

The Risks and Possibilities of Academic Feminist Coalition Building

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Abstract: Feminist scholars have long debated the importance and challenges of doing coalition work across lines of difference. This work has often centralized the difficulties of cross-racial feminist coalitions, but as it has often emerged from an intersectional perspective, other dimensions of power such as class, education, gender, ability, nation, and sexuality are also among the relevant considerations when theorizing and practicing coalition. In this reflection, Chávez considers the risks and opportunities engendered in building feminist coalitions within the academic context across our many power differentials—as administrators, tenured professors, tenure-track professors, contingent faculty, staff, graduate students, and undergraduate students. Despite Chávez’s body of work that praises the possibilities of coalition, in this work, she focuses more on the difficulties, the obstacles, and the material constraints that prevent coalescing in academia. The reflection suggests key areas of focus for feminist scholars of rhetoric.

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“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 you can stay alive” (Johnson Reagon 356-7).

“Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn’t look for comfort... You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more” (359).

“Coalition can kill people; however, it is not by nature fatal” (361).

A significant part of my scholarly and political work has involved understanding the contours of creating political coalitions and actively trying to build them. It is safe to say that, especially as a young scholar, I tended to glorify coalition, thinking of it as an ideal political practice, maybe the most ideal political practice to affect change and achieve liberation. It has only been through the years of really doing the work that I’ve come to understand more fully the cautions that Bernice Johnson Reagon offers about coalition. There’s nothing to glorify in coalition. Coalition building is necessary; it is dangerous; and it is not home. Yet, Johnson Reagon did not offer her stark warn-

ings to deter people from the practice; after all, if you're attempting it, it is because you need it. I tend to believe that Johnson Reagon put things in such blunt terms so that people would know what they are getting themselves into and proceed with care.

This essay is a short meditation on the dangers and possibilities of what I call "academic feminist coalitions." I offer a simple argument: it is useful for us, as academic feminists, to think about our relationship building, networking, and mentoring as coalition work. Doing so provides a framework to ask crucial questions that robustly attend to the risks engendered by feminists relating in the academy and lean into the possibilities that such work can simultaneously invite. There is so much possibility for meaningful social and political change in coalition, but we cannot think about the possibility without thinking about the danger, and the danger for whom. In other words, we can't think about coalition without thinking about our differences from one another.

In the academy, we don't exist in Habermas' ideal public sphere where differences can be bracketed. As Audre Lorde says, "Refusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women [or insert your assumed collectivity here]" (118). What Lorde points to are the dangers inherent in assuming a coherence in identity categories like "woman" or "feminist," which may be better thought of as coalitions comprised of people with a multiplicity of identities and therefore fragile and incoherent. In our contemporary time, this fragility and incoherence has become even more transparent as we have been called so forcefully to consider the multiple subjects of feminism by those who question the gender binary, particularly as binarized gendered thinking intersects with ability, race, class, caste, age, nation, religion and more.

In striving for the possibilities of coalition, we cannot take coalition for granted nor can we take coherence for granted, either within a coalition or within a supposedly coherent identity group on the basis of which one joins into coalition. This is essential when we think about our feminist practices in the academy. Sure, it may seem as if we come together under the auspices of our shared identity as feminist scholars of rhetoric, communication, and composition, but how much do we share?

When we reflect upon feminist teaching, learning, and mentoring, we must raise questions about the coalitions we hope to form among ourselves as faculty and with students. Although in my experience we often begin by asking what we have in common with each other, like Lorde suggests, we may be better served by asking in what ways we are different from each other and from students. For those of us with positions of structural power—as professors and mentors and people with stable jobs, we must then ask questions about how structural power impacts the way we seek and build coalitions. Again, my experience suggests that we must take that power very seriously and interrogate what it means constantly in our relationships with each other and with students. The interrogation of power is not a straightforward endeavor. As Foucault so poignantly

reminds us, power is not held, and it is not uni-directional. Power is exercised. To me, this is a reminder that while faculty are obviously structurally empowered vis-à-vis students and differentially so with each other, no one is without the ability to exercise some form of power in a given relationship. For example, students can exercise immense power, and sometimes that power is even threatening. As a younger gen-Xer, I am on the learning-curve end of social media platforms and practices, and the idea of being an “influencer” is strange to me. It is also hard for me to imagine broadcasting my life on social media like I see some of my students and junior colleagues doing. But many of them do it, and that’s totally fine, and many of them have huge followings, sometimes in the tens of thousands on platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter). If someone takes to X to air their grievances about someone or some institution, that is a powerful move. It can rightfully call attention to damage done, and it can also do harm by reducing complex interactions to 140-character bites. I’ve seen this happen. For example, I once knew a student who identified as a queer feminist of color who felt that a faculty member who was also a queer feminist of color was dishonest with them because the faculty member didn’t tell the student that they might be leaving the institution—before the faculty member even knew if the move was a sure thing. When the student found out that the faculty member was leaving, they took to all their social media to publicly decry the faculty member as a liar. While the student couldn’t harm the professor’s position at either university because the faculty member was tenured, reputational damage was no doubt done as the student had power by virtue of a significant social media audience.

Moreover, often students are far more up-to-date on the latest scholarship, theory, and thinking than those mired in service and teaching, and/or they have very specific (and often quite informed) views about the ways certain course material should be taught. That knowledge can be exercised as a form of intellectual power (and one I hope we generally welcome), but it can also be used to reinforce other forms of power and privilege. For example, I know several Black women professors in feminist courses who have had their syllabi challenged by their non-Black students because they are supposedly teaching too many white scholars or too much “canonical” work. This has happened even in cases when most of a syllabus is comprised of scholars of color and more recent works. In some instances, students have made their grievances known to a department chair or senior faculty member before questioning the professor who teaches the class. The students may have had legitimate concerns, but going directly to someone with more power than the professor is a problematic power move. It suggests both a level of disrespect for the professor’s intellectual choices and an understanding of the power the students hold in relation to that professor. I am making some blunt cuts around the different kinds of power people have, but I offer them as anecdotes to remind us that power is complicated and should be treated as such. And those power lines are even further complicated when considering contingent faculty of all kinds, relationships with department chairs and administrators, and even governing boards or legislators.

When we think about academic feminist relationships of all kinds as coalition work, I think it invites us to ask critical questions about difference and power so that we enter into such relationships intentionally and cautiously. A coalition framework invites us to remember that our academic feminist relationships are political and that it is crucial to consider carefully the harms we can cause, and have caused, sometimes, oftentimes, without even realizing it. When students of color, for example, seek us out as feminist mentors in predominantly white departments, they are in a very precarious position. It may not be life or death, to return us to Johnson Reagon, but it may be. And, we may not know. For instance, I once mentored a brilliant queer, feminist, first-gen, graduate student. The student had a lot of mechanical issues with their writing and came to me for assistance, which I eagerly offered. To me, this student seemed smart and self-assured, so I didn't shy away from offering them very critical but constructive feedback. I didn't hear from them for a good long while after offering the feedback. When they finally surfaced, they reluctantly let me know that my feedback had catapulted them into a bout of extreme anxiety that felt immobilizing. I was stunned, but through conversing with them, I realized how my failure to more carefully frame my feedback in a way that emphasized the strengths as well as the weaknesses did significant damage. I had just come from teaching at an institution with almost all white and privileged students, and so doing this kind of care work had apparently stopped occurring to me. I have since worked hard never to repeat my errors, so that I can meet students where they are and support them in more appropriate ways.

We thus must be transparent about and accountable to our differences and listen to those we want to support, for example, about what support means to them, while never shying away from erecting boundaries that are meaningful to us and that enable our own survival. And it is on this last point where things can also get complicated, particularly when students have an idea about what feminist mentorship, across many lines of difference, is supposed to look like, even more so perhaps when we've signaled to them one kind of relationality only to change course later. That difference, too, must be considered and tended to. I once had a queer feminist student of color with whom I was good friends before they entered the graduate program. When they entered the graduate program, they, rightfully I think, expected our friendship to continue as it had. I expected, without clearly communicating, that for the duration of their graduate program, our relationship would transition to something more professional. I assumed that it was obvious that if I maintained a close friendship with them while not offering the gesture of friendship to other students in the same way that I would be perceived as playing favorites. But this was not clear to a student who was new to graduate school, and it took some careful tending and hard conversations to come to a place where we could both understand where the other was coming from and come to an agreement about what our relationship would look like in this academic space.

This work is hard. It is not, by nature, fatal. But doing it wrong, and I have done it wrong, can be very deeply damaging. It probably sounds too simple, but clear and honest communication is at the heart of effective coalition building. Thinking of our teaching and mentoring as coalition

building is important, not so that we can glorify the possibilities of our coming together across difference, but so we can take those relationships with the dead seriousness that Johnson Reagon insists is necessary for coalition work.

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