

In a speech entitled “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” Bernice Johnson Reagon discusses the difference between home and coalition. According to her, home is “a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are” (358). This nurturing space is like a womb; it feeds and sustains you, giving you a place where “you act out community” (358) with people just like you. Ultimately, home is a place of comfort and safety. What home is not, however, is a place of politics and political change. For this nurturing space is not only a womb but a barred room, a room where only “X’s or Y’s or Z’s get to come in” (357). Such a barred room (a yours only space) cannot prepare you for coping with the real world, with people who are different from you, with different ideas about how to act out community or run society. But, not only does this barred room fail to provide you with the survival skills that you need to work with people who are not like you, it is also an impossible space to maintain, one that inevitably leads to the exclusion of those who want to be included in the group but are not considered members.

Reagon illustrates this problem through a discussion of the women’s movement and its failed attempts to create “women’s only spaces” —spaces where individuals, by virtue of being women, can come together. Reagon writes:

If you’re the same kind of women like the folk in that little barred room, it works. But as soon as some other folk check the definition of “women” that’s in the dictionary (which you didn’t write, right?) they decide that they can come because they are women, but when they do, they don’t see or hear nothing that is like them (360).

Once this space becomes inhabited by all different kinds of women, it is not a safe, comfortable place, but a dangerous one where survival skills are needed in order to negotiate the differences that exist between women. Reagon refers to this type of space as a coalition, arguing that it is where the real (dangerous) work of feminist politics gets accomplished. In contrast to the nurturing space of home where you feel protected and supported by others like you, a coalition exists as a difficult and dangerous place where you “feel as if [you’re] gonna keel over any minute and die” (356). Coalition work is done in the streets and it is not done to feed and nourish you, but to enable you to survive.

Reagon offers this distinction between home and coalition as a way of challenging the idea that feminism and feminist communities are safe homespaces where all women can come together as fundamentally the same (sharing the common bond which makes them all women) and fight injustice. For her, the more effective model for understanding women's connections is through coalition, where women work together, regardless (or in spite) of their differences, in order to survive. It is important to note that she is not rejecting the need for home entirely—she believes that coalition work is too exhausting to do all of the time—but suggesting that it is not the space in which truly effective political action can occur.

Reagon's understandings of home and coalition raise important questions for the nature/practice of feminist community and how feminists work across and between differences. First, Reagon understands home and coalition to be distinctly separate spaces. Home is a space of (albeit for short periods of time) belonging and nurturing. It seems to exist completely outside of the realm of politics and power struggles. In contrast, coalition is a space of fighting for survival and working through the difficulties of difference. It seems to exist completely outside of the realm of community (and therefore nurturing support). But, are these spaces so purely separate? Are politics and community incompatible? And, is home (or can it ever be) a space that is purely outside of politics? Although Reagon is challenging the notion that feminism (or the women's movement) is a safe home, she is leaving the myth that home is a safe, nonpolitical, place intact.

Much work has been done within feminism to challenge the safety (and purity) of the domestic, homespace (in particular, see Martin and Mohanty, "What's Home Got to Do With It?") and to complicate the space of home and its connection to politics (see hooks, "Homeplace" and Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* and her discussion of the domestic worker and the outsider-within). In light of this critical work, where can we find these pure spaces that Reagon feels are so necessary in order to sustain us? Finally, can home and coalition exist in the same space, that is, can one space (or one form of connection) serve to nurture us and support our politics? Can we see this space as a both/and instead of an either/or?

Second, Reagon's models of home and coalition seem to be predicated on some troubling assumptions concerning the role of sameness and difference within feminist communities. Even though she is critical of home and its potential for being maintained, she still envisions it as a valuable place where people (who are the same) can come together and nurture each other. In contrast, she envisions coalition as a necessary place where people (who are all different) are forced to come together and work with each other, whether they like it or not. Reagon writes: "You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure to stay alive" (356-357). Basically, her understandings of home and coalition lead to the following equation: home = same = good (safe, nurturing, happy) and coalition = different = bad (dangerous, hostile, threatening).

Indeed, Reagon is not alone in this depiction of sameness as good and difference as bad. Even as feminists are recognizing the inevitability of differences between and among women, they refer to this difference in terms of "the crisis of difference" or the "problem of difference." Difference is frequently construed as a threat to the unity of feminism and the efficacy of its political aims (see Lorde, "Master's Tools" and Butler, *Gender Trouble*). It is understood as an obstacle to overcome or a problem to be dealt with. In contrast, sameness is promoted as a goal to be achieved or a lost state of innocence to be mourned (In this depiction, narratives of feminism suggest that feminism was once a unified movement that has been splintered by the forced recognition of differences among women). But, must sameness and difference always be construed in such ways? Should sameness be a goal? What are the dangers of promoting sameness over difference (see Jakobsen, "*(Re) producing the Same: Autonomy, Alliance, and Women's Movements*" and her discussion of how the economy of the same within feminism, operating through anthologies such as Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*, erases the difference among women that have always already existed). And, can we develop notions of difference that are not threatening but nurturing? Can we promote difference as a goal?

I would like to take up these two sets of question concerning home and coalition through an preliminary examination of a third type of connection between women, one that complicates the notions of sameness and difference and their roles within feminism and strives to function as more than a pragmatic coalition or a nurturing space of retreat from politics.

Before turning to a discussion of this third type of connection, I would like to offer a few more comments on difference and how it has been articulated within feminist theories. As I mentioned above, difference is most frequently understood in one specific way—as hostile or threatening. When difference is accepted (and, indeed, feminists have been forced to accept it) this acceptance comes at the expense of difference’s complexity. This loss of complexity can be seen in a number of ways. First, it comes in the form of failing to take difference seriously, to merely tolerate it (see Lorde, “Master’s Tools”) without seriously engaging with it (see Lugones and Spelman, “Have We Got a Theory for You!”). Second, this loss of complexity comes in the form of failing to recognize the multiple types of difference (and diversity) that exist. In *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, Janet Jakobsen offers “four analytically distinct but interrelated sites” of difference: (1) *diversity among* which refers to peoples’ different political and social locations, (2) *diversity within* which refers to peoples’ own multiple, intersecting and diverse experiences of race, class, gender, etc., (3) *différance* which refers to Derrida and his notion of the excessive remainder that failure to fully identify with self and other necessarily creates, and (4) *diversity between* which refers to the spaces of possibility—the interstices and intersections—that the excessive remainder produces (12-13). Traditional, uncomplicated notions of difference, fail to see the variety of ways in which difference gets played out within communities and among people. These simple notions also foreclose the possibility of distinguishing between forms of difference that are useful (and productive) and forms of difference that harmful (and hostile).

Third, the loss of complexity comes in the form of treating differences among women as involving discrete and separate experiences of race, class or gender. Such an understanding of difference does not reflect the complex ways in which women’s experiences (of gender, race,

class, sexuality) can never be discretely separated out, with one part being gender, one part race, etc.. It also does not take into account the ways in which all categories invariably fail to fully capture who one is. As Jakobsen argues, “An individual is never only or fully a woman. Social sanctions against those who deviate from their ascribed categories, including the fact that one can be accused of not being a ‘real’ woman, imply that slippage between the category ‘woman’ lives lived by women is a constant possibility” (5). Finally, seeing categories of difference as discrete does not allow for any discussion of the in-between spaces (Jakobsen’s diversity between) where various experiences such as race and gender intersect in complicated ways. The result of this lack of discussion is, as Kimberle Crenshaw articulates in her essay “Demarginalizing the Other,” the virtual silencing and erasing of women, in this case black women, who inhabit two different identities simultaneously—Black and woman—without being recognized by either (women are all white and Blacks are all male). This lack of discussion about intersections (Crenshaw) or crossroads (Anzaldua) also erases the possibility of developing new connections between these intersections. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler argues that the refusal to explore these intersections results in the failure to ask important questions about how these different categories (and our lived experiences of them) are implicated with one another and where they might converge. Such questions, for Butler, could lead to the creation of a dynamic map of power that charts various connections among women (116-117).

In light of all of these problems, a new understanding of difference is needed, one that embraces and celebrates diversity (Lorde) and that maintains (instead of reduces) the complexity that necessarily accompanies difference. In her essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde offers such an understanding of difference. For her, difference is not something to be merely tolerated or to accept as inevitable. Instead, difference is something to be embraced. It needs to be “seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our [women’s] creativity can spark like a dialectic” (111). Sharon Welch echoes this in her book *Sweet Dreams in America*, arguing that the embracing of difference can lead to communities that “have the energy and creativity of jazz [where] community identity and structure can be

improvisational, a fitting response to the needs of the moment and the strengths and resources of this people, at this place, and at this time” (71). Welch adds that difference serves an important critical function, enabling us, through engagement with others, to see the limits of our own knowledge and understandings. “We need the vision and expertise of others,” Welch writes, “to see where our views are partial and/or just plain wrong” (63). This critical function and its connection with vision is further discussed in María Lugones and her essay *Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception*.” In this essay, Lugones discusses how confronting and embracing the differences between her and her mother enabled Lugones to shift her vision from that of arrogant perception—seeing herself as better than her mother—to loving perception—seeing herself as dependent on and connected to her mother. Reflecting on this loving perception, Lugones writes: “We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood without which we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking. [sic] to each other’s ‘worlds’ enables us to *be* through *loving* each other” (394).

This positive understanding of difference points to a third type of connection, one that is neither a home space of pure nurturing, safety, and sameness nor a coalitional space of pure hostility, survival, and threatening difference. Although I am hesitant to label this space of connection, I would argue that among the different terms available—home, coalition, solidarity, community, alliance—community comes closest to describing this connection. For me, the notion of community invokes a sense of responsibility and connection to others that terms such as solidarity and alliance do not. In order to distinguish my notion of community from others, I will further classify it as a feminist critical community (FCC).

There are several important features that make my notion of feminist community different from past (sometimes oppressive) understandings of community. First, unlike understandings of community based on similarity, such as communities based on some assumed commonality among woman or some assumed shared experience of oppression, an FCC does not assume that connections among women must exist prior to these women coming together. In effect, there is no assumed “we” of community existing prior to the development of that

community. As both Butler in *Gender Trouble* and Jakobsen in *Working Alliances* argue, the “we” is something to be created through the process and hard work of developing community. What is important to note is that this “we” (that is, the we of solidarity) is never guaranteed to be created by a community, and, even when it is developed, its existence is always contingent, part of an ongoing project in which members of the community work to “constitute the term ‘we,’ while simultaneously questioning it and pushing its limits” (Jakobsen, 2). Second, unlike communities that understand the goal of community work to be unity or the working through (to get over) difference, FCCs take the critiques and constructions of difference mentioned above very seriously, arguing that difference, particularly a complex notion of difference, is essential for any effective community. Placing such an emphasis on difference and its complexity, FCCs acknowledge that difference comes in many forms and are committed to working at a variety of sites of difference (Jakobsen’s diversity among, diversity between, *différance*, diversity between). FCCs also recognize the value of difference, particularly its ability to “spark creativity” (Lorde), provoke critique (Welch, Butler) and create loving perception (Lugones). Finally, in contrast to notions of connection that are envisioned only as nurturing, resting places (home) or only as sites of struggle and battle (coalitions), FCCs recognize the necessity and value of both functions, but deny that they exist in fundamentally separate spaces. An FCC is a community that “provides home and critique, comfort and challenge” (Welch, 67).

The above discussion has offered some preliminary thoughts on a new notion of feminist community. Fundamental to this community is the idea that is not a given, assumed entity, but is a work-in-progress created through the hard labor (see Butler, “Contingent Foundations”) of working in (and sometimes through) differences and constructing alliances and connections. In *Working Alliances*, Jakobsen argues that most discussions of community/connection fail to address the actual practices and processes of alliance-formation. She writes, “alliances fail, in part, because the work required by this process, the work of constructing (our)selves as allies in the spaces...is inadequately theorized” (157). As a conclusion to this essay, I would like to suggest that one way to think about this work of community formation is through a discussion of

the skills that are necessary for the hard work of community building. Due to time constraints, I will only list these skills. However, I would be more than happy to elaborate on them at the oral exam. The hard work of creating community requires that feminists have the following skills:

1. *flexibility*: being open to new possibilities and new ways of finding connections, continually weighing the usefulness and effectiveness of one's community and examining how it may or may not be foreclosing other connections (Sandoval, Welch, Fraser).

2. *grace*: working within and through difference by creating alliances with others who views are fundamentally different, learning to see others difference in non-appropriating ways (Sandoval, Lugones).

3. *strength*: having the ability to commit to the hard labor of community building even when it is dangerous, taking responsibility for actions even when their effects may be out of your control (Sandoval, Reagon).

4. *imagination*: having the ability to imagine the world differently, generating creative approaches for making connections (Cornell).

5. *ability to express anger*: never losing the ability to express focused anger and outrage at oppression in all of its forms, using that anger to connect across differences with other women (Lorde).

6. *ability to admit shame*: instead of expressing regret, embarrassment or guilt about racism within feminism, being able to express shame, thereby recognizing your culpability (and responsibility) in eliminating that racism (Spelman).