Empathy and Antiracist Feminist Coalitional Politics

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If there is one lesson we have learned over the course of our work, both academic and non-academic, it is that coalitional politics is hard and dangerous work. We have been part of groups that have made valuable contributions to their respective communities. Our own lives have been personally and politically enriched by such work. Yet, we have also seen our powerful coalitions crumble to dust. This paper comes out of our urgent need to make sense of these dissolutions and to figure out ways to move beyond the disillusionment of the moment. We argue here that in order to create real change we need to learn to work together both from our differences and in spite of them. The coalitions we form must be based not on shared experience but on a shared politics. Further, we reject empathy as an adequate tool for building such coalitions. We insist, instead, on the need for a shared intellectual understanding of relations of domination and subordination, and a shared commitment to ending oppression in all of its myriad forms.

Ann Russo: Not Shared Experience but Empathy

One of the most useful essays on the subject of antiracist feminist coalitions is Ann Russo's "We Cannot Live Without Our Lives": White Women, Antiracism, and Feminism." Russo is keenly aware of the importance of working with women different from herself, and is optimistic about the possibilities for such work. Throughout the long history of feminist movement in the U.S., there have been major problems involving "issues of representation, accountability, responsibility, and equal sharing of power and control" (Russo 301). In her essay, Russo provides a number of suggestions for white women to enable them to work towards ending oppression within feminist movement. First, she argues, they must analyze their own relationship to race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. She says, "We must accept that we are privileged as white people, and through our actions and inactions we have purposefully (or not) participated in and benefited from race and class (if middle-class) privilege in this society."

(309) Understanding their own implication in racist, capitalist patriarchy, white women must then reject the status quo and take responsibility for dismantling white supremacy. Russo insists that this move is crucial because race (and racism) significantly shapes the lives of white women and not just women of colour (300). An intersectional mode of analysis will make plain that race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, looks, disability, and age are all integral to sexism and misogyny. Recognizing the conflicts that are bound to arise when dealing with questions of privilege and oppression within activist communities, Russo exhorts all women to refrain from retreating from feminism out of frustration or guilt. Our job is to transform our epistemic lenses such that women of colour are "central to the theory and practice of feminism." (301) Change must occur in terms of leadership and access to resources. White women must let go of power and control, and difference must be embraced within feminist movement (305). Finally, Russo turns to the concept of empathy to provide white feminists with a tool for self-transformation. She states that white women must "acknowledge our own pain and suffering, so that our connection with women of color is one of mutual desire and need, not pity or arrogance." (307) This will enable white women to better empathize with the pain of women of colour. It will lead to outrage about racism instead of guilt, which is a fairly useless emotion in the context of progressive politics.

Empathy and Oppression

In marshalling empathy for the purposes of antiracist feminist organizing, Russo relies heavily on Cherríe Moraga's "La Güera," in the path-breaking collection This Bridge Called My Back. In this piece, Moraga suggests that "without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place." (Moraga 29) Building on these words, Russo claims that "By facing the ways in which I have been oppressed ... I am more able to empathize with the oppression of women of color, in both its similarities and its differences." (Russo 308) Russo here, as well as the Combahee River Collective in their classic statement, seem to claim that one's personal experience of oppression is the best motivator for struggles against racism, classism, homophobia, etc. In the words of the Combahee River Collective, "We believe that the most profound and potentially radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression." (CRC 212) This turn to empathy, and by extension, to one's own identity is troubling. While we agree that a sense of personal outrage is necessary for an individual to be able to commit herself heart and soul to the project of antiracist feminist struggle, we do not see identity as the sole or even the primary basis for radical consciousness. As Rosario Morales explains, "Color and class don't define people or politics. ... Understanding racist ideology - where and how it penetrates - is important for the feminist movement." (Morales 91) In what follows, we will be arguing that identity and empathy are both insufficient grounds for coalitional work.

Before we begin elaborating on our quibbles with Russo's use of the concept of empathy as a strategy for coalition building, we would like to briefly clarify the difference between empathy and sympathy, a term that is related to and often confused with the former. As we see it, sympathy is based on a vertical power relationship. The privileged individual, the person not experiencing the pain, feels sorry for...
Moving beyond Empathy

In her classic essay quoted earlier, "La Güera," Cherríe Moraga also starts with empathy. Like Russo, she claims, "I have come to believe that the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at how it is that they oppress, is when they've come to know the meaning of their own oppression." (Moraga 33) Empathy, it seems, might be a good way to "jumpstart" consciousness. Oppression may not seem like a reality to someone whose social location affords her various kinds of daily, unacknowledged benefits (Mclntosh, 358). But when such an individual is forced to examine and accept the ways in which she has been oppressed, the machinations of power become a reality to her. This, some would insist, will allow the individual to take the next step of thinking about ideologies and institutions that do not affect her directly but in which she too is implicated. Empathy may thus be a way of making real and tangible those experiences that people have read or heard about previously but to which they have not given much thought. But political alliances cannot rest on empathy alone. Russo's use of Moraga in her discussion of empathy leaves out a crucial part of the original argument. While Russo wants white women to come to full understanding of their particular oppression, Moraga requires that we broaden our understanding of oppression to include internalized oppression. How, she asks, have I oppressed myself and others, even those in my own identity group? (Moraga 30). This question forces one to examine one's complicity with systems of power and domination, and helps us understand the pernicious violence of internalized hatred. It forces us to consider how the violence we inflict upon ourselves is related to the ways in which we oppress others. As discussed earlier, Russo does want white women to recognize their privilege and to examine their own complicity with racist structures. However unlike Moraga, she does not link that self-critique to her appeal for
numerous interracial feminist groups and the experience organizing conferences, she writes: Papusa Molina makes a similar point about the place of passion and anger in antiracist feminist activism. Recounting her work in the kind of enraged and inspired action that we are asking of everyone involved in coalitional work.

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on the other hand, incites one to action. It leads "to passion, to incandescent anger, to wild indignation." (Roy 67) It leads, Roy argues, to outrage of the kind that Ann Russo discusses.

Russo makes this move out of fear that a discussion of their own racism will cause guilt and discomfort for white women, which in turn will lead to immobility. To her credit, she argues eloquently about the need for white women to leave behind this sense of guilt and defensiveness if they intend doing any productive coalitional work. Examining the ways in which we as individuals are all constituted by racist ideologies, and how white women (and men) benefit from these ideologies, should lead to outrage and action. This should not be compromised out of fear. An analysis of one's own oppression is important, but it would be meaningless if it were not accompanied with an analysis of one's role and participation in the oppression of others. In other words, one needs to address both of Moraga's questions (How have I internalized my oppression? How do I oppress?) to the same extent in order to effectively dismantle oppressive institutions. Attempting to answer the second question does not have to lead to paralysis; it can lead to self-awareness, which in turn would lead to action.

On Anger and Outrage: "I am not asking you to feel my anger. Understand it, and respect it."

Writer and activist Arundhati Roy draws a distinction between concern and empathy. Concern, Roy points out, is a dispassionate mode of engagement that might produce PhDs and journal articles, but not the kind of passionate commitment that is needed for social change. In other words, what comes out of concern is intellectual inquiry and nothing but that. Concern is distant, disengaged. Empathy, on the other hand, incites one to action. It leads "to passion, to incandescent anger, to wild indignation." (Roy 67) It leads, Roy argues, to outrage of the kind that Ann Russo discusses.

Roy's discussion of empathy brings a few questions to mind: Do empathy and outrage go hand in hand? Or is it intellectual understanding and outrage that go hand in hand? We have been arguing all along for the latter, for how can an intellectual understanding not be accompanied by outrage? If one understands the problem inside out, does that not lead automatically to outrage? The old adage comes to mind: if you're not outraged, you're not looking hard enough. It is important to note here that Roy's use of empathy is slightly different from Russo's application of the same term. The former is what we would term compassion, whereas the latter involves recognizing one's own oppression. Roy's description of the personal anger that those in positions of relative privilege should feel at the condition of the poor villagers being displaced by the Indian government's massive Narmada dam project is similar to the kind of enraged and inspired action that we are asking of everyone involved in coalitional work.

Papusa Molina makes a similar point about the place of passion and anger in antiracist feminist activism. Recounting her work in numerous interracial feminist groups and the experience organizing conferences, she writes:

We needed to admit that we hadn't learned how to work together, hadn't learned how to work across our differences. The fact that almost all of us were lesbians and/or feminists, with an intellectual understanding of racism, classism and homophobia didn't mean a damn thing. (Molina 327, italics added)
Molina's suggestion that intellectual understanding is insufficient grounds for successful coalitional work seems disheartening at first. But on closer reading, it actually is closer to Roy's discussion of concern and compassion. In both cases, the intellectual analysis (an abstract concern) is present, but the passion, the anger (compassion, or what Roy terms empathy) is missing. In an earlier passage Molina observes how the conferences that her group organized were a very different experience for the white women than for the women of colour. For the white women, "it was time only for guilt. There was no understanding of our rage, no clear sense of what we were talking about" despite the fact that they had all worked together for months, even years on end (Molina 327). As we have been arguing, following Ann Russo, guilt is not a productive emotion; anger and outrage can be.

Anger, Audre Lorde writes, is the appropriate response to injustice. Loaded as it is with "information and energy," it can be an important tool for self-empowerment and long-term structural change.

"Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies." (Lorde, "Uses of Anger" 127)

Anger, thus, is important and integral to the process of coalition building. It helps strengthen bonds between those working together to end oppression. Anger is not all destructive. It must be acknowledged and put to good use by the entire group, Lorde advises. Most importantly perhaps, this anger is not the exclusive purview of women of colour. We agree wholeheartedly with Russo when she writes, "We, white feminists, must learn to listen to the anger of women of color, and be similarly outraged by racism, rather than guilty, and to recognize that we are not powerless in our outrage, particularly as white women" (Russo 308). White feminists often feel a sense of personal outrage because of the knowledge that they too are implicated in the system. It is this kind of knowledge and this kind of outrage on the part of white women as well as women of colour that we believe is most productive. Furthermore, whether or not people in positions of power and privilege (white women, in this case) feel the anger of the oppressed, it is important that they understand the cause of the anger and trust that.

Principled Solidarity

In order for coalitions to be successful, there must be a clear understanding of what it means to be part of that particular group. Showing solidarity with the group does not merely mean sticking by one another. Individuals must coalesce around some notion of principled solidarity, a unity based on certain shared values and visions. As pointed out earlier, coalitions cannot be based on shared experience and certainly not on a shared fear of "the Man." In a famous statement, the anti-Nazi peace activist Rev. Martin Niemoller states:

When Hitler attacked the Jews I was not a Jew, therefore I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the Catholics, I was not a Catholic, and therefore, I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the unions and the industrialists, I was not a member of the unions and I was not concerned. Then Hitler attacked me and the Protestant church-- and there was nobody left to be concerned.4

Niemoller's call to action is based on the fear that one could be the next target of oppression. We contend that this kind of fear may unite disparate groups of people for specific, short term campaigns, but it will not prove useful in the long run since it does not force individuals to see how an injury to one person affects everybody. Again, this is why we find empathy a really problematic concept. It does not force people to be personally invested in causes that do not immediately affect them, and thus will not take us very far.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty beautifully articulates this same idea of principled solidarity in her introduction to Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism:

I am suggesting, then, an 'imagined community' of third world oppositional struggles. 'Imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within third world contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of the nation, calls 'horizontal comradeship.' ... (It is not color or sex which constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender-the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. (Mohanty 4)

Coalitional politics, thus, must be based on a shared understanding of oppression.5 Empathy (alone) cannot foster horizontal comradeship because it is, like sympathy, based on vertical, hierarchical power relations. What we need in lieu of empathy is a conscious disavowal of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Examining the ways in which we as individuals are constituted in and through interlocking, oppressive ideologies, as well as how we benefit from them, should lead to outrage and action on the part of all progressive individuals, not just those who are most obviously at the receiving end of the injustices. We must, furthermore, recognize that we are all disadvantaged by ideologies such as racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Bernice Johnson Reagon talks of the importance of keeping our principles intact as we go about the dangerous business of coalition building (362-363). "The thing that must survive you," she emphasizes, "is not just the record of your practice, but the principles that are the basis of your practice." (Reagon 366) We need to see our work combating racism, sexism, homophobia and other oppressive ideologies as a struggle for the future (not just a struggle for our own survival). This is why the principles on which our politics are based are more important than the specific actions we undertake.

Sustaining Coalitions

Given the herculean task that lies ahead of us, it seems clear that we need ways of sustaining our individual energies as well as the coalitions we form so we do not burn out before our work is done. Papusa Molina asks that we distinguish between coalitions and ideologies as a struggle for the future (not just a struggle for our own survival). This is why the principles on which our politics are based are more important than the specific actions we undertake.

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"Alliances, on the other hand, are about individuals, they are about love, they are about commitment and they are about responsibility. They are about concrete manifestations of our rebellious spirits and our sense of justice. They are about shared visions of a better society for all of us." (Molina 329)

Molina goes on to explain that one of the things that is needed in order to sustain alliances is a true understanding and appreciation of our differences. Difference, within alliances, is not threatening. It is in fact, as Audre Lorde insists, a source of creative strength: "Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged." (Lorde, "Master's Tools" 99). It is only through an honest examination of our differences that we can come to a knowledge of our interdependency, and an understanding of "the necessity of interdependency." (99) Molina's argument mirrors that of Lorde. She observes that living as we do in a culture that venerates sameness, we replicate that internalized principle of sameness even in the alternative organizations and institutions we set up (Molina 330). She insists that feminists learn to move beyond mere tolerance of difference. This harks back to our earlier discussion of empathy. To the extent that empathy is a way of erasing or at least minimizing differences in experience, it cannot be the most useful tool in coalitional work.

The kind of dialogue that Lorde and Molina advocate, as well as the shared experience of working closely with allies within such groups - fighting together, surviving together - produces the kind of connection it takes to sustain coalitions and/or alliances. In short, a shared understanding of oppression and a shared commitment to principles of social justice and equality enable people to build coalitions. It is the "common context of struggle" that allows us to keep fighting the fight (Mohanty 7).(8) Common context because we all live under the weight of and at the intersection of various systems of oppression. But what is important is not just the shared context of oppression but the shared context of struggle. It is the knowledge that we are not isolated but are struggling together, and the experience of working with others against common oppressive forces that produce that deep level of trust that keeps us alive and strong.

On January 25, 2004, my dear friend Maggie Caygill-Brouwers passed on after a long and protracted battle with cancer. This essay remains a tangible memory of and tribute to, the strength, hope, and wisdom I drew from our interactions. Maggie's courage, generosity of spirit, and her beautiful smile (not to mention her outrageous adventures!) will be remembered by all of us who had the good fortune of knowing her. She would be so proud today to see our work reach the larger feminist community beyond Ann Arbor, MI. - Pavitra

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1. Following hooks, we use "feminist movement" instead of the more monolithic "women's movement" which flattens out the multiple and heterogeneous positions within feminist politics (hooks x).
2. Throughout this paper we refer to white women in the third person (i.e. as "they" or "them"). Before we move on to make our argument against a simple and/or essentialist brand of identity politics, we would like to point out that this usage does not accurately reflect our subject positions. One of us (Pavitra) identifies as a woman of colour, while the other (Maggie) self-identifies as a white woman--among other things, of course. We bring this up not to foreground the categories that we use to name ourselves so much as to acknowledge the complex negotiations involved in coalitional work (such as the writing of this paper). Coalitional politics of the kind we are arguing for does not entail ignoring one's identity; if anything, it uses identity as a starting point from which to build connections. This is not to say that solidarity across class, race, sexual, and religious differences has been completely absent or impossible in feminist movement. See the work of Becky Thompson for inspiring examples of this history.
   There are multiple versions of this speech in circulation (sometimes in the form of a poem). The above quotation is taken from an online source (see bibliography for full citation) and is believed to be the original text, appearing in the Congressional Record. 14 October 1968, page 31636.
3. Thanks, Adele, for challenging us on this point and thus enabling us to clarify our argument.
4. This idea was echoed by Angela Davis and Cathy Cohen at the Color of Violence II conference held in Chicago in March 2002.
5. This memorable phrase is bell hooks' (see for eg. hooks 22).
6. This was the theme of Cherrie Moraga's inspiring plenary address at the Color of Violence II conference.
7. Mohanty argues that it is not colour or racial identity but the "common context of struggle" that makes "women of color" or "third world women" cohere as a group. Here, we further extend this "common context" to include white anti-racist feminists as well.

Works Cited

How do Third World Feminists counter the perception that feminism is a "Western" ideology and how effective are their methods? What opportunities does globalization bring for cross-cultural organizing? From essays on the race and gender issues in organizing exotic dancers to resistance art in Africa and the U.S., this timely and necessary anthology will be sure to spark debate and controversy.