

Building Coalitional Consciousness

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In this essay, I argue for the practice of “coalitional consciousness-building,” a method of self and collective education toward coalition. The approach itself is based on the radical democratic practice of feminist consciousness-raising, yet reconfigures the method in several ways in light of critiques by women-of-color feminists. In particular, I draw upon the insights of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, María Lugones, and Bernice Johnson Reagon as well as upon examples of approaches used by consciousness-raising groups that had success in engendering solidarity across multiple lines of difference to suggest a process of coalitional consciousness-building. The process includes the following three steps: (1) sharing experiences related to a theme in a way that pays close attention to the national, racial, and class and other relevant contexts and histories in which the experiences being articulated are being played out; (2) examining the experiences with an eye for the multiple relations of oppression and resistance at play; (3) exploring the barriers to, and possibilities for, coalitional action with regard to the experiences. Such a practice, I argue, could help contribute to the development of a feminist movement culture that is oriented toward the work of building and sustaining coalition.

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For many of us, the circles of belonging that we are born into and to which we are trained to direct our efforts and concerns are quite small and often homogenous. In particular, for those of us who are immersed in the pervasive individualism and segregation of U.S. society, when it comes to doing political work for social change across lines of difference, often we are not practiced in the habits of coalition, especially in the habits of what María Lugones calls deep coalitions, those coalitions that go beyond short-term interest-based alliances and challenge us to align our own self-understandings, interests, and goals with other oppressed groups (2003, 26). Given these conditions that confine our senses of belonging, what are some strategies that feminists can use to foster a turning toward coalition in ourselves and each other? In this essay, I argue for one such method (to be used in conjunction with other activist approaches) to orient ourselves toward coalition, one that I call “coalitional consciousness-building.”¹

The approach itself is based on the radical democratic practice of feminist consciousness-raising, yet reconfigures the method in several ways in light of critiques of second-wave feminism in the United States. In particular, I draw upon the insights of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, María Lugones, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, as well as upon examples of approaches used by consciousness-raising groups that had success in engendering solidarity across multiple lines of difference to suggest a process of coalitional consciousness-building. The process includes the following three steps: (1) sharing thematically related experiences in a way that highlights the national, racial, sexual, class, and other contexts and histories relevant to the experiences; (2) examining the experiences with an eye for the multiple relations of oppression and resistance at play in them; and (3) exploring the barriers to, and possibilities for, coalitional action with regard to the experiences. Such a practice, I argue, could contribute to the development of a feminist movement culture that is oriented toward the work of building and sustaining coalitions.

Feminist Consciousness-Raising as Radical Democratic Practice

In the early days of what has become known as the “second wave” of feminism in the United States, much thought went into theorizing practice.² One particularly innovative and influential method that second-wave feminists developed was feminist consciousness-raising. The practice was first proposed in the late 1960s by the group New York Radical Women who were inspired by the Chinese communist practice of “speaking pain” and by the freedom schools and other popular education practices of the civil rights movement in the United States. Kathie Sarachild, one of the members of New York Radical Women, recalled that the method began in a study group dedicated to understanding the ways that sexist oppression shaped women’s lives and choices. Because so little existing theory and knowledge about women could be trusted, the study group turned to what each woman could know and trust—her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In this way, the group hoped to learn about “the whole gamut of women’s lives, starting with the full reality of one’s own” (1978, 145). Sarachild recounts that “one of the questions we would bring to all of our studies would be who and what has an interest in maintaining the oppression in our lives” (1978, 145). She explains that asking these questions had a profound effect upon the group:

From our consciousness-raising meetings was coming the writing which was formulating basic theory for the women’s liberation movement [such as Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the

Vaginal Orgasm," and Pat Mainardi's "The Politics of Housework"]. Most of us were already radicals; but we were discovering that we were only beginning to have a radical understanding of women—and of other issues of class, race, and revolutionary change . . . it suddenly became apparent that women could be doing on a mass scale what we were doing in our own group, that the next logical radical action would be to get the word out about what we were doing. (1978, 146–7)

In 1968, the group introduced the concept and practice of feminist consciousness-raising to the public at the first National Women's Liberation Conference in Chicago. In her speech to the conference titled, "A Program for Feminist 'Consciousness-raising,'" Sarachild urged her fellow feminists to form consciousness-raising groups to "share our feelings and pool them. Let's let ourselves go and see where our feelings lead us. Our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions. Our feelings will lead us to our theory, our theory to our action, our feelings about that action to new theory and then to new action" (1970, 78).

Although the idea of consciousness-raising groups was often met with derision, even from leftist men who ridiculed the groups as "hen parties" or "bitch sessions," the opposition did not stop the practice from catching on. In her account of the spread and impact of consciousness-raising groups on U.S. feminism, *Women Together, Women Alone: The Legacy of the Consciousness Raising Movement*, Anita Shreve notes that "by 1970 there were small women's groups, most of which met for the practice of consciousness-raising, in every major city of the country. New York City alone had hundreds of such groups. Most universities were forming consciousness-raising groups. Even high schools were organizing" (1989, 11). By 1972, she continues, "consciousness-raising . . . was among the Women's Movement's highest priorities" and by 1973 "some 100,000 women belonged to consciousness-raising groups nationwide—making it one of the largest ever education and support movements of its kind for women in the history of this country (1989, 6).³

There were no set rules for forming or conducting consciousness-raising groups, but there were general guidelines for the practice that were adopted by many groups. An iteration of these guidelines was published as a "Guide to Consciousness-raising" (Anonymous 1975). The guide suggested, for example, that groups should meet regularly, should be comprised of six to ten participants, and should pay close attention to questions of transportation, food, and child care so that no one is excluded from participation (Anonymous 1975, 113–5). Further, groups were discouraged from having leaders so as to "eliminate preexisting habits of passivity, dominance, the need for outside instruction, or a hierarchy, even if it is to take care of functional details" (Anonymous 1975, 115). Such practices, the guide asserts, would facilitate the input from all members

of the group. It is this emphasis on the importance of each woman's participation and on non-hierarchical approaches to political community, notes Drucilla Cornell, that mark feminist consciousness-raising as an "experiment in radical democracy" (2000, 42).

According to Anita Shreve, consciousness-raising groups had an average life of about two years and almost all the groups followed a meeting format (or "something similar to a format") based on the process recommended by the New York Radical Women and fine-tuned by other groups (1989, 13). The meetings centered on a particular theme and generally followed a three-step method of sharing, analysis, and action planning. Groups were encouraged to come up with their own themes or choose from a list of questions that other groups had found useful. Themes that the "Guide to Consciousness-raising" suggests, for example, include the following:

"What was our earliest childhood awareness of being trained to behave as a girl? How were brothers or boys in the neighborhood raised, treated, or educated differently? What was our first work experience? Current work experiences?" (Anonymous 1975, 116-7)

The first step of the process of understanding and analyzing the theme was to gather group members' experiences of the theme. Each member of the group would have a turn to share her experience. Interruption and judgment were discouraged so that each group member could be heard and so the conversation could remain focused (Anonymous 1975, 116; Sarachild 1978, 148). The next step of the process involved the analysis of the shared experiences. The "Guide to Consciousness-raising" describes this "summing up process" as follows: "after each woman has given her testimony the whole group should discuss the common elements in our experiences, and how that commonality relates to the role of women as a group" (Anonymous 1975, 118). After this step the group would often strategize action. Kathie Sarachild suggests, for example, that the group "may try to find the common element and see what conclusions can be drawn . . . during this process certain collective actions may become clear to the women present" (1978, 144).

Feminist consciousness-raising had a tremendous impact on U.S. society. It is through the practice of consciousness-raising, for example, says Catherine MacKinnon in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, that the notion of the "personal is political" began to take root as women in the groups began "'to unpack the moment-to-moment meaning of being a woman in a society that men dominate . . . [and look] at how women see their everyday lives" (1989, 104-5). Shreve observes that consciousness-raising had a cultural and political effect that extended beyond the groups themselves:

Not only did it transform the lives of most of the women who participated, but it also did so for millions of women who did not participate but who benefited from the phenomenon as feminist thinking began to pervade the culture. Indeed, much of the ‘basic training’ that was accomplished in small consciousness-raising groups is now simply taken for granted. Critical areas of adulthood—sexuality, marriage, work, and motherhood—were forever changed. (1989, 15)

Given that often experiments in radical democratic practice are discouraged as utopian or ineffective, it is important to remember the large-scale transformations generated, in part, by feminist consciousness-raising. Indeed, as an experiment in radical democracy, feminist consciousness-raising was and is a very important methodological intervention in political praxis in several important ways. First, its emphasis on women’s day-to-day lives, thoughts, and experiences challenges the public/private divide by making explicit the political implications of women’s so-called “personal lives.” Further, in a political culture dominated by divisions between “organizers” and “organized” and between “leaders” and “followers,” its stress on the value of each woman’s experience and knowledge serves to build nonhierarchical and transformative spaces for thinking about and acting upon one’s own and each other’s different situations. Finally, by challenging the divide between theory and practice, consciousness-raising provides a model for ways to create knowledge and theory in a participatory and collective manner; as Catherine MacKinnon notes, the assumption at the root of the process is that “everyone is a theorist” (1989, 102). These contributions all indicate that the practice of consciousness-raising should be kept as a valuable tool in the feminist pedagogic and movement-building toolbox.

Methodological Pitfalls of Second-Wave Feminist Consciousness-Raising

While the importance of consciousness-raising as a feminist and radical democratic practice should be recognized, critiques of second-wave feminism suggest that the method itself must be rethought and reworked. Although the second-wave feminist movement was articulated as a struggle for liberation and inclusion for all women, women of color, third-world women, working-class women, and lesbians, among others, have critiqued it for its own exclusionary practices. In particular, critics point the second-wave movement’s failure to fully incorporate struggles against global, racial, class, and sexual inequalities into its analyses, goals, and strategies. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “even today African-American, Hispanic, Native American women and Asian American women criticize the feminist movement and its

scholarship for being racist and overly concerned with white, middle-class women's issues" (1990, 7). According to Collins, "theories advanced as being universally applicable to women as a group on closer examination appear greatly limited by the white middle-class origins of their proponents" (1990, 7). By failing to incorporate close attention to racial, class, sexual, national, and other differences and the unequal power dynamics among women themselves that have been linked to those differences into feminist analysis and practice, the movement failed to build or sustain long-standing feminist coalitions across lines of race, class, sexuality, and nationality. As Barbara Smith notes, failing to build a coalitional feminism is a failure of feminism itself: "Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement" (1990, 25).

What implications do the failures of the second-wave feminist movement in building and sustaining coalitions have on understandings—and practices—of consciousness-raising? Critiques by those marginalized in second-wave feminism also illuminate the methodological pitfalls of the consciousness-raising model so central to second-wave feminism's development. These include the dangers of centering the analytic practice of searching for commonalities, of not paying close attention to inequitable power relations among women themselves, and of an understanding of the consciousness-raising group as a "safe" space. I'll examine each of these three methodological tendencies before suggesting ways to address them.

The Dangers of the Me Too Moment

At the analytic heart of feminist consciousness-raising method was a search for commonalities, for discovering and articulating what was similar in women's experiences as a way to build knowledge about women's lives. According to the "Guide to Consciousness-raising," a hallmark of the summing up process, and of the consciousness-raising group in general, is "the often repeated statement, 'You feel like that? My God, I thought only I felt like that.'" In her interviews, Anita Shreve found that this was indeed a common refrain in people's recollections of their consciousness-raising experiences. One woman that Shreve interviewed, for example, relates that in a discussion of body image she noticed "as the women talked, that it didn't matter how they actually looked—each of them thought there was something wrong with her. It was *exactly* how I'd felt, how I was feeling then. . . . It was incredible" (1989, 40). In her article,

"Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that such moments of identification—the "me too" moments so common in accounts of consciousness-raising—can be dangerous for feminists (1998). She writes that "it is on the basis of shared experience that feminists of different political persuasions have argued for unity or identity among women" and that this emphasis on commonality has had "problematic effects in the area of race and third world/postcolonial studies" (1998, 255). She urges her readers to remember that gender is produced as well as uncovered in feminist discourse and that all too often "the homogeneity of women as a group is predicated on a definition of an experience of oppression where difference can only be understood as male/female" (1998, 463). From Mohanty's perspective, these "me too" moments are risky because they can serve to downplay important differences between women and reify gender as the only difference that counts for feminism.

Power-Obscuring "Unity"

In addition to the search for commonalities as the analytic focus of the consciousness-raising method, the assumption that women make up a unified category often made it difficult to point out and address power imbalances among women themselves. In her account of the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference on racism in the feminist movement, Chela Sandoval notes that the emphasis on unity was extremely alienating for women of color and that efforts to demand "the recognition of differences from the inside of this unity . . . were either ignored or seen as acts of betrayal" (1990, 66). Indeed, Anita Shreve notes that among the former consciousness-raising group members that she interviewed, only one woman, an African American, "brings up what is perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of the legacy of the woman's movement—that of women exploiting other women" (1989, 180).

Several accounts of consciousness-raising practice do discuss and celebrate difference; however, they often do so in a way that tends to obscure power relations among women rather than clarify or challenge them (there are exceptions to this, of course, some of which I will discuss later in the paper). For many women, the opportunity to interact with women from varied backgrounds was a central component of their consciousness-raising experience. For example, in one interview, a former consciousness-raising group member recalled her recognition of the incredible diversity of women in the room:

I thought to myself, hey wait a minute, she is a thirty year old Irish woman who had had a completely different education and background from myself and

this other woman is a 22-year old woman who also has had a totally different cultural background from myself, and so how is it that we three are sitting here in this same room and the words that are coming out of their mouths are exactly what I feel? . . . You cannot imagine how wonderful that felt . . . it was absolutely my rebirth as a human being. (Shreve 1989, 59)

In her narrative, the member identifies and celebrates difference, but such affirmation does not challenge her to rethink her own position in relation to power and privilege. Instead, her acknowledgment of diversity of women confirms her notion of the fundamental unity of women. According to Elsa Barkely Brown, this understanding of difference as benign and non-challenging is as dangerous and as deadening to coalition-building as the erasure of difference itself. Brown argues that in order to build effective and inclusive feminist coalitions, “we need to recognize not only differences but also the relational nature of those differences . . . white women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do (1992, 298). In Brown’s account, building feminist solidarity requires critical self-reflection that acknowledges that how one lives impacts the lives that others are able to live. For her women are closely linked but not innocently so: we are all connected because of our relational insertion into hierarchies of power and privilege, hierarchies that we also can resist and transform. To the extent that its methodological assumption of unity conceals this dimension of connection among women, participants in consciousness-raising practice lose the opportunity both to see and to remake the very real and often troubling links between women.

Not a Safe Space

Finally, the tendency to think of consciousness-raising groups as “safe” spaces undermines the possibilities of creating the necessarily risky but potentially productive openings in these groups that would be required to create effective and deep coalitions. One of the recommendations that the “Guide to Consciousness-raising” makes to those interested in starting a consciousness-raising group is that the group should be a “free place . . . a group of supportive and non-judging friends who are there to help when we come back battered or ridiculed from trying to change our worlds” (Anonymous 1975, 112). Such an assertion rests on a notion that feminist solidarity should be both comfortable and comforting. Bernice Johnson Reagon’s article “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” advises us, however, that we can’t long for comfort or safety when building feminist coalitional solidarity. Reflecting upon her experiences in the civil rights movement and the feminist movement in the United States, she contests

the notion that there are safe spaces for coalition work. In fact, Reagon holds that one way for a person to tell that he or she is doing coalition work is the experience of profound discomfort. For example, she writes that when she is working in coalition, she often feels as if she is going to “keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you are really doing coalition work” (1998, 242). In making this argument, Reagon is working against a notion that gatherings of women are and should be “safe” spaces where conflicts are few. Instead, she observes, coalition work “is some of the most dangerous work you can do. . . . Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They’re not looking for a coalition, they’re looking for a home!” (1998, 245).

Coalitional Consciousness-Building

In response to the above critiques of the model of feminist consciousness-raising that marked second-wave feminist practice, I recommend a model of explicitly coalitional consciousness-building that draws upon the insights of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, María Lugones, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, and of examples of approaches used by consciousness-raising groups that had success in engendering awareness and solidarity across multiple lines of difference. By naming the practice “coalitional consciousness-building” instead of “coalitional consciousness-raising,” my intention is to echo the usage of the phrase “coalition-building” and to emphasize coalitional consciousness not as an entity lying dormant or hidden that needs to be elevated or brought to light but rather as a set of understandings, motivations, and ways of seeing that can be constructed, formed, and fostered together. Such a practice, I’ll argue, might incorporate the following three steps:

Step One: Locating Experience

In a small group that meets regularly, share experiences relating to a chosen theme, paying close attention to the national, racial, class, and other relevant contexts and histories in which the experiences being articulated are being played out.

Step Two: Seeing Resistance to Multiple Oppressions

Examine the experiences with an eye for the multiple relations of oppression and resistance at play.

Step Three: Coalitional Risk-Taking

Explore the barriers to, and possibilities for, coalitional action with regards to the experience. What are the power relations among women themselves that must be challenged in order to build and sustain coalitional action?

In order to illustrate how a coalitional consciousness-building approach using these three steps might proceed, and how it might differ from a second-wave feminist consciousness-raising approach, I will flesh out each of these three steps.

Step One: Locating Experience

To counter the impulse toward homogenization in feminist theorizing, Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that much more attention be paid to history, to context, and to location. She argues that “the experience of the self, which is often discontinuous and fragmented, must be historicized before it can be generalized into a collective vision. In other words, experience must be historically interpreted and theorized if it is to become the basis of feminist solidarity and struggle” (1998, 269). Although Mohanty’s suggestions for rethinking the basis of feminist solidarity are directed to feminist scholars, her advice can be useful for a reconfiguration of the practice of consciousness-raising as a feminist method of coalition-building as well. Taking up her advice to pay close attention to the context and historical location of an experience suggests an interrogative structure that could be usefully brought to bear on a particular experience articulated in a coalitional consciousness-building group. Questions that might be highlighted and examined about an experience related to the theme at hand might include those such as:

- How was your experience marked by your own and others’ particular racial, sexual, national, class, or other context?
- Whose interests are served and whose are not by the ways that you and others are/were racialized/gendered/classed/sexualized in the experience?

Some consciousness-raising groups did indeed pay close attention to the contexts of their experiences. In describing her own group, for example, Drucilla Cornell notes that her mostly Latina and African American (with the exception of Cornell herself) consciousness-raising group “spent hours discussing the specificity of how we were femmed differently because race and class were integral to the mapping of femininity onto femaleness . . . we saw ourselves as creating new representations of ourselves as a group without minimizing the differences of race, class, ethnicity, and national background among us” (2000, 44). A coalitional consciousness-building approach would draw upon this description as a consciousness-raising “best practice” and incorporate it into a method of collective education toward coalition.

Such attention to context would contribute to coalitional consciousness-building by illuminating different ways that each participant is raced/classed/gendered. As Lynett Uttal notes, it is not only women of

color that are raced or poor women that are classed in our society, as is commonly represented; key to struggling against multiple forms of domination and inequality is recognizing that "'gender', 'race' and 'class' are . . . dynamic social processes in which everyone is located" (1990, 43). Further, exploring questions of context would poise us to investigate race/class/gendering as extremely varied and interconnected processes. For example, Aída Hurtado observes that women of color and white women often have different experiences of gender subordination (and receive different treatment when they rebel):

[White women's relational position to] and everyday interactions with white men . . . promote and reinforce white women's socialization to docility, passivity, and allegiance to white men, so that white women experience an individualized and internalized form of social control . . . in contrast, people of color, as a group, do not have constant family interactions with white men, and social control is exerted in a direct and impersonal manner. . . . When white middle-class women rebel they are accused of mental illness and placed in mental institutions. When people of color rebel, they are accused of violence and placed in prisons. This difference in treatment is related to the distance of each group from the centers of power. (1996, 19)

An open-ended, collective exploration about who and what ends particular forms of race/class/gendering serve in different contexts could help us to understand the myriad ways that inequitable power relations—in both personal and impersonal guises—shape our lives as well as underscore the urgency for working together to transform these relations.

Step Two: Seeing Resistance to Multiple Oppressions

In the second-wave feminist consciousness-raising group process, after the group members share their experiences, the group would proceed collectively to examine the pooled experiences in search of commonalities in order to understand the workings of gender oppression in women's lives. The coalitional consciousness-building approach that I am suggesting would proceed differently. Instead of searching for commonalities among the experiences, after sharing their (located, context-rich) experiences, members would collectively analyze the shared experiences in order to understand the multiple relations of oppression and resistance at play in the scenarios. In her book *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, María Lugones names this process of looking for, recognizing, and validating resistances—whether these resistances be defiantly public or, as is more often the case, quietly and subversively hidden—"faithful witnessing."⁴ While "a collaborator witnesses on the side of power," Lugones explains that "a faithful witness

witnesses against the grain of power, on the side of resistance. To witness faithfully, one must be able to sense resistance, to interpret behavior as resistant even when it is dangerous, when that interpretation places one psychologically against common sense" (2003, 7). In this step, participants would develop their capacity for faithful witnessing by looking for and analyzing resistance in their own and each other's experiences. In addition, members might explore ways that different resistances to relations of domination and subordination impact each other. Such a step would highlight the multiplicity of relational hierarchies of power—of race, of class, of gender, of nationality, for example—at play in different contexts and take up (in order to transform) what Lugones describes as the "actuality and possibility of relations . . . of women standing on the oppression of other women, women colluding with the reduction of other women, women colluding with the blocking of other women's possibilities" (2003, 32).

What might this step look like in a coalitional consciousness-building group and what kind of solidarity might it effect? As in a conventional consciousness-raising group, in this step the group would move from the articulation of individual experiences to a collective analysis of the shared experiences. In order to develop a sense of the varied relations of power at play in the different experiences described and the ways people do or could resist these relations, group members might examine the experiences with the following questions in mind:

- What are the multiple relations of power at play in the scenarios?
- How are group members inserted within these multiple relations of power?
- In what ways did group members resist these relations of subordination in the scenarios described?
- In what ways did group members resist relations of domination in the scenarios described?
- What are other possibilities for resisting both subordination and domination that may have existed in the scenarios described?

These questions assume that one can be located simultaneously as an "oppressor" and "oppressed" within a scenario, that both positionings may be resisted, and that one is not passive in either positioning. The resistances themselves may be small or large; organized or spontaneous; easily understood as resistance or obscured by readings of them as trivial, criminal, or nonsensical; public or very circumspect (Lugones 2003; Kelley 1994; Scott 1990). Exploring these questions collectively could help us to develop a keen eye for both the intersection of different relations of power and the way power moves through our lives to both enable and constrain resistance as well as to enforce or forbid particular interpretations of resistance. As such, this step might enable us to build what Lugones calls "larger and complex resistant collective subjectivities, more complex seeing circles" (2003, 160).

In her work, Lugones articulates a notion of coalitional solidarity as “grounded not in coincidences of individual or group interests but in multiple understandings of oppressions and resistances” (2003, 30). For her, because our own understandings and potential enactments of our lives are deeply tied to one another and to the meanings that we create together, coalition is “the horizon that rearranges both our possibilities and the conditions of those possibilities” (2003, ix). The goal of feminist consciousness-raising according to the “Guide to Consciousness-raising” is to “eventually find out not only who we are, but the political relation of women to society as a whole” (Anonymous 1975, 112). Taking up Lugones’s notion of coalitional solidarity, the open-ended goal of coalitional consciousness-building would be a kaleidoscopic understanding of many different “wes” in relation to many different “thems” in order to not only find out who these collectives are but also create new possibilities for their existence, enactment, and expression.

Step Three: Coalitional Risk-Taking

Far from being refuges or safe havens, for Bernice Johnson Reagon relations of coalitional solidarity require one to be prepared to take many risks, to challenge others, and to be willing and open to being challenged oneself (Reagon 1998, 252). The third step of the process of coalitional consciousness-building would investigate what taking these risks and making these challenges might entail, both within the group and within society more broadly. In this step, group members would interrogate the possibilities for coalitional action with regard to the experiences that they have shared and analyzed. In consideration of the links between multiple forms of oppression, in planning coalitional action, group members would be closely attentive to the possibility that some strategies of action might challenge one form of oppression while reinforcing or even bolstering others.⁵ Questions that might be asked in this step include the following:

- What are the possibilities for coalitional action in regard to the analyzed experiences?
- What are the barriers to coalitional action in regard to the analyzed experiences?
- What are the possibilities for potential courses of coalitional action to disrupt one form of oppression or domination but reinforce another?
- What power relations among the group have to be challenged and transformed in order to pursue coalitional action with one another?

These are difficult questions to ask in that they, in the words of María Lugones, require us to “risk our ground” (2003, 96). These risks will be

different depending on one's insertion into relations of power. For example, for a woman of color, "risking her ground" in planning coalitional action might mean the possibility of yet more betrayals (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981, 63–106; Anzaldúa 1990, 3–71). For a white woman to "risk her ground" might mean continuously acknowledging and rejecting her own privileging by the racial state. These are only two of many potential risks in what would be understood as a necessarily and importantly conflict-laden location, with conflict understood as potentially clarifying and transforming.⁶ Chela Sandoval's account of the Third World Feminist Consciousness-raising Group at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference gives an example of such an understanding of conflict; in the consciousness-raising sessions, she explains "the deluge of differences which mark the separate worlds of our experiences [and] our differing opinions seemed to place us in opposition to one another. We managed this seeming conflict by considering our differences, not as idiosyncratic and personal but as a rich source of tactical and strategic responses to power" (1990, 67). As with Drucilla Cornell's earlier description of the close attention paid to context in her consciousness-raising group, we can consider this attention to the necessity of conflict and risk as another consciousness-raising "best practice" to be incorporated into a model of coalitional consciousness-building. As in Sandoval's experience, keeping the focus on the multiple possibilities for collective action and its transformative power will, in the best cases, give members courage and strength to bear the inherent risks of the process.

Possible Futures

Toward the end of her account of the impact of consciousness-raising on U.S. feminism, Anita Shreve calls for a revival of the practice. In particular, she argues that such a revival would be "vital for a younger generation of women, few of whom have ever had the benefit of consciousness-raising or of the collective support of other women (1989, 235). In contemporary U.S. feminist politics there are some indications that the practice of consciousness-raising might be taken up on a large scale again. For example, in their popular book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards recommend that feminists resume the practice and point their readers to resources such as the early guides to consciousness-raising as a way to start their own groups (2000). I see this as a tremendously hopeful development in contemporary feminism, but I assert that the practice of consciousness-raising needs to be rethought in light of women of color's critiques of the tendency toward homogenization in experience-centered modes of feminist analysis, of the lack of attention to power imbalances between women themselves,

and of the notion of feminist spaces as “safe.” This article attempts to do such a rethinking.

I want to end with a caveat. One of the wonderful features about the consciousness-raising approach as an experiment in radical democracy is that while as a method it had some specific characteristics, it had no official rules (there are no Robert’s rules of consciousness-raising order, for example!) and could be adapted to different situations. Similarly, in suggesting a method of coalitional consciousness-building, I want to offer some ways about thinking about a practice that might orient us toward coalition, while at the same time leave that process open to change, adaptation, and revision.⁷

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Notes

1. See for example, strategies for coalition recommended in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* (Lugones 2003), *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray! Feminist Visions for a Just World* (Albrecht et al. 2003), and *Bridges of Power: Women’s Multicultural Alliances* (Albrecht and Brewer 1990).
2. This essay focuses on the practice of consciousness-raising in the United States. For an account of consciousness-raising groups in other national contexts, see Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes’ “Female Consciousness or Feminist Consciousness?: Women’s Consciousness Raising in Community Based Struggles in Brazil” (2003).
3. By the late 1970s, however, feminist consciousness-raising as a practice declined in the United States, due, Shreve speculates, to a changing political climate, expanding career opportunities for women, and to the women’s movement’s shift in emphasis from consciousness-raising on a large scale to activist issues on a smaller one (1989, 30).
4. This section on seeing resistance is indebted not only to Lugones’s *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, but also to her theoretico-practical work on resistance in the popular education group *La Escuela Popular Nortena* (EPN) of which we are both members. For an analysis of an EPN popular education workshop that centers on the notion of seeing, understanding, and backing up resistance, see Beltré et al. “Towards a Practice of Radical Engagement: EPN’s ‘Politicizing the Everyday’ Workshop.”

5. For example, feminists of color in the activist organization "Incite! Women of Color Against Violence" have critiqued the mainstream feminist movement for turning to the prison-industrial complex in the struggle against violence against women. They argue that this approach to stopping violence against women enhances the power and reach of the police and legal system to brutalize and criminalize communities of color and thus paradoxically increases the violence in women of color's lives (Critical Resistance and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, "Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex").
6. For the purposes of this essay, I am assuming a coalitional consciousness-building group comprised of women from varying racial, class, and national backgrounds. Other configurations of coalitional consciousness-building groups, such as groups comprising both men and women or women of color-only groups, are possible (and sometimes preferable depending on the collectivity and its ends); see for example Chela Sandoval's discussion of the importance of women of color-only space in the third-world feminist consciousness-raising group at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association conference (Sandoval 1990, 61–3).
7. If you are interested in forming a coalitional consciousness-building group, you might start the way that the early feminist practitioners of consciousness-raising did: gather together a group of people interested in exploring issues of oppression and resistance, compile a list of themes that you would like to explore together, and begin exploring those themes through the process outlined above in either weekly, biweekly, or monthly meetings. As did the members of early consciousness-raising groups, participants might pool resources to take steps, such as hiring a babysitter, to enable everyone's participation in the group.

Although I would argue that such face-to-face encounters would be best for the practice of coalitional consciousness-building, we now have new possibilities for organizing such groups via the internet. In using forms of communication such as collective blogs, we might lose in terms of personal interaction but gain in terms of the possibility of meeting across geographic and other lines of difference. If you are interested in forming or joining an online coalitional consciousness-building group, please visit <http://ccbgroups.blogspot.com>. Of course, you can always start your own as well!

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