

*Making Coalitions Work:  
Solidarity across Difference  
within US Feminism*

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THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING in coalition, that is, the process through which groups that define themselves as different work together politically, either long or short term, in the service of some mutually valued end, is a frequent refrain in the writing of feminists of color. In the twenty-five years since Bernice Johnson Reagon addressed the West Coast Women's Music Festival on the importance of coalitions, many feminists—both scholars and activists—have argued for the centrality of coalitional strategies for feminist social change. Feminist coalition work has been variously described as an imperative, an opportunity, and an inevitability, given that difference is culturally constructed and all groups contain heterogeneity.<sup>1</sup> Yet relatively little work has looked at the way these theoretical premises play out in activists' political work. This article aims to bring our models of theorizing coalition into dialogue with practice by listening to activists' own reflections on their work.

In her interview, welfare rights activist Marion Kramer recounted the story of how several organizations serving the interests of poor and homeless people met at a summit in Philadelphia in 1989. Funded only by a small grant allowing homeless people to make the trip, those who attended strategized ways to take a local campaign called "Up and Out of

Poverty" to the national level. Conversations among members of this small within-movement coalition led them to view their mission in a global context. As Kramer recalled, "One thing I love is . . . we can get in a room, we can fuss, we can party, we can do everything. We gonna come out of that room with a plan. And that plan was that we had to look at the question of poverty and looking at our human rights being violated . . . and link them." This way of framing the issue encouraged the formation of a broader cross-movement coalition:

Ah, we were going to participate in the homeless march [in Washington, D.C.]. But our demand was going to be that the homeless had to speak for themselves and lead that march. We had people from the peace movement. . . . We had people from the homeless struggles. We had [social services] providers . . . all the welfare rights [activists] were there. We had people from unions they were there. . . . What was so interesting, see, some of these people had never attended no kind of conference before in their lives, you know. And they were at this, at this summit. And then we united . . . . Eventually we were called in by the National Organization for Women. They joined.

Kramer's anecdote raises several questions about how coalitions can be initiated and sustained. What, other than perceptions of basic self-interest, motivates groups that define themselves as different to work together? How do diverse groups conceptualize identity, belonging, and solidarity across difference—what Scott A. Hunt and Robert D. Benford call "external solidarity"<sup>2</sup>—in order to come together in the first place? What goes on when diverse groups "get into a room" that results in either "fussing" or generating useful new strategies and tactics? How do groups work together productively across power asymmetries to achieve common goals, and what practices are necessary to ensure meaningful participation by the most disempowered constituencies?

This article engages these questions based on a reading of the feminist literature on coalitions and activists' narratives recorded as part of a larger project collecting oral history interviews with feminist scholar-activists in four countries. A description of the project, including the US Site Booklet of interview transcripts, from which quotations in this article are taken, is available at "Global Feminisms: Comparative Case Studies of Women's

Activism and Scholarship," <http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/>. The US-based segment of this project was planned and implemented by an interdisciplinary team of faculty and students. We chose activists whose work addressed sites of intersection between feminist social movements and other axes of oppression such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and ability status. Our selection strategy was intended to generate a sample that could illuminate important fault lines within the women's movement in the United States. Potential participants were told that it was not necessary to identify with the label "feminist" in order to take part and that the interview would include an opportunity to discuss their thoughts about the term. Interviews were conducted at the authors' university, and participants' travel expenses were funded by the project. Despite the substantial demands of participation, only one invitee declined to participate, due to scheduling constraints.

Ten interviews were conducted between June 2003 and May 2006, at which time participants ranged in age from their early twenties to late eighties. Activists' political work focused on issues such as violence against women, reproductive and economic justice, labor conditions, and civil rights (see appendix for a complete list of interviewees). Two of the ten interviews included two participants; in each case their work was so interconnected that the project team or the participants felt separate interviews could not adequately represent the work. For example, one interview featured two women (Loira Limbal and Verónica Giménez) from a collective whose members believed that it would be discordant with the mission of the organization to be represented by an individual. Thus, the ten interviews included twelve participants in total. Each interview was conducted by a member of the project team who was familiar with the participant's work. The interviews were semistructured, using a protocol based on a set of core questions pertaining to background on the activists' lives, reflections on their work and its relation to feminism and the women's movement, and their connections to international forms of activism. The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours and were videotaped and transcribed.

Both authors have worked in depth on many aspects of this project and were familiar with all the transcripts before undertaking the coding for

this article. In order to understand why diverse groups come together in common cause and how they work in coalition, we began with a process of open coding, marking passages that referred either to a sense of solidarity across groups defined as different or to working in coalition (including both explicit use of the term and descriptions of groups/organizations working cooperatively). We compared codes, resolving any disagreements through discussion. These codes were entered into HyperRESEARCH 2.7, a software package for qualitative data analysis, which was used to generate reports of all transcript excerpts that referred to solidarity or coalition. Across all interviews, twenty-four mentions of solidarity across identity groups were made in eight of the interviews; thirty-five mentions of coalition were made in seven interviews. All interviews included at least one mention of either solidarity or coalition, and most interviewees discussed both concepts.

We then read these excerpts closely, looking for subthemes within the two larger concepts of solidarity across identity groups and coalition. In the analysis we present here, we provide excerpts from the transcripts organized in terms of the sub-themes in order to focus our discussion. We also include some excerpts from the interviews that were not coded under solidarity or coalition where they are helpful to clarify or expand on related themes. Because the project team was mindful in the selection of activists to include a broad representation across generations, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and issues and modalities of activism, we felt it was important to preserve this diversity by representing views from all ten interviews. Thus, our analysis achieves breadth, perhaps at the cost of losing the coherence of individual narratives.

#### BUILDING SOLIDARITY ACROSS GROUPS: NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Repeatedly the literature within feminist theory on coalitions suggests that women of color are exceptionally well positioned to apprehend opportunities for, and possibilities presented by, coalitional work because they belong to multiple oppressed communities defined by gender, race, and often class. Of course every individual occupies specific positions with respect to gender, race, class, sexuality, and other socially constructed

distinctions associated with political and economic stratification. However, those who claim multiple subordinated identities may be particularly attuned to the ways that organizations, social movements, and public policies based on social identities often frame their analysis to address primarily the concerns of individuals who, but for one marginalized status, are otherwise privileged.<sup>3</sup>

For example, Diane L. Fowlkes observed that when the Combahee River Collective grounded their political analysis in terms of their lived experiences of racism, sexism, and homophobia, they reconstructed their own identities within a social and historical environment in which issues of sexuality were rarely mentioned and issues of gender were often overlooked. In doing so, not only did the collective reveal implicit aspects of the construction of others' identities (e.g., that the concept of "woman" was often assumed to be white and heterosexual), but they also argued that coalitions were necessary because of complex interlocking structures of oppression and privilege. Later work by Chela Sandoval and Gloria Anzaldúa suggested some of the concrete ways that individuals marginalized by multiple statuses might serve as catalysts for such political linkages. Specifically, Anzaldúa argued that her socially marginal position as a lesbian of color rendered her identity inherently hybrid, or *mestiza*: being at once homeless and at home everywhere positioned her to shift between communities and constituencies.<sup>4</sup> Fowlkes observed that in making this argument, Anzaldúa used "complex identity narration" as a tool of struggle. In this reading, women of color scholar/activists have deployed their analysis of the complex layering of their oppression to construct meaningful identities that are themselves tools for social change.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, scholars of the "new social movements," that is, the non-class-based social movements that emerged beginning in the 1960s, emphasized the central importance of identity construction and redefinition to mobilization in these organizations. Importantly then, because identities are constructed categories, so too are solidarity and connection, and therefore alliances are potentially fluid.

However, other theorists, including Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Judith Butler reject identity as the basis of coalition, worrying that such an approach contributes to the reification and normalization of certain iden-

tities. Butler argued that when activists premise a coalition on the assertion of an ideal association between identity and action ("we'll all join hands as women!"), they impose fixed and normative identities on the actors. Kimberlé Crenshaw also argued that identity politics is flawed, however, not because of its emphasis on differences between groups but rather because it is premised on turning a blind eye to differences within groups.<sup>6</sup> For similar reasons, Mohanty urged activists to engage difference, rather than to attempt to transcend it.<sup>7</sup> Although the claim to a common identity may be motivated by the desire for unity within a movement, Butler encouraged those undertaking coalitional politics to embrace fractures and ruptures in identity in order to make the broadest possible movement:

Without the goal of "unity" . . . provisional unities might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity. Without the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified and agreed upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of "women" for whom the category is permanently moot.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Floya Anthias argued that any attempt to describe membership or belonging simultaneously implies a boundary indicating which groups are different or "other."<sup>9</sup> Thus, within the literature on identities and coalition, there is a tension between those who claim that an appreciation for the complexity of identity is a central tool for struggle and those who caution that as a political tool, any identity claim simultaneously engages otherness and exclusion and thus may be an obstacle to successful coalition.

One of the respondents in our project offered some different concerns about the use of narratives of personal identity for political struggle. Near the end of Andrea Smith's interview, the interviewer invited questions from members of the team who were observing. Smith, whose political and academic work focuses on Native Americans and multiple forms of violence in communities of color, was asked to talk about how her feminist scholarship had affected her personal life. Smith replied:

Well, I just tend not to do that because I just know as women of color, we always just tell our personal stories. . . . I can remember one, a friend of

mine, she was doing her dissertation. She's Maori, and she was told she couldn't proceed until she told a personal story. But they didn't ask any other white man in the program for his personal story. . . . And . . . I've noticed in classes, that people always want to hear stories and [read] novels from women of color, but they don't want to hear our analysis. So that's why I guess I tend to want to stay on that level. And the other thing is also I feel like there's a tendency to individualize everything. And I feel like it tends to be a problem because then people will say, "Well, they're an activist because they're this kind of person and that's why they can do it," but it's something everybody can do, you know. So I try to focus more on the collective rather than my personal thing.

Smith's reply indicated that she rejected the idea that certain identities or life experiences privilege one's access to ways of thinking about or working toward social change; indeed, earlier in her interview she argued that "everybody has a responsibility, I feel, to be engaged in collective action in some regards." This is consistent with the emphasis within the new social movement literature on the way that social change organizations actively construct, rather than reflect, a fixed or ascribed social identity. Taken together, these activists' narratives thoughtfully engage questions of the relationships among identity, solidarity across difference, and opportunities for coalition.

#### DEFINING SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Several of the activists explicitly discussed their experiences redefining the social identities that had been ascribed to them in ways that were consistent with their own sense of the meaning of their social locations. For example, Grace Lee Boggs, a community organizer in her late eighties, discussed how she became a part of the predominantly Black community in south Chicago where she lived and worked. Her involvement with a tenants' union led to her participation in organizing a delegation for a national march to protest discrimination in defense plants. Even though the march did not materialize, Boggs became more active in the larger struggles of African Americans, which led her to Detroit where she resides today. The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Boggs perceived the definition of community in that time and place not to have been constrained by

racial ancestry. She argued that people from generations after hers

who remember the nationalist phase of the Black movement and the extreme race consciousness that has developed ever since, say, 1960, find it difficult to recall that in the 1940s and 1950s there was not that sense of color consciousness in the Black community. . . . And I was strange to people. I mean, they . . . considered me a person of color, but I wasn't Black, and kids used to come up and touch my hair and say, you know, "What nice hair you have," because it was so straight, and black. . . . People, I think, accepted me. Particularly, because, you know, I was married to Jimmy [Boggs, who was Black] and we lived in the Black community. And I had a wonderful time. It was the first community I had ever really belonged to.

Later in the interview she elaborated on the extent of her involvement with that community. "I became so active in the Black Movement that the FBI, its records say, 'She's probably Afro-Chinese.' But that's how closely I became identified." However, when the eighty-eight-year-old Boggs reflected on identity explicitly, she commented with humor that "if I were to characterize myself as something particular, I would say I'm old!"

I don't believe in getting stuck in any one identity. I think that our tendency . . . it's so easy to become fragmented because we live in a fragmented . . . fragmenting society. It's so difficult to be whole, to see yourself as many faceted, to see how many possibilities there are in who we are . . . you know, here I've been Afro-Chinese, I've been Asian American. I've had the opportunity to know so many different people and work with so many different people of all ethnicities and all ages, and of all classes.

Thus, Boggs saw a potential danger in the idea of social identity, in that it can constrain both one's sense of self and the ability to see meaningful connections with others. Her story also pointed to the importance of context as she later reminded the audience that a movement to empower Asian Americans did not exist during her early years of activism. She did not have the option to organize around her racial identity, but, instead of avoiding political action, she became an active ally. Boggs established her commitment to racial justice and local community empowerment over decades. She continued to move beyond activism around obvious identity



categories when she founded the Boggs Center, in Detroit, Michigan, which offers community programs, many of which are aimed at youth.

If Boggs's many identifications were grounded locally, Rabab Abdulhadi, an activist who was instrumental in founding the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations, described how, for diasporic Palestinian women, Palestine transcends a specific geographical location to shape their identities and daily lives.

Thinking about how Palestinian women who are living in the Diaspora, in exile, in the US, people like me and others, have the transnational networks and connections and belongings and identifications with a place called Palestine that is always transnationally imagined. . . . There is a physical place . . . called Palestine . . . geography. At the same time, people are not there, but there is this kind of connection that has . . . that shapes the identity, the thinking, the psyche, everyday life of your existence, and a lot of the women I would call [Palestinian], they have these transnational relations and networks and so on, [but they] are not living actually here and there. They're living here and here. It's always here and here. It's . . . you could be physically here or you could be physically there, but there is this kind of . . . I don't want to call it divided loyalty. I think there is this kind of connection, and I think it is transnational.

In Abdulhadi's reckoning, this transnational experience is so profound that both Palestine and the place of exile may simultaneously be experienced as "here." This view of the world, she argued, allows the transnational feminist living in exile to appreciate the power of borders but also to envision a world in which borders are not fixed in time or space. From this vantage point, Abdulhadi observed that commonalities between women who are widely geographically dispersed may come into view:

I would say, well, "Global South" is right there in New York City—in the Bronx and in Harlem and in El Barrio, and in Brooklyn, and right there in the streets of NYU, which is supposed to be very fancy, but. . . . You know, so it's . . . everywhere, always when we think . . . if we think about South and North, we don't think about them as like, um, forcefully divided geographically . . . and distinct and discrete units, that there is all . . . a lot of fluidity in them, but we recognize how they are structured . . . in terms of oppression.

In contrast, Cathy J. Cohen, whose political and academic work has mainly addressed queer issues within communities of color, particularly their early disavowal of people with HIV/AIDS, envisaged a shared identity based not on a real or imagined location but on a complete reconceptualization of the ways that the state attempts to control sexuality. Early in her interview, she described her political coming-of-age as a graduate student who became a leader in campus antiracism movements in the 1980s. Many women played leadership roles in her organization; in response, members of older Black organizations sought to discredit them through lesbian-baiting. Cohen recalled that these criticisms led members of her group "to kind of debate and talk about what was the importance of having a broad and inclusive agenda. It meant going back and reading things that we hadn't read." This return to theory led the group to a more nuanced understanding of group identity and its political implications. Cohen recalled, "It wasn't about kind of running away in any way from race, because we are all kind of strong, proud Black women. But it also meant understanding that just because someone shared a racial identity with us didn't mean that they also shared a political identity with us. . . . And it was kind of an important and growing moment in understanding the distinction between the two."

Cohen, who is African American and a lesbian, has worked to explain and challenge how the interests of subordinated constituencies within a minority group may experience a political "secondary marginalization."<sup>10</sup> Her thinking has resulted in a new way to understand the concept of "queer" in structural terms that transcend a straight/gay binary. In her interview she noted that

queer sexuality for me is sexuality that really challenges hetero-normative expectations and assumptions. And what I mean by that [is] it's people who are marginalized on the basis of their sexuality. So you can undoubtedly include lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender folks in that category. I would also argue that women who are resource-poor and have children are marginalized by their sexual decisions and might be considered queer. Now, I want to be careful because a lot of people will say, "Oh, that's a nice academic argument." And I think at some level it is an academic argument. It's about kind of how do we conceptualize this category "queer."

But for me it then becomes, are there political unities between these groups of people that organizers can start to think about how would you build a base for political mobilization?

In Cohen's re-vision of queer identity, mothers who are low-income and people who identify as sexual minorities are not merely potential allies. Because they share political interests by virtue of their common social experience of marginalization in relation to dominant groups, they potentially share an identity as well. Her reconceptualization of "queer" as a very broad politicized identity recalls Anthias's observation that "unities and divisions are constructions rather than representing actual and fixed groupings of people."<sup>11</sup> Cohen's narrative highlights the ways that activists' political work and theory building challenges those who might assume that collective identities are essential, fixed, or ascribed and demonstrates the creative ways identity may be used to generate social change.

These narratives illustrate how feminist activists who occupy multiple subordinated identities have developed from their social locations a complex understanding of the ways that identities are crafted through lived experience, the personal meaning attached to experience, and the power of these identities to generate political alliances. Boggs, Abdulhadi, and Cohen described the development of nuanced understandings of their social locations in ways that suggested their identities were built through reflection (as in Abdulhadi's conceptualization of geography and time), carefully nurtured alliances (as in Boggs's relation to Black communities in Chicago and Detroit), and expansive imagination (as in Cohen's re-envisioning of the category "queer").

#### EARLY EXPERIENCES AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Many activists recall that early experiences and influences encouraged them to see connections across difference. A common theme in these interviews is the impact of childhood experiences that pushed interviewees to feel empathy toward people whose social identity categories were different from theirs. These examples highlight the flexible and constructed nature of social identity. For example, bioethicist Adrienne Asch recalled how her parents created a social life for their family that included people from diverse backgrounds; moreover, they also refused to define

their daughter primarily in terms of the way some others saw her—disabled—thus allowing Asch to recognize that marginalized identities were one part of a person but not a defining feature. Later, Asch would challenge feminists whose work implicitly suggested that women with disabilities were not among the women whose interests the women's movements sought to advance. She took feminists to task both for excluding the experiences of women with disabilities from their theorizing and for their failure to acknowledge the implications of women choosing abortion in cases of fetal genetic anomalies, which Asch argued implicitly devalues the lives of people with disabilities, many of whom are women.

In these interviews, respondents also recalled formative experiences that led them to feel connections with people from outside their own ascribed groups, people whom others might have viewed as stigmatized or marked by difference. Loretta Ross vividly described daily experiences that required her to empathize across difference. One of her sisters was severely disabled, and at times Ross recalled resenting the caretaking role she often had to assume. Looking back, Ross felt the responsibility for her sister that her mother compelled her to take on instilled in her a capacity to empathize with Vietnam veterans with whom she interacted during her work as a hospital volunteer. Later, Ross protested the war, having witnessed firsthand its effects on people she claimed as members of her community.

Verónica Giménez is a member of *Sista II Sista*, a Brooklyn-based collective of young Latinas and Black women who work to end violence in their community. She recalled that when she first emigrated to the United States she was bused to a school in racially segregated Howard Beach. When white students suggested she could "pass" as Italian American due to her last name, rather than accept the privileges that might come with such an identity, she chose to identify with her less-privileged national identity. Although it had happened years before, a vicious racist attack on a young Black man in that town was foremost in her mind as she actively chose to embrace her racial consciousnesses as a member of an oppressed group.

So my racial consciousness really became blown when I was not willing to be accepted under the Italian . . . auspice. They were willing to say, well,

since my father's last name has an Italian descendency, they were like, "well, you're Italian too." And I was like "No, I'm not, I'm not Italian, I'm not Italian-American," and I related more to being Venezolana and bringing up my identity that way.

Rather than accepting white privilege, which she felt would make her complicit in racial oppression, Giménez worked to challenge oppression on multiple fronts.

Before activists enter into coalition, they have to consider the possibility as not only viable to some degree but also desirable. Many of the activists described how they imagined connections that helped create a worldview in which links across difference were expected and cultivated. Abdulhadi recalled that when she was growing up in Palestine, her mother emphasized the importance of connections with people beyond one's geographic location. Seeing a newspaper picture of Angela Davis, who was on trial in connection with George Jackson's prison break, her mother insisted Davis was a friend to the Palestinians. Her mother's views led Abdulhadi to develop a sense of solidarity with the African American struggle taking place on a faraway continent, "Because in Palestine you're not interacting with a whole lot of other people from other countries. Little by little you start connecting, and you start seeing the intersections . . . the similarities." In a setting where restrictions on their movement rarely allowed Palestinians to interact with people from other backgrounds, these small moments added up to major changes in her ability to imagine connections. Seeing Davis's picture in newspapers evoked a sense of connection for Abdulhadi's mother who then used the opportunity to teach her daughter about links among oppressed peoples. Although the political contexts were in many ways different for African American and Palestinian women, the understanding of similarities in their experiences of oppression marked an opportunity for feelings of solidarity. Similarly, community organizer and civil rights activist Boggs recalled that upon the start of the Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch counter sit-ins in 1960, Black activists in Detroit held sympathy strikes, even though the right to service in public accommodations had already been secured in the Northern states.

Limbal of Sista II Sista also recalled an influential media representation that influenced her thinking as a young girl. Watching the grainy images in the documentary *Eyes on the Prize* of African Americans enduring police brutality as they fought for basic civil rights encouraged her to question some aspects of the world around her. While the situations differed, Limbal and Giménez explained that police brutality commonly witnessed in their neighborhood led their organization to create the Sistas Liberated Ground program. Devastated by a community member's death at the hands of police who had been called in to resolve a fight between family members, Sista II Sista worked with community members to designate an area in which violence was prohibited and in which violation led to community meetings and accountability rather than a call to the police. Distrust of the police due to their violence toward multiple communities required seeking alternative organizing strategies.

#### SEEING THEIR WORK IN A LARGER CONTEXT

Regardless of the context in which most of their political work took place, nearly all of the activists emphasized the importance of solidarity with oppressed peoples around the world, paired with recognition that because those who live in the First World benefit from political and economic systems that maintain inequality globally, all are in some ways culpable. Limbal implicated all people of the First World—no matter their oppressed status within it—with responsibility for alleviating conditions of poverty globally by working in solidarity with people of the Third World. Similarly, Smith invoked the destruction of a pyramid-shaped structure of wealth and power globally as a rallying point to reach across difference; in this view, her potential allies include the 90 percent of the world's population that does not benefit from the existing structure.

Boggs encouraged people to live out the ideals of Martin Luther King Jr. by seeing themselves as global citizens.

One of the things that [King] was urging at the end of his life was a radical revolution in values. That we see racism as part of a giant triplet that includes materialism and militarism. And that we begin to think of ourselves as global citizens who can only bring out the best of what is in

the American tradition, by caring for people in the rest of the world the way that we care for our own families. We can celebrate King's birthday differently in the next couple of months. We can make a difference. You know, you don't have to overturn the world all at once.

Boggs went back to the message of an inspirational civil rights leader to put activism in context, reminding people that change happens through slowly changing our practices toward others, not just our thoughts about them. These activists' views suggest they believe that one way that change begins is when individuals fashion identities in which they are equally accountable to others globally as they are to those closest to them.

The interviewees described formative experiences in which they were encouraged by others to view oppressions as shared. Many interviewees discussed viewing one or more aspects of their identity as disadvantaged early in life but were taught by family members to see this not in terms of stigma but as a possible site of connection with other marginalized people. These lessons created the conditions for seeing their work in a larger context, well beyond alliances based on identity that might be easily assumed. The ability to appreciate similarities across differences clearly affected the activists' later work. For example, Abdulhadi, who came "face-to-face" with a noted woman of color activist in her youth through media depictions, noted that her transnational organization purposely built strong ties with feminists of color who shared an intersectional analysis that moved beyond binaries. For many of the interviewees, early experiences of broadening the possibilities of who can be a part of, or an ally to, "our" community led to a lifelong commitment to working to develop empathy with people who had different experiences. Building these connections across difference increased their skills and capacity for engagement, which later helped them conceptualize coalition work as not only possible but necessary.

Like Anzaldúa's "complex identity narration," the activists grounded their narratives of identity in their own lived experiences in communities they viewed as politically contextualized. But none of these activists privileged any single vantage point. Nor did they confirm Butler's fears of the limitations that could result from using identity as a tool for forging political alliances. However, the "complex identity narration" taking

place in these interviews was not simply a case of substituting stories for analysis, as Smith cautioned that women of color are so often asked to do. Instead, it provides an example of the tradition described by Barbara Christian, who argued that Black women have long created theory, despite the fact that the form of their theorizing may not be recognizable as such to many academics.<sup>12</sup>

#### DOING COALITION WORK

The literature on social movements addresses the concrete mechanisms through which coalitional work takes place and its political value, particularly for groups with constrained access to conventional sources of political or economic power. Scholars working in this area have identified some of the factors that promote the initiation and success of coalitions. Their work suggests that external threats to organizations/movements facilitate the formation of coalitions.<sup>13</sup> But even as outside pressures may drive organizations to work together, internal divisions may pose obstacles to sustained cohesion. Two such obstacles are disparate ideology and unequal power across the collaborating groups. Clearly, ideological differences must be worked through in order to maintain coalitions, even if only temporarily, and to broaden frameworks that increase supporters. Ellen Reese and Garnett Newcombe observed that social movement organization frames emerge from organizational ideologies that have varying degrees of strictness. The more strict and principled the ideology, the more it may appeal to current members; however, a flexible organization ideology is more likely to allow an organization to frame issues in a way that appeals to a wider constituency.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps for this reason, coalitions based around a specific project, with tactics that differ from the activities of individual organizations, have been found to lead to higher rates of success.<sup>15</sup>

Groups may attempt to forge coalition not only across divides of ideology but also across differences in historical relationship to power and privilege. Each type of work may pose its own challenges. For example, Haunani-Kay Trask discussed attempts by Natives and non-Natives in Hawaii to work together for environmental and land use issues. She noted that most coalitions between the two groups have failed because of the intertwined histories of oppression and exploitation and because the long-



term aims of Natives and non-Natives differ. Natives enter such coalitions because of their connection to land and their anger at injustice; in contrast, non-Natives may desire to promote environmental conservation but have little interest in broader antidevelopment work or Native sovereignty, both of which could threaten their own claim to land. Trask argued that these coalitions should happen when Natives decide they should and that they should only be short term and issue oriented; this aspect of her argument recalls the quotation that opened this paper, in which Kramer expressed the importance of having the leadership and vision for their planned march come from homeless people. Trask's analysis suggests that coalitional work joining traditionally high- and low-power groups may entail different challenges than working in more "horizontal" alliances formed by diverse groups that have faced similar subordinations.<sup>16</sup>

#### COALITIONS AMONG SUBORDINATED GROUPS

Many of the activists discussed the ways that forming political alliances, even among groups deemed socially similar, revealed differences and fissures. Their experiences throw into sharp relief the ways that virtually any group contains multiple subpopulations defined by crosscutting identities, including (but not limited to) generation, citizenship, social class, and sexuality. For example, in reflecting on the formation of the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations, Abdulhadi discussed some of the issues that emerged. Some women viewed the issues for "their" community as centered on religion or wearing the *hijab*; this framing did not always bring them into closer agreement or emotional connection with Palestinian women of different backgrounds or views. Abdulhadi recalled discussions around this controversy within her group.

"Oh, you know, so-and-so is working in a liquor store." And the women who were devout Muslims in Brooklyn would say, "Liquor store? Palestinians owning liquor stores?" . . . there were all the kind of like cultur[al], you know, sensibilities and differences and so on, that, well, it didn't mean much at the time. But [there] was a lot of tension around the whole discourse of modernity and modernization.

Abdulhadi's reflections highlight the ways that even within an identity group that shared gender, nationality, and geographical dislocation,

negotiation was necessary to create the consensus necessary to function as a political organization.

Performance artist Holly Hughes talked about similar fissures within the lesbian and gay community, this time concerning issues of ideology. She gained notoriety in 1990 when she was one of a group of artists whose work came under attack by right-wing politicians, which led to a prestigious grant from the National Endowment for the Arts being rescinded. Hughes, whose work often uses outrageous humor to address issues of sexuality, identity, personal narrative, and freedom of expression, was no stranger to controversy; but this incident drew national visibility as she and the other artists pressed their case to the US Supreme Court. In her interview, Hughes recalled, "That was sort of my induction into—that's when [censorship] became my middle name, as opposed to just my hobby." Discussing the lawsuit, she recalled that the homophobia aimed at her work led some within the lesbian and gay community to stand in solidarity with her but that many others criticized her for not being "really gay." Many members of the lesbian and gay community were sympathetic with Hughes based on the sometimes vicious critiques that placed her at the center of a national debate; however, for others, the content of her life revealed in the same plays and performances that made her a target for external critics put her outside gay "authenticity."<sup>17</sup> Her narrative demonstrates that feelings of solidarity cannot be assumed even within groups that would seem to share oppression. As Smith cogently concluded based on what she described as a "disastrous organizing effort" working with a group of women of color, "you can't assume an alliance. You have to go through the trouble of actually creating them."

However, other activists described successful and energizing coalitions that bridged differences among subordinated groups and resulted in important transitions in how activists viewed political issues and acted on them. For example, welfare rights activists Maureen Taylor and Marion Kramer described the summit of organizations serving the poor and homeless that led to the idea of organizing around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Members of Sista II Sista described their work mobilizing against the US war in Iraq in conjunction with Third World Within (TWW), a New York-based coalition aiming to organize people of color in

the United States against policies of global economic restructuring. Limbal explained how the coalitional strategy leveraged their human capital, as they could call on each other's membership to staff their events: "Yo, we need, we need two more people to come do security, we need somebody else to do this, we need somebody else to do that." But perhaps even more importantly, it created meaningful bonds and understanding across the disparate groups, resources that might fuel future collaboration.

There's a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding and discrimination and a whole lot of things, right, that lead people of color to, to not interact in a, in a good way, right? Even though we sometimes share the same communities, there's a lot of prejudices and a lot of misinformation. A lot of times we'll all believe over each other what the mainstream media is telling us of, you know, each other one, or whatever. . . . We also kind of see TWW as an opportunity and a way for us to be learning more about each other's issues, right? And so all this backlash against Arab folks and South Asian folks, you know, this is like a moment that our sort of working in Black and Latino communities can, you know, do some education around, some political education. . . . And I think that's one of the things that's really kind of special about the TWW thing is that it gives us a chance to work on inter-, intra-people-of-color stuff, . . . and not always necessarily be focused on responding to a larger white something or other.

Although in some ways media images could provide an opportunity for heightened consciousness of injustice (as it did in some of the narratives of solidarity across imagined communities), media representations also serve to perpetuate divisions among people of color through their limited representation of communities and their narrow framing of political issues, particularly those concerning immigrants and the so-called war on terror.<sup>18</sup> In this account, working in coalition not only served the goals of the mobilization, but it also offered community members a chance to gain first-hand knowledge of those deemed different from them.

#### WORKING ACROSS POWER ASYMMETRIES

Activists who described collaborating with groups with greater access to material resources and other kinds of power and privilege recounted the difficulties of what was essentially a translation or cross-cultural understanding. Ross

spoke of her years of work as an African American woman in mainstream, predominantly white feminist organizations. In her view, these organizations were fraught with competitiveness and unspoken class conflicts. Ross argued that these group dynamics are very difficult to apprehend, but this understanding was critical to working successfully in such an environment.

And so for a Black woman, you constantly have to try to figure out what's the normal treatment with which they treat white women versus how they treat me. Is it racism or is this just politics as usual? . . . So I mean, we tend to paint all white women with the same broad brush without understanding the conflicts and tensions within them. We don't understand the role of anti-Semitism in dividing white women, you know, old forms of European nationalism that are still being played out among white people. We don't even understand the construction of whiteness and what goes into that. And so we're not as sharp as I'd like us to be in understanding how to use and manipulate power within the mainstream movement.

But such sensitivity to these dynamics resulted only from years of working within the organization. After she left the organization, Ross continued to act as a bridge even when Black women questioned her engagement with white feminists. Twenty years later Ross was able to use her position to help her organization, SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, gain seats on the steering committee of the 2004 March for Women's Lives. When asked to endorse the march, rather than accept outright, SisterSong set its own terms to reduce the effects of unequal resources between mainstream organizations and smaller women of color organizations. Due to widespread organizing efforts, the march had over one million participants and garnered cosponsors from organizations in multiple movements, not just women's organizations. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Sierra Club endorsed the march, the first time either group had supported a major pro-choice event. Despite the short-term success of the coalition, Ross expressed her frustration with that kind of work: "It's exhausting to try to study [those dynamics], I mean, getting into that. Not everybody is prepared to be a bridge."

Labor activist Martha Ojeda expressed a similar weariness about working across these divides, citing the "challenge in language and culture and



strategies and everything . . . as I told you, it's not been easy." Ojeda is the executive director for Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), a tri-national organization working to address the working and living conditions of workers in Mexico's *maquilas*. Born in Mexico, Ojeda joined her mother as a factory worker when she reached middle school. Ojeda experienced and witnessed pervasive mistreatment of the predominantly female workforce: workers received no bathroom breaks, their injuries were left untreated, and the company refused to provide the legally required maternity leave. Frustrated with poor union representation, Ojeda decided to study labor law at night and on weekends with the assistance and support of her coworkers. Once armed with the same knowledge her employers had, she was able to negotiate better benefits for workers in many cases. When some of these same companies shut down, she later organized protests that other unions and sympathetic community members supported.

Ojeda first learned about CJM, a coalition that includes labor unions and religious, environmental, and human rights groups, from a sympathetic reporter she met at a protest. With some humor, Ojeda recounted the coalition's earliest attempts to work together when activists from the United States assumed the meetings would be conducted the way they typically were in the North; their assumption, and the arcane procedures they insisted on, were met with bafflement from the Mexicans. As Ojeda recalled, the US activists said:

"Right, here is all the system, right here is all the book, this is the Robert rules that all the meetings has to be process." We [Mexican delegates] say, "You know, we don't know Robert, okay, and we don't want Robert. Robert can stay in home" [laughter]. So right here we are three cultures so let's develop one system that will be . . . according with all these three cultures and we can work together. . . . And it's when you start to define, okay, do you want to do something different? Then you have to start on a common ground, all together, with a different vision. And you start from zero, taking the best things from the lesson that you have been taking, of course . . . but moving in a different vision. And that was the way that you start to construct the goals.

Other activists described more short-term partnerships with more privileged groups, but even these demanded patience and the ability to focus on long-term interests. For example, Smith described a short-lived coalition between the Chippewa and sport fishers who worked together to oppose the local threat posed by a proposed mine. One of Smith's mentors urged her to overlook the racist epithets used by the sport fishers when they opposed claims by Natives to sovereignty over the area, in order to join forces with them. The coalition succeeded in keeping the mine from being opened, preserving the natural area over which the two groups had previously been fighting.

The activists in this project were selected because they work for groups facing multiple forms of subordination based not only on gender but also on race, poverty, and sexuality. In most of their narratives of forming alliances across power differentials, therefore, the women we interviewed represented the coalition partner with more limited access to social privilege and traditional economic and political resources. However, some of the activists discussed alliances in which they had participated where they were the privileged partner. For example, Asch, a white woman, and Boggs, a Chinese American woman, both discussed work in the US civil rights movement. Others spoke explicitly of their own sense of privilege as First World women, or as women who had had access to educational opportunities, and felt responsibility to work for and with groups who did not share these privileges. Limbal recalled an older mentor explaining to her that the relationship between people of color in the United States and the exploitative conditions faced by those in Third World countries were analogous to the relationship between house slaves and field slaves.

So I feel like as people within the United States . . . I think we have like a very specific role, a very particular role that we need to be playing in terms of solidarity with, you know, our brothers and sisters that are in the Third World . . . because we are living within the nation that . . . has a huge hand in maintaining the conditions that exist in the Third World, you know? And like as people that . . . that kind of benefit from the comforts and the things, you know, that we have here. Like we have that responsibility to . . . acknowledge that privilege and also to, to be responsible about it, you

know, to be in solidarity. . . . And then I think it's something that, you know, I'm going to venture out and say I think it's something that a lot of folks within Sista II Sista like feel that way.

This consciousness and sense of responsibility motivated Sista II Sista to form a solidarity team that carries out activities such as selling clothing made by a women's cooperative in Mexico at the ideal price set by the workers. Limbal called this a form of economic solidarity, as a portion of the profits were kept by Sista II Sista.

These interviews suggest some of the challenges faced by organizations attempting to work across differences of power. Powerful groups may assume that their practices and internal dynamics are universal and thus should be transparent to all. Such assumptions may pose an additional burden for coalition partners with less power and privilege. Not only must they do the political work, but they must also struggle to decode what is unsaid and then communicate that information back to their coalition partners, who may not be eager to receive feedback reminding them of their blind spots. Activists who recounted such narratives invariably commented on the toll this "double shift" can take. For this reason, some strategically chose only short-term alliances across differences of power.

Martha A. Ackelsberg called for feminist theorists of multiculturalism to engage the real-life political work of activists in order to understand how to effect social change even in the face of the complexities posed by identity. She argued that "our theories and our models of politics are only just beginning to catch up to the best of our practice. . . . We have not looked as carefully as we might at the places where people from a variety of identity categories have actually engaged in real-life political struggle and resistance."<sup>19</sup> In this article, we have attempted to use activists' narratives to do just that, essentially using feminist practice to hone, or even to generate, feminist theory. This is one of the oldest traditions within US feminism, yet one that has languished. What have we learned?

First, in these narratives identity played a central role in the creation of a sense of solidarity, but importantly, these were political identities the



activists actively constructed rather than those based on ascribed or fixed categories. The negotiation of identity, of defining "us and them," was not a theoretical pursuit but an organizational prerequisite, particularly when forming alliances among subordinated groups. This recalls Ackelsberg's observation that group identities are constructed *through* political work, rather than outside of it. These activists' reflections on the challenges of creating alliances, even within groups whose shared interests might appear superficially obvious (e.g., women of color, Palestinian women), confirm the socially constructed and shifting nature of identity groups, suggesting that Butler's fears of fixed identities narrowing the scope and impact of political organizing may be unfounded. Moreover, rather than suggesting that any specific identity is best suited to foster such alliances, these narratives demonstrate how these alliances have the potential to generate new kinds of knowledge and political analysis.

Second, these accounts illustrate the power of such alliances when they function well. The feminist literature on coalitions often cites Reagan's reflections on the pain and effort this process entails.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, this has underemphasized the fact that many coalitions benefit not only those involved but often those outside the formal coalition as well. For example, in a case study of Ojeda's organization, the CJM, Joe Bandy argued that points of conflict are viewed by organizers as productive spaces where change can emerge. Disagreements between member organizations, including issues related to strategies, goals, and access to different resources, means that tensions are continually present and that CJM (like other coalitions) has the potential to reproduce power inequalities. But "brokers" such as Ojeda bring groups together across differences of power and identity, facilitating the process of getting members to engage in "cautious and measured cooperation" that creates cultures of solidarity.<sup>21</sup> Our interviewees suggest that a sense of some shared values provides a basis for a successful coalition whether working with those assumed to be similar or different. Rather than attempting to create false unity to achieve goals, engaging conflicting views while ultimately focusing on a shared commitment allows activists to take on difficult questions while moving the coalition forward.

Thus, two conclusions emerge from our analysis; together, they form a kind of dialectic. On the one hand, activists drew on their autobiographies, imaginations, and intellects to construct broad and inclusive political identities capable of inspiring connections and solidarity, both within seemingly "natural" constituencies and externally across groups deemed different. On the other hand, their organizing strategies suggested the importance of dealing with difference explicitly in order to sustain the collective activities necessary for accomplishing political goals. The synthesis of these two conclusions, as instantiated in these activists' work, represents a fruitful way forward for feminist organizing across difference.

#### NOTES

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13. See especially, Suzanne Staggenborg, "Coalition Work in the Pro-Choice Movement: Organizational and Environmental Opportunities and Obstacles," *Social Problems* 33 (June 1986): 374-90; Van Dyke, "Crossing Movement Boundaries," 226-50.
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## Appendix

List of interviewees, position at the time of their interview, and primary area(s) of activism

### **Rabab Abdulhadi**

*Academic, Arab American studies*

Palestinian self-determination and the well-being of Palestinian women

### **Adrienne Asch**

*Academic, Bioethics*

Bio-ethics, reproduction, and disability

### **Grace Lee Boggs**

*Community organizer*

Labor, civil rights, Black power, Asian American, women's, and environmental justice

### **Cathy Cohen**

*Academic, Political Science*

Queer issues across communities of color

### **Holly Hughes**

*Academic, Theater, Performance artist*

Sexuality, identity, personal narrative, and freedom of expression

### **Martha Ojeda**

*Attorney, Executive Director, Tri-national Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladora*

Empowerment, education, and training for workers

### **Loretta Ross**

*National coordinator, SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective*

Reproductive justice, human rights, and opposition to hate groups

### **Loira Limbal and Verónica Giménez**

*Community organizers for Sista II Sista*

Education, personal development, and empowerment for young Black and Latina women

### **Andrea Lee Smith**

*Academic, Women's studies and American culture*

Violence against women of color and Native American issues

### **Maureen Taylor and Marion Kramer**

*Community activists*

Civil rights, welfare rights, entitlement of the poor to basic services such as utilities

## notes on contributors

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