
who uses it to describe the process that creates communities (of humans and nonhumans): by translating the claims of a group or community, I try to enroll others in my group.\textsuperscript{107} Hence, translating is a way to put in relation different actors, and will always imply also some transformation of my claim. I give here an example from Quebec that illustrates how claims can be translated. The commitment of the Quebecois federation of women (FFQ) to adopt a more intersectional perspective in its political agenda led its executive officers in the early 2010s to push for prioritizing claims in favor of migrant women in the FFQ’s program. However, the FFQ also wanted its base, which is not composed of a majority of migrant women, to support the inclusion of the question of the official recognition of foreign diplomas (an important policy for migrant women trying to access the Quebecois job market) as a top priority. In order to do so, the FFQ practiced a form of translation. It put this claim in relation to other, more traditional, Quebecois feminist claims about access to financial autonomy and work outside of the home. Translating is important because it extends common ground between feminists and enrolls other feminists in my project. Finding connections in claims, translating them so that they echo previous struggles and speak to the moral and political universe of a diverse community of feminism can foster inclusion and create more space of possibilities for others.\textsuperscript{108} It can help us redirect and transform emotions usually put in the service of claiming to speak for distant others—such as compassion and benevolence—into a more radical and critical affective politics, based on care.

\textbf{***}

In this chapter I have argued that debates and conflicts about forms of Islamic veiling require that we rethink the question of the moral ground of the feminist subject, and I have sought to reconceptualize political and moral relations among feminists so as to acknowledge relational responsibilities between feminists as well as power differentials in order to delineate the moral relations that can sustain a collective project. While coalition is often presented as the right way to embody feminism so as to preserve the possibility of a collective project while acknowledging structural differences between women, I have argued that coalition cannot “solve” the question of differences and power asymmetries within feminism, because feminists need to desire coalition in the first place—that is, they must feel morally obliged to enter into coalition with other feminists’ subjects and emotionally invested
in doing so. I have argued that discourses that sustain feminist whiteness and depict certain racialized women or racialized feminists as “bad” feminist subjects prevent such a moral responsibility from materializing in the political subjectivities of many white feminists. Hence, to disestablish feminist whiteness and to provide ways to think, reformulate, and imagine feminism as an inclusive political community, I have proposed to explore the moral relations that feminism must create between the participants in its community, and the types of responsibilities these imply.

Feminists’ political subjectivations, the fact of giving an account of oneself as a feminist, cannot be reduced to a set of sociological identities or to social positions. While acknowledging structural inequalities based on race or religion, and ensuring the full participation of racialized women in feminist organizations should be a central goal of the movement, this goal cannot suffice. Racialized feminists’ discourses, in particular those about coalitions with white feminists, express moral demands that go beyond their formal inclusion or the representation of their interests. They ask for the acknowledgment by white feminists that they share common moral ground. Doing so, they posit that they are in relation with white feminists, and that these relations imply specific moral responsibilities. Relying on this insight, I have identified the moral impulse, the ethical drive within feminism, as one of being recognized by other feminists as sharing common ground. Such a drive means recognizing relationality and the moral responsibilities it creates for feminists. Those responsibilities vary depending on the position of privilege or disempowerment feminists occupy. Drawing on the ethic of care and on philosophical pragmatism, I have formulated a feminist ethic of responsibility that, I argue, is at the heart of the feminist project. This ethic is based on the recognition of power asymmetries and on the responsibility to care for other feminist subjects, defined as those subjects who make claims in the name of feminism, but also those who are put in relation with feminism through their claims—such as a claim to wear an Islamic veil in school or public spaces. Rather than a project to represent other women, feminism is therefore a project to care for those who could be part of this political community, who are put in relation with it through their claims or the claims that are made about them in the name of feminism.

The different ethical practices I have proposed as central to characterizing a feminist ethic of responsibility—putting ends in relation, taking into account experience, and translating—all aim at creating a space of possibility
for others in the moral and political project that defines itself as feminism. They foster what Cristina Beltrán call an “ethos of non-closure” for this political subject.\textsuperscript{109} These practices are meant to enact the broader moral endeavor of a feminist ethic of responsibility; that is, the moral obligation to recognize relationality with those subjects who make claims that put them in relation with feminism—self-identified feminist or potential feminist subjects—and to create a space of possibility for them in this political community. Importantly, I cannot choose or know in advance who will be part of my community. Claims to appropriate feminism, or to embody it in the “right” way, cannot sustain feminism as a political community and must therefore always be critically assessed. What is more, this community is of course defined by equality: I must recognize that those that may be enrolled in my claims can speak back to me. They are therefore equal interlocutors in this project, and feminism as a political community defines a space of moral and political equality.\textsuperscript{110}

I argue that such an approach shifts the focus away from the who question, or the subject question in feminism: who can claim to be a feminist—and a “good” feminist subject—and whether there is a subject (women?) for feminism. Moral inquiries and regulatory discourses about “good” and “bad” subjects become irrelevant because we acknowledge that the political community we seek to create will not be morally “pure” but rather based on compromises and, first and foremost, on our moral responsibility to care for these subjects that are put in relation with us through feminism. Focusing on ethical practices, and rooting them in what I have identified as an ethical drive within feminism that might be shared across power asymmetries, is a way to recognize that disputes over values—autonomy, gender equality, and so on—may not be solved, but that the exclusions that they perform, as they marginalize the identities and interests of some feminist subjects, must be combated. I contend that to struggle against the formation of these excluded domains, we should identify and denounce power asymmetries and racism and we should claim equal participation and representation of multiply marginalized groups. These are crucial tasks and political imperatives. But we must also harness the power of the ethical drive of feminism in order to disestablish whiteness and the resistances and hierarchies it creates. By reformulating feminism as an ethical project that obliges us toward other feminist subjects, I hope we can achieve such a transformation. To do so we must consider feminism also as an ethical commitment, one that means treating other feminists well and treating them equally. Of course, treating the other equally
is never a given. There is no measure by which I can be certain that I have achieved equality when it comes to relations between feminists. While I can evaluate statuses and responsibilities within feminist organizations and aim for just representation of racialized and underrepresented women, treating the other equally requires first acknowledging them as interlocutors.