Chapter 1

Feminist Choices

Feminist Choices: Contemplating the Intricacies of Feminist Spaces

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What are feminist choices? A choice involves both a process of decision-making and a realization that there is more than one way to act or respond, a variety of options to choose from, even if the choice, in turn, leads to inaction—which is also a choice. But what makes a choice, the act of choosing, *feminist*? For me, feminist choices can be either deliberate or unintentional; they can arise in isolation as well as in collaboration with others, forming from within and around ever-changing feminist spaces, constellations, and coalitions. They often arise out of a sense of injustice and in opposition to patriarchal structures, serving as acts of rebellion, and can likewise be completely subtle and seemingly meaningless. They are part of our everyday lives, as Sara

Ahmed argued, and emerge from ordinary life experiences. Feminist choices are as much about making choices from a feminist point of view as they are about navigating the world as a feminist.

While reflecting on feminist choices, including my own, this chapter should not be viewed as an uncritical promotion of Choice Feminism, a form of feminism that emerged from third-wave feminist debates of the previous decade that claim that any decision a woman makes is empowering and justifiable, whether it has to do with employment, childbirth and child rearing, sexual practices, or one's personal lifestyle. Rather, my reflections in this chapter aim to critique notions of individual agency that neglect to acknowledge and understand systemic forms of oppression. Not all choices are available to everyone in the same way, and the same decision could elicit completely different responses and results in diverse contexts.

While I agree that there is no single or right way to live a feminist life and that each individual may choose to forge a different path, I also acknowledge the deep inequities in the societies in which we live; these inequities must not go unnoticed because they often prevent access to certain paths and decision-making processes. Forms of systemic racism, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, sizeism, antisemitism,[1] anti-Muslim, anti-trans, white supremacy, and many other forms of societal prejudices including heteropatriarchy intersect in multiple ways to shape the choices we may and can make. These systems of oppression not only limit access to decision-making processes, but also elicit different responses depending on the situation. In one context, a decision could lead to gratification, comfort, fulfillment, and personal enjoyment; in another context the same decision could lead to confrontation, physical violence, and even murder.

At a time when racist and antisemitic hate crimes are increasing, Indigenous women in Canada are continually reported as missing and murdered, Black trans women are attacked and killed at extremely high rates, and Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color face violence and murder at the hands of the police,[2] it is important to

1 I have chosen to spell "antisemitism" without the hyphen and capital "s" in order to emphasize that the word implies hatred, hostility, or prejudice against Jews rather than against speakers of Semitic languages in general.

2 See, for example, reports on hate crime statistics in Canada (Statistics Canada) and the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation), as well as the Human Rights Campaign's list of transgender and gender-nonconforming people in the United States. The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has also

recognize the potential of intersectional and anti-racist feminism to bring about change. As a result, feminism involves not only confronting the barriers that preclude people from having access to various types of choices, but also attempting to reduce the harm that arises out of deeply ingrained prejudices and systematic forms of oppression. In this way, feminism not only includes the right to individual agency and life choices, but is also a form of political mobilization, "a collective force for change" (Thwaites 59). In making feminist choices, we cannot lose sight of the political or be afraid of it (Ferguson 252). In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Chantelle Moore, and so many others by police in the United States (US), Canada, and other parts of the world, and in light of the protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, feminists and feminist organizations today must work harder to engage in anti-racist activism. After the growing awareness of police violence in the summer of 2020 (which, for many, was not anything new) and the right-wing white supremacist terror that came to the fore at the start of 2021, feminist choices are not just about making lifestyle choices from a feminist point of view or navigating the world as a feminist, they are a call to action. Feminism involves working to dismantle systems of oppression, white supremacy, and white privilege.

A braided essay weaves together different strands to tell a story, intertwining separate narrative voices, stories, or themes. In a meeting in my office a couple of years ago, a graduate student told me about her plans to write a braided narrative and equated it with the act of baking challah bread. For her, the kneading of the dough, separating it into parts, and braiding the strands together was personal, contemplative, physical, artistic, and likely also spiritual.

For me, the act of braiding reminds me of the many times I've had my hair braided, whether it was for a regular day at school as a child, to get

documented the violence faced by Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people in Canada. Since 2015, the *Washington Post* has kept a log of police shootings in the US ("Fatal Force"), demonstrating that Black and Latinx Americans are killed at a disproportionately higher rate.

my hair out of my face before a sporting event, or for a special occasion such as a birth of a child. For me, having someone braid my hair is relaxing, and besides those sessions as a child where I would scream because of the many snarls that had to be combed through first, getting my hair braided was, and typically still is, a fun, soothing, and entertaining event. For me, these hair-braiding sessions represent a feminist space where my sisters and their friends would get together, listen to music, and talk, enjoying the moment while contemplating the world. They were times of storytelling, joking around, and life counselling.

In her memoir *Still Alive*, Ruth Klüger discusses gendered memory as a form of witchcraft and sets up a feminist space around a large cauldron in a kitchen. She writes:

> If I succeed, together with my readers—and perhaps a few men will join us in the kitchen—we could exchange magic formulas like favorite recipes and season to taste the marinade which the old stories and histories offer us, in as much comfort as our witches' kitchen provides. It won't get too cozy, don't worry: where we stir our cauldron, there will be cold and hot currents from half-open windows, unhinged doors, and earthquake-prone walls. (69)

Memory work can be an uncomfortable and difficult process, and, in Klüger's case, by retelling her Holocaust experiences through a feminist lens, she contributes to how and what we, as a society, remember and the ways in which this past informs the present and the future. She invites us to remember together in this feminist space, to listen and react across contexts and generations, and to find strength through those who have come together before us, conjuring up ghosts of the past around the witch's brew with magic formulas and special ingredients and herbs.

I started graduate school at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1987. It was the time when debates around the literary canon were raging. When I entered the MA program, students were required to read and discuss a list of German-language classics (with a few texts by white

women writers thrown in) about which we would be tested by the end of our studies. However, by the time I finished my Masters degree the reading list and corresponding exam had been eliminated as a masters program requirement. Feminism and multiculturalism were challenging traditional notions of *great* works of literature while cultural studies and New Historicism were re-defining the boundaries of traditional literature departments. My years in graduate school coincided with a time of previously unimaginable political transformations that included the fall of the wall in Germany and the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the spread of the AIDS epidemic, the development of the world wide web, and changing notions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Our classes were filled with discussions of postmodernism, new ways of thinking about gender, including through the lens of performativity as articulated by Judith Butler, and emerging ideas about the importance of "interlocking systems of oppressions," as described by the Combahee River Collective in 1977, and intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 and brought to the fore through the work of scholars such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, and many others. My advisor, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, encouraged me to work in an interdisciplinary fashion with a range of prominent feminists across campus, such as M. J. Maynes in History, Naomi Scheman in Philosophy, and Jacqueline Zita in Women's Studies. Besides many courses on women writers with Joeres, I was also fortunate to have taken courses with a wide range of feminist scholars within the Department of German, as well as the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures before the two departments merged, including Rick McCormick, Arlene Teraoka, Heidrun Suhr, Karin Sanders, and Monika Žagar.

Working together, professors and graduate students created feminist spaces of inquiry in these courses, challenging notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and exploring the intersections of these categories with race, class, and other markers of identity. Through Joeres,[3] I became acquainted with a long history of German women writers in German-speaking countries and regions including Bettina von Arnim, Karoline

3 To this day, I recall and am still influenced by some of the comments or observations that Ruth-Ellen made in class, such as the importance of Freud's use of footnotes in subsequent editions of his studies to reflect on, re-visit, and reshape his earlier writing or the question as to why we most often refer to Goethe and Schiller by their last names but female writers such as Bettina von Arnim or Christa Wolf by their first names. Now every time I write about Ruth-Ellen, I ask myself what name I should write and why I would do it that way.

Günderrode, Fanny Lewald, Louise Otto-Peters, Rahel Varnhagen, Klara Zetkin, and of course Hedwig Dohm. In these courses we stirred the cauldron of gendered memory—not to conjure up ghosts of the Holocaust as described by Ruth Klüger, but to expand literary history and to reclaim and appreciate literature that had been seemingly overlooked or more accurately, willfully ignored.

At this time, I became involved in the Coalition of Women in German (WiG). Thanks to Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, Rick McCormick, Ilze Mueller, Liz Mittman, Lisa Roetzel, and the other Minnesota WiGgies, the WiG conference was held in Minnesota for a three-year period from 1988–1990. Here, the feminist spaces of inquiry I had enjoyed during my coursework expanded in a whole new way. I was introduced to participatory feminist decision-making processes; I got to meet feminist scholars whose articles we had read in our classes; I was exposed to a range of guest authors and filmmakers in those years such as Helga Königsdorf, Angela Krauss, Waldtraut Lewin, Deborah Lefkowitz, Ruth Klüger, Ika Hügel-Marshall, and many others; and I partook in a myriad of conversations during the conference sessions, at meals, and out in nature. Julie Klassen, a professor at Carleton College, encouraged many graduate students at the University of Minnesota to get involved with the WiG newsletter that was assembled and published under her supervision at that time. Soon thereafter I served as a graduate student representative on the WiG steering committee. The feminist networks that came together through WiG created a community that influenced my personal and academic growth in significant ways.

"We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen people on whose traditional territory the University of Victoria stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day." This land acknowledgement is typically recited at public events at the University of Victoria to recognize the history of the place, the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the land, water, and sky that surrounds us, and to be reminded of the legacies of colonialism. It is a way to pay respect to the Indigenous Peoples in Canada and a small, but important, step in the broader movement towards

reconciliation. But land acknowledgements are not enough. As both the *Final Reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* and the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* proclaim, there are a number of Calls to Action and Calls for Justice that must be addressed as we work towards creating a more just future.

During my childhood and well into my graduate studies, I knew very little about the Dakota (Sioux) and Ojibwa (Anishinaabe or Chippewa) peoples who lived near the "sky-tinted water"[4] around the Minnesota River. I knew much more about the *pioneers*, the early European settler colonialists, and grew up reading books like the *Little House* series and *Caddie Woodlawn* that were lying around the house. Only more recently, after emigrating to Canada, did I begin to reflect on the gaps in my own knowledge about the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and my own willful ignorance (see Smith and Thorson, 352–56). As a white woman, I had never heard anyone declare that they grew up hating white people until I attended the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in Victoria in April 2012, and then I began to understand why.

I moved to Canada in the summer of 2005 shortly after receiving tenure at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. The move, as I understood it at the time, would most likely mean the end of my career as an associate professor of German studies. Yet, after running a successful program with my Swiss colleague, earning tenure, and receiving promotion, I determined that there was more to life than one's profession. I was also not happy with the direction the US was heading at the time nor was I pleased with the many school visits I had undertaken as my older daughter was getting close to starting elementary school. Several things deeply disturbed me at the time: capital punishment, gun ownership, religious fanaticism, and a lack of investment in the infrastructure supporting the common good (including education), among others. On a whim, my spouse and I applied to become permanent residents of Canada. A couple of years later, we found out that our applications had been accepted. Was it brave or foolish of us to leave our university positions and move to Canada with two young children and no jobs in hand?

Once the choice was made, I had to notify the university that I was leaving, giving enough lead time so that they could hire a replacement, and also start sharing the news with family and friends. Telling your

4 The word "Minnesota" is derived from the Dakota Sioux name for the Minnesota River, which can be translated as "sky-tinted water."

Doktormutter that you are most likely leaving the profession is not an easy thing to do. I was nervous about it, especially because I still felt extremely lucky to have gotten a tenure-track position right out of graduate school. With a mixture of both excitement and dread, I sent an email to Ruth-Ellen. Shortly thereafter she wrote a long, heartfelt, and moving email about how delighted she was to hear the news.

I think back to this time and ponder the extent to which this move to Canada was a feminist choice, a political act of rebellion, or a mid-life crisis. Most likely all three strands contributed a significant part to the decision-making process. The choice was informed by strong feminist values, political events such as the Iraq war and the revelations of torture and prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison, and a mid-life realization that I wanted something different for my children. Clearly, the network of feminists, friends, and feminist friends that surrounded me at the time made the decision to take this risk that much easier, and Ruth-Ellen's joy and excitement meant so much.

Among the texts that informed my decision to move to Canada in 2005 were also Victor Klemperer's diaries of the Nazi years published in two volumes. Reading Klemperer's entries, I realized how gradually things can change—bit by bit so that nobody feels the need to protest—yet, ironically, how rapid these changes can be. Reading his reflections on everyday life in Nazi Germany made me realize how vulnerable democracy is, how easily human rights can be abandoned, and how destructive and cruel human beings can be towards one another. In the fifteen years since I left the US, so much has changed, and the speed has been simultaneously gradual and rapid in recent years.

I was never really good at braiding my own hair. If I did braid my hair, it was either in two basic braids, one on each side, or one large braid down the back. Sometimes I would leave my hair down and put in one or two small braids in the front in order to get the hair out of my face. My sisters knew how to French braid, but I was never talented enough to do it well myself. I loved it when they would braid my hair. They would always do a much better job than I could do myself.

Little did I know that what we in my family considered braiding wasn't the only way of doing it. During high school track and field prac-

tices and meets, we would sometimes braid each other's hair in the locker room or on the school bus. Some of my teammates could braid really well. In our school we had several students who were part of the "A Better Chance" (ABC) program, highly talented Black girls who were chosen to attend our small-town school from *far-away* places like Milwaukee and Chicago on account of their leadership potential. A couple of them were on the track team and would sometimes braid my hair. They could make the braid stick out or tuck in and could also braid with four or more strands instead of three. For me, these locker room experiences taught me that the knowledge and way of doing things I had grown accustomed to in my family weren't the only possibilities.[5]

I learned this lesson in my first years living in Little Rock as well. After working on a project with a group on campus called TEAMS, an acronym for a program called Teaching Enhancements Affecting Minority Students that was designed to help graduate students of color succeed at the university, I was invited to a 70s disco night organized by the group. I was pretty confident I knew what I was getting into, having grown up in the 1970s and regularly attending the weekly teen disco night with my friends every summer. I knew disco, or so I thought. As the evening progressed, I realized that I only recognized a few songs here or there, namely, the Motown classics that had made it to the Top 40 list. It struck me again that my childhood experiences were not *universal*, and that my white-centered, middle-class Minnesota upbringing was indeed quite limited.

Thinking back on feminist spaces, I now recognize that the spaces I created and that I inhabited were also exclusionary without me even realizing it. While we seemed to have fun in the locker room, on the school bus, and at track meets, I never invited the ABC students to come over or to hang out outside of school or track. Drawing on "the

5 From DoVeanna S. Fulton's *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery* (2006) to Emma Dabiri's *Don't Touch My Hair* (2019) as well as the work of many other Black scholars on this topic, the importance of black braided hair as well as the cultural transmission that occurs during hair-braiding sessions themselves have been well documented. The oral traditions passed on through the process of braiding hair, or what Nadia Prendergast has termed a "pedagogy of learning" (122), are moments of transmission and dialogue that are significant for understanding history and for negotiating life's current challenges and demands. It is during these hair-braiding sessions, which in Prendergast's own experience occurred between mother and daughter in different locations and contexts, that the individuals involved not only work through the entanglement of hair but also "the entanglement of their lives and share the care and attention they give to their struggle to survive as Black women" (122).

epistemology of ignorance" discussed by Linda Martín Alcoff and others, I see that the choices I made at the time perpetuated my willful ignorance, even though I was not aware of it then. In a blog written in February 2016, almost nine months before the US presidential election, Alcoff wrote:

> It's not just that folks are not knowledgeable. It is that their lack of knowledge is the product of some concerted effort, a conscious choice or, in actuality, a series of choices. Certain news articles, or news sources, are avoided, certain college courses are kept away from, certain kinds of people are never asked for their opinion on the news of the day. The boundaries of the bubble of ignorance are monitored, protected, even nurtured as a positive good. (Alcoff, para. 5)

Like my own high school experiences, second-wave feminist spaces also had the tendency to be willfully ignorant, even when feminism prided itself on being inclusive. To a certain extent, white, middle-class feminism at that time still believed in its own universality—but that was changing too.

White feminists' attempts to promote multiculturalism and to celebrate diversity did not necessarily translate into spaces that were welcoming for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. In the words of Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill:

> The project of inclusion can serve to control and absorb dissent rather than allow institutions like feminism and the nation-state to be radically transformed by differing perspectives and goals. (17)

Inclusion in and of itself is not enough; feminism must interrogate and transform the very spaces that it creates.

In the introduction to their edited book *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions*, Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres discussed the importance of "treating *how* we write with the same

intellectual seriousness as *what* we write" (2, emphasis theirs). They called for, among other things, greater accessibility in academic writing and argued that "*matters of form*" are actually "*matters of content*" (2, emphasis theirs). The book began as a conversation between the two editors, first in email correspondences and phone calls and then in a distilled version that entailed a staged reading of the essence of their dialogue at the 2007 WiG conference (24).[6]

I learned from Ruth-Ellen that it was okay to do things differently. There was nothing wrong with wearing jeans to an academic conference, with challenging academic traditions and trying something new, and with questioning disciplinary boundaries and talking across contexts. In so much of her work, including co-editing *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* and the *Women in German Yearbook*, she showcased the value of collaboration, accessibility, and interdisciplinarity.

In the courses she taught or co-taught, Ruth-Ellen demonstrated that learning was a dialogical process and allowed ample time for small group and class discussions. The graduate students built strong relationships with one another both inside and outside the classroom, as well as with the authors and the theorists under discussion. Ruth-Ellen taught us that learning, as modeled in her courses, is not solely abstract and analytical but also personal and relational.

I try to replicate this teaching philosophy with my students. In my experience, rigorous scholarly examination is most beneficial when it goes hand in hand with affective and dialogical learning. I too have come to value collaborative research and learning and am at my happiest when I work with colleagues, students, and community members from diverse backgrounds in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary way. Through these endeavors, I have come to understand that the processes of respectful listening, dialogue, and relationship building are an essential part of fruitful research collaboration and that we have much to learn from one another. For example, the article I co-authored together with Dawn Smith on building transdisciplinary relationships between German studies and Indigenous studies as well as a current research grant with a team of colleagues at the University of Victoria have shown me that these collaborations are not solely about the resulting publications. Working on these collaborative projects has taught me the value of a process-oriented approach centered on

6 A revised written version of their WiG conference presentation, published for the first time, can be found in Chapter 9 of this book.

relationship building. In fact, my colleagues and I spent the entire first year of a three-year grant cycle taking the time to get to know each other over regularly scheduled dinners and learning about each other's priorities, goals, and perspectives. In addition, we followed local Indigenous protocols such as smudging and drumming to prepare for our meetings.[7] Besides fostering trust within the group, this collaboration served to cultivate anti-racist and decolonial feminist spaces across campus.

Thinking back to my own childhood, to the comfort of getting my hair braided and the realization that so much more was going on in these sessions than what was happening to my hair, I wonder if the braiding metaphor could be extended to community-building practices in general. Braiding bread, braiding hair, braiding baskets, braiding sweetgrass,[8] and braiding stories or memories—all these activities have a complicated history of tradition, resistance, and decolonial knowledge keeping. In solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, I hope to do what I can to unlearn the myth of the universality of white feminism, to recognize my own white, middle-class privilege, and to work collaboratively to dismantle systems of oppression in academia, in professional organizations such as WiG, and in the communities in which I live and work. In my mind, feminism today needs to be firmly grounded in anti-racist activism.

I realize that having the opportunity to move to Canada in 2005 was not a choice that everyone could make, and that my white, middle-class, privileged background guided the process and made my integration here that much easier. After reckoning with the likelihood that I was giving up my profession when I moved to Canada, I was fortunate to be hired into an academic position in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of Victoria three years after my arrival. One of the first people with whom I shared the news was Ruth-Ellen and, four years later, she was also one of the first to hear that I had received tenure (for the second time) as well. She was also one of the

7 This grant project on historical injustices and current realities was funded by the President's Strategic Framework Impact Fund at the University of Victoria in 2019. At this point in the project, we have seventeen members from a wide range of disciplines, over a third of whom are Indigenous scholars. During our final meeting of the first year, we agreed that our research would focus on examining the history and legacy of historical injustices at the University of Victoria itself.

8 See, for example, the book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

first to congratulate me when I was elected Vice-President (and President-Elect) of WiG in 2018. As a mentor and friend, Ruth-Ellen has always been supportive of my work as a teacher, scholar, and feminist activist and has rejoiced in my life choices—even when they deviated from the *usual* academic career trajectory.

Feminist spaces are the places where we support and encourage one another, where we can become vulnerable as we go outside our comfort zones and see the world in a new light, where we build relationships, collaborate, and do things differently. These spaces help us come together, organize, take a political stance, fight against injustice, laugh, have fun, get angry, theorize, celebrate, reflect, and reassure one another. They are where we can braid together different strands either in a tactile sense or through language. Feminist spaces allow us to gather together and stir the cauldron of memory. This FEMINIST-SCHRIFT is a place to reflect on feminist spaces and the feminists who have helped build them. As a way of closing, I turn to the words of Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres: "We make and unmake worlds in language and define relationships among ourselves in words" (1).

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