Title
Thinking With and Through the Concept of Coalition: On What Feminists Can Teach Us about Doing Political Theory, Theorizing Subjectivity, and Organizing Politically

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Subjectivity, and Organizing Politically

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

by

Alice Elizabeth Taylor

2015
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Thinking With and Through the Concept of Coalition:
On What Feminists Can Teach Us about Doing Political Theory, Theorizing
Subjectivity, and Organizing Politically

by

Alice Elizabeth Taylor

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Carole Pateman, Chair

Despite the extensive attention political scientists have given to predicting decision-making patterns within parliamentary coalitional governments or voting outcomes of legislative and policy coalitions within congressional systems, the literature largely neglects social justice activist coalitions that form outside the formal governing bodies of the state and at the hands of political activists who are often invested in contesting formal institutions. While a narrow set of political theorists have turned attention to theorizing extra-governmental coalitions such as these, scholarship here is beset by a false crisis that effectively obscures the high-stakes politics (the arrangements of power) that situate coalitions across intractable race, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity divides. By theorizing the proliferation of differences as a discursive phenomenon, contemporary political theories adopt problematic notions of: ontological unfixity—the idea that all social identities (i.e., “workers” or “women”) are in the process of becoming in and through
language and therefore remain permanently unfinished or unfixed; epistemological undecidability—the idea that social forces (i.e., the movements of power and forms of oppression) may never be decidedly known or fully comprehended; and political indeterminacy—the idea that activist politics cannot be planned, predicted or advocated for in advance of its occurrence. This dissertation brings feminist theory to bear on these discussions. After exposing the limitations of scholarship on coalition within both political science and political theory, I turn to women of color feminist activists and scholars to develop four unique ways in which feminist theorists think with and through the concept of coalition. Confronted with political questions related to organized group resistance across deep cleavages of difference, I develop a notion of politico-ethical coalition politics that foregrounds the decidable and goal-oriented politics that situate social justice coalitional encounters. In attending to ontological and epistemological questions related to the proliferation of differences that have destabilized unitary categories such as “class” and thrown into question unitary systems of oppression, I develop notions of coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness that effectively accommodate complexity without subscribing to either unfixity or undecidability. In the final chapter, I develop a notion of coalitional scholarship, arguing that the collaborative, unapologetically political, and intensely self-reflexive ways in which women of color feminists do political theory not only usher in new and innovative reconceptions of activist politics and political subjectivity, but also encourage a rethinking of methodological questions related to how to do political theory.
The dissertation of Alice Elizabeth Taylor is approved.

Joshua Foa Dienstag

Raymond Rocco

Juliet A. Williams

Carole Pateman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015
For Lori Marso.
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At the beginning of *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), Chandra Mohanty states that her search for “emancipatory knowledge” has taught her that “…ideas are always communally wrought, not privately owned.” The communities that have encouraged, challenged, inspired, and certainly shaped this dissertation project are expansive indeed. It seems that it would be almost impossible to accurately list every single person who deserves my deepest gratitude for bringing this project together; nevertheless, I would like to acknowledge a constellation of different communities without which this project never would have been.

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Introduction

What is it that inclines different political parties in a parliamentary system to collaborate in a coalition government? In non-parliamentary contexts, what is it that may incline different elected representatives to come together in a coalition to pass a specific law? How might we predict the likelihood of coalition formation, duration and success in either of these contexts? Political scientists have long been interested in answering questions such as these.¹ And yet, these questions only apply to a very narrow conception of “coalition.” Despite the extensive attention political scientists have given to studying formal governmental decision-making bodies,² there is a conspicuous gap in this literature in terms of its attention to social justice activist coalitions that form outside the formal governing bodies of the state and at the hands of political activists who are often invested in contesting formal institutions. While a narrow set of political theorists have turned attention to theorizing extra-governmental coalitions such as these, scholarship here is beset by a false crisis that effectively obscures the high-stakes politics of social justice activist coalitions. The discipline is therefore in need of new and more expansive ways of thinking about “coalition” politics.

Given the unique context of formal governmental decision-making bodies–wherein all members have some amount of decision-making power, all members enter these bodies knowing at least the minimum amount of time they will serve on the body, members tend to experience a certain socio-economic, educational attainment, and often race and gender privilege, and all

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¹ The literature on “coalition” within political science is expansive indeed. As I will go on to outline in Chapter One, a survey of all 161 political science journals in JSTOR’s digital library for instances of articles with “coalition” in the title yields 402 hits. When this search is expanded to instances of “coalition” in the abstract, the number of hits doubles. When expanded even further to instances of “coalition” in the full text of political science articles, the search yields more than 39,000 hits.

² With only a handful of exceptions, when political scientists speak about “coalitions” they have in mind formal governmental or intergovernmental decision-making bodies such as cabinet coalitions (or coalition governments), legislative coalitions, domestic policy coalitions, war coalitions, and international policy coalitions.
members are presumed to be more or less rational actors—it is unsurprising that political scientists turn to the formal game modeling of rational choice theory to derive scientific models for explaining and predicting decision-making behavior. When the stakes of coalition politics center only on winning or losing a voting game, one can see how such models might seem appropriate.

However, “coalitions” do not only form within formal governmental decision-making bodies or within strictly game-like contexts. One can imagine instances in which non-governmental actors, such as political activists on the ground, decide to come together for the sake of achieving a shared political goal. The coalitions that form out of such contexts are extra-governmental, meaning they form outside of formal governmental decision-making bodies and often with the expressed purpose of contesting such bodies. Social justice activists come together in such contexts often out of dire necessity, not only strategic voting advantage. What is at stake here—such as curtailing police violence, achieving equality before the law, achieving forms of social and economic equality, and ending both overt and more subtle forms of discrimination and domination—far exceeds the low-stakes of either winning or losing a voting game. In such a context, the parameters of rational choice theory are unlikely to apply.

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3 In The Theory of Political Coalitions (1962), William Riker uses the general theory of coalitions in economics—the theory of n-person games, which uses mathematical modeling to predict the decisions that rational actors will make in a variety of decision-making contexts (Von Neumann and Morgenstern 1944)—to develop a specific theory of coalitions that may be used in the study of politics (Riker 1962: vii). Doing so, Riker has argued, allows political science to “rise above the level of wisdom literature and indeed to join economics and psychology in the creation of genuine sciences of human behavior” (viii, emphasis added). The discipline’s formal definition of “coalition” reflects this bias wherein coalition is defined as “any combination of separate players (such as political parties) to win a voting game” (McLean and McMillan 2009). For similar game-theoretic definitions of “coalition” see: Gamson (1961), Riker (1962), Kelley (1968), Coleman (1970), and Sing (1977). I outline these in Chapter One.
Research on these kinds of coalitions—what I have termed *social justice activist coalitions*—is marginalized within political science.\(^4\) For scholarship on these coalitions, one might instead turn to political theory. Engagements here center on answering the fundamental question of post-Marxist collective politics,\(^5\) that is: What form of collective left-oriented politics is possible in a contemporary context marked by diverse social justice struggles on the ground that exceed the boundaries of unitary categories such as “class”? Theories attending to this challenge of progressive collective politics outside the Marxist category of class, however, are beset by a false crisis. This *crisis* centers on the perceived political indeterminacy that is thought to result from the discursive unfixity of all social categories and identities. For many contemporary scholars,\(^6\) the category “class” is in crisis not simply because of the proliferation of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. struggles that exceed a fundamental “class” boundary, but because all categories are thought to be forever unstable due to their ongoing discursive production. If “class” only gains meaning in and through language—as many contemporary scholars maintain that it does–then what is meant by “class” is never finalized and is therefore forever unstable, or unfixed. To accommodate complexity of this sort, contemporary scholars have turned to the notion of coalition.

However, theories of left-oriented coalition that proceed from a starting place in discursive unfixity encounter a fundamental tension: a commitment to discursive unfixity seems to sit at odds with moving in a clear, left-oriented, political direction. The only way

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\(^4\) As I will demonstrate in Chapter One, despite the expansive literature on “coalition” within political science, treatments of social justice activist coalitions are severely limited. The few articles that do appear on this topic are authored by gender, race, or class scholars and appear primarily in special issue journals devoted to race, gender, class, or other social justice topics.


contemporary scholars have managed to maneuver around this tension is by sacrificing a leftist politics in favor of unpredictable ontological disruption or apolitical and highly unlikely notions of universal ethical community. Is it possible, one is left wondering, to foreground the politics—that is, the arrangements of power—that demand social justice coalition in the first place as well as both situate and frustrate encounters within coalitional spaces, while also attending to the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and complexity that mark our contemporary social world?

An affirmative answer to this question and a possible way out of this impasse between unfixity and fixity, I will argue, may be sought in feminist political theory. An important contribution of feminist political theory to the discipline of political science, and particularly to the study of political theory, resides in its ability to both refine key concepts within the lexicon of social and political thought (i.e., politics, freedom, citizenship) and to expand this very lexicon to include new concepts (i.e., patriarchal domination, marital rape, the sexual contract). This dissertation sets out to grant the concept of “coalition” its rightful place on this list. The concept of coalition is treated here as an established concept within the discipline of political science that is in need of feminist refinement.

I approach such a project in the same spirit of activist political theory that has animated many feminist political theorists. An “activist” feminist approach to the study of political thought, I maintain, certainly involves the audacity to reconceive established concepts within the lexicon of political thought in the way that Carole Pateman (1988) has done in her theorization of the “sexual contract,” revealing the clear patriarchal dimensions of the celebrated “social contract.” Additionally, an “activist” feminist approach involves the boldness to retrieve the voices of feminist activists and to treat them as rigorous political thinkers in the way that Kathy Ferguson (2011) has recently done with her treatment of Emma Goldman. Influenced by such
examples of feminist audacity, I seek here to not only reconceive an important concept within political science that will result in the introduction of a number of new concepts within the lexicon, but to also retrieve the voices of important feminist activists and to treat them as rigorous coalition theorists.

The Roots of Social Justice Activist Coalition Politics

One of the “go-to” examples of social justice activist coalition activity, and certainly what is thought to be the site of its origins, is the notion of Rainbow Coalition made popular by the Reverend Jesse Jackson (the first African American man to seek the Democratic Party nomination for president) after his first bid for the presidency in 1984 (Coles 1996). At its formation, the Rainbow Coalition sought equal rights for all Americans, with a special focus on demanding social programs, voting rights, and affirmative action for minority groups left out by “Reaganomics”—or those policies of President Ronald Reagan that focused on reducing domestic government spending on programs that would help minority and poor Americans, while granting multi-billion dollar tax cuts for the rich and big business and increasing military spending to fund wars, a nuclear stand off in Europe, and other aggressive offenses abroad. First coined by Fred Hampton (one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party) in 1969 to describe the class-conscious, multi-racial alliance and nonaggression pact between Chicago’s most powerful street gangs, Jackson appropriates the notion of “rainbow coalition” to describe a progressive, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious coalition meant to unite diverse subjugated people all suffering under the first four years of Reaganomics.

Part of the progressive platform of the Rainbow Coalition included electing Jackson as president. Jackson sought to represent the poorest and most marginalized constituency in
America, with aspirations of full inclusion of all of these people in the American dream. “Our flag is red, white and blue,” he proclaims in his address to the 1984 Democratic National Convention, “but our nation is a rainbow–Red, Yellow, Brown, Black and White” (Jackson July 1984). This rainbow nation, he asserts, can and should come together in a Rainbow Coalition to elect him to America’s highest office. A “rainbow” coalition, he explains, will “make room” for “the White, the Hispanic, the Black, the Arab, the Jew, the woman, the Native American, the small farmer, the businessperson, the environmentalist, the peace activist, the young, the old, the lesbian, the gay and the disabled” (Ibid). Known as “the Great Unifier,” Jackson invoked a sense of coalition characterized by optimistic aspirations of uniting all progressive people into a “coalition of conscience” dedicated to making America more inclusive.

Jackson, however, was not the only one pushing for an unprecedented sense of “coalition” politics at this time. Shirley Chisholm—who in 1968 became the first Black woman to be elected to the U.S. Congress—made a similar argument more than a decade prior to Jackson’s 1984 Rainbow Coalition speech when she put herself forward as the first woman and first African American to seek the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party in 1972. Well before Reaganomics, it was clear to Chisholm that multiple oppressive forces in society worked together to create a second-class status for many Americans. Black Americans, she

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7 In this sense, the Rainbow Coalition was both a social justice activist coalition and an electoral or campaign coalition. While an electoral coalition may also have broader social justice aspirations—and it most certainly did in the context of the Rainbow Coalition—an electoral coalition sits somewhere in between a formal governmental coalition and an extra-governmental coalition because, while it is made up primarily of non-governmental actors, it forms for the expressed purpose of gaining access to formal governmental decision-making bodies.

8 Jackson’s sense of optimism toward forming a broad union through coalition resonates with The Oxford English Dictionary’s more general definition of coalition as “the union, combination, or merging of different groups, peoples, interests, etc., into one. See the OED online for “coalition,” definition 2a.

9 I am following Barbara Smith (1983) and others in capitalizing “Black.” While not all authors I will be quoting throughout the dissertation will use the capital “B” when referring to Black people, Black women, or Black feminism, I would like to follow in the spirit of Smith and others who insist on capitalizing it. This is one of the many ways in which Black feminists and other women of color bring activism to their scholarship.
argued, must see their struggle as linked to other second-class groups whose discrimination is based on other difference markers—such as religion, sex, creed, or sexual orientation. Though Chisholm suggests that women of color are certainly uniquely positioned to see the value in coalition politics, she nevertheless calls on all “progressive-minded Americans...[to] join in the struggle to end all forms of discrimination in America” through progressive coalition politics (32).

There is hope for oppressed groups, Chisholm argued, if they “unite and challenge the forces which now hold power in [the] country” (Chisholm 1972: 31). It is for this reason that Chisholm had long since spoken out in favor of “coalition politics” (31). Chisholm was not the only woman of color to see the connection between undermining interlocking oppressive forces and the absolute necessity of coalition politics. Because women of color face discrimination based on both racism and sexism, Chisholm acknowledges that they have long since been involved in both Black and women’s liberation.10

Unlike Jackson’s 1984 “Rainbow Coalition” speech, for Chisholm the hope of “coalition” politics extends beyond the goals of an electoral coalition or optimistic aspirations of complete inclusion. Chisholm was running for office in 1972, and so to a certain extent her comments here must be taken within the context of garnering support for an electoral coalition designed to benefit diverse subjugated peoples if she were elected, but Chisholm also taps into a mentality present among many women of color feminist activists at the time: one that sees the absolute

10 Sojourner Truth is exemplary here. In her “Ain’t I A Woman?” speech (Zinn and Arnowe 2004: 128)–delivered to the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851–Truth challenges both the racial violence of slavery and the rigid gendered stereotypes of Southern, aristocratic femininity in her provocative and repeated question, “ain’t I a woman?” Within a context of a convention devoted to the situation of “women,” Truth challenges both the women and men present there to consider whether a Black slave such as herself, who defies traditional notions of white femininity by working in the fields and stepping out of carriages and over ditches without the help of a man, is still a “woman.” Through this simple question, Truth reveals two different, though clearly interconnected, systems of oppression at play for the Black woman. Also see Chisholm (1972), Smith (1983), Lorde (1984), and Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) for similar arguments.
necessity—and not just strategic electoral advantage—of coalition politics. Coupled with this sense of urgency, women of color feminists such as Chisholm were also soberly aware of the unique challenge of coalition politics across diverse subjugated groups. Unlike Jackson’s optimistic and inspiring calls to complete inclusion, Chisholm’s language of coalition continuously circles back to the idea of “struggle” (see Jackson July 1984 and Chisholm 1984: 30-32).

Chisholm is not arguing that women of color are those who are most optimistic about the possibility of coalition politics. She is instead arguing that women of color know better than anyone else that coalition politics across diverse subjugated groups, each invested in fighting different forms of oppression, are absolutely necessary. The sense of urgency she invokes here therefore better aligns with Fred Hampton’s original sense of “rainbow coalition” as a multi-racial alliance and nonaggression pact between powerful and dangerous street gangs, than with Jackson’s optimistic sense of “coming together” or “making room” for all minorities. To understand what I mean by this distinction, it will be helpful to tease out the difference between “alliance” and “coalition.” While political scientists and political activists alike use these terms interchangeably, there are subtle differences in the definitions of these terms that prove instructive when theorizing social justice activist coalition politics.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the second meaning of “coalition” explicitly equates it with “the formation of an alliance.” Indeed, the word “alliance” is used frequently across iterations of this second sense of “coalition” wherein it is defined as:

(2a) the union, combination, or merging of different groups, peoples, interests, etc., into one; the formation of an alliance; (2b) a single group or alliance formed by a number of separate groups, states, people, etc., to further a common interest or achieve a shared purpose; and (2c) a temporary alliance of distinct political parties. (OED, coalition 2a-c)
When comparing this sense of “coalition” to definitions of “alliance”–as “the state or fact of being united for a common purpose or for mutual benefit, especially of nations or states”¹¹–one thing in particular stands out: while these definitions seem almost identical, definitions of alliance make no mention at all of coalition. Clearly, then, there must be something more, and something unique, to what is meant by “coalition.”

Outside of their explicitly political (referring to the coming together of parties, states, and governments) definitions, definitions of alliance and coalition both emphasize components of coming together in nature.¹² It is here that important points of divergence emerge. The sense of there being a natural affinity between people–i.e., relatives and friends–is much stronger in instances of alliance than in those of coalition. Definitions of coalition make no mention of friends or relatives or even the idea that people would naturally find themselves together because of kinship or other ties. What is more, the definitions of coalition that do reference the union of people refer exclusively to the political sense outlined above, one that depends on a shared common interest or purpose to unite them. Even when used to describe instances of animals of the same species coming together, there is no sense that these animals have a natural affinity toward grouping together. Instead, such instances are those of “coalition” only when the animals “exhibit” cooperative behavior, implying that these animals do not necessarily have a natural affinity to cooperate but may, in certain instances, choose to do so.¹³

¹¹ See the Oxford English Dictionary online for “alliance,” definition 3a.

¹² Definitions of alliance emphasize “familial” or “friendship” unions or bonds, in one sense, and associations or connections rooted in similarities in nature, in another. See the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online for “alliance,” definitions 1, 2a-b, 4a-b. Definitions of coalition also emphasize “union,” “coming together,” or “combination” in nature, but here in terms of either animals of the same species that exhibit “cooperative” behavior, or “the union or combination of separate parts or elements into one mass, body, or whole” in the sense of elements growing together or “coalescing”; the best counterexample here would be oil and water, which will never form a coalition. See OED online for “coalition,” definitions 1 and 4.

¹³ See the Oxford English Dictionary online for “coalition,” definition 4.
Also notable here is the first sense of coalition as “the union or combination of separate parts or elements into one mass, body or whole.”\textsuperscript{14} Here again, the sense of natural affinity is muted. While certain elements are capable of coalescing, it is not the case that these elements have a natural “affinity” toward each other. Instead, they have a natural “aptitude” toward merging if or when they are joined together. They are able to coalesce only because the particular elements involved, when joined together (through shaking or other means), will transform into a new and different body or whole. For instance, because oil and water will never join, even when vigorously shaken together, they will never form a coalition. The distinction between alliance and coalition now becomes clear. Whereas alliances describe instances in which people, animals or things have a natural affinity to join one with the other, coalitions describe instances in which not-so-natural allies either choose to come together or are placed together. And, as suggested by the first sense of the word, when such coalitions do form, a major existential transformation is likely under way. It is these latter two senses of coalition—those that emphasize not-so-natural allies choosing to come together, and the likelihood of existential transformation resulting from such a process—that resonate strongly with the sense of social justice activist coalition politics advocated for by Chisholm and many other women of color.

While women of color feminists speak to the necessity of coalescing with both white feminists and Black civil rights groups, they are also, like Hampton, well aware of the challenge and potential danger inherent in such groupings. These are not natural alliances; they are chosen coalitions. Because they “face discrimination based on both racism and sexism,” including racism at the hands of white feminists or sexism at the hands of Black civil rights leaders, women of color understand that they need to fight both of these oppressions at once (Chisholm

\textsuperscript{14} See the Oxford English Dictionary online for “coalition,” definition 1.
Coalition emerges in this context not as an optimistic solution, but as an urgent and necessary strategy for dismantling interlocking oppressive forces.

It comes as no surprise that the majority of women who a decade later would support Jackson’s 1984 campaign and actively work in the Rainbow Coalition that formed to get him elected would be women of color attuned to the importance of coalition politics. However, what is perhaps more interesting in this matter is the lack of support Jackson received from white feminists. Despite the fact that Jackson’s platform was the most progressive in terms of a women’s rights agenda, it failed to garner support from the mainstream, white women’s movement (Louie and Quinones 1984: 28). Sadly, the 1984 primary suggests that regardless of the gender gap, white feminists in the early 1980s “were still not prepared to break with the racial interests they shared with white men” (28).

Women of color in the early 1980s, on the other hand, displayed Chisholm’s dexterity in their ability to “move...readily around anti-racism and the politics of the oppressed” without viewing “these politics as standing in contradiction to the issues of women’s rights” (31). Instead, women of color expressed “the issues of women as part and parcel of a broader program and coalition of the oppressed” (32). It is precisely this shared commitment to opposing multiple and interlocking systems of oppression that forms the basis of social justice activist coalition politics. While Jackson’s notion of a Rainbow Coalition certainly falls within this type of

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15 Throughout his campaign, Rev. Jackson consistently called for the restoration of social service programs for women and children, supported the legal right to abortion and opposed the Hyde Amendment, supported the Equal Rights Amendment and linked its passage to the enforcement of the Voting Rights Act and the elimination of second primaries and gerrymandering, supported the rights of lesbians and gays and Senate Bill 430 which would have added sexual orientation to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, rejected military aggression and racist assault, and promised to select a woman as his running mate if nominated (see Louie and Quinones 1984).

16 The National Organization for Women (NOW), for instance, ultimately endorsed Walter Mondale as the Democratic nominee for president and not Jackson, despite the fact that Jackson’s platform was far more feminist than the platform put forth by either Mondale or Gary Hart (the other frontrunner for the Democratic nomination) (Louie and Quinones 1984: 30).
coalition, I want to emphasize the subtle difference between his sense of coalition as an optimistic union or merging, and Chisholm’s more sober understanding of the challenge and urgent necessity of struggling to come together across race, class, sex, and/or sexuality divides. This emphasis on urgency and struggle are key components of what coalition means for women of color feminists and form the basis of the notion of social justice activist coalition politics that I seek to develop across this dissertation.

**On the Limitations of Contemporary Political Theories of Coalition**

While far fewer political theorists than political scientists rigorously engage “coalition” as a central concept within the study of politics, among those who do, attention to theorizing “coalition” emerges primarily within the context of discussing social justice activist coalitions. The most influential thinkers here are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Indeed, much of contemporary political theory scholarship on theorizing coalition can be understood largely within the context of leftist attempts since the 1970s to engage with, work through, and revise Marxist notions of collective left-oriented politics in a contemporary context marked by the growing necessity of the merging of multiple and diverse social justice struggles. However, for contemporary political theorists this practical politics challenge of post-Marxist collective

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17 I take this up in the first two chapters of the dissertation. Within a range of popular political science journals, a title search for the word “coalition” yields 402 hits. Within a similar range of popular political theory journals, the same search only yields 2 hits.

18 Other important thinkers include: Georg Lukács (see Coles 1996); Rosa Luxemburg (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985); Vladimir Lenin (see Coles 1996, and Laclau and Mouffe 1985); Antonio Gramsci (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985 and Apostilidis 2010); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see Coles 1996); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (see Tampio 2009); Judith Butler (Schram 2013, Watson 2012, Stone 2005, and Rushing 2010); Iris Young (see Di Stefano 2001 and Falbo 2008); Hannah Arendt (see again Falbo 2008); and Simone de Beauvoir (see Stavro 2005, Marso 2010, 2012a, and 2012b).

politics is rooted in perceived underlying ontological and epistemological crises. The implications of these perceived crises, I will demonstrate, necessarily foreclose possibilities for left-oriented coalition politics.

With the increased heterogeneity that characterized the progressive political terrain in the wake of the U.S. civil rights movements, broad-based social justice activist coalitions, such as those advocated by Jackson and Chisholm, formed to contest and undermine multiple and interlocking forms of oppression. The environmental movement and the women’s movement, for instance, both began confronting questions of race and class, while the Black movement began confronting questions of gender, sexuality, and environmental degradation. To address these multiple forms of oppression, coalition politics presented itself as the most viable way forward for progressive activists. To keep pace with this shifting political terrain, some political theorists, and most notably Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), began in the early 1980s thinking much more carefully about the advantages of coalition politics over narrow class, race, or gender politics. However, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985), as well as other influential thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) and Judith Butler (1990), this concrete politics consideration was heavily informed by a concurrent shift at a more theoretical level toward a “growing disenchantment with the practice and telos of Marxian politics and the increasing sway of neo-Nietzschean philosophical and political reflections on difference” (Coles 1996: 375).

Laclau and Mouffe best articulate this growing disenchantment in what has become a seminal text in progressive coalition politics. In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), Laclau and Mouffe argue that the 20th century, and particularly the movements of the 1960s, has exploded the Marxist notion that class is the primary marker of forms of social injustice. What is now “in crisis,” they tell us in the first pages of the text, is a notion of socialism that relies on the
Marxist ideas of the “ontological centrality of the working class” and the illusory homogeneity of a collective will (LM 1985: 2). Narrow class, race, or gender politics alone, it seemed, were ill equipped to take on the devastating neoliberal policies of Reaganomics. Such a realization, however, posed a challenge to progressive collective politics. If the category of class fails to accommodate the variety of social problems people face, then what is it that would bring left-minded people together in political alliance?

This practical politics challenge to Marxism, however, is shaped for Laclau and Mouffe and others by underlying ontological (related to being or what is in the world) and epistemological (relating to understanding, of what can be known about the world) crises (1-2). The ontological crisis is marked by the “plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles” that is thought to throw into question the Marxist base-superstructure model and the “universal subjects” that accompany it (2). The proliferation of struggles by feminists, sexual minorities, racial minorities, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, etc., they argue, “presents itself, first of all, as a ‘surplus’ of the social vis-à-vis the rational and organized structures of society—that is, of the social ‘order’” (1).

The simple presence of this surplus, however, is not the only component of the ontological crisis. Laclau and Mouffe, and indeed many others,²⁰ seek to explain this ontological surplus—i.e., the proliferation of social justice struggles—discursively. I contend that it is this discursive element that uniquely characterizes what Laclau and Mouffe and others broadly influenced by poststructuralism understand to be the ontological crisis of Marxism (xi). As Laclau and Mouffe assert, society is determined not just by economic modes of production, but

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²⁰ Many contemporary scholars are interested in the “discursive” production of categories such as class, race, women, etc. I address these scholars in Chapter Two.
instead by “discursive” modes of production. This discursive ontology—that is, that all social categories and identities are forever in the process of becoming through multiple and fluid linguistic or discursive forces—Laclau and Mouffe maintain, throws “universal subjects” and fixed categories such as “class” into question. For Laclau and Mouffe, what they call “unfixity”—or the fact that all subjects are in the process of becoming through language and so are never permanently fixed—“has become the condition of every social identity” (85).

In addition to challenging fixed categories such as “class,” Laclau and Mouffe argue that discursive unfixity also has devastating implications for modes of understanding built on structural determinism (xi)—or the notion that “society is an intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered” through modes of scientific rationalism and “conceptually explicable laws” (3, 4). For Marx and Engels, the social world is fixed; it is based in the economic structure. This rigid social ontology—that the social world is determined and fixed by economic modes of production—is informed, at least in certain readings of Marxism, by an equally rigid scientific materialism. Any transformation of the material conditions of society can be explained scientifically. According to Lenin’s reading of Marx in particular, both the origin and the

21 Of “paramount importance” to their theory, Laclau and Mouffe state in the preface, is that “the social” be “conceived as a discursive space” (x).

22 As Marx states in the preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, the “anatomy” of “civil society” must be “sought in political economy” (Marx 1970: 20). The economic structure, which we may come to understand through the study of political economy, determines the nature of civil society. Marx is uncompromising on this point. This strict social ontology is the “guiding principle” of his studies (20). According to Marx, “the economic structure of society,” made up of the totality of relations of production, is the “real foundation” of human society. The “legal and political superstructure” which determines forms of “social consciousness,” arises from this base (see 20–21). Quite simply, the base determines the superstructure. Any change in the economic structure will lead to “transformation of the whole immense superstructure” (21). Social relations and social consciousness of these relations—the “process of social, political and intellectual life”—are both determined by relations of production.
direction of the evolutionary process toward Communism can be scientifically known. An unfixed social order, Laclau and Mouffe argue, necessarily throws this rigid scientific socialism radically into question.

If the perceived ontological crisis is marked by a surplus of the social, we may understand the epistemological crisis to be marked by a perceived deficit of knowledge, or “structural undecidability” (xii) (emphasis added). Because Laclau and Mouffe believe discursive forces are thought to be forever in flux, they argue it becomes almost impossible to determine anything about these forces with absolute certainty (1). If we cannot rely on our old ways of knowing and understanding social forces, the question goes, how are we to identify the power structures that we hope to challenge politically? One can see here how ontological unfixity, and the epistemological undecidability it is thought to engender, could have devastating effects for practical politics. However, this threat to practical politics only emerges if one concludes that the surplus of social justice struggles on the ground is a result of discursive unfixity.

For contemporary political theorists still interested in elaborating notions of coalition that move in clear left-oriented directions, a commitment to a fixed political direction seems to sit at odds with a prior theoretical commitment to notions of ontological unfixity and/or epistemological undecidability. Both Laclau and Mouffe’s (1983) formulation of coalition as *Left hegemony* (via Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci) and Nicholas Tampio’s (2009) more recent formulation of coalition as *left assemblage* (via Deleuze and Guattari) suffer from this problem. Recent attempts by Butler (1990, 2004, 2009, and 2011), and scholars influenced by

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23 For Lenin, this firm scientific socialism ultimately requires the adoption of Communist ideology rooted in strict and uncompromising goals: to abolish the bourgeois state and bourgeois property, through the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat. See Lenin (1978: 8-9, 20-23).
her work,\textsuperscript{24} to relieve this tension between unfixity and fixity only succeed in doing so by obscuring the concrete politics of social justice activist coalitions.

In one such formulation, coalition emerges as spectacle (Butler 1990 and 2011), wherein sexual minorities find themselves performing unplanned disruptive acts of gender and sexuality defiance, such as collectively dressing in drag. Butler arrives at this formulation by insisting that the politics of coalition mirror the unfixity of the social, leaving her with a theory of coalition built on political indeterminacy wherein social justice struggles may emerge on their own, but cannot be planned, predicted, or even advocated for in advance; instead, they can only be identified and described after the fact of their occurrence. However, reducing the scope of coalition politics only to unpredictable moments of ontological disturbance in the form of coalition as spectacle severely overestimates the role of strictly “discursive” arrangements of power in situating variously positioned subjugated peoples, thereby concealing institutional and other arrangements of power that may not be troubled by such “performative” acts.

\textit{Theory and Event}’s 2012 supplemental journal issue on the student coalition (Coalition large de l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale, or CLASSE) that emerged out of Quebec’s Maple Spring, in which students and non-students came together to contest the neoliberal policies that resulted in increased tuition fees for students among other austerity measures, is indicative of this. The articles appearing in this issue highlight the undecidability, unpredictability, and indeterminacy of this coalitional event,\textsuperscript{25} instead of focusing on the concrete, knowable, and decidable political demands of the CLASSE coalition itself (centering on a more participatory democratic order) (CLASSE 2012). The dissonance between the concrete politics articulated by the student coalition and the stubborn insistence by contemporary

\textsuperscript{24} See Schram (2013) and Watson (2012).

\textsuperscript{25} See articles by Lynes (2012), Al-Saji (2012), and Manning (2012). I return to this in Chapter Two.
political theorists on the complete undecidability and indeterminacy of this moment of activist
coalition politics reflects the severe limitations of a theoretical framework that proceeds from
notions of discursive unfixity and epistemological undecidability.

In a second (though incongruous with her first) formulation, Butler (2004, 2009, and
2011) works on this tension from the other end by replacing unfixity with fixity. Here, coalition
emerges as “precarious community,” wherein all progressively minded people come together in a
broad ethical community defined by the shared precariousness of all to the forces of global
market capitalism. An odd form of ontological fixity therefore emerges here in the form of a
fixed, universal precariousness. This shared experience of precariousness, Butler argues, will
generate ethical coalitions committed to relieving the heightened precarity of the most
vulnerable. However, here a focus on a shared ethical condition of caring for others in the form
of coalition as precarious community threatens to eclipse considerations of the arrangements of
power (the politics) that situate and necessarily frustrate all self/other encounters and certainly
most coalitional efforts.26 Think here of the emphasis Chisholm’s places on “struggle”: attention
to the real challenge of forming coalitions across multiple subjugated groups is completely
absent in Butler’s notion of coalition as precarious community. I contend that both of Butler’s
formulations, though each in a different way, obscure the concrete politics of social justice
activist coalitions.

For contemporary political theorists, notions of ontological unfixity and epistemological
undecidability throw the practical challenge of engaging in progressive group politics outside of
the category of class into full on crisis. Informed by this crisis, contemporary political theory
finds itself at an impasse wherein relieving the tension between unfixity and fixity requires

obscurring the politics of coalition. Recall, however, that for Chisholm, uniting fractured social justice movements was a *challenge* (not a crisis) that she and other women of color feminists met with a notion of coalition politics centered on dismantling interlocking oppressive structures. While scholars since Laclau and Mouffe have taken for granted the relationship between the proliferation of social justice struggles and *discursive* unfixity, I shall claim that there are alternative ways to accommodate multiplicity and complexity on the ground without subscribing either to discursive unfixity in the form of coalition as spectacle or to ethical fixity in the form of coalition as precarious community.

**Theorizing Social Justice Activist Coalitions Beyond Unfixity and Undecidability**

To move these discussions forward, I turn to feminist political theory. In what follows, I will argue that in turning to this rich body of work we will discover how to disentangle notions of ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability from the political *challenge* of progressive group politics outside of the category of class and rigid scientific socialism. Though I will ultimately turn to 1970s and 1980s women of color feminism to develop a promising vision of coalition politics, examples of feminist activists theorizing social justice coalition politics in new and innovative ways began as early as Rosa Luxemburg (1906).

Often overlooked by contemporary coalition theorists, Rosa Luxemburg offers a Marxist alternative to the rigid scientific socialism of Lenin that succeeds in accommodating complexity, fluidity, and even a sense of unpredictability without subscribing to ontological unfixity, epistemological undecidability, or political indeterminacy. Challenging Lenin’s reliance on Communists to shape the proletariat’s class-consciousness and corresponding politics,
Luxemburg replaces a rigid scientific socialism with a theory of proletarian coalition politics that emerges neither out of the precision of natural science nor out of the morass of theories of discursive unfixity, but instead out of the school of lived struggle.27

By theorizing from the inside out—that is, from inside a space of lived struggle—Luxemburg opens up possibilities for spontaneous, though nevertheless united and directed, coalition politics. According to Luxemburg, an experience of “ceaseless economic struggle” against capitalist owners (Luxemburg 2004: 195) will awaken in workers, like an “electric shock,” a “class feeling” that will compel them toward “spontaneous” and united action against the conditions of their social and economic existence (181). Proletarian politics, she maintains, are born out of these “coalescing wage struggles” (180, 192-193). In this sense, they are not and cannot be governed by a particular party ideology (180). These coalitions are spontaneous in the sense that their emergence cannot be planned, predicted, or placed “on the calendar for a specified day” (169). In this sense, we may think of them as “unpredictable,” but not because Luxemburg accepts the discursive unfixity of all beings and political categories. For Luxemburg, such coalitions are only unpredictable from the outside—meaning such coalitions cannot be created from the outside by the Community party. Instead, they must emerge from within lived struggle; within this context, she believes, coalescing wage struggles will emerge with “historical inevitability” (170). Instead of imposing reason, order, or a programmatic plan from the outside,

27 Luxemburg argues that the “political education” of the proletariat is not something imparted on them through “pamphlets and leaflets” or by a “schoolmaster” (Luxemburg 2004: 198). Instead, proletariats gain a “theoretical edge” (Marx and Engels 2004: 74) not with scientific precision (see Lenin 1975: 24-25), but within the fight itself: that is, in and through lived experience and struggle (Luxemburg 2004: 182).
Luxemburg insists that a sophisticated worker’s consciousness will emerge from within because it is inherent to the lived experience of the proletarian masses.\footnote{Beginning in coalescing wage struggles, mass strike, according to Luxemburg, is “not a draft method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, but the method of motion of the proletarian masses” (192, emphasis in original).}

Luxemburg offers here an alternative to the rigid class politics of Lenin’s scientific socialism. However, her reading of Marxism is overlooked in contemporary theorizations of coalition. While Laclau and Mouffe, for instance, engage Luxemburg on some of these points, they seek to impose indeterminacy on Luxemburg’s theory of spontaneous coalition politics. They argue that because the unity of the workers results for Luxemburg in a “class unity,” she has contradicted her own logic of spontaneity that, they believe, would require that the “type of unitary subject” to emerge out of spontaneous struggle remain “largely indeterminate” (LM 1985: 11, emphasis added). Luxemburg’s logic of spontaneity, they insist, subscribes her to a discursive understanding of class unity wherein it is best understood as only ever a symbolic unity that will ultimately “overflow its own literality” (11). By this they mean to suggest that the category “class,” and indeed all unitary political subjects, are forever unstable, because of their discursive production in and through language, and thus indeterminate. For Luxemburg to speak in terms of “class” unity at all, they argue, is to violate her own logic of spontaneity.

There is no reason, however, to insist that Luxemburg’s logic of spontaneity moves in this direction. While her notion of spontaneity accommodates complexity, movement, fluidity, and change, it does so without subscribing to indeterminacy and, unlike Laclau and Mouffe, I see no reason why it must. Luxemburg, unlike Laclau and Mouffe, is not informed by discursive commitments to unfixity or undecidability. Her notion of spontaneity accommodates a purposeful direction toward emancipation, broadly speaking, and while this spontaneous coming together may have occurred in certain instances of coalescing wage struggles in the form of class
unity, there is no reason to believe that within other contexts it would not take the form of other, and perhaps even more complex, forms of coalitional unity—such as some combination of race, class, and gender unity at once. Luxemburg was quite aware, for instance, of the connection between women’s struggle and class struggle. The lack of rights of women in Germany, she has argued, “is only one link” in a chain of oppression “that shackles people’s lives” (239). Her logic of spontaneity therefore leaves room for the possibility of political unity and determinacy across diverse subjugated groups.

When contemporary political theorists elaborate theories of coalition politics, they do so always against the backdrop of a perceived crisis of Marxism. This crisis centers on how to break the rigidity (on an ontological level, an epistemological level, and a political level) that is thought to be inherent to Marxism. However, while we find a vivid expression of such rigidity in Lenin’s scientific socialism, not all expressions of Marxism adopt a rigid epistemology and politics. When contemporary scholars attempt to move against fixity or rigidity, they have Lenin’s version of Marxism in mind. What has not yet been given enough attention, however, are the kinds of creative possibilities for flexible social justice coalition politics opened up by Luxemburg’s notion of spontaneous workers’ coalitions.

As I will demonstrate across the dissertation, Luxemburg is not alone either in her insistence on theorizing from within lived struggle or in her notion of the inevitability of social justice coalition politics. The notion of coalition politics I develop and defend here rests on similar ideas that have become a mainstay of much contemporary feminist theory.

An explicit turn to social justice activist coalitions has been central to contemporary feminist theory at least since women of color feminists first championed it in the 1970s (Chisholm 1972). By the mid 1990s, a much broader range of white, postmodern, and third
world feminists also began discussing coalition. By 2000, a broad consensus across feminist theory had emerged: the way forward for feminism is coalition. This consensus remains strong even today. The variety of ways in which feminist activists and theorists think with and through the conception of coalition, I will show, usher in new and creative ways to think through the challenge of left-oriented collective politics across intractable differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Not only do these notions challenge the narrow definition of coalition


operative across political science, they also throw into question the dominant theoretical
paradigm of rational choice theory for interpreting coalitional behavior. Additionally, and
perhaps most importantly for political theory, they challenge the stronghold that notions of
undecidability, unfixity, and indeterminacy seem to have over attempts within contemporary
political theory to theorize social justice activist coalition politics.

The richest understanding of coalition, and the one that most fully embodies the spirit of
Luxemburg on these points, I contend, may be located in the work of U.S. women of color
feminism. By U.S. women of color feminism I mean to refer to a wide range of scholars who
started to appear en masse in the early 1980s (although Chisholm’s 1972 article is certainly a
precursor to this body of work) with the publication of a variety of women of color and Black
of color” not as an ontological category describing a certain identity related to being a woman of
color, but instead as a way of understanding—in this sense, an epistemology or analytic. As such,
even feminists who are not “women of color” can engage in key components of women of color
feminism.

As demonstrated through Chisholm’s short coalition article, the theme of coalition
politics has been central to the work of U.S. women of color feminism since at least the 1970s
(Townsend-Bell 2012). The “comprehension of the simultaneity of oppression,” which Barbara
Smith argues became characteristic of Black feminist thought in the early 1980s, created a

32 Some of these anthologies include: All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave,
edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith in 1982; Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology,
edited by Barbara Smith in 1983; This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color, edited by
Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1983; and Haciendo Caras: Making Face, Making Soul, edited by Gloria
Anzaldúa in 1990. Key women of color feminist thinkers include: Bonnie Thorton Dill, Barbara Smith, Audre
Lorde, Barbara Christian, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Bernice Reagon,
Chela Sandoval, Mario Lugones and Chandra Mohanty, among many others.

33 I take Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984) as exemplary on this point in Chapter Four.
“political atmosphere particularly conducive to coalition building” (Smith 1983: xxxiii). It is not that racism exists and so does sexism and that they may happen to act on one person (a Black woman) simultaneously; it is rather that one cannot truly make sense of the inner workings of racism without understanding the ways in which sexism interacts with racism (King 1988). This critical insight inclined many women of color feminists toward social justice coalitions with multiple subjugated groups mutually committed to undermining interlocking oppressions. As Angela Davis declared in 1989, “this is the era of coalitions” (Bhavnani and Davis 1989: 71). The turn to coalition politics for these authors was never merely intellectual; as Pat Parker put it, women of color “cannot afford not to” form coalitions with other oppressed groups (Parker 1983: 238). As many of these authors maintain, and as Chisholm suggested in her 1972 article, women of color feminists are particularly well-suited to this form of political engagement.

By recuperating, rigorously engaging, and ultimately defending this rich body of work, this dissertation challenges its readers to enter into unfamiliar and even uncomfortable territory, wherein the concept of “coalition” will emerge in unconventional and perhaps perplexing ways. In addition to introducing my readers to more-concrete notions of activist coalition politics—which I will term politico-ethical coalition—I will invite my readers to also entertain notions of coitional identity, coitional consciousness, and coitional scholarship. These more peculiar formulations of coalition, I will argue, offer creative and ultimately promising ways out of the tensions and conundrums of dominant articulations of “coalition” within contemporary political theory. Before sketching these more challenging adjectival iterations of coalition, however, it


may help to briefly introduce the concrete notion of activist coalition politics I wish to defend across the dissertation.

By taking seriously the challenge of uniting across diverse and sometimes hostile race, class, gender, and sexuality divides vividly brought to people’s attention in Bernice Johnson Reagon’s 1981 coalition speech, women of color feminists such as Reagon, Smith, Lorde, and many others, develop a notion of *politico-ethical coalition politics*. Unlike the theories of coalition on offer by political scientists interested in predicting the outcomes of voting games typical of formal governmental decision-making bodies, politico-ethical coalition politics anticipates the power struggles, fears, and challenges of social justice activist coalition politics across unequal power differentials and at times hostile race, class, gender, and sexuality divides.

Additionally, unlike contemporary articulations of activist coalition politics such as those by Butler and many of the authors appearing in *Theory and Event’s* 2012 supplemental issue on Quebec’s Maple Spring, both of which obscure the politics of social justice coalitions in favor of unpredictable ontological disturbance, politico-ethical coalition politics foregrounds the shared political commitment that brings activists to the space of coalition in the first place, thereby opposing notions of coalition that emphasize political indeterminacy or undecidability. The direction and purpose of politico-ethical coalitions is made explicitly clear from the moment of their formation: such coalitions move unequivocally in the direction of undermining all systems of oppression. Recalling one sense of the OED’s general definition of coalition then (def. 2), politico-ethical coalition politics foregrounds both the challenge of working across hostile divides—highlighting coalition as a *struggle* toward unity—and the importance of *choosing* to do so for the sake of a shared political commitment.
What is more, in response to other contemporary articulations of coalition by Romand Coles (1996) and Butler (2004 and 2011) that allow shared ethical commitments to eclipse political ones, politico-ethical coalition foregrounds the politics of coalition while still attending to important ethical considerations related to how to treat one another within the space of coalition. Specifically, by adopting a self-reflexive political commitment to undermining all forms of oppression, women of color feminists insist that this political commitment must be informed by a consideration of the ways in which one may or may not be applying this political commitment to personal encounters within the coalition itself. Being truly self-reflexive in one’s political commitment requires her to interrogate her own behavior. This is what women of color feminists do across both their scholarship and their activist politics.

I will argue that it is precisely this sense of self-reflexivity as an integral component of coalition politics that aligns politico-ethical coalition politics with a broader understanding of coalition as instances of internal or existential transformation (see first OED definition of coalition). As Reagon famously put it, the only way for white anti-racists to come South and work effectively in coalitions with Black people was for them to remain open to losing a sense of who they are in the process of coalition–open, that is, to transforming from “Mary” to “Maria” (Reagon 1983: 350). I will argue that opening up coalition to its broader uses in this way proves hugely instructive when revisiting the ontological and epistemological “crises” that have beset other contemporary articulations of coalition politics.

Specifically, I will show that a politico-ethical understanding of coalition politics is made possible for women of color feminists by profoundly reconfiguring notions of political subjectivity and political consciousness. In these reconfigurations, women of color feminists begin to think creatively through the notion of coalition in rather unconventional ways. I defend
such reconfigurations across the dissertation. Moving away from the notions of permanent ontological unfixity on offer by contemporary political theorists, women of color feminists experiment with notions of ontological complexity and fluidity that ultimately resist unfixity. By describing and enacting what some scholars casually refer to as coalitional identities, wherein women of color are thought to be internally heterogeneous and complexly situated and yet nevertheless in a constant struggle toward ontological wholeness and unity, women of color feminists offer alternatives to the indeterminate political subjects appealed to by Laclau and Mouffe and Butler.

For women of color feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, simply living as a woman of color is characterized by a continuous struggle across her multiple and conflicting selves—as a poor woman, as a Black woman, as a Chicana woman, as a lesbian woman, etc.—and toward a coherent center. When recounting experiences of this internal struggle, women of color appeal to the language of “coalition.” In so doing, they encourage us to open our understanding of coalition to its broader uses. While thus far only casually referenced by women of color activists and scholars, I develop and defend the notion of coalitional identity as foundational to politico-ethical coalition politics.

Through this process of internal struggle toward coalitional identity, women of color feminists acquire what Chela Sandoval (2000) has referred to as a coalitional consciousness; that is, a unique epistemological awareness and acuity for not only navigating complex social systems of oppressions but also assuming tactical political subjectivities for the sake of collective

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36 See Crenshaw (1991), Chung and Chang (1998), Burack (2004), Rowe (2008), Chavez (2013), and Carastathis (2013) for instances of referring to something called a coalitional identity. For other feminist theorists who also gesture toward a strong connection between identity and coalition politics, see Fowlkes (1997), Ackelsberg (1996), and Adams (1989). Carastathis (2013) also uses the phrases “coalitional self” and “coalition of one.” I engage this literature in Chapter Four.

37 Also see Cricket Keating (2005) on coalitional consciousness.
group action. The skills women of color have acquired by navigating their own multiple identities and struggling toward ontological wholeness as coalitional selves, I argue, prepare them for the difficult work of concrete coalition politics with other subjugated peoples and across, at times conflicting or hostile, differences. Much in the same way that Luxemburg speaks of spontaneous awakening in and through workers’ struggles, women of color feminists have adopted these sophisticated forms of being (coalitional identity) and knowing (coalitional consciousness) as necessary survival tactics. I seek to develop and defend both of these uses of coalition not only because these modes of being and knowing prove to be invaluable to the viability of successful politico-ethical coalition politics, but also because the use of coalition in its adjectival forms seems appropriate insofar as it summons a broader understanding of coalition that emphasizes profound existential transformation as indispensable to the process of coalescing.

I recognize that to use the concept of “coalition” in such unconventional ways will likely puzzle at least some political theorists, and certainly most political scientists. However, I will demonstrate that the multidimensionality this concept holds for contemporary feminist theorists need not trouble us. On the contrary, the variety of ways in which feminist activists and theorists think with and through the concept of coalition will enliven broader conversations within contemporary political theory on theorizing political subjectivity, left-oriented collective politics, and political consciousness. Indeed, it is precisely their bold creativity that enables women of color feminists to move beyond troubling notions of political indeterminacy.

38 I want to note one important exception here. In “From Third World Liberation to Multiple Oppression Politics: A Contemporary Approach to Interethnic Coalitions,” Angie Chung and Edward Chang make a brief mention of “coalitional identity” and “coalitional consciousness” (1998: 95-96). This article came up in one of my “political science” searches so it would be unfair to say that these notions would be completely foreign to political scientists. However, it is also important note that this article was not published in a classic political science journal. Instead, and like much of the work on social justice activist coalition politics, it was published in a special issue journal, called Social Justice.
Nevertheless, arriving at these imaginative concepts is no easy task. In order to get there, women of color feminists have also profoundly reshaped how they do political theory. To be sure, the unique contribution of women of color feminism to the study of social justice activist coalition politics does not end with its strong appeal to politico-ethical coalitions as the best way to unite diverse subjugated groups working to undermine oppression. While attention to coalition building and coalition politics is perhaps one of the most celebrated aspects of women of color feminism among contemporary political and social theorists interested in progressive group politics (see Burack 2004: 159), the true sophistication in their notion of coalition, I maintain, lies in its multidimensionality.

For women of color feminists, coalitions are not only “indispensable instrumental tools” of minority politics (Burack 2004: 159). Following Cynthia Burack (2004), Chela Sandoval (2000) and others, I will argue that women of color feminism also functions as a kind of coalitional discourse that not only arrives at coalition as the answer to the progressive politics question provoked by the perceived crisis of Marxism, but also enacts a form of coalitional scholarship. I contend that this new understanding of what is entailed in the very process of theorizing coalition has led contemporary scholars such as Erica Townsend-Bell (2012) to describe women of color feminist anthologies such as This Bridge Called My Back (edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1983) as literal “written” or “textual” coalitions (Townsend-Bell 2012: 130). While attempting to understand a material object such as a book as a “coalition” no doubt poses a hefty set of challenges, to pass off this final formulation of coalition as too strange or less than rigorous would be to miss one of women of color feminism’s most important contributions to contemporary political theory, and certainly to my own scholarly commitments across this dissertation.
I contend that certain questions in contemporary political theory demand new ways of theorizing. In a contemporary moment defined by increasing complexity, the proliferation of even more differences\(^\text{39}\) and the profound need to work across them in a continuous fight for social justice,\(^\text{40}\) it would behoove political theorists to spend more time theorizing coalitional possibilities. I am arguing that when doing so, they should take cues from women of color feminism.\(^\text{41}\) In order to effectively theorize coalition politics, women of color feminists demonstrate that a more-collaborative mode of scholarship is absolutely indispensable. I call this mode of scholarship “coalitional” because it is not just collaborative; it is also unambiguously political, grounded in an activist social justice mission. The insights emerging out of this coalitional scholarship and the urgency with which it pushes toward workable and practical solutions provide a stark contrast to the impasses and deadlocks that shape scholarship within contemporary political theory. A coalitional approach to scholarship contains a few key characteristics.

Firstly, it moves us in the direction of collective and even coalitional conversations, as opposed to Master narratives that grant authority to a handful of canonical, male thinkers and comprehensive rational, or scientific, theories (see Boucher and Kelly 2009: 1-20). Across the

\(^{39}\) Just this summer (2015), the trans movement has gained increased momentum with Caitlyn Jenner’s recent public transition from male (Bruce) to female (Caitlyn). With this increased momentum, debates have already erupted over whether the trans movement and the feminist movements share similar goals.

\(^{40}\) In addition to the many police shootings of unarmed Black men that have inspired numerous rallies across the country that both white and Black Americans have taken part in, the recent mass shooting of nine people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, has spurred public demonstrations and protests against American racism. Almost all social justice issues and movements of our time demand similar acts of coming together across difference.

\(^{41}\) The most recent text published on theorizing social justice coalition politics is Karma Chávez’s *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (2013). It is worth noting that Chávez is a Chicana/o theorist located in a communications department, not a political science department. The most promising work on theorizing coalition continues to come out of feminist, race, and Chicana/o studies. Political theorists interested in social justice activism ought to become more familiar with this literature.
chapters of this dissertation, I take no one, single theorist as my primary thinker. While I do select certain authors and pieces in order to illustrate certain points, many of the points I make by way of one text or one thinker are echoed across many other authors. The texts I engage here mostly include a range of shorter essays, speeches, stories, poems, streams of consciousness, personal reflections, movement documents, and manifestos written by a range of women of color feminists and often appearing in anthologies, as opposed to single-authored books that attempt to outline a comprehensive theory of collective progressive politics.

Much of early women of color feminism in fact comes to us through anthologies. By their very nature, anthologies create the opportunity for “a print-based collective space” (Norman 2006: 39). When such anthologies also self-reflexively engage the challenge of working across differences and for the sake of egalitarian social justice, then they also have the potential to enact the very coalitions for which they seek (39). The coalitional discourses activated within these anthologies are overtly political, rooted in an activist social justice mission, and intensely self-reflexive. The authors are aware of the challenges inherent in the coalitional goals they hope to achieve and spend much time—in conversation with one another through printed interviews or explicit references to one another across the pages of the anthology—working toward solutions to the challenge that difference poses to collective left-oriented politics. Women of color feminist anthologies such as *Home Girls* (1983), *But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), and *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) all exemplify this collectively self-reflexive and overtly political character. Many of the authors I engage here (such as Barbara Smith, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde) were actively involved in bringing these anthologies to print.

Ideas presented in the handful of single-authored texts that I engage here have also clearly emerged out of coalitional conversations. For example, the linchpin of Chela Sandoval’s
argument in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000)—which becomes the bedrock of my own understanding of coalitional consciousness—is developed in conversation with other women of color as they collectively reflect on their marginalization within mainstream academic feminism. The major ideas appearing in the pivotal chapter of this book—wherein Sandoval turns to the epistemology of U.S. Third world feminism to develop a “methodology of the oppressed”—emerge out of a piece she wrote almost two decades prior to the book’s publication, entitled “Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women’s Studies Association Conference.” As secretary to The National Third World Women’s Alliance, a group that formed within the space of the 1981 NWSA Conference and due to feelings of severe marginalization as women of color within the space of the conference, Sandoval documents, summarizes, and reflects on the proceedings of the conference and the experiences of the Third World Women’s Alliance group.

By assuming the role of “secretary,” as opposed to primary “author,” of this report, Sandoval places herself within a coalitional conversation with the other women at the conference. As such, she documents, rather than develops, a unique epistemology—or consciousness—of U.S. Third world women that moves unequivocally in the direction of coalition. In this sense, coalition operates on two levels across Sandoval’s work. The notion of the “methodology of the oppressed” that she develops in her 2000 book not only relies most fundamentally on the coalitional consciousness typical of U.S. women of color, but the very idea

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42 As was the case for “Black” feminism, I am following Sandoval and others in capitalizing “Third” world women/feminism here.

43 This article was originally published in 1982 and then anthologized in *Making Face, Making Soul / Hacienda Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa in 1990.

44 Like Sandoval, I am using U.S. women of color and U.S. Third world women interchangeably here.
itself emerges out of the coalitional space of the 1981 meetings of the Third World Women’s Alliance group.

In the preface to Pilgrimages, Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions (2003), Maria Lugones similarly tells us that the book “represents” an “attempt to grasp a thematic” for “many years of theoretical reflection within grass-roots radical political work” (ix). Ultimately, she asserts, the book is the outcome of “shaping ground together” (x). The book is “neither a contemplative, nor a visionary, nor a programmatic work:” instead, it “takes up, from within, a feel for collectivity” (ix, emphasis added). Not only will Lugones ultimately arrive at coalition as an indispensable tool for minority group politics, the book itself also attempts to embody many key components of coalitional thinking. It takes concrete encounters with difference as its starting place, and it creatively and collectively thinks through how such differences may provide the basis for collective emancipatory politics.

In the introduction to Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity (2003), Chandra Mohanty makes a similar kind of declaration:

While many of the ideas I explore here are viewed through my own particular lenses, all the ideas belong collectively to the various feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist communities in which I have been privileged to be involved. In the end, I think and write in conversation with scholars, teachers, and activists involved in social justice struggles. My search for emancipatory knowledge over the years has made me realize that ideas are always communally wrought, not privately owned. (1)

Like Sandoval and Lugones both have done, Mohanty positions her text within a coalitional conversation among women of color and other social justice activists collectively committed to undermining and resisting interlocking oppressions. Not only is the book fundamentally preoccupied with elaborating visions of feminist political solidarity, but the text itself is born out of “a self-reflexive collective process” (Mohanty 2003: 8). Even across single-authored texts
such as these, women of color feminism therefore emerges as a mode of coalitional scholarship and activism.

A second component of coalitional scholarship is located in a commitment among women of color feminists to theorizing from within lived struggle, instead of from abstract principles of reason. Like Luxemburg, women of color theorize from within grass-roots activist work. It is this experience of struggle, and not a theoretical framework rooted in either rational choice theory or discursive unfixity, that shapes their theory of coalition politics. In so doing, these authors dispense with a certain style of political theory that focuses on rational argumentation, in favor instead of innovative and creative modes of storytelling, polemical prose, rousing speeches or manifestos, and intensely personal reflections on encountering and working through multiple levels of difference. With this unique methodological approach to political theory, women of color feminists spend time tracing both individual and group journeys toward coalition. Through such endeavors, the very notion of coalition—that is, of collectively struggling across differences for the sake of a shared political commitment to undermining all forms of oppression—inflects the full life of their work. Arriving at theories of politico-ethical coalition politics, coalitional identity, and coalition consciousness, I maintain, is made possible by these new coalitional ways of doing political theory. For this reason, it would be less than rigorous on my part to not also attend to these important methodological contributions.

It is this more comprehensive and creative treatment of coalition that I seek to activate across this dissertation. Feminist thought has long had the tools for rethinking difficult political and theoretical questions related to left-oriented collective politics, political subjectivity, political consciousness, and engaging in activist political theory. While not yet introduced as a rigorous concept within the emerging lexicon of feminist political theory, the concept of coalition is
clearly in circulation among a number of contemporary feminist scholars. In this project, I seek to place this concept, in all of its perplexing and promising permutations, within this lexicon and explore the creative ways in which it may guide us toward more robust visions of social justice activist coalition politics.

**Outline of Dissertation**

In this dissertation, I develop and defend a notion of politico-ethical coalition politics in two broad moves across five chapters and a brief conclusion. The first two chapters expose the limitations of current scholarship within both political science and political theory. The remaining three chapters develop a notion of politico-ethical coalition politics and demonstrate how it may attend to the various blind spots and tensions that emerge across political science and political theory. In so doing, these chapters also develop three related concepts: coalitional identity, coalitional consciousness, and coalitional scholarship.

In the first chapter, I show that while political scientists spend considerable time theorizing coalition, they do so within a limited frame. First, they narrow their definition of coalition to formal governmental (or intergovernmental) decision-making bodies. Second, they turn almost exclusively to the formal game modeling of rational choice theory to study coalitional behavior. This limited definition and theoretical framework, I will argue, necessarily sidelines discussions of extra-governmental coalitions such as the social justice activist coalitions that most concern me here.

For more careful consideration of social justice activist coalition politics, I turn in the second chapter to political theory. The few political theorists interested in theorizing “coalition” part ways with political scientists in examining primarily social justice activist coalitions, but
also adhere to a limited theoretical framework. In this chapter, I critically interrogate four popular notions of coalition within contemporary political theory. Both coalition as Left hegemony (developed by Laclau and Mouffe via Althusser and Gramsci) and coalition as left assemblage (developed by Tampio via Deleuze and Guattari), I will demonstrate, run into a fundamental tension between a theoretical commitment to ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability on the one hand, and a political commitment to left-oriented coalition politics on the other. Contemporary efforts by Judith Butler (1990, 2004, 2009, and 2011) and those informed by her work (Schram 2013 and Watson 2012), to relieve this tension between the unfixity of the social and the fixity of left-oriented coalition politics, I go on to argue, only succeed at doing so by sacrificing the politics of activist coalitions in favor of either ontological disturbance (in the form of coalition as spectacle) or ethical community (in the form of coalition as precarious community). Either way, the concrete politics of social justice activist coalitions—that is, the goal or purpose of the coalition and the arrangements of power that situate coalitional efforts—becomes obscured in the process.

As I go on to argue in the remaining three chapters of the dissertation, women of color feminists are at the forefront of scholarship attempting to move outside of these limited frames. By turning to Bernice Johnson Reagon’s 1981 coalition speech, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in the third chapter I develop a notion of politico-ethical coalition politics that both foregrounds the arrangements of power that situate and frustrate all coalitional efforts, and offers opportunities for maneuvering around and through them. Moving away from the language of crisis, I locate in Reagon the fundamental challenge of social justice activist coalition politics in a contemporary moment marked by hostile race, class, gender, and sexuality divides. Such a challenge, I insist, is not insurmountable. Parting ways with Coles (1996) and other
contemporary scholars, I treat this speech as an important and rigorous text in political thought that provides an answer to this fundamental challenge. Where Coles misidentifies in Reagon an emphasis on a shared ethical orientation toward receptive generosity as the key to successful social justice coalition politics, I locate instead a nascent theory of coalition as politico-ethical encounter. What Coles misreads as an ethical orientation in Reagon, I re-read as a self-reflexive political commitment to undermining all forms of oppression and particularly those that emerge within coalitional spaces.

In the fourth chapter, I ground politico-ethical coalition politics in coalitional understandings of both identity and consciousness. Key to Reagon’s notion of coalition politics, I argue, is her insistence on opening oneself to self-transformation through the process of coalescing. Politico-ethical coalition politics, I contend, takes place on both an internal and an external level. By turning to the work of women of color feminists such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa, I develop a notion of coalitional identity as an internal political process, or struggle, toward ontological wholeness that mirrors the external political process of struggling across difference that is required of politico-ethical coalition politics. Through this internal process, I demonstrate, women of color feminists acquire a coalitional consciousness that will ultimately guide them through external coalitional encounters. These two notions, I will argue, enable women of color feminists to accommodate ontological and epistemological multiplicity and complexity, without subscribing to ontological unfixity or epistemological undecidability. By turning in the final pages of the chapter to Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical essay on her own coming to consciousness (as a white, Southern, Christian, middle-class, lesbian woman), I demonstrate that coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness are not capacities reserved
only for non-white women. On the contrary, I argue that all those interested in engaging in politico-ethical coalition politics can and must develop these capacities.

In the fifth chapter, I argue that Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1983 anthology, \textit{This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color}, is an exemplary depiction of the coalitional scholarship typical of women of color feminism that both arrives at and enacts politico-ethical coalition politics in the form of what Erica Townsend-Bell has called “textual” or “written” coalition. I make this argument by juxtaposing \textit{This Bridge} with two other groundbreaking attempts at collective feminist scholarship–Robin Morgan’s 1970 anthology, \textit{Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement}, and Rebecca Walker’s 1995 anthology, \textit{To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism}. Because feminist anthologies are thought to “enact the collectivity for which they call” (Norman 2006: 39), this juxtaposition enables me to reveal the danger in relying on either ethical notions of textual “sisterhood” and community (in one instance), or ontological visions of lifestyle feminism in the form of colorful textual mosaic (in the other instance), as the cementing force behind social justice coalition politics. Only \textit{This Bridge}, I argue, emerges as a truly coalitional text. It is precisely this mode of coalitional scholarship, I contend, that enables women of color feminism to arrive at a politico-ethical understanding of coalition politics.

Finally, I conclude by summarizing the main components of my argument and considering the ways in which a politico-ethical understanding of coalition yields constructive insight to a number of ongoing debates within contemporary political theory.
Chapter One

Low-Stakes Coalition Politics: Winning for Winning’s Sake

In order to fully appreciate the theoretical contribution of feminist theory to discussions on theorizing coalition, it is necessary to first turn to the political science literature. Many political scientists specialize in studying a variety of formal governmental coalitions—i.e., cabinet coalitions, legislative coalitions, coalition governments, policy coalitions. However, and as I will demonstrate below, despite the extensive attention given to theorizing coalition within the political science literature, this scholarship seems constrained in a number of ways.

Specifically, this chapter argues that while political science scholars spend considerable time theorizing about coalitions, they work within a rather limited frame. First, they narrow their definition of coalition to include primarily formal governmental (and intergovernmental) decision-making bodies, thereby sidelining discussions of coalitions that form outside of formal governing institutions. Second, they treat such bodies or alliances (“alliance” is used interchangeably with “coalition” across the literature) as taken-for-granted occurrences that can be explained scientifically. I say “taken for granted” because the formal governmental decision-making contexts in which these coalitions form almost demand their creation. To explain the occurrence, endurance, and success of governmental coalitions, political scientists turn to the formal game modeling of rational choice theory. While research within political science has moved both with and against this dominant paradigm, game models stand at the epicenter of these discussions. Within this context, the stakes of the coalition do not seem to extend beyond winning or losing a voting game.

With such a limited frame, I contend, fruitful discussions about coalitions that form outside of the formal governing institutions of the state cannot occur. Notwithstanding a few
exceptions, thorough consideration of what I will call extra-governmental coalitions, and particularly social justice activist coalitions that form to contest the formal governing institutions of the state, are conspicuously absent from this literature. Furthermore, when such discussions do emerge, they are authored primarily by sociology, race, and gender scholars, only further demonstrating the severe ghettoization of discussions of social justice activist coalitions within the field. I conclude by considering what can be gained by attending to this limited body of work. Not only does this research offer a wider definition of coalition, but it also pushes discussions about coalition out of the limited frame of rational choice theory. It opens up possibilities for new types of conversations about coalition, conversations that feminist theorists have been actively engaged in for more than three decades, and to which I turn in subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Surveying the entire political science literature on coalition is no small task. In an effort to narrow my search to a size that is manageable while still being sufficiently thorough and instructive, I make use of JSTOR’s digital library. Not only do most of the academic articles I have read in the social sciences (across political science, political theory, and feminist theory) appear in JSTOR, but also JSTOR’s search engine is particularly user-friendly and sufficiently robust, with 161 political science journals and many carrying the most current issues. JSTOR allows me to search for the word “coalition” within the 161 political science journal titles they carry in the full text, the abstract, the title, or a caption. Additionally, as many of the titles JSTOR carries include book reviews, doing a journal search such as this one also gives me access to the most important and influential texts on the subject. While a simple word search for coalition in the “full text” yields 39,413 results—and as I know from a similar search across feminist theory journals that most of these articles only appear because the word coalition was
used once (perhaps in the name of a coalition that a scholar mentions in passing)–it was clear to me that I would need to narrow the search to either the title or the abstract. Because many (approximately ninety percent) of the journals in JSTOR do not provide article abstracts, I have done a title search in order to give me access to all 161 journals. Additionally, because I am interested in whether and how political scientists theorize the concept of coalition, articles directly on this topic are most relevant to the task at hand.

Within these search parameters, it is clear that coalition is discussed at length across the political science literature. A title search for coalition across all 161 political science journals yields 402 results, spanning all traditional subfields of political science as a discipline (including American politics, comparative politics, legislative politics, international relations, formal political theory, and political theory\(^1\)). Expanding the search to coalition in the abstract yields just over double that, at 842 journal articles. After surveying both the title search results and the abstract search results, it became clear to me that the greater number of articles appearing within the abstract search does not necessarily yield any new patterns in terms of the various ways in which these articles discuss coalition. The patterns that I go on to outline within the results from the title search are more or less repeated across the articles appearing in the abstract search. I focus primarily on the results from the title search throughout my discussion. Any important exceptions will be noted.\(^2\)

\(^1\) I should note here that a JSTOR search is not the best for political theory titles. While JSTOR does carry some of the major journals titles in political theory, a thorough search here would require using different digital libraries as well as specific journal title searches. I do this more thorough research in the subsequent chapter that addresses the political theory literature.

\(^2\) The most important of these exceptions (to be discussed in the main text of this chapter) is the fact that the abstract search yielded more results within the category of extra-governmental coalitions. I discuss these below. Additionally, some of the political theory articles that did not come up in the title search appeared in the abstract search. See Coles (1996) and Stavro (2007). I plan to address this material in the subsequent chapter.
Surveying this body of work, I set out to answer a number of questions. First, I ask: What do these scholars mean by the word “coalition”? Second, I ask: Do these scholars “theorize” coalition, and if so, how do they theorize coalition? What research questions motivate their work? Do they use the concept of coalition to help them think through other political questions? And finally, I ask: What kind of questions and research may be either opened up or closed down by the way in which they both define and/or theorize coalition? The remainder of this chapter is organized around answering these questions.

Part I) Defining Coalition

As I will demonstrate below, notwithstanding a handful of exceptions, when political scientists speak about coalition they do so in a limited context that narrows “coalition” to refer primarily to formal governmental (or intergovernmental) decision-making bodies. While even early scholars within the field make this connection explicit, the most unequivocal rendition of this narrow conception appears in McLean and McMillan’s Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics (2009). This dictionary of politics, compiled by scholars in the field, defines coalition as:

Any combination of separate players (such as political parties) to win a voting game. The commonest form of coalition arises where legislation requires a majority to pass, but no one party controls as many as half of the seats in the assembly.

There are a number of interesting things to point out about this definition but first we ought to put it in its appropriate context. Appearing within a dictionary of politics it may prove instructive to consider how the dictionary defines politics. As a “general concept,” McLean’s and McMillan’s dictionary defines politics as “the practice of the art or science of directing and administrating states or other political units.” While the dictionary goes on to note that the question of which things count as “political” is a highly contested one—and outlines the “extreme” version of the spectrum as including the personal (such as relations between man and woman)
within the domain of the “political”–the dictionary ultimately settles on the popular usage notion of politics wherein “politics only occurs at the level of government and the state and must involve party competition.” This definition of politics clarifies much about the above definition of coalition. If politics only occurs within state-governing bodies, and specifically between political parties, then it comes as no surprise that political scientists would understand “coalitions” as groups that form specifically within state-governing bodies.

Additionally, it is worth paying attention to the choice of language used in defining coalition. For political scientists, coalitions are conceptualized within the language of games; they are made up of “players”–not, for instance, members or people–who come together for the purpose of “winning” a voting “game,” or, as they go on to clarify, to pass their preferred legislation–not, for instance, for the purpose of improving society or fighting for social justice. The purpose of the coalition is therefore quite specific: to pass the legislation that players in the coalition mutually want to pass; that is, to win. In this sense, we can say that the “stakes” of these coalitions are rather low, centering only on winning or losing a voting game.

The political science literature reinforces this narrow definition. One of the earliest definitions of “coalition” appears in William A. Gamson’s “A Theory of Coalition Formation” (1961). Gamson defines coalitions as,

…temporary, means oriented, alliances among individuals or groups which differ in goals. There is generally little value consensus in a coalition and the stability of a coalition requires tacit neutrality of the coalition on matters which go beyond the immediate prerogatives. This makes the pursuit of power itself, i.e., control over future decisions, an ideal basis for coalition formation since it is an instrument for the achievement of widely ranging and even incompatible goals. Two members may realize their mutual goal antagonisms but such decisions lie in the future and the present alliance may make both better able to achieve wide range of goals not all of which will be incompatible. Power is the currency of politics. (Gamson 1961: 374)

As we can see, the explicit language of games appearing in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* is not yet present in this early definition of coalitions. The definition starts out broadly,
understanding coalitions as only “temporary, means oriented, alliances among individuals or groups which differ in goals.” In this early articulation coalitions are made up of individuals or groups, not players. No language of games here, that is until we read the next line.

Coalitions, we learn, are “temporary, means oriented alliances.” It is this emphasis on coalitions being “means-oriented,” I believe, that aligns Gamson’s understanding of coalition with that of McLean’s and McMillan’s. A coalition is a space in which members come together in a temporary alliance for the purpose of moving forward their individual goals. As such, the coalition cannot be “ends-oriented” because each member has his/her/their own individual ends or goals. Instead, Gamson argues, the coalition is “means-oriented.” By this he seems to mean that the coalition is strategically, rather than goal-, oriented. To be sure, Gamson states that there is generally “little value consensus in a coalition.” In fact, the very stability of the coalition actually requires “tacit neutrality of the coalition on matters which go beyond the immediate prerogatives.” These “immediate prerogatives,” Gamson maintains, are related only to devising a strategy (or means) for winning. Therefore, the only “end” these members share is one designed around winning; their common goal centers on devising a winning strategy. The specific individual, ideological, or moral, goals they each hold do not drive the actions of the alliance. The alliance forms to win.

As a “means-oriented” body, it is interested in finding the best (read: most strategic) way (read: means) to win as many voting games (i.e., pass as many bills) as it can. In this sense, the members of the coalition are interested in pursuing power for power’s sake only. As Gamson states rather explicitly, the basis for the formation of the coalition is simply the “pursuit of power itself” (emphasis added), which is defined as “control over future decisions.” This is the one interest that all coalition members share. Their shared end is, quite simply, to gain control over
the *means* to win present and future voting decisions. With this explicit focus on devising and implementing a winning strategy, one sees how a “means-oriented” alliance aligns with the game-like context outlined by McLean and McMillan.

In another formulation, Gamson tells us,

> A coalition is the joint use of resources by two or more social units [defined as any individual or group which for the duration of the decision follows the same coalition strategy]. Once formed, a coalition will frequently meet the definition of a social unit from the period of formation until the decision has been made. A winning coalition is one with sufficient resources to control the decision. The decision point is the minimum proportion of resources necessary to control the decision. (Gamson 1961: 374)

In this context, coalition is defined as an action: specifically, it is “the joint use of resources.” A coalition is an instance of two or more “social units”–defined as individuals or groups “which for the duration of the decision follow the same coalition strategy”–pooling their resources. In this way, a coalition can, and often does, come to resemble a social unit itself. A coalition is understood as a group that forms for the purpose of pushing through its preferred decision. Importantly, what holds the coalition together is a shared commitment to following the same “strategy,” *i.e.*, the means for winning. A coalition “wins” when it has enough resources to control the decision. We now have our first explicit reference to the language of games. Gamson tells us that a full-fledged coalition situation is “an essential game” (Gamson 1961: 374) (emphasis added).

While we might assume that all coalitions are invested in “winning” to a certain extent–especially if we understand winning broadly in the sense of achieving a shared goal, whatever that may be–the game-playing context among formal governmental decision-making bodies is a rather unique one. Here, all players come into the situation with individual power. They are all elected officials and therefore usually highly educated and middle to upper class. Once they find themselves in this rather privileged position, they can then choose to combine their power with
others or not in order to win as many voting games as possible. This seems to be a rather
different situation from one wherein a number of subordinate groups come together to fight
forms of social injustice. In this latter context, the powerless enter into coalitions with other
equally powerless groups, often for the sake of survival. To reduce such a situation to a “game”
would not only be insensitive but descriptively inaccurate. There is much more at stake here, it
would seem, than “winning for winning’s sake.” I return to these stakes in subsequent sections.

Alongside Gamson, one of the most (if not the most) influential political science scholars
discussions within political science since its publication in 1962, one year after Gamson’s article.
While Riker does not provide a clear definition of coalition anywhere in this text, in his
discussion of politics he equates a coalition with what he calls a “subgroup,” or a group of people
who have come to a decision in a decision-making situation—what he also calls a “political”
situation—to form a group that will then proceed to make decisions for the group as a whole in
future political decision-making situations (Riker 1962: 12). Like Gamson’s understandings of
coalition, for Riker a coalition is a strategic alliance that forms between groups or individuals in
a decision-making context that increases the chances that the preferred decision of the group will
result from future decision-making situations with other coalitions, groups or individuals.

Riker is absolutely unequivocal in understanding a coalition as a game situation. The
“theory of coalition,” as he calls it (Riker 1962: 12), that bolsters his theory of political coalitions

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3 I am using “survival” in a broad sense here. In some instances, social justice activist coalitions may form in order
to survive police brutality or other forms of violence (think of women forming coalitions to fight domestic violence).
In other instances, marginalized groups may form coalitions with other subjugated groups in order to gain access to
a definition of formal citizenship that currently leaves them out. In this sense, it is still about survival but survival in
a broader sense of the word. Yes, these activists are alive, but they are living a second-class existence. True
“survival” may mean for them to live as first-class citizens.

4 All references to definitions of coalition appearing in the index of the book lead one to an appendix in which he
discusses the derivation of the size principle. No clear definition of coalition is offered there, but he does spend time
explaining and defining, mathematically, what a minimum winning coalition is.
is “the theory of $n$-person games” elaborated by John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern in *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944). While Riker was not the first to discover the relevance of the theory of $n$-person games to the study of politics, he was certainly the first to outline a comprehensive “theory of political coalitions” derived from the game theory model.

As he states in the preface to his book: “The specific purpose of this book is to construct, with the help of an existing general theory of coalitions (the theory of $n$-person games), a theory of coalitions that will be useful in studying politics” (Riker 1962: vii). The audience he wishes to reach in this work, he asserts, is “primarily, political scientists and those laymen interested in the abstract interpretation of political events” (Riker 1962: vii). “The more general purpose of this book,” he continues,

is to add another (putative) example (to the several that already exist) of the fact that it is or may be possible for political science to rise above the level of wisdom literature and indeed to join economics and psychology in the creation of genuine sciences of human behavior. (viii)

By applying the mathematical models of game theory to the study of politics, or the study of decision-making situations (what “politics” amounts to for these scholars), Riker believes human political behavior can be explained *scientifically*. Following David Easton’s understanding of politics as “the authoritative allocation of value,” whereby Riker understands “allocation” to refer to “the social process of deciding how a physical process shall be carried out,” Riker defines “politics” quite simply as “social behavior,” or the “study of dynamics” (between people) and not of static things such as forms of government (11, 10). Specifically, Riker understands politics as the study of decision-making and particularly of “authoritative decisions” that concern “allocations of value” made by groups (as opposed to individuals) through a conscious (as opposed to a quasi-mechanical) process (11).

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Paraphrasing Riker, Mahendra P. Singh outlines this “game theoretic definition of coalition” as,

a subset of players in a game situation, who choose to combine their resources to affect the outcome of the game in accordance with some decision-rule accepted by the whole set of players. (Singh 1977: 167-168)

The language here closely resembles the definition of coalition offered by McLean and McMillan. We are now dealing exclusively with “players,” not members, people, or groups. These players find themselves in a “game situation.” In such a situation, all players already hold a certain amount of power, or “resources,” that will allow them to sway the outcome of the game. A coalition describes that instance in which a group of players in this wider decision-making context choose to pool their resources (i.e., their decision-making power) in order to get their preferred outcome out of the game situation—essentially, in order to win the game, or ensure their preferred outcome results from this process.

E.W. Kelley’s definition of coalition (appearing in an article published six years after Riker’s book) shares much with Gamson’s insofar as it at first seems to lack the unequivocal language of games that Riker and McLean and McMillan attribute to political scientists more generally. Kelley defines a coalition as,

A group of individuals or groups of individuals who: 1. agree to pursue a common and articulated goal; 2. pool their relevant resources in pursuit of this goal; 3. engage in conscious communication concerning the goal and the means of obtaining it; 4. agree on the distribution of the payoff (benefits) received when obtaining the goal. A political coalition is distinguished from other coalitions only by the fact that the goal is political in nature. (Kelley 1968: 62-63).

As in Gamson’s definition, the language here starts out broadly, applying to a range of types of coalitions. Also like Gamson, coalitions are made up of individuals or groups of individuals, not “players.” However, and it would seem unlike Gamson, Kelley allows for the possibility that

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6 Presumably all have some element of decision-making power, especially if the decision-making situation is one wherein all members vote. Although one can imagine other situations when certain members have more “resources” (decision-making power) than others due to higher levels of influence one person may have over the rest of the players.
coalition members “agree to pursue a common and articulated goal.” If this goal is understood as an ideological, moral, personal, or, to put it more broadly, “ends-oriented” goal, then it would seem Kelley is parting ways with Gamson. Alternatively, if this goal is understood as a “strategic” goal then it would seem Kelley aligns with Gamson. As we can see above, the rest of the definition does indeed align with Gamson’s and Riker’s insofar as the coalition is an instance of pooling resources and discussing a strategy for winning, or getting their preferred political goal (decision) out of the voting process. This goal is something that produces payoffs or benefits that can be divided. Decision-making power is one such goal if you think about it in terms of a strategic game in which the benefits would be the amount of resources (decision-making power) you can carry with you into the next round of decision-making.

Furthermore, when Kelley defines a “coalition situation,” the range of possible coalition scenarios narrows to one involving voting games. A coalition situation, he tells us, is one in which,

more than one individual or group in competition with others can increase its payoff (i.e., gain power over others, advance certain policies in a legislature, etc.) by combining with other individuals or groups to form a coalition. Where competition is among many groups, and no one group is more powerful than all the others combined, then to be in a coalition is advantageous. (Kelley 1968: 63).

Like in Gamson and Riker, the goal of the coalition in Kelley’s conception is to gain power over others or advance certain policies (decisions) within the legislative process. Once again, coalitions pursue a rather specific “goal,” namely gaining power within the context of decision-making scenarios, such as in legislatures. In “The Benefits of Coalition” (1970), James Coleman defines coalitions in a similar way. The coalition is understood to be made up of a subset of the “total set of actors” in a “social system” (a decision-making situation) that decide to make a pact wherein they pool their resources in “a single unit” in an effort to affect the outcomes of the larger decision-making process (the social system) (see Coleman 1970: 45).
Versions of this game theoretic definition of coalition abound across the political science literature. According to these scholars, coalitions form among separate players–often political parties, but these players could also be individual representatives, such as in Congress–who come together within the space of a formal governing institution with the intention of winning a mutually preferred outcome. Such a context is therefore characterized by a set of relevant conditions. Firstly, all coalition members hold a positive amount of political power. While members come together to increase their political power, all start out–by way of being politicians within the formal governing institution–with some amount of political or decision-making power. Relatedly, prior to forming the coalition, all coalition members already exist on the inside of the political space in which the coalition will form–i.e., political parties already exist within the formal governing institution of the state and members of Congress are already elected officials. As such, and thirdly, all coalition members know that they will be working with or against one another for a set amount of time in order to achieve a range of concrete outcomes (such as to win an election or pass legislation). To put it another way, all members know that there will be multiple rounds of decision-making. As such, coalition members are very much driven by “winning” -they want to be reelected or they want to get their preferred legislation passed.

In this sense, the coalitions are “means-oriented” (focused on the strategy) instead of “ends-oriented” (i.e. focused on a larger goal beyond developing a winning strategy). Different members (parties or individuals) come together for the purpose of dominating (exercising power over) other members in a game-like situation. In this sense, coalition politics is about mutually exercising power over others; power is, after all, the currency of politics in these frameworks. The coalition members are united in one thing only, and that is to devise a winning strategy,
precisely because winning translates into payoffs or resources that will ensure future winnings. Part of this strategy may even involve losing one decision outcome for the sake of future, and perhaps even larger, winnings. To be sure, such a context comes to resemble one big game of strategic maneuvering where nothing seems to be at stake beyond “winning” for winning’s sake. Understood this way, it makes sense that the lion’s share of research on “coalition” across the political science literature would address what I call formal governmental (or intergovernmental) decision-making bodies. These coalitions are “formal” and “governmental” insofar as they describe coalitions that exist either within or between formal state-governing bodies. The most common type of formal governmental coalitions addressed across the literature is “cabinet coalitions.” Most commonly, cabinet coalitions refer to coalitions that form between multiple parties in parliamentary governments. These can be either legislative coalitions that form between parties in the legislature or coalition governments that form when more than one party has seats in the executive branch. Much of the research in political science addresses this type of formal governmental coalition, both in a general sense⁷ and in terms of country specific case studies, such as those on Australia,⁸ Belgium,⁹ Colombia,¹⁰ India,¹¹ Italy,¹² Japan,¹³ Laos,¹⁴

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⁷ For general accounts of parliamentary coalitions, see de Swaan (1973), Browne and Franklin (1973), Browne and Frendreis (1980), Kaarbo and Lantis (1997), Golder (2006), Druckman (2008), and Dodd (1976).


¹⁰ See Berry, Hellman, and Solaün (1980).

¹¹ See Brass (1968); B.L. Maheshwari (1970); Bueno de Mesquita (1975); Majeed (2000); Khan (2003); Bhatia (2003); Chaudhuri (2005); and Kailash (2007).


¹³ See Leiserson (1968).
the Soviet Union,\textsuperscript{15} and the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{16} In addition to those that form between parties within parliamentary systems, legislative coalitions can also refer to coalitions that form between individual legislators within congressional governments such as in the United States. A large portion of work within political science focuses on this type of legislative coalition.\textsuperscript{17}

Unlike governmental coalitions that form within state-governing bodies, \textit{intergovernmental} coalitions form \textit{between} formal state-governing bodies. Examples here would include war coalitions,\textsuperscript{18} environmental coalitions,\textsuperscript{19} anti-terrorist coalitions,\textsuperscript{20} and generally any coalition made up of multiple state-governing bodies or representatives, such as those that may form in the United Nations. Almost all of the literature on “coalition” within political science addresses formal governmental or intergovernmental decision-making bodies such as these.

\textbf{Part II) Theorizing Winning Coalitions}

Given the game theoretic definition of coalition operative across much of the political science literature, it should come as no surprise that the dominant methodological approach underpinning coalition research is one informed primarily by the mathematical models of formal

\textsuperscript{14} See Brown and Zasluff (1975).

\textsuperscript{15} See Ross (1980).

\textsuperscript{16} See Laver, Rallings, and Thrasher (1987).

\textsuperscript{17} For general accounts of legislative coalitions within the context of the United States, see Hammond and Fraser (1983), Collie (1988), Sundquist (1988-1989), Budge and Keman (1990), Martin and Vanberg (2005), Aksoy (2010), Carson, Lynch and Madonna (2011), Lutz and Murray (1975), and Madonna (2011).

\textsuperscript{18} Much of the earliest work on coalitions within political science literature addresses war coalitions. See Maurer (1942), Werner (1943), Langer (1947), Hagan, Everts, Fukui, and Stempel (2001), and Tago (2009).

\textsuperscript{19} See Finus and Rundshagen (1998); and Christoff (2006).

\textsuperscript{20} See Wanandi (2002).
game theory. Starting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, these formal models were used to predict, examine, and understand a variety of decision-making situations, including those within the contexts of congressional voting or legislative behavior, parliamentary coalitions, and other forms of coalition government, as well as strategic decisions on the battlefield in wartime coalitions. The questions motivating this literature center on why coalitions form in the first place, which coalitions are most likely to form, and what makes coalitions successful—i.e., what ensures that they will achieve the outcomes they desire. Why, for instance, would members forgo portions of their own decision-making power in order to work in concert with others? Within the space of formal governing institutions (such as in a congress or parliament) with multiple potential coalition members, what compels members to form one coalition over another? For political scientists, “coalition theory” is meant to answer questions such as these—questions, I contend, that necessarily take for granted the limited frame of the game theoretic definition of coalition as well as the game-like situation within formal governmental decision-making bodies, and therefore does little to help us in understanding coalitional activity outside of these formal, game-like institutions.

As outlined above, Riker’s understanding of politics aligns with that found in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*. For Riker (and many others), politics is the study, or “science,” of political processes whereby political processes are understood as decision-making processes that take place within formal governing institutions. “To theorize” becomes equivalent to “to scientize” for these scholars. As McLean and McMillan present it, “coalition theory” is simply the “study of which of the available coalitions tend to form” (McLean and McMillan 2013). Political scientists are invested in the project of theorizing why, how, and when formal governmental coalitions will form. And as McLean and McMillan claim, and as my own
examination of the literature bears out, scholarship here has been shaped by two competing explanations for coalition formation and behavior: the size principle and the policy distance principle.

The size principle is generally attributed to Riker, even if others publishing in the 1960s and 1970s proved similar hypotheses (such as Gamson’s “cheapest winning coalition”)\(^{21}\). Derived from the theory of zero-sum games, the size principle simply states that of all the possible coalitions that could form (in situations such as those found in congress and/or parliament), the one which forms a majority with “the smallest number of seats ‘to spare’ is the likeliest to form” because the “prize–government and the spoils that flow from it–is of a fixed size, which it is best to distribute among as few people as possible” (McLean and McMillan 2013). Behind Riker’s size principle are a number of implicit and explicit assumptions, the first of which he shares with all coalition game theorists: that is, the assumed perceptual rationality of actors. The second is also an implicit assumption regarding the existence of a “coalition situation” in which “the preferences of the actors are not identical but under the given rules of

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\(^{21}\) See Gamson (1961). Gamson’s “cheapest winning coalition,” for instance, begins with the same implicit assumptions regarding presumed rationality as well as the existence of a coalition situation. To this set up, Gamson adds a few other assumptions regarding the conditions of the situation: (1) The actors “have the same (but not necessarily perfect) information about the initial distribution of resources and the payoff to any coalition” (Gamson 1961: 376); (2) The actors do not differentiate between the payoffs in the same class, with “payoff class” being defined as “a set of payoffs of which the lowest is no more than K percent less than the highest” (Gamson 1961: 376); (3) Every actor has a set of non-utilitarian strategy preferences for joining with other players, which he will pursue, within any class of payoffs, to form a coalition with actors who have the highest mean rank on his scale of non-utilitarian strategies; (4) Every actor “will expect others to demand from a coalition a share of the payoff proportional to the amount of resources which they contribute to a coalition” (Gamson 1961: 376). This is Gamson’s so-called “parity norm” (Singh 1977: 169-170). From these assumptions, Gamson concludes that coalition actors will always seek to form the smallest coalition in which “the total resources are closest to the decision point” (Gamson 1961: 376), or what he calls the “cheapest winning coalition.” Also see Leiserson (1968) and Browne and Franklin (1986: 470).
the game…some subset of actors can cooperatively make an outcome happen, which is preferable to that which will happen if they acted alone” (Singh 1977: 169).

One can already see how the situation Riker imagines here is one particular to legislative and governmental bodies. According to Riker, a coalition forms by way of a strictly rational and strategic calculation meant to maximize individual winnings (which come in the shape of getting one’s preferred outcome from a voting situation that may translate into getting one’s preferred candidate elected or passing one’s preferred legislation, both often resulting in more decision-making power in the future). One would want to enter into as small a coalition as possible in order to ensure that whatever payoffs one receives by way of entering into a winning coalition—i.e., one that wins the voting game—will be divided between as few people as possible. Riker’s work has been hugely influential across political science since its appearance in the 1960s, with articles on “minimum winning coalitions” appearing across the 1970s and even as recently as 2011. Indeed, much of the theoretical work on coalition within political science has been in response to this principle.

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22 Riker’s other explicitly stated assumptions include: “(1) The availability of perfect information about moves of each other to the actors; (2) The existence of some rewards or payoffs to the winners; and (3) The n-person and zero-sum nature of the game situation, which simply means that there are three or more participants in the game situation and that the sum of what the winners gain equals what the sum of what the losers lose” (Singh 1977: 169). Under this set of implicit and explicit assumptions, Riker concludes: “In n-person, zero-sum games, where side-payments are permitted, where players are rational, and where they have perfect information, only minimum winning coalitions occur” (Riker 1962: 32). From this formal game theoretic formulation, Riker concludes that in any social situations similar to the one he has imagined here, people will always create coalitions only “as large as they believe will ensure winning and no larger” (Riker 1962: 32-33).

23 See Leiserson (1968); Groennings, Kelley, and Leiserson (1970); Coleman (1970); Brams and Riker (1972); Lutz and Murray (1975); Dodd (1976); Hardin (1976); Mershon (2002); Martin and Vanberg (2003); Lutz and Murray (1975); and Madonna (2011).

24 Barbara Hinckley, for instance, points out that the zero-sum condition of their model seems ill suited to real world coalition situations (Hinckley 1972, cited in Singh 1977). Many theorists question whether the size principle alone is able to explain coalition formation without adding to it other independent variables. See Singh (1977); Leiserson (1968); De Swaan (1970); and Callen and Roos (1977). In an attempt to answer some of these concerns, and particularly that regarding the variable of the degree of information available to the actors, Riker offers a corollary hypothesis, the information effect hypothesis, to complement his minimum winning hypothesis, stipulating that the
Beginning from the same presumption of the rationality of actors and therefore residing firmly within the game theory tradition, an alternative cohort of coalition theorists developed in the early 1970s. In response to the limitations of the size principle as a uni-causal explanation of coalition formation, Michael Leiserson, Abraham De Swaan, and others developed models that attempt to explain coalition formation outside of the limited size paradigm. Sharing the assumptions of the rationality of actors and the zero-sum condition (i.e., one person’s gain results in another person’s loss), these scholars question whether the only motivating factor for individuals or groups considering entering into a coalition would be how to maximize payoffs (i.e., by keeping the coalition as small as possible so payoffs are split as few ways as possible).25

The most influential of these alternative explanations is De Swann’s “policy distance minimization theory,” or the policy distance principle (also thought of as the ideological congruence model). De Swaan concludes: “An actor strives to bring about that coalition which he expects to adopt through its decision-making process the policy that is as close as possible (on a scale of policies) to his most preferred policy” (De Swaan 1970: 429 in Singh 1977: 176). Because the minimization of ideological distance will not always permit the maximization of payoffs in terms of cabinet seats, this model contradicts the uni-causal explanation of the size principle. Instead of coalescing on the basis of the size of the coalition, De Swaan argues that actors will coalesce on “the basis of the distance between their most preferred policy and the policy expected to be adopted by the coalition” (Singh 1977: 176). Instead of minimizing the size

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25 Leiserson, for instance, attempts to explain the small size of coalitions not through motivations for splitting the payoffs as few ways as possible, but instead through motivations related to bargaining possibilities within the coalition. Members will still want to keep the winning coalition as small as possible but this is because doing so facilitates bargaining and accommodation within this space (Leiserson 1970, cited in Singh 1977).
of the coalition, actors seek to minimize the distance between their preferred policy and the likely outcome of the coalition. They will join that coalition in which this distance is the smallest.

This family of theorists26 “abandoned the constant-sum focus of the earlier theories and established that actors valued membership in a coalition as a function of their relative locations on some scale of preference—what is called a spatial modeling approach” (Browne and Franklin 1986: 470). Whereas Riker’s model was limited to size (and specifically a balance between smallest size and maximum payoffs) as the primary factor in determining coalition formation, the policy distance principle allows for other factors, such as policy preference, to play a foundational part in coalition formation. While both models treat coalition formation as a game-like situation, they offer different explanations for what it is that motivates players to act. Whether it is size or policy preference, players are still making decisions within a game-like situation wherein the ultimate goal is to come up with a winning strategy that yields winnings in multiple rounds. While the policy distance principle may appear to be more ends-oriented—especially if we understand policy preferences as “ends”—players must still balance their policy preferences with the ultimate goal of devising a long-term winning strategy.

During this initial stage of coalition theory (across the 1960s and 1970s), these two families—the size principle and the policy distance principle—competed as explanations of observable coalition behavior.27 Together, these theories comprise what some scholars refer to as

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26 We can add to the authors already listed, Axelrod (1970) in Browne and Franklin (1986); Taylor (1972); Sened (1996); Bawn (1999); Warwick (2005); and Martin and Vanberg (2003, 2005, and 2008).

27 Other popular principles include: the unanimity principle (see Collins and Guetzkow 1964 and Golembiewski 1962 cited in Adrian and Press 1968); the indispensable member principle (see Adrian and Press 1968); and the power thesis, which examines the social distance (i.e., based on race, class, or gender) between potential coalition members (see Michael Giles and Arthur Evans 1985). Callen and Roos (1977) alternatively argue that coalition durability is based on the distribution of rewards rather than size.
the “first generation” of coalition research within political science. In the second generation of research on coalition, the focus shifted from devising formal theory models for coalition behavior to testing the models that had been developed by Riker, Gamson, Leiserson, De Swaan, and others. While game theoretic models of coalition formation and behavior assume the universal applicability of their models, second generation empirical research sought to challenge the assumption of universal applicability by examining real-world coalitions, and particularly those of cabinet coalition formation in multiparty parliaments. Much of the empirical work on cabinet coalitions already referenced sought to test the formal models of the size and policy distance principles. Unfortunately, many of these empirical analyses “generated mixed to unsupportive results” (Browne and Franklin 1986: 470), which in turn led to skepticism within the field toward formal coalition theory.

However, while theorists during this period attempted to move away from, or at least examine more carefully, the formal game theory models of the first generation, they still operated within the narrow definition of coalition as formal governmental decision-making bodies. And ultimately, despite some interest in challenging the rational choice theory paradigm, political scientists made their way back to it in what Browne and Franklin call the third generation of research on coalition. Whether second generation scholars ultimately challenged or proved the principles of Riker, Gamson, De Swaan, and others, research from this period (the

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28 Browne and Franklin use this generational metaphor analytically to separate out different eras, one of theory development and another of empirical testing. While these two activities overlap in time, they maintain that the theoretical era came first and drove the empirical research, which comprises the “second generation” (Browne and Franklin 1986: 480, n. 1).

29 See Taylor and Herman (1971); Dodd (1976); Sanders and Herman (1977); and Warwick (1979) all cited in Browne and Franklin (1986).

1970s and 1980s) continued to be shaped by formal game theory models—even if only to challenge this paradigm.

The third generation of coalition research outlined by Browne and Franklin is characterized by an inductive and descriptive approach. Instead of focusing on empirically proving or disproving the formal game theoretic models of coalition formation, third generation scholars sought to “understand coalition processes as they are manifested contextually” (Browne and Franklin 1986: 471). This emphasis on examining the context around coalitions instead of an abstract theory of behavior based on formal game models inclined scholars toward more inductive and descriptive methods. At first glance, then, it seems this generation of scholars (across the 1980s) was less influenced by the coalition theory of the 1960s and early 1970s. For instance, by examining cabinet formation over a large sample of countries and over an extended time period, Franklin and Mackie analyze the importance of coalition size and ideological diversity in cabinet formation (1984), showing that influence of these factors varies across time and space (Browne and Franklin 1986: 472). This suggests that contextual factors interact with motivation and operate on government formation decisions and that coalition formation is dynamic rather than episodic (Browne and Franklin 1986: 472; see also Druckman 2008).  

Such case-specific studies, focusing on contextual factors rather than abstract principles, may seem to have moved research away from the formal game theories of Riker and others. However, as Browne and Franklin point out, research like this is better read as an attempt to reinvigorate the field after the exposed shortcomings of the original theoretic models by second generation scholars (Browne and Franklin 1986: 473). While this research has no doubt introduced other factors into the explanation of coalition formation and coalition duration, this  

31 Other scholars have engaged in thorough case studies of coalition processes in various national settings through anthologies. See Browne and Dreijmanis (eds., 1982); Bogdanor (ed., 1983); and Pridham (ed., 1986). All cited in Browne and Franklin (1986).
research is best understood as the beginning of a trend toward outlining a theory that can unite the processes of coalition formation, payoff allocations, and the continuation of cabinet governments over time (Browne and Franklin 1986: 475).\textsuperscript{32} Such work has focused more attention on the decision-making environment than previous formal theories allowed for.\textsuperscript{33}

Following on from the policy distance principle, scholarship since the 1980s accommodates a range of motivating factors related to policy and ideological preference.\textsuperscript{34} Such factors, however, must always be balanced against a fundamental interest in winning. Browne and Franklin maintain: “formal models of coalitional phenomena ought not to be sacrificed on the altar of empirical evidence. Rather, such theoretical efforts should be understood for what they can (and cannot) accomplish” (Browne and Franklin 1986: 479). Successful theoretical treatments of cabinet coalition phenomena, they maintain, “will generate probabilistic, rather than deterministic, expectations of behavior” (Browne and Franklin 1986: 480). In this way, they see an important place for formal theoretical modeling of coalition behavior, but they maintain that such models must be buttressed by more precise treatments of the relationship between environmental conditions and dynamics and the elements of rational decision-making in coalition contexts (Browne and Franklin 1986: 480).

\textsuperscript{32} See the other articles published in the Legislative Studies Quarterly on “New Directions in Coalition Research” (1986) from which Browne and Franklin’s editor’s introduction is taken.

\textsuperscript{33} Those who started studying coalition in this way in the 1980s include Browne, Frendreis, and Gleiber (1984, 1986) and Cioff-Revilla (1984), both cited in Browne and Franklin (1986).

\textsuperscript{34} However, Browne and Franklin challenge the early spatial distancing models of De Swaan (1973), Axelrod (1970) and others who compare actor’s preferences on a unidimensional scale of ordinarily arranged preference locations. Even those scholars who treat actors’ preferences multidimensionally (see Taylor and Laver 1973, Dodd 1976 and several chapters in Browne and Dreijmanis 1982) run into serious problems (see Browne and Franklin 1986: 478). Future work, they maintain, must seek to address these problems. Scholars they cite who began this work in the 1980s include: Franklin and Mackie (1984); Browne and Dreijmanis (1982); Bueno de Mesquita (1975); Browne, Frendreis and Gleiber (1984); Schofield and Laver (1984); and Peterson, De Ridder, Hobbs, and McClellan (1983).
Surveying the range of articles published in political science since the 1980s reveals the prevalence of the concerns outlined here. With titles such as “Baselines for Evaluating Explanations of Coalition Behavior in Congress” (Hammond and Fraser 1983), “Situational and Motivational Assumptions in Theories of Coalition Formation” (Reisinger 1986), “A Model of Coalition Formation: Theory and Evidence” (Sened 1996), “Constructing ‘US’ Ideology, Coalition Politics, and False Consciousness” (Bawn 1999), “Negotiating a Coalition: Risk, Quota Shaving, and Learning to Bargain” (Bottom, Holloway, McClurg, and Miller 2000), “Wasting Time? The Impact of Ideology and Size on Delay in Coalition Formation” (Martin and Vanberg 2003), “The Micro-Dynamics of Coalition Formation” (Diermeier, Swaab, Medevec, and Kern 2008), “Dynamic Approaches to Studying Parliamentary Coalitions” (Druckman 2008), and “Coalition Formation in the House and Senate: Examining the Effect of Institutional Change on Major Legislation” (Carson, Lynch and Madonna 2011), we see a clear trend in research toward accounting for a wider set of environment conditions and dynamics, including those of preferences, ideology, bargaining incentives, and risk. Nevertheless, formal game theory continues to inform these discussions even as the literature attends to the various issues and concerns outlined by Browne and Franklin. These formal models have shaped research across all subfields of political science as the field has continually sought to explain formal

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35 From the 1960s to the present, the majority of articles published in political science journals on coalition have been informed by the models of formal game theory. In addition to all of the other articles cited so far, also see: Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Young (1971); Komorita (1978); Burgess and Robinson (1969); Chertkoff (1971); Brams and Riker (1972); Li and Hinckley (1976); Friend, Laing, and Morrison (1977); Oliver (1980); Budge and Laver (1986); Laver, Rallings, and Thrasher (1987); Collie (1988); Budge and Keman (1990); Golder (2006); Goodin, Guth and Sausgruber (2008); Kiss (2009); Holyoke (2009); Aksoy (2010); and Jeong, Miller, Schofield, and Sened (2011).

36 Much of the work in American politics has already been referenced. Additionally, much of the work in the UK and other parliamentary systems across a range of national contexts has also already been referenced (see footnotes 7-16). For an example of how these models have been applied to work within comparative politics, see Juliet Kaarbo’s and Jeffrey S. Lantis’ “Coalition Theory in Praxis: A Comparative Politics Simulation of the Cabinet Formation Process” (1997). One may easily argue that these formal game models actually originally came out of
governmental (or intergovernmental) coalition formation and success within the game-like contexts of cabinet, legislative, policy, and government coalitions.

In many ways coalition research continues to be defined by this dynamic between relying on rational decision-making models and attending to environmental factors outside of what traditional rational models can accommodate. A good example of the different theoretical hybrids that have resulted from this balancing act is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF).\(^{37}\) Instead of examining the incentives of individual actors in the process of coalition formation, this approach takes policy advocacy coalitions—composed of individuals from various institutional settings who share a set of policy core beliefs understood as “basic values and perceptions about factors affecting the policy topic” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1988: 124)—as the primary units of analysis. These coalitions reside within what are called “policy subsystems” made up of “those actors who specialize in a policy issue area, and regularly follow and seek to influence the course of policy development in that area” (Jenkins-Smith 1991: 162). Unlike earlier formal game theory models that relied on the taken-for-granted assumption of the perceptual rationality of actors, ACF moves outside of strictly instrumental rationality models, identifying “belief systems as the primary heuristic on which individuals rely for political decision-making”.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{37}\) For an early example of an attempt to move beyond the rational choice theory paradigm by elaborating a nonrational theory of coalition behavior rooted in social-psychological notions of balance and dissonance, see Mazur 1968.

\(^{38}\) Cited in the University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs “Workshop on Policy Process Research” website, tab on “Advocacy Coalition Framework Overview.” http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/SPA/BuechnerInstitute/Centers/WOPPR/ACF/Pages/ACFOverview.aspx
The most central of these belief systems is what the ACF identifies as “deep core beliefs,” or those beliefs that are fundamental to individuals, are normative in nature, develop during childhood socialization, and, as such, are hard to change—examples include individual views on “the role of government, beliefs about human nature, or priorities regarding who should participate in government.”39 No matter what information and knowledge another coalition presents, one’s deep core beliefs are unlikely to change. A second component of this belief system is “policy core beliefs,” which tend to be subsystem-wide and form the foundation for forming coalitions among subsystem members. While policy core beliefs are resistant to change, they are not as rigid as deep core beliefs. The third component is “secondary beliefs” which are those beliefs most likely to change over time due to new information and learning. These beliefs are narrower in scope and more empirically based, which accounts for their malleability.40 While the deep core beliefs are unlikely to ever change, the ACF defines “major policy change” as a shift in the policy core beliefs of a policy subsystem (brought on by external events or shocks, policy-oriented learning, internal shocks, or negotiated agreement) and “minor policy change” as a change in secondary beliefs.41 The ACF has been used to explain major and minor policy changes and to predict policy outcomes on a range of policy issues within multiple national contexts.42

The major theoretical claims underpinning this framework are those of bounded rationality—which asserts that “due to limitations in resources and ability to process stimuli, an

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/SPA/BuechnerInstitute/Centers/WOPPR/ACF/Pages/AdvocacyCoalitionApplications.aspx
individual typically relies on heuristics for decision-making, rather than behaving in a classical ‘rational’ sense (Simon 1985)”43—and prospect theory—which asserts that “actors tend to remember losses more than gains (termed loss aversion in prospect theory)” (Quattrone and Tversky 1988), which in turn “increases the likelihood that actors will exaggerate power and maliciousness of their opponents.”44 As Edella Schlager (1995) notes, the great advantage of this notion of bounded rationality is in its ability to account for a more complex picture of human behavior than that congruent with a strictly instrumental rationality model characteristic of much of the research in political science informed by formal game theory (see Simon 1985 in Schlager 1995: 253). Whereas instrumental rationality models presume that individuals act solely on the basis of their preferences, the ACF maintains that individuals act both on their preferences and their beliefs, which include moral values. Furthermore the preferences of instrumentally rational individuals are “assumed to be fixed and exogenously determined,” whereas the ACF allows for preferences to change over time and allows for them to be endogenously determined. Additionally, unlike instrumental rationality models the ACF admits the existence of cognitive filters (such as belief systems and other cognitive processes) (see Schlager 1995: 253-254). By accounting for multiple causes of human motivation, the ACF offers more relevant and relatively accurate explanations of policy making and implementation.45


44 Ibid.

45 By incorporating insights from the IAD framework and structural choice then, Schlager maintains that the ACF can accommodate and address three crucial questions central to understanding collective action on the part of [advocacy] coalitions: “(1) what situational and individual characteristics promote the emergence and longevity of advocacy coalitions; (2) what situational and individual characteristics deter the emergence of cooperation and coordination among actors who share common policy goals; and (3) how do situational factors affect the strategies that coalitions are likely to adopt to achieve shared policy goals” (Schlager 1995: 253). Where the IAD framework and structural choice theory prove helpful is in their ability to relate beliefs to action and action to the larger
By attempting to accommodate and measure the influence of moral commitments, ideological preferences, and other strongly held beliefs (forces that do not necessarily abide by the principles of formal game theory), it may seem that the ACF would prove useful in describing coalitional situations outside of formal governmental coalitions. However, given their interest in examining advocacy coalitions that form within policy subsystems, it is nevertheless likely that while the advocacy coalitions they examine may involve some policy advocates and experts from the public who do not hold formal positions within state-governing bodies, the majority of such advocacy coalition members will be from formal state-governing bodies (legislators) or other formal institutions. While this research seems to move scholars outside of a narrow focus on formal governmental coalitions, the ACF has not necessarily moved the definition of coalitions outside of decision-making bodies in formal institutions. Additionally, while this approach may modify the game theoretic approach to coalition research within political science, it is still relevant to game-like situations in which the stakes of the coalition institutional environment. Insofar as they address these concerns, they can together answer the questions outlined above. And specifically, they help Schlager to arrive at four hypotheses that she maintains ought to be added to Sabatier’s and Jenkins-Smith’s twelve ACF hypotheses. See Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) or Schlager (1993: 247, table 1). Schlager’s four hypotheses include: Hypothesis A. In a separation of powers system, coalitions (both winning and losing) press for legislatively imposed structures that insulate and constrain the operation of a public agency, paying less attention to ensuring the effectiveness of a public agency and the policies it implements. (Schlager 1995: 260); Hypothesis B. In a two party parliamentary system, the ruling party legislates public agencies and policies that effectively promotes its policy desires, insulating its creations through informal mechanisms of cooperation. (Schlager 1995: 260); Hypothesis C. Actors who share beliefs are more likely to engage in at least minimal levels of collective action (i.e., agree upon a definition of the problem and the content and structure of policies to address the problem) if they interact repeatedly, experience relatively low information costs, and believe that there are policies that, while not affecting each actor in similar ways, at least treats each fairly. (Schlager 1995: 262); Hypothesis D. Coalitions are more likely to persist if (1) the major beneficiaries of the benefits that a coalition produces are clearly identified and are members of the coalition, (2) the benefits received by coalition members are related to the costs that such members bear in maintaining the coalition, and (3) coalition members monitor each other’s actions to ensure compliance with agreed upon strategies, resource contributions, and cooperative and supportive activities. (Schlager 1995: 264)

Within the “abstract” search, I came across a handful of articles on coalitions that, like those informed by the ACF, were interested in civil society and policy coalitions made up of state and non-state actors. See Tong (1994) on civil society coalitions with state and non-state actors; Edwards III (2000) on a president’s coalition between formal state governing bodies and the public; and Salisbury, Heinz, Laumann and Nelson (1987) on interest-group policy coalitions.
center on winning or losing the voting game. While they have shown that losing in this context carries a heavier burden insofar as one’s moral and ideological beliefs may be compromised, it is not yet clear that the coalition actors who fail to get their policy passed will be the ones to suffer the material costs related to living without that policy in place. By this I mean to suggest that these coalitions are still primarily made up of representatives and legislators who carry relatively low material risk in the event of a loss.

Therefore, despite some explanatory variety that has emerged within political science over the years (I have selected illustrative examples of this variety here), discussions within political science on coalitions continue within a remarkably narrow frame in which: a) coalitions refer primarily to formal governmental (or intergovernmental) decision-making bodies; b) coalitions are treated as inevitable occurrences that may be explained scientifically; and c) the primary models for explaining coalition formation and behavior are shaped by the mathematical modeling of rational choice theory wherein the context of coalition formation resembles a game-like situation in which the stakes do not exceed those of winning or losing the voting game. In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to some of the problems with adopting such a limited frame.

Part III) Some Implications of a Limited Theoretical Frame

a) The Ghettoization of Extra-Governmental Coalitions: An Exception That Proves the Rule

With its narrow focus on formal governmental decision-making bodies, political science scholarship on coalitions tends to sideline discussions of coalitions that form outside of formal state-governing institutions. Unlike formal governmental (or intergovernmental) coalitions, what I will call extra-governmental coalitions exist outside of formal state-governing bodies and often

47 While ACF research provides a possible alternative to coalitions made up only of formal state governing members by examining a wider spectrum of policy coalitions, many of these policy coalitions are nevertheless made up from members from formal state governing bodies or other formal institutions.
outside of institutional bodies altogether. Sometimes such coalitions are comprised of members
from different formal institutions or state-governing bodies, but the coalition itself is something
that exists outside of these spheres.48

Extra-governmental coalitions share a number of characteristics that distinguish them
from formal governmental (or intergovernmental) coalitions. First, the coalition itself forms in a
space that is outside of the spheres of power that it forms to contest, disrupt, or gain access to.
Second, the coalition is made up of members who enter it willingly, often based on a shared
ideological belief or goal. In this sense, we can say that the coalition is ends-oriented (i.e.,
directed toward achieving an ideological or social justice goal) rather than means-oriented (i.e.,
directed only toward strategic advantage in present and future decision-making situations). For
this reason, the stakes of the coalition are often much higher than simply winning for winning’s
sake. And finally, there is no guarantee that the members working within the coalition will have
to work together again in the future. The members work together as long as they choose to. In
this sense, certain presumptions of game theory—i.e., that the game will be repeated over a period
of time, that the actors all share some amount of decision-making power, and that the actors can
approach each “voting game” with a calm, rational, and level head with an eye only toward a
strategic gain—do not necessarily hold within this context. Because the purpose of an extra-
governmental coalition is tied to the goal it forms to achieve, calculations regarding strategic
alliances that could help with future projects do not necessarily come into play.

While the majority of research on coalition within political science scholarship addresses
formal governmental or intergovernmental coalitions, a small group of scholars are interested in
extra-governmental coalitions. Interestingly, however, the majority of this scholarship focuses on

48 In the abstract search, I came across more instances of discussions of coalitions involving members from formal institutional bodies. See Fish (2006) or Ellis (2004).
one particular type of extra-governmental coalition, *electoral coalitions*. The most commonly discussed examples of electoral coalitions are “biracial electoral coalitions,”\(^{49}\) or coalitions that form across racial lines in order to try to get a particular political candidate elected to office.\(^5\)

Such electoral coalitions technically exist outside of formal state-governing bodies, and may therefore be considered *extra-governmental*. However, as their expressed goal is to gain entry into formal state-governing bodies, they seem to share something with formal governmental coalitions. As they attempt to achieve participation through the electoral process, they also share with formal governmental coalitions the context of voting situations and an interest in effecting change within formal state-governing bodies—*i.e.*, getting elected to such bodies and then

\(^{49}\)Another example discussed here is the Rainbow Coalition. Like biracial electoral coalitions, the Rainbow Coalition formed for the purpose of getting a minority candidate, Jesse Jackson, elected to political office. See Pierce (1988); Louie and Quinones (1984); and Meier and Stewart Jr. (1991). Also discussed within an article found in the abstract search was ethnic (electoral) coalitions that formed in Hawaii. See Haas (1987).

\(^{5}\)The most influential book here is *Protest Is Not Enough: The Struggle of Blacks and Hispanics for Equality in Urban Politics* (1984), written by Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David H. Tabb. Examining the politics of Black and Hispanic mobilization in ten northern Californian cities, and echoing the title of their book, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb demonstrate that simple demand-protest was not enough to ensure greater government responsiveness to the needs of minority groups; for this goal, electoral biracial coalitions—between Blacks and/or Hispanics and supportive whites—were needed. Specifically, they demonstrate that simple minority representation in elective offices failed to “capture the strength of the minority position in the more responsive city governments” (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1986: 576). What ensured government responsiveness, they found, was not representation, but coalition: “minority inclusion in a coalition that was able to dominate a city council produced a much more positive governmental response than the election of minority councilmembers who were not part of the dominant coalition” (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1986: 576). In their study, they measure the relationship between three variables: political incorporation (measuring the extent to which minority representatives enter into dominant coalitions), electoral mobilization (measuring the extent to which minority Black leaders formed electoral coalitions with whites and Hispanics), and government responsiveness (measuring the extent to which the government passes policies supporting minorities’ interests). Doing so, they identified two types of mobilization, demand-protest and electoral. They found that whereas electoral mobilization through biracial electoral coalitions had a direct positive impact on political incorporation and government responsiveness, demand-protest mobilization produced no net independent effect on incorporation or government responsiveness. The greater the size of Black and supportive white biracial electoral coalitions, including with Hispanics, the greater the efforts of Blacks to win local elections, which in turn ensured greater government responsiveness to the concerns of minority groups. Also see Browning, Marshall and Tabb, 1984. Further substantiating these findings, and responding to criticism that the conclusions drawn in *Protest Is Not Enough* are limited in scope to small and unusual northern Californian cities such as Berkeley, Ralphe Sonenshein proves a similar relation between biracial electoral coalitions, political incorporation and government responsiveness in the United States’ second largest city, Los Angeles. Here Sonenshein demonstrates how shared feelings of being an “out-group” enabled white Jews to form political coalitions with Blacks and Hispanics. While such alliances were far from perfect, the Los Angeles example further substantiates Browning, Marshall and Tabb’s findings and demonstrates the positive impact liberal biracial (electoral) coalitions can have on government responsiveness to minority concerns (Sonenshein 1986).
passing legislation. Also like formal governmental coalitions, such elections will occur every so often and may involve some of the same players each time. At the very least, coalition members know that the alliance they have formed can either be repeated or abandoned in the next round. Crucially, there are multiple rounds. Therefore, while they form as *extra-governmental* bodies, the purpose of electoral coalitions is to gain entry into formal governmental bodies, and in this way they are not so dissimilar from the coalitions addressed here.

As the research bears out, this scholarship continues to theorize (electoral) coalitions as phenomena to be explained scientifically. Nevertheless, these scholars, who are no doubt interested in questions of strategy and strategic voting, discuss the phenomenon of electoral coalition formation, durability, and success outside of the paradigm of rational choice theory formal modeling.51 One way to explain this shift would be to understand this wave of research as part of what Browne and Franklin identify as the second or third generation research on coalition in which scholars moved away from formal game theory modeling and toward more empirically based methods focused on: describing at length the particular experience of coalitions, including the historical, social, political, and economic contexts surrounding the coalition and its achievements, challenges, and failures, and then drawing conclusions from these descriptive findings. Nevertheless, and despite some similarities between electoral and formal governmental coalitions, the absence of rational choice modeling marks a shift in terms of how political scientists talk about the bi-racial electoral coalitions as opposed to formal governmental or intergovernmental coalitions. As we will see, such rational models are even farther removed from discussions of a second, and even more marginalized, type of extra-governmental coalitions, what I call *social justice activist coalitions*.

Whereas the goal of electoral coalitions is to gain access to formal state-governing spheres, social justice activist coalitions (I will also call these simply “social justice coalitions” or “activist coalitions”) not only exist completely outside of formal state-governing bodies but are also interested in a broad conception of social change that may or may not involve gaining access to these spaces—and when it does involve gaining access to such spaces, the goal of the coalition is never limited to this end. Instead, activist coalitions are often defined by a shared ideological goal related to a wider social justice issue. I am aware that there are “activist coalitions” that are not social justice seeking. Not all “activists” are invested in fighting for social justice. I am limiting activist coalitions specifically to those invested in fighting for social justice because these are the kinds of coalitions that feminist scholars are most interested in.

While examples are scarce across the political science literature, those that do appear include coalitions with rather broad goals such as feminist appeals for oppressed groups to unite in a coalition to fight all forms of oppression and discrimination, or coalitions committed to addressing rising inequality through economic and social reform that benefits all groups. Other examples are more international in scope, advocating the creation of a “climate coalition of the willing” to fight climate change across the globe or decolonization through a transnational coalition of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While still other examples

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52 See Shirley Chisholm (1972) and Chung and Chang (1998).
54 See Peter Christoff (2006).
55 See Aziz Choudry (2007).
include coalitions with more-narrowly prescribed goals, such as raising the national minimum wage.\textsuperscript{56}

What is important to note about these coalitions is that they are made up of completely willing participants who are often connected to some kind of social justice movement. Unlike formal governmental coalitions, wherein members find themselves confined within the same institutional space for an extended period of time in which they must come together to make decisions, activist coalitions form only because members share a common goal. Within formal governmental coalitions, the “goal” of the coalition is often to get legislation passed—what is being voted on becomes less important than winning for winning’s sake. As such the goal of each individual voting decision—\textit{i.e.}, the preferred outcome of the vote—is constantly shifting and the members know they will potentially be in repeated coalitions with the same set of people. This is not the case with activist coalitions. While it is true that activists may choose to join a number of different coalitions and may indeed encounter familiar faces across these circles, there is no sense of being stuck with the same group over and over, forced to either make alliances or enemies. Similarly, unlike formal governmental coalition members, activist coalition members are often ardently committed to the goal driving the formation of the coalition in the first place. In this sense, we can say that both the ideological stakes and the material and personal stakes are very high for activist coalition members, much higher than for formal governmental coalition members.

Activist coalitions (we could also think of them as social movement\textsuperscript{57} coalitions) receive scant attention across political science journals.\textsuperscript{58} While this gap strikes me as odd for scholars

\textsuperscript{56} See Stephanie Luce (2002).

\textsuperscript{57} One group of scholars who are interested in what I am calling “activist coalitions” are sociologists and particularly those who study social movements. Social movement theory seeks to explain why social movements
whose subject of study is “politics,” recalling McLean’s and McMillan’s definition of politics may help explain this puzzling lacuna. According to their “dictionary of politics,” politics is “the practice of the art or science of directing and administrating states or other political units.” They tell us that this traditional definition “offers no constraint on its application since there has never been a consensus on which activities count as government,” and yet it remains that political units seem to refer only to formal state-governing, or at least state-like governing, institutions. The political science literature on coalition affirms a similarly narrow definition of political units. But what, we may ask, about units that form to contest the power of the state? Are these not also political units? While often operating outside of the formal parameters of governmental politics, these groups are unequivocally political insofar as they often seek to contest various forms of governmental or institutional power and/or to radically transform society, including a range of political, social, economic, and cultural institutions within society. It would seem, then, that they offer fertile ground to explore questions to do with collective action, forming alliances across difference, and dismantling formal and informal systems of power. And yet, only a handful of political science scholars discuss them.

The absence of such discussions within the discipline leads one to wonder if political scientists interested in activist coalition politics are perhaps publishing in journals elsewhere.

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58 While more results appeared in the abstract search than in the title search, discussions of activist coalitions were nevertheless very limited across political science journals. Some exceptions that appeared in the abstract search include: Ellis (2004); Salisbury, Heinz, Laumann and Nelson (1987); Fish (2006); Coate (2004); Dix (1984); Krieger (1970); Jamal (2001); Costain (1980); Magis (2010); Jackson, Gerber, and Cain (1994); and Woliver (1990).

59 So much so that the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics deems it necessary to include a separate entry for what is known as “minority politics,” or organized politics of under-represented groups that necessarily occur outside of formal state-governing bodies.
Some such articles may be found in sociology journals, and specifically within social movement studies. In fact, almost all of the articles on activist coalitions cited above appeared in journals that are cross-listed as both political science and sociology journals, which only further reveals the severe ghettoization of this area within political science. What is more, even across sociology, most of the articles on activist coalitions are published in issue-specific journals such as *The Black Scholar*, or *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, or *Social Choice and Welfare*, thereby suggesting that scholarship on activist coalitions is marginalized even within sociology. Given that many activist coalitions are minority coalitions fighting for some form of social justice, it perhaps comes as no surprise that much of this scholarship would appear in race-specific journals such as *The Black Scholar*. Nevertheless, the fact that so few articles on activist coalitions of this sort appear in mainstream political science journals, and those that appear in sociology journals tend to be confined to race- and gender-specific journals only reinforces the going political science definition of coalition succinctly articulated in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* that equates coalitions to formal governmental decision-making bodies. Such a definition, we have seen, works to obstruct research into the occurrence of extra-governmental coalitions, and particularly that of activist social justice coalitions.

b) Conversations That Could Have Been...

Before moving on to a rather different body of literature in the subsequent chapter (that of political theory), I want to consider what kind of questions and issues may be occluded by the severe ghettoization of discussions of activist coalitions within the discipline of political science. I do this by attending to the themes and issues raised within the limited body of work within

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60 This is again according to JSTOR’s classifications, which includes 153 journal titles within sociology, in addition to the 161 titles within political science.
political science on activist coalitions in an effort to see what new kinds of conversations may be under way there. It is precisely these conversations, as well as the potential to build on and expand from these conversations, that I believe is lost by adopting the limited frame characteristic of coalition research within political science. I contend that discussions of activist coalitions already under way among a handful of political scientists—though primarily race, feminist, social movement, and sociology scholars—accomplish a number of important things. First, they expand the definition of coalition to include higher stakes, strategic, at times unlikely, and temporary alliances that form outside of formal state-governing bodies. Second, these scholars expand the range of coalitional phenomena to be examined, while never taking for granted that such coalitions will easily form. The focus here shifts away from explaining coalition formation and toward advocating for the creation of social justice coalitions and then considering the range of challenges that must be overcome in order to do so. What is more, the methods that these scholars use to examine and advocate for coalitions break completely out of the formal game modeling of rational choice theory, precisely because the game-like situation that characterizes formal governmental decision-making bodies does not apply to these extra-governmental spaces. Breaking out of this mold, I argue, enables scholars to examine a range of different kinds of questions. As I will demonstrate below, feminist theory began these conversations at least as early as the 1970s. It is precisely these kinds of conversations that I seek to encourage in the remainder of the dissertation.

The most conspicuous trend among activist coalition scholars is an interest in moving away from the rational choice theory paradigm of formal game modeling. As within discussions of electoral coalitions, within discussions of activist coalitions formal game modeling and
rational choice theory are completely absent. In their stead we find descriptive narratives, empirical case studies, and inductive reasoning based on these findings. William Julius Wilson (2000), for instance, provides an extensive overview–complete with charts, tables, and graphs–of income trends across race and education since the 1970s as he makes his case for the need for multiracial coalitions committed to fighting income inequality through economic and social reform. Additionally, he provides a case study of an effective grassroots multiracial political coalition at the end of the article from which he substantiates some of the claims he has already made as well as extracts further lessons on how to effectively coalesce across divisions of race. Providing descriptive accounts of the social, economic, historical, and cultural contexts in which activist coalitions form and operate is characteristic of this scholarship.

Political scientists share much in common with sociologists and social movement scholars; rational choice theory and formal game modeling has also informed much of the work on coalitions within sociology. In the 1960s, economists such as Mancur Olson applied microeconomic assumptions to collective action, arguing from the primary assumption that individuals are rational actors and can therefore only be expected to participate in unions, social movements, and revolutions (or any form of collective action) “if they personally gained something that they would not have if they did not participate” (Jasper 2010: 968).

61 This is also true for the articles (footnote 60) that appeared within the abstract search.

62 See Chung and Chang (1998), Ritchie (1995), and Rakowski (2003), for examples of this methodological approach.


64 Without these “selective incentives,” Olson claims, individuals will prefer to “free ride”; that is, they will enjoy the benefits of the collectivity while refusing to actually participate (Olson 1965 in Jasper 2010: 968). Like Riker, Olson concludes that small groups work best, but for Olson this is because members can “monitor each other and shame each other into contributing” (Jasper 2010: 968). While Olson acknowledges the presence of moral and
Olson’s 1965 book and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the field of sociology was shaped by rational choice theory. What is called “resource mobilization theory” became the dominant paradigm for studying collective action within sociology from the 1970s up until the 1990s. Informed by rational choice theory, resource mobilization theory’s founding premise is that of “rational actors engaged in instrumental action through formal organization to secure resources and foster mobilization” (Buechler 1995: 441), thereby placing the study of social movements “clearly within the instrumental, utilitarian natural science tradition” (Mueller 1992: 3).

Much like scholarship within political science, the first wave of scholarship within sociology after the arrival of microeconomic theories in the 1960s, was devoted to testing and elaborating the resource mobilization model. Throughout this period, skepticism regarding the usefulness of the model also emerged, and particularly to do with its marginalization of issues of meaning construction and of structural inequality (see Mueller 1992: 4). Since the 1980s, one dominant response within sociology to the shortcomings of resource mobilization theory and the rational choice paradigm more generally has been “new social movement theory.” Informed by continental European traditions of social theory and political philosophy, new social movement

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66 For the decade of the 1970s, “over half (56 percent) of the social movement and collective action articles in the American Sociological Review, the American Journal of Sociology, Social Forces, and the American Political Science Review were based on the theoretical approach of resources mobilization, but by the early eighties it as almost three-quarters” (Mueller 1992: 3). See Buechler (1995: 441). Also see Morris and Herring (1988: 182), cited in Mueller (1992).


68 See Eisinger (1973); Jenkins and Perrow (1977); McAdam (1982, 1986); Morris (1984); Freeman (1973); Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson (1980); Gamson (1975); Piven and Cloward (1971, 1977); Curtis and Zurcher (1973); Rosenthal et al. (1985); Mottl (1980); Lo (1982); Zald and Useem (1987); Haines (1984); Jenkins and Eckert (1986); Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly (1975); Jenkins (1983); and Barkan (1985). All cited in Mueller (1992: 4).
theory looks to logics of action “based in politics, ideology, and culture as the root of much collective action” and examines sources of identity outside of class, “such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as the definers of collective identity” thereby displacing the old social movement of proletariat revolution (Buechler 1995: 442). Whereas resource mobilization theory, much like the formal coalition theories of Riker, Gamson, and others, emphasizes “structures, strategies, institutions, and opportunities,” new social movement theory instead examines the “internal dynamics of social movements,” focusing on the role that shared identities and attitudes play in the formation of such movements (see Rupp and Taylor, 1999, and Taylor and Whittier, 1992 in Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001: 3). Nevertheless, despite the arrival of new social movement theory, recent scholarship suggests that the rational choice theory paradigm continues to influence work within sociology, as it does within political science, on collective action, social movements, and coalitions. Indeed, K.D. Opp (2009) “presents the rational-choice paradigm as the only approach to social movements with an explicit and general theory of action” (Jasper 2010: 969). All other attempts to theorize action, he argues, ultimately come back to the rational-choice paradigm (see Jasper 2010: 969).

Nevertheless, the rational-choice paradigm is certainly not the only dominant paradigm for studying coalitions within sociology.69 In addition to “new social movement theory,” certain scholars within sociology, and particularly those studying race and gender, have turned to critical social theory, where the aim is to oppose all forms of oppression and to challenge unjust ideas and practices (Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001: 6). 70 In their edited collection, Forging Radical

69 Beyond resource mobilization theory, Jasper lays out three other approaches taken more recently by sociologists: pragmatism (see Cefai 2007 and Emirbayer 1997); cultural-historical activity theory (see Krinsky and Barker 2009; and Krinsky 2007); and feminism and the queer turn, taken largely from de Beauvoir and Butler (see Groves 1996; Kleinman 1996; and Taylor 1996). All cited in Jasper (2010).

70 See Patricia Hill Collins (1998).
Alliances across Difference: Coalition Politics for the New Millennium, Jill M. Bystydzienski and Steven P. Schacht (2001) present a range of articles primarily by sociology and women’s or gender studies scholars (with the exception of two political science scholars) that taken together develop a “critical social theory” of coalition formation born out of the experiences and concerns of actual groups of people in particular, real-world contexts. In this way, they theorize from the case studies instead of from abstract, decontextualized categories that impose a universal interpretation on different coalition-building projects. Instead of imposing models onto coalitional contexts, they turn to activists themselves to help them make sense of activist coalition politics. Like the few political scientists publishing articles on activist coalitions, these scholars operate completely outside of the rational choice paradigm, relying instead on drawing lessons from narratives, lived experience, and empirical case studies.

Research methods such as these have alerted political scientists, sociologists, and gender and race scholars to new kinds of conversations about coalition. Most notably, for these scholars coalition politics is seen as the best way to fight broad systems of power. As many argue, activist coalitions form for this express purpose. In many instances, these articles read less as attempts to theorize the perplexing phenomena of coalitions, and more as rallying calls to turn to coalition politics as the best way forward for ensuring social justice. Coalitions are treated as necessary and promising alliances, rather than puzzling occurrences.

At least some of the political science articles on coalition share with feminist theory articles on coalition a sense of urgency related to the need for coalition. Recall Shirley Chisholm’s (1972) call for all oppressed groups of the world to unite in one coalition to fight all forms of oppression, discrimination, and domination. Because no one group suffers exclusively from one type of oppression, and because no one type of oppression—*i.e.*, racism—can be
dismantled without dismantling all others—i.e., sexism, homophobia, etc.—Chisholm sees a broad coalition politics as the best way forward for oppressed groups. Angie Y. Chung and Edward Taehan Chang (1998) similarly make a case for interethnic coalitions rooted in a similar notion of “multi-oppression politics.” A multi-oppression politics understands forces of oppression to be multiple and overlapping. It therefore seeks to form alliances across a wide range of collective identities and issues. Doing this, Chung and Chang argue, taking their lead from women of color feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, helps one to develop—or rather to acknowledge—a “coalitional identity,” reinforced by a “coalitional consciousness” that enables her to work alongside multiple oppressed groups (Chung and Chang 1998: 95-96).  

Similarly, Robert Dix (1984) argues that the primary factor determining the success or failure of a revolutionary struggle is the “willingness and ability of the revolutionaries to construct wide-ranging alliances or coalitions of opponents of the government” (432) or “negative” coalitions against formal state institutions. While formulated in the negative—i.e., uniting around the negative goal of ridding the country of corrupt or oppressive forces rather than the positive goal of fostering social justice—Dix is getting at a similar idea. More recently, Wilson (2000) has argued that because rising inequality is tied to a comprehensive network of social, economic, and political forces, those suffering from economic duress must come together in a broad national multiracial political coalition. Instead of focusing on the differences that may divide poor and working-class white Americans from poor and working-class non-white Americans, Wilson directs attention to the commonalities across these racial lines, such as the “economic anxiety” brought on by a handful of economic forces well beyond our control. As we see here, uniting around the shared goal of either fighting oppression or fostering social justice

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71 I take up this notion of coalitional consciousness up in Chapter Four.
enables disparate groups to unite across race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and other cleavages.

For these authors, the fact of people coming together in coalitions to fight social injustice is not something that needs to be explained; it is something that needs to be encouraged. Whereas political scientists operating within rational choice theory spend considerable time predicting which coalitions will form and whether they will succeed at winning their voting games, political scientists and sociologists operating outside of rational choice theory spend time celebrating coalition as a way to undermine multiple and interconnected oppressive forces. Additionally, as we have seen in Chung and Chang (1998), they also spend time thinking with and through the concept of coalition in order to rethink identity and consciousness. The occurrence of coalitions provides fertile ground for understanding effective social change and thinking through questions to do with subjectivity and epistemology.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of forming or joining broad-based coalitions, these articles also tend to focus on the “how to” of coalition politics; that is, in addition to trying to convince readers that subjugated groups must enter into broad coalitions, these scholars spend some time explaining how to go about doing this, thereby returning to the kinds of questions that motivated political scientists interested in cabinet coalitions, but examining these questions outside of the limited theoretical frame of rational choice theory. Wilson, for instance, emphasizes the importance of coalescing around commonalities instead of focusing on the differences that may divide racial communities. Despite differences of race, and despite the attempt by the media and politicians to pit these groups against one another, whites and non-whites all suffer from the economic anxiety and distress “caused by forces beyond their control”

72 We can add to the scholars already mentioned some of the other work appearing in the abstract search. See Coate (2004); Krieger (1970), Jamal (2001), Rakowski (2003), and Ritchie (1995).
Thus, there is room to change the rhetoric around economic hardship and inequality away from the differences between suffering groups and toward their commonalities, ultimately elaborating a political message underscoring the “need for economic and social reform that benefits all groups” (91). Additionally, Wilson emphasizes the importance of having effective leaders to develop and articulate this ideological vision (Wilson 2000: 94).

The articles published in Forging Radical Alliances across Difference similarly demonstrate that variously identified individuals and groups of people can successfully come together in broad coalitions despite these differences just so long as these differences are successfully negotiated (not ignored) at both the interpersonal and the group or structural levels (Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001: 1-20). Not only do these scholars\textsuperscript{73} demonstrate that activist coalitions are more likely to form around shared ideological beliefs, values, and principles rather than strictly game-playing tactics, but they also attempt to think with and through the concept of coalition in ways that prove useful and instructive for questions to do with a wide range of issues including: identity, subjectivity, epistemology, group formation, and solidarity.

**Conclusion**

Decades of political science analysis has explained the formation of coalitions as a means for rational actors in a governmental game-model to succeed in specific decision-making endeavors. Constrained by this limited scope, I have argued, established political science theories address coalitions only as taken-for-granted occurrences within game-like situations that at times seem extraordinary only because of unlikely bedfellows having come together for the purpose of developing a winning strategy. The stakes here are low and center on the possibility of losing

\textsuperscript{73} See also Woliver 1990; Jackson, Gerber, and Caine 1994; Costain 1980; and Magis 2010 (all from the abstract research). See especially Magis 2010 and Costain 1980 on the possibility of coming together across vast differences of race, glass, gender, etc.
these voting games. Such a framework, I have shown, offers little explanatory currency when turning to extra-governmental activist coalitions wherein the stakes are much higher and the context in which they form fails to resemble a game-like situation.

As I will go on to demonstrate in subsequent chapters, while social justice activist coalitions are also thought of as inevitable occurrences for many activists/scholars, their inevitability resides in the fact of spontaneous awakening in and through struggle (think of Luxemburg here), and not in terms of the game-playing politics that demand strategic, low-stakes alliances for the sake of winning voting games. When theorizing activist coalition politics, I contend, social scientists would do well to turn to feminist theory. This body of work (in conversation with other special issue scholars), I have briefly outlined, not only helps us to theorize extra-governmental coalitional activity, but also provides opportunities for treating the concept of coalition as a conceptual framework within which to contemplate a range of important political questions related to the effectiveness of activist political action, reconceiving political subjectivity, and building political solidarity. In the remaining chapters of my dissertation, I would like to continue the conversation that scholars such as Chisholm, Chung and Chang, Collins, and Crenshaw have already begun, and specifically to consider what new ways of thinking and conceiving are opened up by thinking with and through the concept of coalition.
Chapter Two

Contemporary Articulations of Activist Coalition Politics: Encountering a Tension, Obscuring Politics

In this chapter, I turn to political theory in an attempt to find alternative, and ideally more expansive, frames for theorizing activist coalition politics than was available in the political science scholarship. However, despite the fact that when political theorists theorize coalition they focus almost exclusively on activist coalitions (instead of, for instance, only formal governmental decision-making bodies), on the whole, political theorists seem far less interested in “theorizing coalition” than political science scholars have been. Across the journals I examined, derivations of the word “coalition” almost never appeared in article titles. This would suggest that political theorists rarely take “coalition” as the object of sustained analysis and examination. Instead, “coalition” often appears within the context of discussions about other political and philosophical issues. To find more scholarship within political theory on theorizing coalition

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1 For the purposes of surveying the “political theory” scholarship on coalition, I again make use of word searches within a range of popular political theory journals. To access the most popular political theory journals, I used the following digital libraries: JSTOR, SAGE complete, Palgrave, Project Muse, Wiley Online, and Taylor and Francis Journals Complete. The journals I examined include: Political Theory; Theory and Event; Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory; Contemporary Political Theory; Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory; Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy; Ethics; Journal of Political Philosophy; European Journal of Political Theory; Philosophy and Social Criticism; Perspectives on Politics; and Polity.

2 There were two exceptions here: a review article on Maria Lugones’ 2003 book, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions in Political Theory (Keating 2007); and an article by Sylvia Walby (2001) in Theory, Culture and Society. The only other “political theory” articles in which coalition appears in the title are published within classic American and Canadian political science journals. See: Romand Coles (1996) and Elain Stavro (2007).


4 As Coles (1996) makes clear, the major theorists of coalition have become so due more to contemporary interpretations of their work than a sustained treatment on their part of the concept of “coalition.” Coles, for instance, juxtaposes the work of Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) and Friedrich Nietzsche in an attempt to rework what Coles understands to be a seminal text in theorizing coalition, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s Hegemony...
activist coalition politics, I moved on to derivations of the word “coalition” within the full text of journal articles. The wider search yielded a much larger sample of articles (though still notably smaller than the plethora of scholarship on coalition within classic political science journals).

This larger sample size (from two hits in “title” searches, to more than four hundred hits in “full text” searches) allowed me to examine the range of political and philosophical questions that generate attention to the notion of coalition, in addition to the dominant theoretical frames used to answer them.

Perhaps most noteworthy among the (smaller) set of articles examined here was the fact that feminists were at the forefront of these discussions. María Lugones’ book, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (2003), for instance, is the only book within contemporary political theory scholarship explicitly about “theorizing coalition.” The other articles in which “coalition” appears in the title are also heavily

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5 These journals include: *Political Theory* (1 hit in the title, about 120 hits in the full text); *Theory and Event* (0 hits in title, 70 hits in the full text); *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* (0 hits in title, 113 hits in full text); *Contemporary Political Theory* (0 hits in title, 29 hits in full text); *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* (0 hits in title, 46 hits in the full text); *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (0 hits in title, 55 hits in the full text); *Ethics* (0 hits in title, 140 hits in the full text); *Journal of Political Philosophy* (0 hits in title, 54 hits in full text); *European Journal of Political Theory* (0 hits in title, 29 hits in full text); and *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (0 hits in title, 57 hits in full text). I also examined *Perspectives on Politics* and *Polity* but these results would have already come up in my political science journal search and indeed the findings in those journals followed the same patterns I outlined in Chapter One.
informed by feminist theory. A similar emphasis on feminist theory is also present within those articles in which coalition appears in the full text. Among the seventy-five most relevant articles that I gathered from the list of more than four hundred, forty-nine are written by feminist theorists and/or are explicitly about feminist theory and/or praxis. This means that over half (sixty-five per cent) of the political theory scholarship appearing in popular political theory journals on theorizing activist coalition politics is informed by feminist theory. And yet, even as the political theory scholarship seems to part ways with the political science scholarship insofar as feminist theorists are at the forefront of this work, very few non-feminist theorists have begun to use this rich theoretical resource for thinking with, through, or about coalition. Lugones’ book, for instance, only appears in a short review article by another feminist theorist.

A second noteworthy finding emerged within the more empirically grounded political theory articles. Of the articles examined, just under thirty percent address empirical examples of

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6 Elaine Stavro (2007) turns explicitly to feminist theory, and particularly to the work of Simone de Beauvoir, to theorize coalition. While Coles’ (1996) article is purportedly about Friedrich Nietzsche, it also carefully engages, and indeed relies on, work by feminists of color. Similarly, while Walby (2001) examines the advantages of shifting from community to coalition within the context of debates about forsaking a politics of equality for a politics of recognition, she ultimately turns to examples of feminist coalition politics to make her case for coalition before community.

7 Because this search was a “full text” search, every article that even mentioned the word coalition resulted as a hit. I therefore had to narrow down this list to those articles in which coalition appears more than once and is given substantial theoretical attention, meaning it appears as the answer to an important philosophical or political question or it appears within the context of a question the article sets out to answer. Once I did this, I narrowed the list down to seventy-five articles.

8 Unsurprisingly, to find more political theory articles explicitly about theorizing coalition, one only needs to turn to actual feminist theory journals. Coalition appears frequently within the full text of these articles as an answer to important political and philosophical questions. I address this scholarship in the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

9 See Keating (2007). I plan to take up Lugones’ text in subsequent chapters; for now, it suffices to say that mainstream political theorists do not look to hers as an influential text in theorizing coalition.
activist coalition politics.\textsuperscript{10} While at least some of these empirically focused articles tended to repeat and add to the patterns already outlined in Chapter One, a second noteworthy trend emerges; that is, a tendency to eschew discussions of politics altogether by relying on notions of undecidability and unpredictability. This trend was particularly evident in a special \textit{Theory and Event} issue on the student coalitions that formed as part of Quebec’s Maple Spring of 2012. Coming across an entire special issue within a popular political theory journal devoted to examining a concrete coalitional event such as the Maple Spring was a significant find. However, instead of encountering a range of theoretical interpretations of the collective politics of a variety of student coalitions working to dismantle neoliberal policies and the undemocratic politics they engender, I encountered a rather narrow interpretative frame for making sense of this moment of activist coalition politics.

As I will argue here, though much of the political theory scholarship is oriented toward addressing the question of delineating a post-Marxist vision of activist coalition politics (and in this respect parts ways with the political science scholarship that tends to completely overlook the post-Marxist politics challenge by focusing primarily on governmental coalitions), such endeavors tend to obscure the politics of coalition by turning to notions of ontological unfixity, epistemological undecidability, and political indeterminacy. As I demonstrate in Part I of the chapter, the dominant interpretive framework for making sense of Quebec’s Maple Spring relies precisely on such notions of undecidability and unpredictability. In Parts II and III of the chapter, I attempt to put this trend toward undecidability and unpredictability into a richer theoretical context by analyzing four contemporary theorizations of activist coalition politics.

\textsuperscript{10} This sample of articles was quite small. Among the 75 most relevant articles from the sample of just over 400, 22 of these articles seemed to address empirical examples of coalition activity.
In Part II, I introduce two such theorizations: *coalition as Left hegemony* (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) and *coalition as left assemblage* (Nicholas Tampio). As I will demonstrate there, both theorizations encounter a fundamental tension between ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability, on the one hand, and political fixity, in the form of a clear left-oriented political project, on the other. In Part III, I discuss two incongruous attempts—*coalition as spectacle* and *coalition as precarious community* (both on offer by Judith Butler)—to relieve this fundamental tension between unfixity and fixity. While both attempts succeed in relieving this tension, they do so by obscuring politics in favor of ontological disruption, in the first attempt, and ethical orientation, in the latter. As I argue throughout the dissertation, with the exception of attention given to Butler, contemporary political theory has yet to take seriously the rich body of work on offer by contemporary feminist theorists. By purposefully omitting the diverse contributions of feminist theorists in this chapter (with the exception of Butler), I show that political theory scholarship, minus the contributions of feminist theory (beyond Butler), is ill-equipped to resolve the variety of tensions that emerge as contemporary scholars attempt to outline a post-Marxist vision of collective politics.

**Part I) The Undecidability of CLASSE**

Nowhere is this trend toward undecidability more apparent than in a recent special issue of *Theory and Event*. In 2012, *Theory and Event* published a supplement issue on Quebec’s Maple Spring of 2012 (the *printemps érable*), in which a student strike against rising tuition fees grew into a broader people’s struggle against “neoliberal policies, the failed logic of austerity, and the weakening of democratic institutions” (Sorochan 2012). In response to the

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11 This social movement declared itself *le printemps érable* (or Maple Spring) to align its efforts with those across the Arab world in 2011 and with a global resurgence of leftist resistance. See Sorochan (2012).
Parti Liberal du Québec’s announcement in early 2010 of its intention to raise tuition fees by seventy-five percent over five years beginning in 2012, a handful of Quebec student associations formed the Coalition large de l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale (CLASSE), which represented half of the striking students and was considered to be the most radical of the student groups in its commitment to “the principle of free post-secondary education as well as its organizational structure, which is based on direct democratic decision-making in weekly meetings” (Sorochan 2012). Along with an editor’s introduction, a chronology of events, and the CLASSE Manifesto, thirteen articles were published in this 2012 special supplement issue. Rather than predict next directions for CLASSE or other activists, these articles explain and interpret the events of the Maple Spring as they had unfolded up until the point of the issue’s publication (summer of 2012). Given the scarcity of political theory articles dealing with activist coalition politics, I was very pleased to have come across an entire special issue devoted to a social justice coalition such as this one. What I found within the pages of this issue, however, engendered more cause for concern and befuddlement than for elation.

What is most remarkable about this collection of articles is the common intellectual tradition informing the authors’ various interpretations of the events, as well as the striking disciplinary homogeneity among these scholars. Most of the authors are from Art, Art History, Communications, and Philosophy departments. Given that Theory and Event self-identifies as a journal committed to the fields of political theory and political science, it is at least noteworthy that only one “political theorist” appears in a special issue on an explicitly political event (Lamoureux 2012). What is more, the dominant analytical lens used by these authors is one

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12 Two exceptions include one article by a political science scholar and another by an educational studies scholar.

13 See the journal description at: http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/
informed broadly by poststructuralist thought, and particularly by the work of Jacques Rancière, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Alan Badiou, Slavoj Zizek, and Judith Butler.

A dominant theme across these interpretations is that of “undecidability” (scholars also use “unimaginability” and “unpredictability”) within the space of coalition. Krista Geneviève Lynes (2012), for instance, puts Derrida in conversation with Gayatri Spivak to argue that the classroom may act as a “preview of the formation of collectivities” typical of coalition-building due to the “undecidability of the classroom as a space for solidarity” (Lynes 2012). While turning to the classroom is an interesting approach, there are important ways in which a classroom is not at all like a coalition such as CLASSE. While CLASSE is partly made up of students and professors, some of whom may have occupied the same classroom space, it is not clear how or why a classroom functions like a coalition. Are the motivations bringing students to a classroom the same as those bringing people to a coalition? This seems highly unlikely. It seems instead that Lynes is arguing that much could be gained if we approach coalitional work in the same way as we approach dialogical encounters in the classroom wherein basic principles of mutual respect operate. These ethical principles, she claims, operate precisely because of the “undecidability” of the classroom—i.e., the fact that we never know (at least at the beginning) with whom we will occupy this space and with whom we will have to attempt to engage in productive and fruitful conversations (Lynes 2012).

However, while it may very well be true that approaching the inevitable differences that emerge in both a classroom and a coalition with a similar spirit of acceptance and generosity may prove useful within both spaces, it nevertheless strikes me as odd that the lesson learned from the Maple Spring would be that undecidability succeeds in cementing coalitional activity. Even if there were something comparable between a classroom and a coalition (although I am not yet
convinced that there is), it is still not clear that undecidability (the fact that we do not know who our classmates will be when we first enter a classroom) generates an ethical inclination toward acceptance, respect, or generosity. It may in fact generate opposite feelings of fear, mistrust, or animosity.

If Lynes’ article were the only one to focus on “undecidability” as a crucial component of coalition work it would not be as remarkable. Lynes’ article, however, is not alone. As Alia Al-Saji (2012) and Erin Manning (2012) both underscore, what was most remarkable about the event of the strike was the diversity of participants working in solidarity within the space of the demonstration. This leads them to emphasize the “unimaginability” or “unpredictability” of the event itself, in addition to its equally unknowable future course, thereby emphasizing a non-linear opening of time and what Al-Saji calls a “politics of the future” that “in its unpredictability and newness, holds the promise of reconfiguring the present” (Al-Saji 2012; also see Lynes 2012 and Manning 2012). Similarly, other authors read the strike as a rupture or disruptive moment that underscores the necessity of acts of civil disobedience wherein the uncounted or invisible (following Rancière 1999 and 2004) unexpectedly make themselves visible (see Baillargeon 2012, Barney 2012, Manning 2012). Authors use the language of unpredictable “emergent collectives” (Manning 2012) and “assemblages” (Al-Saji 2012) to describe such collective efforts.

Such an emphasis on undecidability and unpredictability, however, seems odd given the fact that the strike was planned and organized by specific student groups on campus. While it may seem unimaginable that so many different people would find themselves walking side-by-side, perhaps the easy explanation for such a phenomenon mirrors the interpretative frames used by the gender and race scholars (introduced in Chapter One) and rooted in the gravity of the
social injustices that this group formed to contest. Following both Fred Hampton’s original sense and Shirley Chisholm’s later understanding of coalition, it seems we may alternatively argue that often coalition members come together out of necessity. For Hampton, Chicago street gangs formed a rainbow coalition for the sake of survival. For Chisholm, women of color formed coalitions with subjugated groups also out of necessity, and specifically in order to undermine a complex and interlocking oppressive system. The gravity of social injustices groups are forced to bear will, in certain moments, bring them together across stark race, class, sexuality, or gender divides.

It also worth noting that this emphasis on “unpredictability” shares little with the sense of unpredictability described by Luxemburg. When Luxemburg tells us that “coalescing wage struggles” are “unpredictable,” she means that they cannot be planned or programmed by the Party (Luxemburg 2004: 180). However, the formation of such coalitions is nevertheless inevitable precisely because of the kind of political consciousness that is born out of collective and individual struggle. The reason this process cannot be predicted or planned is because one must arrive at her political consciousness through her own examination of her lived experiences in struggle. It cannot be imposed from the outside. As I will demonstrate across the rest of this chapter, the sense of “unpredictability” called on in the CLASSE special issue is of a different sort, relying heavily on a discursive understanding of the permanent unfixity of all categories, identities, and systems of power and, in the last instant, looking to an external democratic discourse, as opposed to an internal political awakening in and through struggle, for the impetus of left-oriented coalition politics.

Whereas the interpretations of the Maple Spring are replete with unknowns–and with an emphasis on undecidability as a site of productive political engagement–CLASSE’s Manifesto is
quite explicit in outlining its own set of knowable problems and political goals. The problem, they assert, is neoliberal capitalism and the corresponding undemocratic form of politics it both engenders and relies on. The goal is a more participatory democratic order.

This burden [unequal access to public services] is one that we all shoulder, each and every one of us, whether we are students or not: this is one lesson our strike has taught us. For we students are also renters and employees; we are international students, pushed aside by discriminating public services. We come from many backgrounds, and, until the color of our skin goes as unnoticed as our eye color, we will keep on facing everyday racism, contempt and ignorance. We are women, and if we are feminists it is because we face daily sexism and roadblocks set for us by the patriarchal system; we constantly fight deep-rooted prejudice. We are gay, straight, bisexual, and proud to be. We have never been a separate level of society. Our strike is not directed against the people.

We are the people. (CLASSE 2012)

They call for a social strike that unites students and non-students alike in contesting a social order that guarantees unequal access to public services that results in increasing wealth for a small number of people and corporations. The most concrete act they call for is the strike itself. They hope that this action will incite a groundswell that will move Quebec in a fundamentally different direction, and one that supports participatory democracy.

Now is no time for mere declarations of intent: we must act. In calling for a social strike today, we will be marching alongside you, people of Quebec, in the street tomorrow. In calling for a social strike today, we hope that tomorrow, we will be marching, together, alongside the whole of Quebec society.

Together, we can rebuild.
Share our future.
Share our future. (CLASSE 2012)

While this future has not yet been written, it is clear that it will be guided by certain democratic principles. In this way, it is not completely unknown. Like any movement at its infancy (and it is here that we might invoke Luxemburg), the details of the direction of the movement have not yet been determined. Perhaps this is where the emphasis on unpredictability, undecidability, and unimaginability comes from. Nevertheless, what seems absent from at least a good portion of the articles published in this issue of Theory and Event is attention to alternative frames for
interpreting collective or coalitional politics outside of those given to us by Derrida, Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, and a handful of others. One of the only pieces published within this special issue that explicitly takes up the concrete political reasons for the formation of the strike is the CLASSE Manifesto itself. Are we therefore left to believe that political theorists have no insightful interpretative frames to apply to the unfolding of these events? And if indeed it seems that activists may be the best theorists of the concrete politics of coalition, then why aren’t their theoretical insights foregrounded in this special issue?

While Al-Saji points out the remarkable diversity of protestors walking alongside her, it doesn’t seem that she, nor many of the other scholars published here, takes the time to consider what it is politically that has brought such a diverse set of actors to the street. Instead, she is stuck by the surprising, indeed “unimaginable,” comfort she finds in walking alongside such a diverse array of people. What has brought such an unlikely or “unimaginable” group of protestors together seems to be taken for granted by many of the scholars here.\textsuperscript{14} The “theory” these scholars use to interpret the event of the Maple Spring therefore relies less on the sort of claims reiterated across the empirical literature and feminist theory scholarship introduced in Chapter One and instead on a notion of coalition that refuses to identify a clear political commitment that would have acted as a foundation for the formation of CLASSE in the first place.

Whether it be due to the poststructuralist theoretical inflection informing these engagements or the fact that these authors were in fact writing at a moment of undecidability insofar as the events of the strike were still unfolding, a strong emphasis on a politics of the future that cannot be known in the present emerges across these articles and stands in marked

\textsuperscript{14} Exceptions include articles by: Normand Baillargeon, Diane Lamoureux, and Brian Massumi.
contrast to CLASSE’s actual Manifesto as well as the Chronology describing the events and the specific demands of the coalition, both published in the special issue. Instead of focusing on the very concrete reasons for the emergence of the mass strike, these authors focus on the complete unknowability or unpredictability of the event.

At this point, it may prove instructive to contrast this particular account of a social justice coalition with some of the other empirically grounded political theory scholarship. While a notable portion of the empirically focused literature is shaped fundamentally by commitments to ontological unfixity, epistemological undecidability, and political indeterminacy, another portion echoes findings from the political science literature (outlined in Chapter One). For instance, in the same way that political scientists found that activist coalitions prove to be a particularly effective mode of political engagement for marginalized groups (such as women and Blacks fighting for social justice), political theorists studying the lesbian and gay movement, the AIDS movement, and the environmental movement, similarly suggest that forming coalitions is a necessary and effective mode of political engagement for social justice causes. Precisely because certain issues cannot be treated as isolated issues, they call for coalitions that seek to confront multiple sites of difference and engage multiple issues at once (gender justice, sex justice, race justice, reproductive justice, climate change, rising sea levels, health, poverty, etc.).

For instance, echoing Chisholm’s (1972) argument that all oppressed groups of the world should

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15 As was also the case in the political science scholarship, many of these theorists also emphasize the importance of forming issue-specific coalitions. In an article on the role of the women’s movement during and after Iran’s 2009 presidential election, the author highlights an instance in which a diverse array of women and women’s groups succeeded in building alliances across difference by focusing on specific issues pertaining to the democratic demands of the people (a commitment to freedom and equality for all) rather than religion, politics, or ideology (Tahmasebi-Birgani 2010: 80). See Diedrich (2007), Kaplan (1997), Riggle (2003), Rimmerman (2002), Di Chiro (2008), and Segura and Bejarano (2004). Renata Segura and Ana Maria Bajarano found that the formation of coalitions between multiple marginalized groups and governmental bodies were absolutely essential if marginalized groups were to play a part in constitution-making and reform in the Andes, thus aligning with the political science literature on the importance of activist coalitions forming with governmental bodies to impact change within the government (Segura and Bajarano 2004).
unite in one broad coalition to contest an interlocking system of power and Chung and Chang’s (1998) notion of “multi-oppression politics,” scholars similarly argue for the absolute necessity of coalition politics when fighting such a pervasive and undiscriminating issue such as AIDS. One of the most interesting additions to scholarship attending to the challenge of coalescing across difference emerges in Joseph Schwartz’s review article of Erin O’Brien’s recent (2008) book, *The Politics of Identity: Solidarity Building among America’s Working Poor*. As Schwartz notes, O’Brien’s book challenges the assumption that strongly held identities (of race, gender, and ethnicity) “serve as barriers to the building of majority coalitions for economic justice” (Schwartz 2009: 970). One of the main indices O’Brien use is what she calls “coalitional solidarity;” she shows that among hotel and food service employees, those who develop “‘associational identity politics’–a sense of shared fate with members of their primary group [based on race, ethnicity or nationality]–possess a ‘cognitive developmental’ orientation that enables them to empathize with the struggles of other marginalized or disadvantaged groups” making them more likely to develop a sense of coalitional solidarity with other workers from different identity groups (Schwartz 2009: 970).

O’Brien’s research resonates with the main argument of Tommie Shelby’s (2002) article in which he argues that building a strong “collective identity” among Blacks will foster

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17 As Kaplan (1997) argues in a review of a handful of books recently published on theorizing gay and lesbian politics: “The current debates about Medicaid and medicare underline the extent to which gay men have concerns that overlap with those of many other disadvantaged groups. AIDS demands a politics of coalition based on all persons’ rights to decent health care. Sexual oppression must be articulated theoretically in relation to other inequalities abiding within modern democracy” (Kaplan 1997: 419).

18 See O’Brien 2008. By working for 11 months in a hotel and food service venue and conducting in-depth interview with co-workers and other hospitality employees, O’Brien found that the presence of identity politics between employees, based on race, ethnicity or nationality actually increased their likelihood of forming alliances with other workers. In her sample of 48 workers, of the 19 who displaced a sense of “collective worker solidarity,” 14 of them also had a strong racial, ethnic, or national identity.
possibilities for interracial coalitions. Importantly, however, Michael Hanchard (2010) argues that identity (or ontology) alone is not a sufficient foundation for politics. While identity politics may prepare the groundwork for coalition politics, the two are not interchangeable. By turning to women of color scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Hanchard argues that political communities are not born solely out of a common oppression or common identity. There is a difference, he argues, between “doing” politics and “being” a certain type of person (ontology)—i.e., being a woman, being poor, being non-white, etc. (526). In examining “black political thought,” Hanchard challenges the “collective identity theory” advocated by some scholars for its ability to produce exclusions of, for instance, Black women. By turning to women of color feminists and adding their voices to this tradition of thought, Hanchard advocates moving away from identity politics and toward coalition.

As we can see here, at least some political theorists are interested in examining the concrete politics—political goals and commitments, such as undermining oppression—of coalitional activity. With scholarship that places concrete politics in the foreground often comes attention to questions of what it is that will help to bring people together in the space of coalition and to keep them there—the challenge of coalition politics. A shared ontology alone (e.g., the fact that a group of people may all be poor, Black, women), Hanchard is suggesting, is not enough to unite people in the space of coalition. The missing ingredient, it seems for these scholars, is a shared political commitment.

**Part II) Encountering a Tension**

Turning now to the rest of the political theory scholarship, I will identify the dominant theoretical trends that inform the empirical engagements outlined in the previous section. While
the political theory literature on coalition as a whole seems principally concerned with attending to the crisis of delineating a post-Marxist activist politics outside of the category of class.\footnote{There were a handful of exceptions that theorize party and governmental coalitions within the context of democratic theory and in so doing return to canonical texts by Jeremy Bentham, David Hume, and Thomas Hobbes, as well as the Federalist Papers. See James (1981), Brendes (2012), Drake and McCulloch (2011), Wilson (1991), Christiano (1990) and Sabl (2002).} I will demonstrate here that that scholarship is far removed from practical considerations related to progressive politics. Instead, these scholars find themselves wading through incredibly deep and dense philosophical waters as they turn to notions of ontological unfixity, epistemological undecidability, and political indeterminacy.

As I argued in the Introduction, political theory literature on theorizing coalition has emerged out of critical engagements with Marx and Marxist notions of class politics. In response to the perceived ontological, epistemological, and political crises of Marxism, contemporary authors have moved toward progressive positions that embrace coalition (in place of class) as strategically necessary, “historically…more fundamental, ethically more desirable, and politically more tenable” (Coles 1996: 375). As shifting and interlocking currents of power explode traditional race, class, and gender categories, left-oriented progressive groups have gravitated toward coalition politics as a necessary political tactic. However, and as I argued in the Introduction, these more concrete shifts within political activity have occurred alongside an important philosophical shift, and specifically “a growing disenchantment with the practice and telos of Marxian politics and the increasing sway of neo-Nietzschean philosophical and political reflections on difference” (Coles 1996: 375). Romand Coles concurs with Laclau and Mouffe that both of these shifts, each in their own way, have led to “greater political fragmentation and contestation” (Ibid). It is this moment of fragmentation and contestation (ontologically,
epistemologically, and politically) that seems to call for coalition as the way forward for progressive leftist politics.

In this section I examine two articulations of post-Marxist progressive coalition politics: Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of coalition as Left hegemony; and Tampio’s notion of coalition as left assemblage. By exposing the philosophical underpinnings on which these concepts rest, this section reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of such endeavors between a commitment to ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability, and a progressive commitment to outlining a left-oriented collective politics.

a) Coalition as Left Hegemony

Through an engagement with Althusser and Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) develop a notion of coalition that I will call coalition as Left hegemony; here, coalition politics takes on the form of “hegemonic articulation.” Their intention is to move beyond a narrow Marxist class politics, and to describe a form of Leftist politics that incorporates the “proliferation of struggles” (around sex, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) characteristic of their contemporary moment (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 1). A “hegemonic relation” emerges, they tell us, when a “set of particularities”—social actors occupying different positions “within the discourses that constitute the social fabric”—establish “relations of equivalence between themselves” vis-à-vis oppressive forces, and then one of those particularities succeeds in representing the “totality of the chain” (xiii). Different particularities separately concentrating on, say, race, class, or gender, see the equivalences in their struggles and come together around one of those particularities—class, for instance. Laclau and Mouffe position the creation of “a chain of equivalence among the various democratic struggles against different forms of subordination” as a central tenet of their theory.
While they do not call this chain of equivalence a “coalition” (they instead call it a Leftist hegemony), and nor do they use the word “coalition” anywhere in the text outside of one instance of “coalesce” when describing the process of hegemonic articulation, contemporary authors, including Coles (1996), understand hegemonic articulation as a form of coalition politics. This progressive political project, however, rests on an enormously complicated philosophical terrain that results in a number of inconsistencies and an unworkable tension between the ontological unfixity\(^\text{20}\) and epistemological indeterminacy\(^\text{21}\) of the social, and the political fixity of a Left hegemony.\(^\text{22}\) I sketch these composite parts below.

In elaborating an unfixed and indeterminate picture of the social world, Laclau and Mouffe attempt to break a perceived rigidity of Marxist social ontology, represented in the base-superstructure model wherein social categories and forces are determined by economic modes of production. One way to break this rigidity, they believe, is by presenting a new ontology characterized by unfixity and indeterminacy and rooted in “discursive formation” which—unlike rigid or fixed economic formation—is thought to accommodate complexity and fluidity. This turn to discursive formation is characteristic of much of the contemporary political theory scholarship on coalition informed by “neo-Nietzschean” reflections on difference (Coles 1996: 375). For Laclau and Mouffe, the social is understood (and determined) discursively, not economically (x).


\(^\text{21}\) Laclau and Mouffe (1985) also articulate notions of epistemological and ontological indeterminacy across *Hegemony*. See especially pages 144, 152, and 186.

\(^\text{22}\) In addition to advocating notions of ontological unfixity and indeterminacy, Laclau and Mouffe also strongly advocate for a clear, left-oriented political project. In this sense, despite the unfixity of the social world, they insist on a notion of political fixity in terms of adopting a clear left-oriented direction. See especially pages xiv, xvi, xix, and 186.
They turn to the “Althusserian complexity” inherent in the process of “overdetermination” in order to outline a picture of this fundamental ontological unfixity (97).

Following Althusser, they maintain that “everything existing in the social is overdetermined,” because the “social constructs itself as a symbolic order” (97). By this they mean that because all categories and identities are constructed symbolically through language—the category “class,” for instance, only gains meaning in a particular historical location that has attributed certain meanings to it through language—they are always in the process of potentially changing meaning. The state of something being infinitely open to new meaning, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is the same as being “overdetermined” in language. According to them, once we accept that categories and social relations are “symbolic” and therefore “overdetermined,” we necessarily also accept their unfixity. “The symbolic—i.e., overdetermined—character of social relations,” they contend, “implies that they lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moments of an immanent law” or to a concrete and stable meaning (97). Because “class” is only a symbolic category, there is no final or stable meaning for “class”—it “lacks an ultimate literality.”

Understanding all social categories as “symbolic” or “overdetermined,” they believe, necessarily inserts an element of undecidability into the base-superstructure model (x, xii, and 58). It introduces a “logic of the social” that, they argue, is no longer rooted in social foundations characteristic of the base-superstructure model (3). Instead this “logic of hegemony,” as they call it, is rooted in a fundamental “structural undecidability” (xii), or the fact that all social categories are forever unfixed. This would suggest that we can no longer rely on categories such as “class” or “women” or “workers” to unite us in political action, precisely because these categories are
already overdetermined—there is no way to know in advance the content of these categories because it is constantly evolving through language.

As a “complementary” and “contingent” operation, the logic of hegemony depends instead on external forces to which it reacts (3). As Laclau and Mouffe put it, hegemony is not “the majestic unfolding of an identity but the response to a crisis” (7). It is not something, echoing Luxemburg, that is predetermined by mathematical or scientific precision. Relations of modes of production do not simply determine social relations. Instead, the social is marked by a fundamental “unfixity” (85). Society, they argue, does not have an essence, a base or a foundation—it is not a totality of this sort. Unlike the Marxist base-superstructure logic, the logic of overdetermination is rooted in a “critique of every type of fixity, through an affirmation of the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity” (104). The first challenge to ontological fixity therefore goes something like this: because the social is itself fundamentally undetermined due to the unfixity of discursive formation, there is no solid structural base from which politics (the superstructure) may be predetermined.

If the first way they challenge Marxist ontology is to replace the economic base—determined with scientific precision—with a much more fluid and indeterminate discursive base, the second way they challenge Marxist ontology is to claim that the determining or causal relationship between the base and superstructure now goes in both directions. They argue that neither the base nor the superstructure definitively determines the other; instead they are in a symbiotic relationship with one another. While the base may determine the superstructure in some way, so too does the superstructure determine the base, thereby eroding the clear distinction between the two. To put it another way; Laclau and Mouffe maintain that instead of ontology determining politics in the classic Marxist sense, politics also plays a role in
determining ontology. As they state in the preface to the second edition: “…we conceive of the political not as a superstructure [in the classic Marxist sense] but as having the status of an ontology of the social” (xiv). As “an ontology of the social,” then, it seems the social is a political process. According to them, every social identity—something that can be ontologically determined according to Marxism through examining the relations of production that bring it into being—must now be thought of as indeterminate; only “‘mythical’ fixations” of a determinate social ontology emerge, and such fixations, they argue, depend on political struggle (41-42). Thus, they have inverted the model: politics, it now seems, determines ontology. In order to understand concrete “social” formations, they tell us, we must appeal to a “political” concept (139) called “hegemonic articulation” (7).

Laclau and Mouffe develop this notion by combining two important concepts: Althusser’s concept of articulation and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Following Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe understand discursive “structures” or “formations”—the only “structures” that emerge in their social ontological—as “articulatory practices.” By this they mean to say that the structures themselves, which are only moments of perceived fixity, are always contingent because they emerge as a result of a political practice that is external to the pieces that make up the structure (96). The only coherence that inheres in discursive formations, they maintain, following Foucault, is “regularity in dispersion” (105). No discursive formation, they argue, can be thought of as a “sutured totality” precisely because it only ever comes into being through an articulatory, or political, process (106-107); discursive formations are not an ontological facts, but a political creations.

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What is possible, they maintain, are “partial fixations” that enable social subjects to form contingently and momentarily in relation to other social subjects (112). The “practice of articulation,” they tell us,

...consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social [a social ontology of unfixity], a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse [overdetermination] by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (114) (Emphasis in original.)

By asserting that hegemony is an articulatory practice, Laclau and Mouffe mean to draw attention to the political, and therefore purposefully constructed, ontology of hegemony. Instead of simply describing an ontological fact of the social, for Laclau and Mouffe—following Gramsci, and now putting him in conversation with Althusser—hegemony is best thought of as a purposeful (read, political) practice. Replacing the principle of representation, which depends on representation of a social identity that is ontologically fixed, Laclau and Mouffe argue that hegemonic articulation is instead the “result of a political construction and struggle” that produces not an ontological category that can be re-presented by a political party, but “chains of equivalence” that form to contest different forms of subjugation (65).

Chains of equivalence form when a set of particularities—“women” and “workers” and “Blacks,” for instance—identify a shared antagonism, perhaps in this case vis-à-vis corporate capitalism. In order to represent “the totality” of this “chain of equivalences” (xiii), it is necessary for one of the three particularities to emerge as hegemonic with a split identity as both its particularity—e.g., “workers”—and as the totality of the chain itself, that is representing the universal struggle of all women, workers, and Blacks against corporate capitalism. While this

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24 Laclau and Mouffe insist, however, that this antagonism is never a true opposition because of the permanent unfixity of the social identities perceived to be positioned antagonistically (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 124-127). Just as identities are never permanently fixed, so too are antagonisms never permanently fixed. While in one instance an antagonism will emerge against corporate capitalism, it is not a sutured or permanent antagonism because it is always subject to changing or disappearing.
chain of equivalence may form around a class subject, Laclau and Mouffe assert that it need not do so (65). According to them, there are not necessary (read, ontological) links between, for instance, anti-capitalism and anti-sexism; any unity between them must be understood as a political (opposed to an ontological) unity, and as such it must be the result of a hegemonic articulation, or political struggle (178). While democratic struggles may appear to reflect an antagonism between two stable social positions—between, for instance, men and women or whites and non-whites or workers and capitalist owners—they contend that this sutured space is always political and therefore contingent; it is never strictly speaking ontologically stable. The perceived closure of this space is therefore only necessary for the sake of the construction of the antagonism and the momentary “division of this space into two camps,” resulting in the perceived autonomy of the particular social movement (132).

However, their commitment to unfixity sits in tension with their political commitment to developing a Leftist hegemony capable of contesting the already relatively sutured hegemony of neo-liberalism (xvi). In order for this hegemony to form—and this is the last component of hegemonic articulation—a “discursive ‘exterior’” must emerge (154). According to Laclau and Mouffe, a hegemonic articulation is always external to the fragments (particularities or marginalized groups) that make it up (94). They tell us that there is no “logical and necessary” relation between “socialist objectives and the positions of social agents in the relations of production.” Any “articulation” that may result between them is “external and does not proceed from any natural movement of each to unite with the other” (86). There is nothing about the social that ontologically predetermines a site of political articulation; instead, these momentary sutured groups form through a process of political struggle that ultimately results in a “collective will” that is laboriously constructed from a number of dissimilar points” (87).
“collective will” that results from this struggle is not, they maintain, predetermined by the ontological positions of each of its elements; instead, it originates in an external democratic discourse that may be summarized in the “democratic principle of liberty and equality” (154-155). This discourse, they argue, will form the basis of a new Leftist hegemonic articulation manifested in a chain of equivalences between a variety of struggles against oppression (176).

Like Luxemburg, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the importance of struggle. However, they ultimately locate the origin of coalition politics in an “external” democratic discourse. In this sense, they part ways with Luxemburg. Recall that for Luxemburg, political awakening happened in and through struggle not from external Communist dogma or a Party program; it was rather internal to the very process of lived struggle. As I will argue below, it is precisely this emphasis on theorizing from within lived, internal, struggle that differentiates Luxemburg’s understanding of unpredictability from those later put forward by Laclau and Mouffe, Deleuze and Guattari, and Butler.

Although their politics, consisting of a hegemonic construction that will decide social division on the new basis of a chains of equivalence between different struggles against oppression, deepens and expands liberal-democratic ideology, Laclau and Mouffe assert that “the meaning of liberal discourse on individual rights is not definitely fixed” and it is precisely this “unfixity” that makes this new articulation possible (176). The discursive unity that inheres in any hegemonic articulation, they insist, is not to be understood as “the teleological unity of a project” (109). In this way, we are led to believe that there is no predetermined direction, end, or telos to liberal-democratic ideology. Indeed, they distinguish their notion of ideology (borrowing from Gramsci) from a Marxist “superstructuralist” reading of ideology wherein the scientific
calculability of economic relations determines ideology and politics (think here of Lenin’s scientific socialism).

The fundamental obstacle in the task of creating a Leftist hegemonic articulation, they maintain, is that of “essentialist apriorism,” or “the conviction that the social is sutured at some point from which it is possible to fix meaning of any event independently of any articulatory practice” (177). This conviction leads to a “failure to understand the constant displacement of the nodal points structuring a social formation, and of an organization of discourse in terms of a logic of ‘a priori privileged points’” (177). The most basic of these a priori privileged points, they argue, has been classism (177). Unlike scientific socialism, their version of Leftist hegemonic politics lacks a clear or fixed nodal point in class antagonism, or indeed in any other fixed binary antagonism (such as gender or race antagonism) (180). Because every hegemonic articulation depends on a struggle, they believe it is impossible to know in advance what any new articulation will look like. Each new articulation and all political subjects must be left somehow indeterminate. The first tension that emerges here can therefore be stated thusly: while they want to replace a class movement with a more expansive Leftist hegemony, their emphasis on ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability precludes them from outlining the contours of the liberal-democratic ideology that presumably provides the articulatory core of this political construction. This tension is compounded by a second one.

While in many places Laclau and Mouffe seem heavily invested in challenging the causal link between a sutured social ontology and a corresponding political formation, in other instances they imply that liberal-democratic ideology is in fact sutured in an ontological conception of society. Recall that for Laclau and Mouffe the “Gramscian theory of hegemony accepts social

25 I am not the only one to pick up on this tension. Coles (1996) makes a similar claim, ultimately going on to argue that the articulatory core of equality and liberty must be supplemented by an ethic of receptive generosity in order to make coalition politics viable and desirable.
complexity as the *very condition* of political struggle” (71) (emphasis added). This assumption would suggest that their version of social ontology (discursive complexity) does indeed determine politics. Because they understand all identity as partial or incomplete, a “negative identity,” it cannot be represented directly and so must instead be articulated through equivalences between its different “moments” (128). In many ways, such an assumption makes perfect sense. Precisely because individual beings are complexly situated, their politics will also need to reflect this complexity. Coalition politics between multiple and different subjugated groups seems to effectively accommodate complexity of this sort. Hegemonic articulation, it therefore seems, is the inevitable result of a social ontology rooted in unfixity (see 134, 144-145, and 186-187). I wonder, however, is “unfixity” the only way to get at this complexity? As I will demonstrate across subsequent chapters of the dissertation, women of color feminism offers a vision of complexity that is detached from this strong emphasis on discursive unfixity.

The second tension can therefore be stated this way: because the liberal-democratic discourse or ideology that provides the very basis of their Leftist hegemony must be thought of as *external* to the process of hegemonic articulation—or political struggle toward coalition—Laclau and Mouffe are stuck trying to identify from where it emerges and in so doing they fall back into an ontological origin in unfixity that necessarily stands in tension with a fixed left-oriented politics as they describe it. As they have already insisted, social ontology, indeed all social beings, are radically unfixed and indeterminate. Such radical unfixity and indeterminability seems to be at odds with a claim that these beings will come together for shared Left-oriented political goals.

To put it another way; the discourse that shapes a Leftist hegemony must be “external” to the process that generates it, but where exactly does this external discourse come from if not
from either a stable ontological vision of the social or a political commitment that has been decided in advance—both origins Laclau and Mouffe actively resist? How can we be sure that the very real differences and points of hostile contention between various groups—such as those between, for instance, second-wave white feminists and women of color feminists—will not foreclose in advance the possibility of hegemonic articulation between them? Or, alternatively, even if hegemonic articulation is possible in this case (which some would argue it was insofar as white feminism remained dominant within academia until at least the turn of this century, and many would argue that it remains dominant), then how are we to know that this new articulation is the inclusive Leftist hegemony that Laclau and Mouffe clearly seek?

As we can see here, Laclau and Mouffe’s attempt to sever a Leftist coalition politics from ontological determination runs into a number of problems. They ultimately find themselves moving back and forth between fixity and unfixity, struggling to maintain a workable balance between the two, leaving much to be explained in terms of how or why a Leftist hegemonic articulation will emerge between different subordinated groups. If they are accurate in describing political moments as “struggles”—and I believe they are—they leave much to be explained in terms of what it is that will ultimately settle these battles. They also underestimate the ability of such struggles to produce their own internal oppositional discourse against oppression.

b) Coalition as left Assemblage

A second attempt to move outside of Marxist social ontology is located in a contemporary reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “assemblages.” Tampio (2009)

26 One dominant response to this problem within contemporary political theory has been to supplement coalition politics with a particular ethical comportment. See Coles (1996 and 2001), Young (1997), and Honig (1993). I take issue with such a conception in Chapter Three through a close reading of Coles (1996).
outlines what he argues is a more authentically Deleuzian notion of left coalition politics than the notion of the “multitude” developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.\footnote{27} A Deleuzian left politics, Tampio argues, is located in the notion of “left assemblages” committed to the ideals of liberty and equality (392).\footnote{28}

Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, who never actually describe their notion of Left hegemony as a form of Left “coalition” politics, Tampio is explicit in his intention to mobilize the Deleuzian concept of “assemblages” for the explicit purpose of outlining a left “coalition” politics.\footnote{29} However, Tampio’s notion of a left coalition politics is immediately differentiated from Laclau and Mouffe’s in its use of the lowercase in “leftist.” Laclau and Mouffe use the capital “L” when they talk about their vision of Left politics, I believe, because of the movement aspect of their version of politics. With the concept of hegemony, they seek to develop what will ultimately resemble a cohesive Left movement rooted in a liberal-democratic ideology committed to equality and liberty. Tampio’s use of the lowercase in “leftist” signals a more decentralized

\footnote{27} By rephrasing Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the “war machine” in their concept of the “multitude,” Hardt and Negri seek to “go ‘beyond’ Deleuze by fabulating a concept of political subjectivity for postmodernity” (Tampio 2009: 384). By designating a social body in which singularities act in common without a “transcendent organizing agent,” the multitude, they believe, succeeds in naming a political body that is unlike other left political subjectivities in its respect for difference in itself; in this way, Tampio maintains, the notion of the multitude incorporates a key Deleuzian commitment to difference (388). However, their notion of the multitude also relies, Tampio argues, on certain Marxist-Leninist assumptions—that the agent of political change is the proletariat, that the means of political transformation is revolution, and that the telos of politics is the end of sovereignty—from which Deleuze would seek to distance himself (384). For this reason, the concept of the multitude is not, according to Tampio, capable of enacting an authentically Deleuzian left politics. See Hardt and Negri (2004). Other authors discussing coalition within the context of Hardt and Negri’s work include Cidam (2012) and Angus (2004).

\footnote{28} I give special attention to Tampio’s work not because it has become particularly influential across contemporary political theory but, instead, because this article is one of the few that actually spends considerable time theorizing coalition. I also believe that the Deleuzian notion of assemblage has become influential across contemporary discussions of post-Marxist collective forms of political engagement. While I do not have rigorous analytics to point to, I can recall a handful of panel discussions at recent political theory conferences wherein people have turned to this concept of “assemblage” as a viable form of collective action. As I will also point out below, this concept also features heavily in one of Butler’s conceptualizations of coalition.

\footnote{29} Here Tampio interprets the notion of assemblages developed in A Thousand Plateaus through Deleuze’s writings and interviews that he did independent of Guattari. For this reason, Tampio attributes the concept to Deleuze and not to Deleuze and Guattari.
leftist politics. Nevertheless, as he attempts to wed a protean coalition politics to a vision of left
assemblages committed to enacting the ideals of equality and liberty, the tensions we found in
Laclau and Mouffe reemerge.

The crucial theoretical move in Tampio’s argument relies on evaluating comments
Deleuze made in a 1989 interview with Claire Parnet, in which he is asked to explain what it
means to be “leftist.”30 In Deleuze’s response to this question, Tampio locates the fundamental
components of a Deleuzian leftist politics: refashioned notions of equality and liberty. Tampio
develops this refashioned Deleuzian notion of equality from Deleuze’s comment that to be on the
left means “discovering that ‘Third World problems…are often closer to us than the problems in
our own neighborhoods’” (Tampio 2009: 393). Deleuze describes being on the left as a “matter
of perception” whereby one first perceives the “periphery…the world, the continent” or the
“horizon” and then oneself; one makes his or her way back to his- or herself only after
“perceiving on the horizon”. 31 Tampio interprets this passage as elaborating a refashioned
concept of “equality” insofar as it encourages us to find equivalences across difference (Tampio
2009: 393). In this understanding, then, equality reduces to unity or sameness. Tampio develops a
refashioned Deleuzian concept of “liberty” from Deleuze’s description of the left as “the
aggregate of processes of minoritarian becomings.”32 The concept of “minoritarian becoming,”
or the idea that different minority oppositional groups can and will form, Tampio argues,

30 See Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet (1989) L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze, tr. Charles Stivale, ‘G’ as in
“Gauche”. URL (consulted Mar., 2014): http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CSivale/D-G/ABC2.html. This site does
not, however, take you to a transcript from the interview. Instead, it takes you to Charles Stivale’s recounting and
translation of the interview. I will be referencing the portions of the interview that Tampio relies on to make his
argument and will therefore cite Tampio instead of the above URL. I am less concerned with whether or not Tampio
accurately depicts Stivale’s translation of Deleuze’s ideas here. What is interesting for me is the way in which
Tampio uses Deleuze’s comments to develop his own notion of protean left coalitions.

31 Deleuze and Parnet (n. 32).

32 Ibid
“revitalizes” a positive concept of “liberty” by emphasizing freedom through self-determination and self-transformation (393). Here, liberty reduces to an emphasis on difference or plurality—the fact that many different minority oppositional groups can and will form. Together, Tampio believes, these concepts enable him to develop a Deleuzian notion of the left that successfully maintains a tension between equality (as unity or sameness) and liberty (as plurality or difference) (see 393).

With these refashioned notions of equality and liberty, Tampio precedes to “reconstruct the left political theory of A Thousand Plateaus,” by wedding these concepts to two other concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari in that text: “assemblages,” and an “abstract machine” (393). Through the concept of “assemblages,” Tampio means to emphasize the decentralized and “semi-coherent” nature of political entities. Think here of the difference between a coherent movement and multiple, fragmented coalitions. Through the concept of an “abstract machine,” Tampio seeks to emphasize the possibility of convergence and unity between semi-disparate singularities, or between different social groups (394). Tampio conceives of the left “ideationally” as an abstract machine, or as “an incorporeal power that pilots the formation of assemblages” committed to the concepts of equality and liberty, while nevertheless leaving “wide latitude to how assemblages contain and express those ideals” (393). The politics of the left, according to Tampio, is therefore located in the creation of multiple “left assemblages” conceived of as “protean coalitions that articulate and enact the ideals of liberty and equality” (392).

Let me start with the notion of assemblages. Tampio rightly locates the origin of this concept in the ontology presented in A Thousand Plateaus. We find one of the clearest
descriptions of this ontology in “Nomadology: The War Machine.” Here, Deleuze and Guattari contrast two ontological visions of what exists in the world: one vision (what they argue is a false vision) resembles chess pieces on a chessboard, while the other (correct) vision resembles Go pieces on a Go-board. In the Chinese game of “Go,” two players place stones (one has black stones, the other has white stones) on a checkered board with the aim of encircling the largest total area on the board. Additionally, each player may encircle one another’s pieces, at which point the piece is removed from the board, as a defensive strategy to occupy as much space as possible. While both games are played on a checkered board, the rules and objectives of the games differ. Whereas winning Go requires occupying the most enclosed territory on the board, winning Chess requires capturing the opponent’s king.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the “Go pieces are elements of a nonsubjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, but only situational ones”—i.e., all the Go pieces are identical stones (black for one player, and white for the other) that only gain meaning when positioned or situated relative to one another on the Go-board (DG 1986: 3). We can contrast this understanding with intrinsic properties of chess pieces by classification as a king, queen, rook, knight, bishop, or pawn. These properties then determine the pieces’ movement and placement on the board. Whereas the relations between the chess pieces are interior and “structural,” the relations between Go pieces are strictly exterior, meaning determined by the constellations in which they sit at any moment in time (3). As Deleuze and Guattari put it, whereas chess can be thought of as an “institutionalized, regulated, coded war,” Go is best thought of as a “war without battle lines…without battles even” (4). Chess may be understood as semiology—or an activity in reading signs (i.e., the relationships of all of the different players relative to one

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This is twelfth plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated and published before the full translation of the entire text. I will be citing this publication: *Nomadology: The War Machine*, Brian Massumi (trans.), New York: Semiotext(e), 1986.
another and based on their intrinsic properties) and then positioning oneself within a safe, closed space—Go is “pure strategy” precisely because there are no intrinsic properties to help one to read or interpret one’s safety within certain constellations. Instead of marking off a safe, closed space for one’s king, in Go one positions her pieces in open space and attempts to hold that space without aim or direction (4).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the Go pieces, and the relations between them, resemble a “machine assemblage.” They describe assemblages as “packs” or “bands” of the “rhizome type,” which they contrast with those of the “arborescent type” (13). Instead of originating in a vertical trunk formation, rhizome assemblages grow horizontally and vertically, resulting in something that resembles a garden, as opposed to a tree. They argue that the entire Go-board can be thought of as a machine assemblage; it is constantly changing shape depending on where the pieces are placed on the board and the various constellations of pieces that result. The machine itself exists only in these various metamorphoses (17). The smooth space of the Go-board is characterized by “rhizomatic multiplicities” occupying the space of the board in constantly moving and changing (flowing) constellations (34). The conditions of existence on a Go-board, they argue, resemble those of a nomad existence. A nomad does not travel from one point to another, occupying each point along the way. Instead of resembling destinations, each point exists only as a relay on a trajectory. The nomad’s existence, they argue, is one of constant flowing and movement. In this sense, his existence simply is the trajectory itself, not the points that punctuate it. The nomad holds no land, points, or paths: he is completely “deterritorialized” precisely because there is “no reterritorialization” after his arrival at each point (52).

As we can see from these two examples, Deleuze and Guattari depict an ontology of movement. According to them, the universe is made up of a single flow of matter-movement.
Matter forms into assemblages along the way, which resemble “constellations of singularities and traits deduced from the flow—selected, organized, stratified—in such a way as to converge (consistency) artificially and naturally” (95). In this sense, they conceive of assemblages as “inventions” (95) that shape the flow of matter in various instances and for various reasons, resulting, at least momentarily, in something that resembles order despite the inherent chaos of constant matter-movement. Tampio builds off of this notion of assemblage—represented in the picture of one possible constellation of pieces on a Go board—to develop a notion of left assemblages.

While the passages I have cited from Deleuze and Guattari do not discuss the notion of assemblages as political entities, Tampio argues this notion was constructed for an explicitly political purpose, to “show how the left could nurture diversity and disagreement” (Tampio 2009: 395). Understanding constellations of matter-movement as temporary “assemblages,” Tampio argues, allows Deleuze and Guattari to move away from the notion of Leftist politics rooted in a “common ideological trunk”—think of Lenin’s scientific socialism—and toward a vision of the left that “prizes ‘underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes,’” or to put it in more concrete terms, “temporary and surprising campaigns that would assemble different constituencies for political action and then dissolve” (395). Tampio contends that Deleuze and Guattari created this concept of assemblage “to help the left envision political bodies that may ‘gently tip’ society in the direction of freedom and equality” (395).

It is important to note that the passages Tampio cites here are related to the ontology of matter-movement that Deleuze and Guattari outline in *A Thousand Plateaus*. What is illuminating about the connection that Tampio draws between these passages and a vision of left politics is the way in which an ontology of matter-movement necessarily opens up, or perhaps
even demands, a particular form of politics: one wherein political entities behave in the same way as the various other constellations that form in the universe. Instead of understanding them as forming into permanent and fixed movements of the arborescent type tied to an ideological trunk (e.g., scientific socialism), Tampio alerts our attention to the way in which a Deleuzian ontology may only accommodate visions of politics wherein political entities form into temporary and fluid assemblages of the rhizome type (Tampio 2009: 385). Such an ontological vision is not, Tampio is arguing, compatible with a vision of politics made up of competing coherent movements or parties.

According to Tampio’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari, politics, like everything else, occurs on the “smooth space” of a Go-board through the form of competing, “semi-coherent” and flowing political entities, what Tampio calls “protean coalitions” (394, 392). By protean coalitions, I take him to mean to emphasize both the inherent instability of these political entities as well as the creative potential that such transience brings with it. However, what I find perplexing in the connection Tampio draws here is his assertion that protean coalitions “articulate and enact the ideas of liberty and equality” (394). Given what I believe to be his accurate depiction of Deleuzian ontology, how is Tampio then able to marshal the concept of “assemblage” for an explicitly “leftist” political purpose? Is it correct to assume that the ideals of equality and liberty are capable of holding a protean coalition together? Tampio argues that they are, and they do this, he claims, through the form of an “abstract machine.” Let us then return to Deleuze and Guattari to examine this concept.

Deleuze and Guattari tell us that Go pieces are in fact elements of a “machine assemblage.” There is something that holds these pieces and their various constellations together; this “something” is the “abstract machine” of the Go-board. What happens on the board –the
constellations that emerge and ultimately determine whether one wins or loses the game—is completely unpredictable. While there are certain rules in Go—one cannot move pieces once placed on the board, though pieces can be removed from the board if encircled by one’s opponent’s pieces—there is no set pattern for winning. One must continuously react to the constellations that form as each player places their pieces one-by-one on the board. For this reason, Deleuze and Guattari understand the game of Go as pure strategy—what one does in each move is always determined by the shifting constellation of pieces on the board at any given moment. The only thing holding these shifting constellations together is the board itself (and the few rules that govern it).

As they tell us in the fifth plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, an abstract machine is “pure Matter-Function—a diagram dependent on the forms and substances, expressions and contents it will distribute” (141). While an abstract machine can “diagram” or “map” formations across or within it, it cannot predetermine them. In this sense, they tell us that it is not an “infrastructure that is determining in the last instance, nor a transcendentlal Idea that is determining in the supreme instance” (142). The metaphor of the Go game is helpful here. While the Go-board does map different constellations, it cannot predict them, nor can it decide which constellations will win. It simply provides the diagram of these constellations, from which one may decide on successive moves and then tally the final scores.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that an abstract machine plays a “piloting role” insofar as it “functions to…construct” a new reality—a “real that is yet to come”—instead of “representing” the real (142). Given everything else they have said, it seems “to pilot” in this context must mean to “test” as opposed to “steer.” The “piloting role” would therefore be one of identifying and testing new constructions of the real, as opposed to controlling or steering their construction. The
abstract machine is therefore not necessarily constructing or steering new realities; instead, it is
functioning to make possible or open up the possibility of the construction of new realities. Every
new piece on the Go board brings with it a new constellation, a new “real.” The abstract machine
itself does not represent that particular vision of the real, it simply provides the canvas on which
new possibilities of the real may unfold. Without the abstract machine, the assemblages would
not form. And yet, this machine is incapable of determining the form, content, path, or direction
of its various constellations.

When utilizing the concept of the “abstract machine,” Tampio immediately goes to the
other sense of the verb to pilot. He tells us that left assemblages “are steered by a plurality of
abstract machines” (Tampio 2009: 394) (emphasis added). This usage is already confusing
insofar as he also tells us, “the left” is “an abstract machine” (Tampio 2009: 393). So, is the left a
singular abstract machine, or is the left made up of a plurality of left assemblages that are each
steered by one or more abstract machines (plural)? It seems that whereas Laclau and Mouffe may
describe a singular Left assemblage–keeping in mind of course that “assemblage” does not quite
fit here as they instead appeal to the concept of hegemony–only a left conceived as multiple
assemblages (plural) would be consistent with Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology.

However, while Deleuze and Guattari’s commitment to a vision of politics that unfolds in
the form of coalitional assemblages is unequivocal, their commitment to defining the direction,
even a left direction, of these assemblages is far more circumspect. Tampio, however, is at pains
to develop a Deleuzian vision of left coalition politics. For this reason, a commitment to equality
and liberty–even refashioned notions of equality and liberty–must, for him, operate as the
cementing force behind either the left conceived as an assemblage or behind each individual left
assemblage. It doesn’t matter if the left is conceived as one or multiple assemblages, precisely
because, according to Tampio, any left protean coalition must be steered by a commitment to activating and enacting the ideals of equality and liberty.

However, like Laclau and Mouffe, Tampio struggles to articulate where such a commitment may originate. While for Luxemburg such commitments originate internally, from within lived struggle, locating this space of awakening is more difficult for Tampio. While he contends that there is “no guarantee” that left assemblages will “fit together in their ideals, aims, strategies, and tactics,” they are nonetheless cemented in their commitment to equality and liberty (Tampio 2009: 394). Throughout the article, Tampio moves back and forth between the potential stability and inevitable instability of these core ideals. The ambiguity here, I believe, results fundamentally from Tampio’s attempt to impose a fixed or directed politics on Deleuzian ontology. As I will demonstrate briefly below, the problem with doing this is that Deleuze and Guattari describe an ontological process and not a construction of reality to which a left politics may be ascribed. While this ontological process (of mapping constellations on the Go-board) will nevertheless result in a form of protean coalition politics, it is not the case that it will necessarily result in a coalition politics that is decidedly “leftist.” While their ontology permits the emergence of what we may consider to be left coalitions in the form of assemblages, I contend that their ontology does not necessarily guarantee or prescribe them.

Politics, for Deleuze and Guattari, is about diagraming striated social formations, not programming equality and liberty (DG 1987: 161). By mapping the different social formations (power relations), they argue that one is then able to free up potential “lines of flight” for oppositional “minoritarian becomings” (161)–subjugated groups that form to contest arrangements of power. Think here again of the Go game. Politics is about diagramming constellations so that one may map her next move, but it is not about prescribing what that next
move will be. The Go-board, for instance, does not determine the players’ moves; it only creates the conditions of possibility for unpredictable movement. Similarly, the abstract machine—this diagram of the social formation—holds together multiple political assemblages and functions to create potential lines of flight to resist or tip that very social formation.

As they explain in the ninth plateau, politics takes place on both a molar and a molecular level. The molar, or macropolitical, level attends to divides between different strata in society, or between binary contradictions in the Marxist sense—i.e., between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The molecular, or micropolitical, level attends to multiple and varied contradictions that open up lines of flight that disrupt the binary distinction between molar aggregates (such as between proletariat and bourgeoisie) by “causing a zigzag crack, making it difficult for them to keep their own segments in line” (216). It is these cracks that account for the discursively unstable character of all social identities and categories (the crisis Marxism). Deleuze and Guattari maintain that social movements in society proceed in this way, through cracks and lines of flight that disrupt molar aggregates; and yet, they argue, such disturbances would accomplish nothing if they did not ultimately “return to the molar organizations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes, and parties” (216-217). According to Deleuze and Guattari, politics is an exercise in mapping or diagramming what exists in society. It is only through this process of diagramming, they contend, that one may identify points of resistance. Once one does this, coalitions (as assemblages) will form to disrupt binary distinctions between molar aggregates (for instance, between the Marxist proletariat and bourgeoisie).

In this way, they describe a political ontology, not a politics determined by the striated space of the social. While social structures will present themselves as binary contradictions and must be contested, this happens on a smooth plane of micropolitical disturbances. This is why
they say, “ours is becoming the age of minorities” (469). For them, to make this claim is not equivalent to a call to action in the Marxist sense; it is, instead, an ontological or descriptive claim. While they contend that the presence of multiple minority movements creates the conditions for a “worldwide movement,” they are not outlining a political program to achieve this end.

In this sense, they remain locked into a *descriptive* mode of engagement. While Deleuze and Guattari seem to celebrate the emergence of the age of minorities, they do so not because of their potential to strengthen equality and liberty, but because of their potential to reveal and expose the contours of the social (see 469-471). A concrete left political program is not on offer here; instead, what is on offer is a diagram of the social. So, while Tampio seems to rightly identify the form that left political entities will take according to Deleuze—that of assemblages, resembling protean coalitions—he wrongly, at least in a Deleuze and Guattarian sense, ascribes to these ontological creations a left politics committed to enacting equality and liberty. While their vision of the social makes room for the emergence of left assemblages, it certainly does not prescribe them.

For this reason, it seems that for a more authentic Deleuze and Guattarian account of coalition politics we would perhaps do better to turn to the *Theory and Event* special Maple Spring issue. Along with other theorists interested in attending to notions of undecidability and unpredictability (Rancière, Derrida, Badiou, Zizek, and Butler), Deleuze and Guattari feature as prominent theoretical influences in these conversations. As Al-Saji (2012) argues, using predictions and prescriptions to tell the story of the Quebec student movement “misconstrue its temporality and freeze its becoming.” The unfolding of this coalitional event, she argues, “escapes definitive–complete or final–comprehension” (Ibid). Evoking Deleuze, and certainly
echoing arguments made by Laclau and Mouffe, she argues that the student strike has an “open duration,” which means that “the whole is not given, and that the movement cannot be grasped as a totality” (Ibid). Its past, present, and future, she maintains, are all radically indeterminate and/or incomplete. Following Guattari, Eric Manning (2012) similarly argues that coalition events such as the Maple Spring must “exceed the thinkable.” Here, the political gets reconceived as the “impossible” (Ibid).

While it is certainly true that the movement could not have been grasped in its “totality” at the moment when Al-Saji and Manning were writing (the journal issue came out while the events were still unfolding), certain concrete aspects of the purpose and direction of the movement could have been addressed at that time. One only needs to look at the CLASSE Manifesto itself to answer these kinds of questions. In addition to radically obscuring the concrete politics of the CLASSE coalition (addressed in Part I), such interpretations are limited to a descriptive mode of engagement. This limitation should come as no surprise when we recall that while Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of assemblage may help us to describe or map moments of coalitional activity once they are already in motion, they cannot help us to predict or prescribe them.

As I have demonstrated here, while both Laclau and Mouffe’s and Tampio’s approaches to developing a progressive left coalition politics–coalition as Left hegemony and coalition as left assemblage–adopt a radically unfixed social ontology, they are unequivocal in their investment in developing a left-oriented politics committed to the ideals of equality and liberty. While I applaud the latter political commitment, it unfortunately sits in tension with notions of ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability. The tension produced by these competing aims generates a number of problems for both theories. While both approaches reveal
the clear compatibility between a more fluid social ontology and a notion of politics grounded in shifting and even spontaneous coalitions, neither approach successfully demonstrates how these coalitions may adopt a distinctively left-oriented direction. To understand how a distinctively leftist political awakening toward social justice may occur, we must follow Luxemburg in theorizing from within lived struggle. I turn to such a project in Chapters Three, Four, and Five. What seems to be the more consistent theory of coalition politics emerging out of this commitment to ontological unfixity and radical indeterminacy is something along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of unpredictable assemblage, evident across *Theory and Event’s* 2012 Maple Spring special issue. To outline what such a vision would look like, I turn now to Judith Butler.

**Part III) Obscuring Politics**

In this section I would like to outline two approaches to relieving the tension between unfixity and fixity. Contemporary political theorists influenced by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Michel Foucault and others have looked for this cementing force, I will argue, in either ethics or ontology. What gets obscured through such accounts, I believe, is politics—and by politics I mean both the concrete political goals for which the coalition forms in the first place as well as attention to the arrangements of power that situate and challenge coalitional encounters. To make this argument, I critically examine two dominant articulations of coalition politics within contemporary political theory: what I will call *coalition as spectacle* (Butler 1990 and 2011) and *coalition as precarious community* (Butler 2004, 2009 and 2011).
a) Coalition as Spectacle

Butler’s groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), offers a particularly influential rethinking of coalition outside of leftist teleology. While Butler may indeed see coalition as spectacle as at times compatible with a leftist politics, she states unequivocally that this notion of coalition cannot, indeed must not, be tied to a particular leftist goal (*telos*). Butler’s notion of an “antifoundationalist coalition politics” takes its roots in a critique, following Nietzsche, of the “metaphysics of substance” (Butler 1990: 28). A clear presentation of this critique appears in Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* where he tells us that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (Nietzsche 1998: 25). According to Nietzsche, there is no ontological core—there is no “being” behind the acts that one carries out. Instead, the acts themselves are everything. Butler famously uses this insight to argue, much in the same way, that there is also “no gender identity behind the expressions of gender” (Butler 1990: 34). Instead, she maintains, “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions that are said to be its results’” (34).

In a reworking of Marx that resembles what we saw in both Laclau and Mouffe and Deleuze and Guattari, Butler maintains that neither subjects nor the social world they inhabit are produced by an identifiable economic base. However, and following in the footsteps of thinkers like Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, and Laclau and Mouffe, she does not necessarily do away with the broad causal relationship between ontology and politics. Like Laclau and Mouffe and Deleuze and Guattari, she argues that both mutually reinforce one another. Butler asserts that a linguistic process that is always already a political process determines social life, which in turn shapes politics (45). Like Marx, she maintains that what
exists in the social world is not ontologically innocent; it is produced by something. However, this “something” is not economic modes of production; it is instead, echoing Laclau and Mouffe, linguistic or discursive modes of production—a signifying process that produces subjects and their relations to one another (45).

For this reason, Butler sets out in *Gender Trouble* to trace a “feminist genealogy of the category women” (8). Such a genealogy, she tells us, will investigate the “political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects of* institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (xxxi) (emphasis in original). For Butler, gender is a *process* not an ontological state of being; it is a verb, not a noun. Ontology itself is a political process for Butler. There are no fixed beings that simply exist according to Butler; all beings are in the process of becoming through a discursive (signifying) process (45). For this reason, as “ongoing discursive practices” that require repetitive signifying performances in order to *appear* stable—such as wearing a dress to signify being a woman—Butler argues that categories such as man or woman are forever “open to intervention and resignification” (45). Such interventions occupy the space of the political for Butler, precisely because the very construction of identity (of ontology), according to Butler, is a political process. For this reason, Butler seeks to “make gender trouble” by radically shifting “one’s notion of the possible and the real” (46). It is precisely this kind of ontological trouble that defines Butler’s politics. Through practices such as dressing in drag, one necessarily destabilizes current notions of *real* men and women: in imitating gender through forms of parody—what she calls parodic repetition—drag “*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*” (187). What is being “parodied” here is ontology itself, or the “very notion of an original” (188).
On one level, causing “gender trouble” is a highly individualized mode of political engagement; one can carry out her “politics” by choosing to dress like a man or choosing to engage in certain types of speech acts or behaviors that have been coded as masculine. This limitation has led many to wonder whether Butler’s notion of politics can accommodate forms of collective group action. However, while her notion of gender precludes a feminist politics on behalf of a fixed ontological class such as “women,” Butler does not abandon all forms of group-based politics. In the same way that Deleuze and Guattari desert the notion of class in favor of coalitional assemblages, Butler abandons ontological categories such as “women” in favor of “antifoundationalist” coalitions that leave the content of “women” open to being debated and produced through “dialogic encounters” in which variously positioned women are able to each “articulate separate identities within the framework of an emergent coalition” (20-22). Such a coalition, she tells us, takes on the form of an “unpredictable assemblage of positions” (21). Butler remains critical of “the coalitional theorist” who inadvertently reinsert[s] herself as sovereign of the process by trying to assert an ideal form for coalitional structures in advance” (20) (emphasis added).

Following in the footsteps of Laclau and Mouffe (in certain instances) and Deleuze and Guattari, Butler envisions a notion of coalition politics wherein the coalition is treated as an “open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure” (22). Neither the identities of coalition members nor the “shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage,” Butler maintains (echoing Deleuze and Guattari), can be known “prior to its achievement” (21). This sense of unpredictability, let me be clear, parts ways with the sense of unpredictability found in Luxemburg. Coalescing wage struggles are unpredictable for Luxemburg simply because there is no way to predict when
someone, let alone a group of people, will have the “awakening” that leads them to coalition politics. This awakening cannot be predicted, planned, or imposed from the outside (i.e., from the Communist Party). This unpredictability does not center, however, on the fact of permanently unfixed and unfinished discursive formation for Luxemburg; it centers on coming to consciousness in and through lived activist struggle.

Given the radical openness of coalitions that Butler describes here, it is fair to question what it is, exactly, that brings coalition members together in the space of a coalition. Butler states that her hope for *Gender Trouble* is that it would inspire coalitions “of sexual minorities that will transcend the simple categories of identity” (xxvii-xxviii). In the same way that Butler calls on individuals to make gender trouble through parodic repetition such as dressing in drag, her vision of collective group politics similarly involves elements of performance, parody, and spectacle. The only difference is that instead of individuals acting alone in ways to disrupt the signifying process, in these instances individuals come together and act in groups. Butler is adamant that such coalitions would be made up of individuals each articulating his/her own separate identity. Butler imagines that these individuals simply will come together (echoing Deleuze and Guattari) and once together they will begin the dialogic process of renegotiating and ultimately challenging received norms related to gender, sex, and sexuality through various disruptive acts.

Coalition emerges here as spectacle. The very purpose of the coalition reveals itself in a spectacular performance of gender and sexuality parody. The coalition members are united in a group display of striking or unusual character –i.e., one that parodies their gender and/or sexuality through dressing in drag or other forms of parodic repetition. In this way, the coalition itself –this spectacle of gender benders –causes ontological trouble. It challenges the line between what is real and what is fabricated, between the original and the copy. My use of
“spectacle” here therefore shares something with Debord’s use of this concept in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) insofar as it speaks to an instance of turning what is thought to be real (sex) into “mere representation” (12). In so doing, it accomplishes a kind of “inversion of life” (12), wherein “what has been passed off as authentic life turns out to be merely a life more *authentically spectacular*” (112) (emphasis in original). For Butler, the mere presence of a coalition of sexual minorities will challenge ontological certainties about sex, gender, and sexuality precisely by eluding the dividing line between reality and appearance, thereby “turning the material life” of what it means to be a man/woman “into a universe of speculation” (Debord 1995: 17). Consistent with Butler’s ontological commitments however, the direction (*telos*) of these coalitions is left radically open because the form that their disruption will take is left to be decided by the coalition members in conversation, and in action, with one another.

This radical openness, however, continues to beg the question: What is it, then, that brings these sexual minorities to the space of the coalition in the first place? Do they just randomly find themselves together in these spaces? Do they seek out one another with the intention to “cause gender trouble” together? Do they gravitate to one another because of a shared experience of marginalization? Butler does not adequately answer these questions in *Gender Trouble*. We must therefore turn to her more recent work. Sanford Schram (2013) builds off of the notion of “precarity” that Butler develops in some of her more recent work to outline a version of coalition politics “grounded on diverse people’s shared precarity given their economic

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34 I should note, however, that Debord means to do something very different with this concept. While he uses the notion of “spectacle” to describe, and critique, the state of society, I am using it in the context of Butler’s work to describe what she sees to be the productive function of coalitions of sexual minorities. I also differentiate my use of “spectacle” from Foucault’s in the context of the “spectacle of the scaffold” in *Discipline and Punish*. According to Foucault, the spectacle of torture and the sufferings therein endured was meant to establish truth—the truth of the accused’s guilt and the truth of sovereign power. The only way to do this was through “a spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess” (Foucault 1995: 49). The spectacle of torture therefore reconstituted sovereign power by “manifesting it at its most spectacular” (49). In this way, the function of spectacle here seems to be to establish truth not to parody it.
marginality” (Schram 2013).\textsuperscript{35} It is this shared sense of precarity, Schram argues, that brought people together in the Occupy movement. To make this argument, Schram turns to Butler ‘s (2011) “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street.”\textsuperscript{36} We find in this short piece two different ways of approaching the question of what it is that brings people together in the space of coalition: an ethical explanation (community), which I will turn to shortly; and an ontological explanation (spectacle).

Working within the paradigm of coalition as spectacle, Butler outlines a notion of coalition as a form of representation. Here she focuses less on why coalition members come together and more on what is achieved through the coalition’s existence. As we saw in Gender Trouble (and we did in Deleuze and Guattari), there is a sense in Butler that coalitional assemblages simply will form; they are an ontological certainty. Because many people living in the world today experience a similar sense of vulnerability or precariousness in relation to the market forces of global capitalism, it is inevitable that these groups will come together. This is precisely what happened in the Occupy movement, argues Schram (2013). Many of the articles on the Maple Spring similarly took for granted the inevitability of the coalition’s formation. Instead of analyzing the politics of why the coalition came together, they focused on the unpredictability of its occurrence. The fact of these groups coming together is a given for Schram, Butler, and many of the authors writing in Theory and Event’s Maple Spring supplement issue: a shared sense of precarity will eventually compel diverse groups to come together to name and contest this vulnerability. While these thinkers seem to share something in common with Luxemburg, the fact of a coalition’s inevitability and simultaneous

\textsuperscript{35} Butler first develops this notion in Precarious Life (2004). She elaborates on it in Frames of War (2009).

unpredictability is rooted here in a discursive understanding of the social, not, I contend, in an appreciation of the process of coming to consciousness in and through lived struggle. It is the “naming” of this precarity that seems to be most important to Butler. Even the phrase she chooses, “bodies in alliance,” speaks to their ontological inevitability: there is something about these bodies that will necessarily bring them together in alliance. They exist in alliance; they do not struggle toward forming alliances. Consistent with her aversion to “theorizing” coalition politics, Butler resists being prescriptive; instead, she names an ontological phenomenon—the emergence of various mass demonstrations such as those characteristic of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement—as instances of collective resistance in the form of “bodies in alliance” (Butler 2011). As we have seen in Luxemburg, however, this aversion to theorizing coalition is unnecessary, especially if we reconceive theorizing outside of Lenin’s scientific socialism and within lived struggle.

The “politics” in Butler’s understanding of coalition—what makes these “bodies in alliance” political coalitions or collectives—is rooted again in spectacle. By occupying public space, these bodies disrupt a social, political, economic, legal, and cultural imaginary that refuses their presence. By coalescing in public they demand a recalibration of public space and who has a right to it. As Butler argues (echoing Rancière 2004), the collective public appearance of precarious bodies in alliance has the “performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law, and that can never be fully codified into law” (Butler 2011). Such an action, she tells us, “reconfigures what will be public, and what will be the space of politics” (Ibid). By appearing in public then, as bodies in alliance, these groups represent a social group that has not been given access to the public sphere and in this way does not yet exist. By representing this group they are exercising a right that they do not yet have. “Taking over the
public," Manning tells us in his account of the Maple Spring protests, “is a tactic that reminds us that the political is active everywhere a group-subject takes hold, and that this politics, the politics of the emergent collective, is the one where new potentials for collective living best take form” (Manning 2012). Evoking Butler, Manning and others (see Barney 2012) argue that the very presence of the Maple Spring protestors caused a kind of ontological trouble.

Such bodies exist in public as the “precariat” despite the fact that their very condition as precarious lives is premised on their marginalization and vulnerability.

Simply put, the bodies on the street redeploy the space of appearance in order to contest and negate the existing forms of political legitimacy […] These are subjugated and empowered actors who seek to wrest legitimacy from an existing state apparatus that depends upon the public space of appearance for its theatrical self-constitution. In wrestling that power, a new space is created, a new “between” of bodies, as it were, that lays claim to existing space through the action of a new alliance, and those bodies are seized and animated by those existing spaces in the very acts by which they reclaim and resignify their meanings. (Butler 2011)

In the same way that a woman dressing as a man disrupts the signifying process that produces sex and gender, Occupy participants are behaving as bodies that “count” in a “distribution of the sensible” wherein they have not yet been recognized or permitted to exist, thereby calling into question the entire signifying process that partitions bodies as the counted and uncounted.37 In this way, they perform a certain type of ontological disturbance. By taking over public spaces such as town squares and streets and existing, literally living and sleeping, in these spaces, these bodies–taken as a collective–parody an already existing ontology of which bodies count. As Schram has put it, Occupy participants “occupy precarity” by “spitting back their marginalization in the face of those who have marginalized them” (Schram 2013). As Butler has put it, it is not simply about “entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology” itself that allows for “a critical opening up of questions” such as “What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” (Butler 2004: 33).

For Butler, representation itself is an important mode of political resistance. The goal of the coalition for her is none other than to form, because by forming it is already engaging in performative disruption. The question of what brings a coalition together is not the interesting one for Butler. These groups simply will form; what is interesting for Butler, and also what clearly informs accounts of the Maple Spring, is what kind of trouble their unpredictable presence may cause.

Through coalition as spectacle, Butler envisions a radically individualized mode of collective politics wherein individuals will find themselves in alliances with other bodies who will either each perform their own type of ontological trouble in unison (coalitions of gender benders) or whose collective presence simply will disrupt the signifying processes that create and reinforce their absence (coalitions of precariat groups in the form of “bodies in alliance”). In both instances, the coalition emerges as spectacle. In the case of coalitions of sexual minorities, the spectacle consists in the gender trouble it performs through unified acts of parodic repetition. In the case of “bodies in alliance,” the spectacle consists in their very presence within public spaces from which they have been barred. According to Butler, in both instances the coalitions cannot be predicted, programmed, or planned in advance. Such coalitions cannot even have concrete goals or directions. They are ontological inevitabilities, not political constructions. They are not directed toward a specified end or telos, even if their very presence may have “political” effects. Because ontology—what exists in the world—for Butler is understood as a discursive and therefore political process, disruptive forms of parodic repetition (drag) or defiant presence (precariat bodies in alliance in the street) are also political acts. Politics here gets reduced to ontological disruption.
b) Coalition as Precarious Community

While coalition as spectacle relies on radically *individual* (particularly in Butler’s notion of coalitions of sexual minorities) forms of collective politics, coalition as precarious community, I will now argue, relies on radically *universal* forms of collective politics. Built on an ontology of *process* in which all categories are in the process of discursive becoming, in “coalition as spectacle” politics takes the form of ontological disruption and can be carried out by individuals on their own or individuals acting together. By refusing a clear left-oriented goal or *telos*, Butler therefore successfully envisions a form of politics that remains consistent with her prior ontological commitments. As I will argue below, another way around the tension that plagues Laclau and Mouffe and Tampio is also found in Butler’s recent work, emerging in the notion of coalition as precarious community. Except here an ontology of process (emphasizing undecidability and difference) is replaced by a flattened ontology of shared vulnerability (emphasizing decisive sameness) that elicits an ethical orientation toward precarious community. A political ontology is replaced here by an ethical ontology. Politics here gets eclipsed by a shared ethical commitment, that is itself rooted in a shared ontological vulnerability.

When Butler talks about politics in the form of, what I am calling, coalition as spectacle, she purposefully uses the word coalition. Her choice of “community” in this second instance should therefore not go unnoticed. Because of the emphasis on a shared ontology, politics here comes to resemble a particular ethical comportment that is capable of cementing a sense of “community” committed to left-oriented political goals. As recent authors have noted, however, this move seems particularly odd given Butler’s strong “aversion to the collective” and to “proposing a universal theory of oppression” in earlier works such as *Gender Trouble* (Watson 2012). Her turn in later work toward developing an all-inclusive ethical community is therefore
at least noteworthy. I am reading it here as a second, though incongruous with Butler’s first, attempt to relieve the tension between ontological unfixity and political fixity. Whereas coalition as spectacle evades the tension between ontological unfixity and political fixity by resisting a fixed (left-oriented) political direction, coalition as precarious community works on this tension from the other end: that is, it firms up an ontology of shared vulnerability (ontological fixity) that makes possible a left-oriented ethics (political fixity).

In texts such as Precarious Life (2004), Frames of War (2009), and “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street” (2011), instead of outlining a leftist coalition politics built around the experience of a particular social group, such as the proletariat, Butler expands the very notion of class to include all people. As Butler states, a “different social ontology” has emerged wherein a “shared condition of precarity…situates our political lives” (Butler 2011) (emphasis added). When Butler says “our” here she is using it very broadly; as she argued in both Precarious Life and Frames of War, all people share a sense of precariousness. All lives, she tells us, “are by definition precarious” because they can be “expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed” (Butler 2009: 25).38 There is “no thinking of life,” she continues, “that is not precarious” (25). For Butler, precariousness is an ontological condition that we all share as social creatures whose lives are always in the hands of the other (Butler 2009: 14 and 2004: 27). Butler emphasizes a universal condition wherein we will encounter, and even find ourselves at the mercy of, others. For this reason, she asserts: “It is not that we are born and then later become precarious, but rather that precariousness is coextensive with birth itself” (14).

38 She first makes this argument in Precarious Life. See Butler (2004: 28-29).
What Butler is saying here must be situated within the context of the ethical turn among contemporary theorists informed, broadly speaking, by postmodern thought (see Baker 1995 and Voloshin 1998). This turn to ethics can be traced across the work of a variety of thinkers, including Foucault, Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, and Luce Irigaray. Butler develops this notion of shared precariousness from Levinas’ notion of “the face as the extreme precariousness of the other” (Levinas quoted in Butler 2004: 134). To “respond to the face” of an “other”—that is, to someone other than oneself—Butler argues, also “means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself” (Butler 2004: 14). It is the very presence of others, she maintains, that awakens us to our own vulnerability and precariousness. This ethical orientation toward the other, and specifically

39 Butler’s ethical turn to thinkers such as Levinas is, I believe, emblematic of a wider trend in contemporary political theory. While not all authors emphasize precariousness as the basis of a shared ethical comportment to the other, many do seem to be interested in claiming that we do share, or at least ought to share, a common ethical disposition to one another. Within the context of discussions of coalition see Coles 1996 and 2001, Young 1997, and Cornell 1995a and 2005.


42 See Levinas: Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (1969); Humanism of the Other (1972), Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence (1974), Ethics and Infinity (1985); Face to Face with Levinas (1986); Outside the Subject (1987); The Levinas Reader (1989); “Peace and Proximity” in Basic Philosophical Writings (1996); and Alterity and Transcendence (1999).


44 See Irigaray: This Sex Which Is Not One (1985); Speculum of the Other Woman (1985); and An Ethics of Sexual Difference (1993).
the precariousness of the other and of our self in relation to this alterity, she argues, alerts us to
the precariousness of all life, precisely because all life (ontology itself) has been fundamentally
reoriented toward alterity (or otherness).

As Butler argues, a reorientation toward alterity challenges the notion of a stable and
autonomous self. Once we accept that all “selves” are precarious insofar as they sit in relation to
an exterior, to an “other,” we begin to understand how precariousness itself is a kind of shared
ontological condition for Butler. As she argues, we are born precarious because of this
fundamental alterity. Levinas’ reorientation of discussions toward “the other” and toward the
possibility of a new kind of ethics that is still rooted in the notion of ‘right conduct’—but now
from a perspective of radical alterity, or a reorientation of the self toward the other—has
profoundly shaped the thinking of a number of contemporary theorists.45

Butler links this “more or less existential conception” of precariousness to a “more
specifically political notion” of precarity (Butler 2009: 3), or “that politically induced condition”
of heightened suffering for particular marginalized and poor communities (25). Whereas all
beings are equally precarious, Butler explains that beings experience different levels of precarity.
For Butler, the fact of uneven exposure to precarity ought to concern us ethically and politically.
However, what enables us to enter into a Leftist46 politics that would address uneven precarity,
according to Butler, is the fact of universal precariousness. In this way, political and ethical (she
uses these words interchangeably) responsibilities for Butler are rooted in a shared ontology.

“From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of
violence we have suffered,” she asks, “if not from an apprehension of a common human

45 As I will argue in Chapter Three, in addition to Butler’s notion of coalition as precarious community, Coles
(1996) understanding of coalition as ethical encounter is also clearly shaped by this notion of alterity.

46 I use the capital “L” purposefully here to align her project with a Leftist movement politics similar to what Laclau
and Mouffe attempted to do.
vulnerability?” (Butler 2004: 30) For Butler, a certain ethics (or politics) is indeed “implied” by “staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself” (29).

This insight, she suggests, may lead us to a “normative reorientation of politics” (28). An ontology of universal shared vulnerability to the forces of the global marketplace therefore encourages a particular ethical orientation that, she argues, enables people to see themselves as part of a precarious community committed to challenging precarity. While the precarity of life—the _uneven_ distribution of precariousness—“imposes an obligation upon us,” what enables us to meet this obligation according to Butler is the fact of a shared precariousness that, in its evenness and universality, will somehow encourage a particular ethical orientation toward those particular instances of uneven precarity of some. While nothing can be done about universal precariousness in relation to a shared condition of alterity (we all share this condition in equal amounts), this shared sense of vulnerability, Butler is arguing, will compel us to condemn the uneven precarity of the most vulnerable. Indeed, it is on the “generalizability” of the condition of precariousness of all, she tells us, that one may “object to the differential allocation of precariousness and grievability” (precarity) for some (Butler 2009: 22). This shared sense of vulnerability serves as the “basis for a new kind of community” (Watson 2012).

I want to pause over this notion of community. I contend that Butler uses the notion of _community_ as the basis for a form of _coalition_ politics. Faith in the possibility of an ethic oriented toward an ontological vision of precarious community—a realization that all lives are vulnerable—enables her to envision a form of coalition politics committed to tackling the fact of precarity, or the uneven precariousness of certain lives. As she states in the introduction to _Frames of War_, “this work seeks to reorient politics on the Left toward a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange” (Butler 2009: 28). While
Butler claims here that it is in fact precarity that will form the “basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit, and distribute precarity for the purpose of profit and territorial defense” (emphasis added), I contend that it is not actually precarity that is at the base of such alliances. While these coalitions will presumably be committed to opposing state violence and its capacity to produce and distribute uneven levels of precarity, what forms the basis for such alliances, I argue, is in fact a shared condition of precariousness. While people should care about the precarity of the most vulnerable, what enables or compels them to actually do so, according to Butler, is not an automatic sympathy to the uneven precarity of the most vulnerable, but instead a universal and shared experience of precariousness.

Coalition emerges here as a kind of ethical orientation, or ethical ontology—an ethical way of being; in this process, politics get obscured by ethical commitments rooted in universally shared precariousness. Uneven precarity is the problem coalitions will form to contest; what ensures their emergence is a “recognition of [the] shared precariousness” of all (Butler 2009: 28), which forms the basis for a universal ethical community. The concept of class is therefore replaced by that of global community rooted not in a political understanding of the uneven forces of market capitalism but in an ethical understanding of the undiscriminating precariousness of all lives in relation to the fact of alterity. In this way, unlike Laclau and Mouffe and Tampio, Butler again (though incongruous with her first vision of coalition) successfully envisions a Leftist coalition politics that remains consistent with her ontological vision. She accomplishes this coherence in this second instance by appealing to a flattened ontology of sameness—the fact of precariousness for all through the ethical condition of alterity—that she asserts, necessarily generates a particular ethical, which is now also a political, orientation toward precarity—the fact
of heightened vulnerability for some. Such an understanding, however, is unable to attend to the politics—the arrangements of power that situate all self/other encounters—that may thwart such community efforts. This optimistic version of Leftist coalition politics is therefore rooted in radical universal collectivity centered on a notion of politics that is reduced to ethical ontology.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen in the final section of the chapter, while Butler succeeds in relieving the tension that emerged for both Laclau and Mouffe and Tampio between ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability, on the one hand, and political fixity, on the other, the politics of coalition becomes obscured in the process. Butler’s two incongruous accounts of coalition work on the tension from opposite ends. *Coalition as spectacle* offers a vision of coalition politics that is as unstable and undecidable as its vision of the social; however, the politics of coalition becomes obscured here by a narrow focus on ontological disruption. *Coalition as precarious community*, on the other hand, offers a vision of coalition politics oriented around a shared vulnerability that forms the basis for an expansive and naively optimistic notion of coalition as ethical community; however, the politics of coalition is again obscured here, this time by an ethical ontology.

It therefore seems clear at this point that the strength in notions of *coalition as Left hegemony* and *coalition as left assemblage* inheres precisely in their expressly and overtly political nature. For Laclau and Mouffe and Tampio, and certainly echoed across portions of the empirically focused literature addressed in Part I, coalition is conceived as a necessary political, as opposed to ontological or ethical, construct. There is nothing inherent to different subjugated groups, Laclau and Mouffe tell us, that ensures their coming together. The formation of
coalitions of this sort is not guaranteed for Laclau and Mouffe. Such formations are struggled for; for this reason they are political.

I find myself in agreement with Laclau and Mouffe on this point, and indeed the women of color feminists I will turn to in the subsequent chapter further substantiate this claim. It is this same sense of inevitability, I believe, that also motivates Luxemburg’s understanding of coalescing wage struggles. However, as I have argued here, what strikes me as problematic about Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of coalition as hegemonic articulation is the rigid ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability or indeterminacy on which it rests. If subjects are radically unstable and indeterminate in the way that Laclau and Mouffe insist they are, there is nothing to explain why a Left hegemony will form in the first place. The chance of this happening, it would seem, must also remain radically uncertain. It is because of this, I believe, that they insist on turning to an external democratic discourse. While Laclau and Mouffe (and Deleuze and Guattari) seem to follow Luxemburg on these points of inevitability and unpredictability, they ignore the most sophisticated component of her theory of coalescing wage struggles: which is, of course, that such coalitions emerge out of internal struggle and must therefore be theorized from the ground up. What is more, the problem with relying on an external democratic discourse, or a commitment to liberty and equality, is that there is absolutely nothing to guarantee that people will subscribe to these values. This focus on an external democratic discourse obscures the arrangements of power—the politics—that may prevent people from subscribing to equality and liberty in the first place.

As I will argue in Chapters Three and Four, instead of looking to an external democratic discourse, coalition politics, much in the way Luxemburg seemed to be suggesting, must develop from the inside-out. While Laclau and Mouffe give us much to work with here—by insisting that
there is an important and even causal link between social ontology and politics—their rigid
depiction of ontological unfixity and indeterminacy actually stands in the way of a clear left-
oriented coalition politics. Though Tampio’s vision of coalition as left assemblage is similarly
rooted in a clear left-oriented coalition politics, this political commitment ultimately also sits in
tension with the Deleuze and Guattarian framework on which it rests. While I nevertheless find
myself sympathetic with his project, it seems his vision of ontological complexity and fluidity
would benefit from a basis rooted in an examination of activists and scholars engaged in political
movement. It is precisely such a rethinking that, I believe, contemporary feminist theory may
offer.

Even a cursory glance at two recent political theory articles with “coalition” appearing in
the title points to a number of important critiques and insights that come out of contemporary
feminist theory. By turning to examples of feminist coalition politics, Sylvia Walby (2001)
draws attention to the limitations of envisioning progressive collective politics through the notion
of “community,” as opposed to coalition, thereby raising important challenges to theorizing
coalition only on ethical, as opposed to political, grounds. Elaine Stavro (2007) engages and
critiques many of the thinkers I have introduced here, ultimately arguing that these accounts fail
to give us a tenable theory of feminist coalition politics. By turning to Simone de Beauvoir to
help her to theorize coalition, Stavro attempts to develop a notion of coalition that balances
ethical, ontological, and political considerations. Aware of the power that a common experience
of oppression can engender in similarly “situated” women, Stavro is adamant that what enables,
supports, and sustains feminist coalition politics is a common political commitment or a shared
political goal (Stavro 2007: 45-455, 457, 458). Such a commitment, she maintains, does not
eclipse ethical commitments to working with differently situated women; instead, these two
commitments are inextricably linked (459). As I will demonstrate next, Stavro is not alone in attempting to bring together ethics and politics; such an endeavor has become a priority of many contemporary feminists.

By sitting with feminist theorists in the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I seek to bring to light new and promising ways to rethink the tensions I have outlined here. In addition to theorizing “coalition” as an answer to the post-Marxist politics challenge (i.e. replacing the category of class with that of coalition), feminist scholarship on this topic (beyond Butler), I will argue, alerts us to the variety of ways in which political theorists may think with and through the concept of coalition. The unique understanding of coalition emerging out of contemporary feminist scholarship offers promising avenues for revisiting the variety of problematics I have outlined here. Most fundamentally, it helps us to develop a post-Marxist left-oriented coalition politics that effectively avoids the ontological and ethical traps that have troubled other contemporary scholars. It does this, I will argue in Chapter Three, by advocating a notion of politico-ethical coalition politics, which is made possible, I argue in Chapter Four, by a prior coalitional understanding of both ontology (coalitional identity) and epistemology (coalitional consciousness), as well as, I argue in Chapter Five, the unique mode of coalitional scholarship that informs women of color feminist theory.
Chapter 3

Women of Color Feminism and Politico-Ethical Coalition Politics

In this chapter I turn to feminist theory in order to develop an alternative theory of coalition that avoids the obfuscation of politics characteristic of certain contemporary approaches to coalition, while still leaving ample room for notions of complexity and fluidity. By turning to the work of women of color feminism, I develop a notion of coalition as *politico-ethical encounter*. As I will argue below, activist social justice coalition politics is best thought of as a potentially hostile and dangerous *encounter* with difference—for some it wouldn’t be a stretch to call it a sort of collision of differences. As such, these encounters are best theorized as *political*, and by this I mean to emphasize that they are actively chosen for the sake of a political commitment to undermining oppression in all its forms and acutely attentive to the arrangements of power that situate such encounters. While this political commitment necessarily engenders a particular *ethical comportment*—or way of treating one another within the space of coalition—the coalitions themselves are unequivocally political.

The theory of coalition politics I develop here is fundamentally rooted in the work of women of color feminism (primarily from the 1980s). I use Romand Coles (1996) to help frame my discussion because he is the only contemporary political theorist to seriously engage women of color feminism in order to theorize the possibilities and challenges of activist coalition politics. In order to outline what he perceives to be the real challenge of post-Marxist coalition politics, Coles turns to Bernice Johnson Reagon, a woman of color singer-songwriter, activist, and scholar.

In her now famous speech, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” Reagon (1983) vividly captures the real challenge of engaging in coalition politics with diverse subjugated
groups. Over the past few decades, Reagon’s speech has been used to substantiate claims regarding the difficulty and even “danger” of progressive coalition politics among diverse marginalized groups. Indeed, a handful of articles that appeared as hits in my “coalition” word searches across popular political theory journals did so simply because they cited this essay, even if this was the only mention of “coalition” in the article. However, almost all of the scholars citing Reagon are feminist theorists.¹ Coles therefore stands out as an exception at least among mainstream political theorists, both for turning to Reagon and for his thorough engagement with her work.

Coles uses Reagon’s critical insights on the difficulty of coalition politics in a moment characterized by difference and diversity to challenge Laclau and Mouffe’s theorization of coalition politics as rooted in a shared commitment to equality and liberty. Through this encounter with Reagon, Coles presents perhaps the most thoroughgoing practical challenge to post-Marxist left-oriented collective politics to date, what I will call Reagon’s challenge. I outline Reagon’s challenge in Part I of the chapter. With this move, Coles demonstrates the value of women of color feminism to contemporary discussions on activist coalition politics. In this way, Coles’ work is truly on the cutting edge of where these conversations are and ought to be going. However, in his next move, Coles attempts to chart a possible way out of Reagon’s challenge by reading into Reagon a neo-Nietzschean interpretation of coalition as ethical encounter. It is this latter move that I set out to examine as I develop an alternative theoretical framework for post-Marxist left-oriented collective politics.

In turning to a different tradition of political thought, and one beginning with women of color activists and scholars writing and publishing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this chapter

continues in the mode of scholarly activism initiated in the Introduction by displacing dominant white, largely male, and largely Euro-American theories of coalition in favor of activist feminist theoretical perspectives. Reinvigorating Luxemburg, I argue that turning to activists such as Reagon, who theorize out of lived experience and struggle, will guide us toward more promising and rigorous theorizations of social justice activist coalition politics. As I will demonstrate here and in the two chapters that follow, failing to engage this broader feminist literature presents a missed opportunity for contemporary political theory.

**Part I) Reagon’s Challenge**

The major limitation of progressive approaches to coalition politics such as Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985), according to Coles, is the failure to recognize what I call Reagon’s challenge—or the fact that even progressive coalition politics is a vexed affair, characterized by contentious disagreement and potentially life-threatening alliances across hostile differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. Such alliances are “life-threatening” for Reagon (and indeed for many women of color) both because of the physical violence they may face when teaming up with groups (such as Black men or white women) who may be invested in their continued subjugation, and because doing coalition work requires one to remain open to existential transformation where one may actually lose a sense of herself for the sake of the cause at hand. Coles (1996) uses Reagon’s challenge to critique Laclau and Mouffe’s assumption that a shared commitment to equality and liberty will be enough to unite potentially hostile groups. Building from Reagon, Coles argues that equality and liberty alone will not be enough to unite coalition members; these ideals, he argues, must be accompanied by a third ideal, what he calls “receptive generosity.”
In “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” Reagon presents one of the most well-cited challenges to progressive coalition politics. Speaking to a women-only crowd at the West Coast Women’s Music Festival in Yosemite in 1981, Reagon vividly outlines the ways in which this warm and comforting site of celebration and music for her and many other women who do not fit the white and/or lesbian definition of “women” shaping the event, is instead a site of coalition politics, with all of the hope and discomfort it brings with it. Such sites—sites that pretend to be “homes” or “communities” but are really coalitions—she tells the crowd in the first few lines of her speech, are disorienting for women who don’t fit the prescribed definition of “women.” Employing the geographically apt metaphor of altitude sickness, Reagon tells them that being in such unfamiliar spaces, spaces for which she lacks the appropriate “environmental conditioning” as a woman who doesn’t fit the norm of what “woman” means in this context, leaves her and others “staggering around,” unable to think straight (Reagon 1983: 343). This experience of confusion, panic, and disorientation, she tells them, is exactly what that “workshop” is all about. The experience she has just described is the experience of “really doing coalition work,” an experience marked by the immanent feeling that you may “keel over any minute and die” (343). “Most of the time,” she tells them, “you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing” (343).

Sites of coalition, Reagon maintains, are not safe spaces; they are not homes that bring warmth and comfort. One does not go into coalition politics, she tells them, because she “just like[s] it”; “the only reason,” she continues, “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” (343-344). This is the double-edged sword of coalition work: while coalescing with

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other subjugated groups fighting for social justice is indeed the only way for oppressed peoples to survive in a post-Marxist landscape, entering into coalitions with these other groups may be life-threatening.

While it is unlikely that the women’s music festival would have erupted in violent fights resulting in fatalities, Reagon’s appeal to the visceral danger of coalitional work no doubt struck a chord with at least some of the women listening. The real danger in women of color feminists attempting to form coalitions with white women or Black men are well documented in women of color scholarship. For women of color in particular, teaming up with either Black men to fight racism or white women to fight sexism could very well prove to be dangerous. It is worth recalling that Reagon’s political consciousness formed during the civil rights era in which sit-ins, freedom riding, and other potentially dangerous forms of protest were a regular part of her activist experience. It is also worth noting that violence at the hands of Black men was also a very real possibility for women of color feminists working in coalition with other civil rights groups. So when she says that one knows she is doing coalition work when she feels like she could die any minute, it is not just hyperbole; she is speaking from an authentic experience of fear of personal physical/bodily harm within the space of coalition. In addition to the fear of working with others who may be invested in your continued subjugation, working in coalition can also be a dangerous affair for fear of such coalitions failing. As Reagon makes clear throughout the speech, their survival—as poor, or lower income, women of color—very much depends on forming successful coalitions to fight all forms of oppression and domination.

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Feelings of fear and disorientation coupled with the danger that is inherent to coalition politics profoundly shape Reagon’s understanding of coalition as a uniquely political space. The fact of difference, disagreement, and decisive action as written into her definition of coalition from the outset is a great theoretical insight of Reagon’s work. Because coalitions are made up of multiple and differently subjugated groups, these are inherent political spaces characterized by both decision action—a political commitment to undermining oppression compels one to choose to be a part of the coalition—as well as conflict and disagreement regarding the best course of action for the coalition. While it may be the case that all subjugated groups share a common existence as oppressed people, this commonality alone does not bring them together (in the way Butler seemed to suggest about a shared sense of vulnerability). What brings them together in a coalition, I will go on to demonstrate, is a chosen political commitment, and even with this shared political commitment, such encounters are dangerous.4

Using some of the more provocative phrases from Reagon’s essay, Coles argues that coalition politics is an extremely difficult and indeed dangerous undertaking that requires the safety of an external home to which members may retreat when things get particularly heated. Given such a setting, Coles questions whether Laclau and Mouffe’s ideals of equality and liberty are enough to unite people across treacherous divides. He asks, “does their construal of equality and liberty provide an ethical standpoint sufficient for the coalition politics they seek to embrace” (Coles 1996: 379)? Given Laclau and Mouffe’s commitment to envisioning a radical and plural democracy characterized by the coming together of diverse people in the kinds of uncomfortable alliances that Reagon speaks of, Coles wonders how we are to “imagine this gathering, this community of impossibility, these relations between selves and others” (379).

4 Such a position is in line with the empirically focused political theory scholarship addressed in the conclusion of Chapter Two. See: Hanchard (2010), Diedrich (2007), Kaplan (1997), Riggle (2003), Rimmerman (2002), Di Chiro (2008), and Segura and Bejarano (2004).
What, he asks, “ought to animate these exchanges and movements” (379)? The ideals of equality and liberty alone, Coles worries, will not be enough to support and sustain such encounters. What is missing from Laclau and Mouffé, he suggests, is a promising ethical account of how progressive coalition politics will unfold (380). Coles believes he can find the beginning of such an account in Reagon’s speech, and that he may bring this account to its full potential through an idiosyncratic reading of Nietzsche.

Part II) Misreading Reagon’s Solution as Receptive Generosity

Coles’ interpretation of Reagon’s “principles of coalition,” I argue in the first part of this section, locates in Reagon an ethical solution to the challenge of coalition politics: that is, for left-oriented coalition politics to work, Coles argues, the political ideals of equality and liberty must sit second seat to the ethical ideal of receptive generosity. In the second and third parts of this section, I proceed to challenge this interpretation of Reagon. Specifically, I take issue with Coles’ understanding of Reagon’s “principles of coalition” as ethical principles. I argue instead that these principles must be understood as explicitly political. I do this by analyzing two moves in particular: the distinction Reagon draws between homes and coalition, and the way in which Reagon conceives of giving within the space of coalition. While these principles take on an ethical guise when self-reflexively applied to the coalition itself, they are unequivocally political insofar as they are fundamentally rooted in a political commitment to stand against oppression.

a) Coles’ Reading: Reagon’s Ethical Solution

Coles argues that Reagon’s position shares with Laclau and Mouffé’s a strong sense that subjugated peoples need each other in order to survive. Similarly, according to Coles, she also
shares an “open-ended and expansive” understanding of the ideals of liberty and equality (Coles 1996: 377). What fundamentally differentiates Reagon’s text from Laclau and Mouffe’s, argues Coles, is the way in which these ideals (of equality and liberty) are supplemented by a particular ethics in Reagon. The issue for Reagon, he tells us, is “clearly deeper and higher than mere survival” (377). Quoting Reagon, he claims:

Rather, it is a question of “turning the century with our principles intact” (1983, 363). “The thing that must survive you is…the principles that are the basis of your practice” (p. 366). Most important to the possibility and event of coalition politics, as well as the most important outcome of it, is an ethical survival that exceeds mere survival. My contention is that the principles to which Reagon refers are absolutely vital both in drawing her in the direction of encountering others as other and in sustaining her commitments to this direction even in the midst of great difficulties and dangers. (Coles 1996: 377)

The principles she speaks of, according to Coles, are ethical principles insofar as they describe how people ought to treat one another within the space of coalition (i.e., how “to encounter others as other”). In this sense, here ethics describes a particular comportment that ought to guide coalitional encounters. It is these principles of comportment that must survive, according to Coles’ interpretation of Reagon, and this survival is itself an ethical survival.

Coles interprets this ethic as one of “receptive generosity,” and he argues that within Reagon’s text it successfully “refigures” the meanings of the principles of equality and liberty such that “they take a greater turn toward otherness” (380) (emphasis added). With this emphasis on “otherness,” Coles situates his intervention within the ethical turn in political theory, focused on how to encounter “others” (those outside of one’s own self).⁵ Coles substantiates this claim by interpreting Reagon’s appeal to “giving” within the space of coalition as her “highest virtue” (380), arguing that when she “reflects upon the ethical direction which ought to guide our lives

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⁵ See work by Levinas, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Butler, and Irigaray. For references, see Chapter Two, footnotes 39-45.
and ‘turn the century’” it is this virtue that will succeed in “drawing her to others as other” (380).

To make this claim, he quotes the following passage from Reagon:

But most of the things you do, if you do them right, are for people who live long after you are long forgotten. That will only happen if you give it away. Whatever it is that you know, give it away, and don’t just give it on the horizontal…give it away that way (up and down). (Reagon 1983: 365, quoted in Coles 1996: 380)

Coles argues Reagon believes that without this ethic of generosity (the desire in our hearts to “receive the other as other”), the ideals of equality and liberty—which, we are to presume, are what the coalitions she describes are committed to—will “take up strategic positions within imperialist identities that assimilate, smother, or explicitly deny otherness” (Coles 1996: 380). Cole argues that it is this virtue that Reagon believes will guide activists in efforts to “receive and grapple with core-threatening differences in coalition politics” (380). While coalition politics is hard, and one may at times need to retreat to a safe home, it is an ethic of generosity, Coles maintains, that is the key virtue that Reagon believes will keep one coming back for more (380).

In the remaining pages of the article Coles goes on to develop Reagon’s “brief remarks” on “giving” into a notion of receptive generosity through a reading of Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra. It is unnecessary to go into Coles’ reading of Nietzsche here, except to say that he finds in Nietzsche a similar emphasis on “gift-giving as the highest virtue” (380) and uses this finding to further substantiate and develop Reagon’s reflections on generosity. Those who Reagon believes “hold the key to turning the century” (Reagon 1983: 363), Coles argues, are those “who remain active across decades” and those who “frequently demonstrate a capacity to engage respectively a wide range of difficult issues and perspectives” (Coles 1996: 381). It is these people, Coles argues, who are most likely to have something to give, and this gift simply is a “sense of receptive generosity itself as a way of being” (381). As a “way of being,” receptive generosity describes a particular ethical comportment that graciously seeks out and receives
others. Coles believes that coalition members give one another this gift of generosity within the space of coalition. This gift, he argues, creates the foundation for a new kind of ethical community,\(^6\) one “animated by a desire for the others’ otherness” (Coles 1996: 380). Despite the challenge that coalescing across diverse subjugated groups poses to recent articulations of progressive coalition politics, such alliances may be desirable, viable, and enduring, argues Coles, as long as an ethic of receptive generosity may enter into a constellation with equality and liberty as the “slightly brighter star” (Coles 1996: 386).

While certainly aware of Reagon’s historical location as a singer-songwriter and lifetime activist, instead of taking her remarks on coalition on their own theoretical merits, Coles turns to Nietzsche to give Reagon’s “brief remarks” the theoretical robustness they supposedly lack (Coles 1996: 380). I wonder, however, if something rather important has been lost in his turn away from Reagon and toward Nietzsche. While I too will ultimately turn away from Reagon in order to flesh out the nascent theory of coalition politics presented in this speech, I worry Coles has turned away too soon and in the wrong direction. In the remainder of this section, I return to Reagon and consider what may be gained by a closer reading of her speech, and one that is

\(^6\) Coles is not alone in contemporary political theory literature in his appeal to ethics as both the generating and cementing force behind coalition politics. See Iris Young (1997), Sara Rushing (2010), and Drucilla Cornell (1995a, 1995b, and 2005). We also saw a similar orientation toward ethics and community—the fact that our shared ontological vulnerability will generate a certain ethical orientation toward the precarity of others—in Butler’s notion of precarious community (see Chapter Two). However, if we put Coles’ argument in conversation with one of few other articles published in popular political theory journals with “coalition” in the title, we immediately see the potential limitations of his and other neo-Nietzschean approaches to coalition that appeal, in the last instance, to notions of ethical community. In her 2001 article, Walby makes a case against community as a useful category for collective political action. Walby points out that recently coalition building, not community building, has become the dominant mode of political organizing within feminist politics in the West and within global feminist coalitions (Walby 2001: 120, 128). Unlike community, which relies on sameness—i.e. adopting a similar culture, ethos, or, in the case of Butler and Coles, ethical orientation—coalition directly engages differences within feminist and other political groups (117, 123). On this front, she asserts, the insights of feminist activists are steps ahead of the variety of theoretical engagements with difference and its relationship to group politics that we have seen thus far (120, 129). Echoing Reagon’s central argument, coalitions simply do not operate as communities; the emphasis on hostile disagreement and threatening difference gets lost when we conceive of these spaces as communities instead of coalitions.
completely unhinged from neo-Nietzschean influences. Such a reading will be easy to do by recalling that Reagon’s own work was informed not by Nietzschean philosophy but instead by a lifetime of activist experience on the ground. Engaging in this closer reading, I contend, brings politics back to the fore as the cementing force behind coalitional encounters and enlivens a spirit of activist political theory.

*b) Homes vs. Coalitions: Coalition as Political Encounter*

Coles first locates an ethic of generosity in Reagon’s remarks on “turning the century with our principles intact” and particularly in the importance she places on our principles “surviving” (Reagon 1983: 349, 353 and Coles 1996: 377). Coles swiftly interprets Reagon’s appeal to survival as an “ethical survival” that somehow “exceeds mere survival” (Coles 1996: 377). However, from this passage alone, it is not at all clear why Reagon would be speaking of an ethical, as opposed to a political, survival. In fact, given the context of her speech, her own commitments, and what she actually says in the text, it would be more correct to interpret these principles as explicitly political. The fact that she wants these principles to “survive” does not, in itself, give them an ethical form. A few pages later, Coles points to Reagon’s comments on “giving” as further indication of her preference for generosity as the “highest virtue” and that virtue with which we must turn the century (Coles 1996: 380, Reagon 1983: 346, 348, 352). However, if we return to these and other comments and put them in their proper context within Reagon’s speech as a whole, we find that while developing a particular comportment may indeed be valuable within the space of coalition, coalition politics requires more than an ethic of generosity.
Reagon makes a case for both the danger and dire necessity of coalition work. The site of
the music festival, she argues, is itself a site of coalition, which is why it is, in many ways, an
uncomfortable site for her and other women who do not fit the white, Western, middle-class,
educated, lesbian image of “woman” shaping the event. Nevertheless, as a “women’s” music
festival, Reagon and other women find themselves collectively occupying this shared space.
Despite the fact that persisting in such a “coalitional” site provokes feelings of terror, nausea,
and impending death (Reagon 1983: 343), Reagon is adamant that coalitional work is absolutely
essential. Because “we’ve…come to the end of a time when you can have…barred rooms”
reserved for “X’s-only”—“yours only” spaces for you and your people—Reagon argues that
women must find themselves in uncomfortable sites of coalition (344-346, 349). Confronting
difference, she implies, is inevitable. Politics cannot persist as isolated X-only struggles any
longer. Instead, X’s and Y’s and Z’s will find themselves together in the same space precisely
because “X-only,” or “women-only, always already meant X’s, and Y’s and Z’s—i.e., “women”
already implies white women, non-white women, poor women, lesbian women, heterosexual
women, and other categories, which, she points out, are already infused with difference. Despite
the disorientation and anxiety that coalition politics between diverse subordinated groups
engenders, Reagon believes that she and the other women at the music festival are “positioned to
have the opportunity to have something to do with what makes it into the next century” and that
“the principles of coalition are directly related to that” (Reagon 1983: 343).

At this point, it is important to ask, what are the “principles of coalition”? Coles
interprets the principles to be a constellation of equality, liberty, and receptive generosity with
generosity as the “slightly brighter star” (Coles 1996: 386). I want to offer an alternative reading
in which we interpret the “principles” of coalition as a political commitment to undermining
oppression and the corresponding ethical comportment that this political commitment self-reflexively generates. It is this principle of coalition –directed toward the vision of a world without oppression –I contend, that Reagon hopes will survive; it is also this very same commitment that will make this future and the coalitional work necessary to reach it possible.

Consider, first, the next few lines of the text. She tells us:

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. (Reagon 1983: 343-344).

The principles of coalition, it would seem, are related to the fact that one does not “like” coalition work, because it is an inherently dangerous affair. This danger lies in the fact that such spaces are no longer “X-only” spaces (344). While identity politics–in the form of safe spaces where groups may come together to define who they are and “shoulder up all of [their] energies so that [they] and [their] kind can survive” (345)–still has a place in the political landscape, the principles that govern these spaces are not, argues Reagon, the ones that will usher us into the next century; they are not the principles of coalition. These “little barred rooms”–wherein we are all alike, untouched by difference–she tells us, are “nurturing spaces” (345). These are the “communities” that we may retreat to when we can’t handle any more coalescing. These are the “homes” where we “take [our] bottle” in preparation to go back and coalesce some more (346). These are the places where we all share common experiences. These are sites marked by sameness. These are not, she asserts, spaces for coalescing. “You don’t do no coalition building in a womb” (346).

I should note here that I do not believe that this political commitment is equivalent to a commitment to “equality and liberty” in the way that Laclau and Mouffe advocate (1985). By committing to “undermining oppression,” Reagon commits not to ideals that are open to misinterpretation, but rather to a clear political and analytical project of discerning how power operates and when/how to intervene along with the political will to do so.
Coalition work, she asserts, is always dangerous: “you shouldn’t look for comfort,” nurturing, or even food in a coalition (346). What you seek in coalitions is survival. But you don’t seek it through nurturing and nutrients; you seek it through mutual struggle to topple an oppressive system that is out to kill you (346). In this sense, coalitions are not “refuge place[s]” (347), even if they may succeed in saving one’s life (344). When you enter them, she tells us, you know you are in trouble (347). Reagon insists that we must not confuse home and coalition (347). Reagon takes the time to contrast the “dangerous” space of coalition with the safety of the home in order to distinguish two forms of collective politics: identity politics and coalition politics. Identity politics relies on the principles of home, but these principles were already outmoded as the guiding principles for post-Marxist progressive politics in the moment Reagon was speaking. An ethic of love, respect, and generosity may operate in communities and homes, a political commitment to a self-reflexive politics of undermining oppression, on the other hand, operates in coalitions. While this political commitment has certain ethical implications for how one ought to treat others within the space of coalition—i.e., one must try to uphold a commitment to undermining and challenging oppressive relationships with other coalition members—it is at its core a political commitment, meaning it is both something we strive and struggle for, and something that alerts us to the arrangements of power that situate all encounters and at times prevent feelings of love and mutual respect (Dean 2009: 142). It is this commitment to both understanding and attempting to undermine oppression that compels us to join with others who may kill us, compelling us to leave our safe homes for the hard work of coalition.

It is important at this point to recognize that Reagon’s interest in contrasting home and coalition is political. She is giving a polemical speech, and one in which she is trying to entice a much more thoughtful, measured, and deliberate approach to post-Marxist progressive politics
across diverse subjugated groups. Her claims regarding the danger of coalition, however, are not hyperbole. Coalitions across stark and at times hostile differences were indeed dangerous affairs: they were dangerous because one was not always sure she could trust her coalitional allies; they were dangerous because one’s very survival (as a subjugated person) depended on their success; they were dangerous because the forms of disobedience and protest generated from these spaces could compromise ones’ bodily safety; and they were dangerous because sometimes our most intimate partners and allies may wish us physical or psychological damage. In addition to all of these reasons, Reagon also implies that coalitions were potentially dangerous because one was likely to lose a sense of oneself through coalitional work. The most successful activists, she tells us, were those who were open to self-transformation through the process of coalescing (Reagon 1983: 350). I take up this concept in Chapter Four.

From a feminist perspective, one can immediately see how such an appeal to home as an inherently safe and nurturing space could be seen as problematic given the reality of domestic abuse. I believe Reagon too was aware of this. She and other contemporaneous women of color scholars and activists were well acquainted with the dangers of domestic violence (this is a dominant theme across women of color feminist anthologies published in this period)8. Nevertheless, and especially among Black feminists and other women of color writing at the time, we find a strong emphasis on the home as a nurturing and empowering space for women of color, in spite of the forms of domestic abuse that may take place here. It is for this reason that the space of the home provides a nice contrast with the space of coalition politics. The important point here seems to be that whereas one may be able to count on feelings of warmth and comfort

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8 See But Some of Us Are Brave (1982), This Bridge Called My Back (1983), Home Girls (1983), and Sister Outsider (1984) for a variety of depictions of the home as both a safe space and a dangerous space simultaneously. For other articles on the theme of “home,” see Bonnie Honig (1994), Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty (2003), Mary Louise Adams (1989), Barbara Smith (1983), and Caren Kaplan (1987).
being present within her home, there is certainly no guarantee of safety, comfort, love, generosity, or mutual respect emerging within the space of coalition.

Both spaces are crucial for feminist politics; the important contribution Reagon makes here is that she forces feminists to consider that these spaces are not identical. A feminist coalition must not be mistaken for a warm, safe, and nurturing women-only space. It is for precisely this reason that I am reluctant to accept Coles’ interpretation of Reagon’s principles as ethical principles. It seems that what Reagon wants to do instead is to distinguish spaces in which we may be able to count on a certain ethics of love and generosity from spaces in which we cannot count on ethics to guide our actions. The only force capable of generating and sustaining these more dangerous and tumultuous spaces, I contend, is a political commitment to undermining oppression.

c) Giving in Coalition: A Self-Reflexive Political Commitment

While Reagon concedes that we must give in coalitions without expecting anything in return (346, 348), I remain unconvinced that such statements point toward an ethic of “generosity born in our efforts to receive the other as other” or “animated by a desire for the others’ otherness” (Coles 1996: 380). Instead, this generosity, if we can call it that, is born of a survival instinct. Reagon does not speak in terms of giving to individual others; instead, she speaks in terms of giving to the coalition itself, and she conceives of the coalition as a “monster.”

You have to give it all. It is not to feed you; you have to feed it. And it’s a monster. It never gets enough. It always wants more. So you better be sure you got your home someplace for you to go to so that you will not become a martyr to the coalition. Coalition can kill people; however, it is not by nature fatal. You do not have to die because you are committed to coalition…But you do have to know how to pull back, and you do have to have an old-age perspective. You have to be beyond the womb stage. (Reagon 1983: 348)
The fact that Reagon speaks of giving to the coalition, as opposed to one another within the space of coalition, is illuminating insofar as it calls into question Coles’ reading of her conception of giving as “receptive generosity.” By giving to the coalition, one gives to a cause, not to an “other as other” (Coles 1996: 380). While it may very well prove to be wise to embrace the “other as other” within the space of coalition, this ethic of receptive generosity is not what animates giving for Reagon. According to Reagon, one doesn’t give to an “other” that she is ready to receive in a generous way; one gives to a monster and she does so because she has to, not because she wants to or even likes to.

As she states at the end of the speech, “the reason we are stumbling is that we are at the point where in order to take the next step we’ve got to do it with some folks we don’t care too much about” (Reagon 1983: 355). According to Reagon, we don’t “care” about one another in coalition; we care about toppling oppression, including oppressive relationships in our encounters with others. “I am talking about turning the century with some principles intact. Today wherever women gather together it is not necessarily nurturing. It is coalition building. And if you feel the strain, you may be doing some good work” (349). While one may lovingly and generously give to the people in her home, one does not give to coalition members in the same way. One does not give to these others necessarily at all. One gives to the cause; and in order to effectively give to the coalition, Reagon insists, one must know when to pull back from the coalition and get the nurturing, loving, giving, and receiving she needs from her home. Coalition work is hard, I contend, precisely because it is guided by a politics born out of necessity, and not an ethics born out of a “desire for the others’ otherness” (Coles 1996: 380).

The principle she has been alluding to throughout the speech is clearly outlined in the final pages of the text. She speaks of the civil rights movement and how it eventually became
bigger than a Black thing, and then bigger than even a race thing. As people found themselves fighting for causes outside of their “identity” categories, they were clearing the way for coalition. Eventually, one realizes that she “cannot be fighting one oppression and be oppressed [herself] and not feel it” (350). In these moments, a *self-reflexive* commitment to undermining oppression requires one to identify oppressive acts she may commit against others as well as those forms of oppressive behavior that she may be forced to bear by her own fellow travelers. Those who truly “hold the key to turning the century with [their] principles and ideals intact,” she finally tells us, are those people who showed up at all of the different struggles, and who kept up with many issues at once (350). These people are very rare but they must be studied and protected because they can “teach you how to cross cultures and not kill yourself” (350). They are the ones who are truly committed to toppling oppression. They are the ones who have learned how to recognize it in all of its forms, and how to align with others in order to fight this expansive force without succumbing to it. There is no sense here that Reagon is outlining an ethic for how to receive those who cross over; she is instead pointing the way to crossing these divides without killing oneself in the process. In this sense, it is not other-oriented in the way in which Coles seems to interpret her notion of coalition. The “other” that most interests Reagon is not an individual “other” person; it is a political cause. For this, she will risk her life, and she implores others to do so as well.

People who refuse to treat taking a stand against oppression as only a race, class or gender issue may not have always gotten it right, but they at least show us how to take a political stand; how to put yourself and your “shit” out there so that others may either learn from it or call you on it and force you to change (350). In this way, Reagon allows for mistakes. A commitment to a political cause does not guarantee a fool proof program of action for Reagon, but it does
orient our coalitional efforts. As such, it requires careful analysis of the situation of oppression; it requires seeing the way in which multiple forms of domination may be interlocking; and, it requires giving one’s commitment to fighting domination in the one form in which one experiences it to a bigger cause and seeing how these causes are one in the same (352-353).

The principle that must survive is a political principle of social justice generally, and a commitment to undermining oppression in particular. It is a “political” principle because it is chosen and it is struggled for. In this way, Reagon calls it “biased” and even “bigoted” insofar as it reflects a firm and unwavering belief in the rightness of a position against oppression (353).

Choosing a direction, an end, or a political course is not problematic for Reagon. Along the way, one’s actions will need to be updated and adjusted to fit this principle. But the principle itself, according to Reagon, is unwavering; it is, to use language from previous chapters, “fixed.” Such a notion of political fixity, however, avoids sliding into Lenin’s scientific socialism while still nurturing Luxemburg’s notion of the unpredictability of lived struggle.

As I have demonstrated here, there is ample evidence to suggest that Reagon’s principles of coalition are political at their core. While a political commitment to undermining oppression necessarily guides a certain type of comportment characterized by a commitment to undermining or opposing oppressive interpersonal relationships within coalitional spaces, this ethics—if we want to call it an ethics—is rooted in a prior political commitment. It is for this reason that I am challenging Coles’ picture of coalition as an ethico-political encounter: that is, an encounter in which the political ideals of liberty and equality must sit second seat to receptive generosity. What we instead find in Reagon, and what warrants further consideration, is a picture of coalition as a politico-ethical encounter: that is, an encounter in which the political ideal of
undermining oppression in fact generates a corresponding ethical comportment as a guide to encounters between coalitional members.

**Part III) Reagon in Conversation with Cotemporaneous Women of Color Feminists**

Reagon was not alone in advocating a notion of *político-ético* coalition politics. Such an understanding of coalition was characteristic of contemporaneous women of color feminist activism and scholarship and emerges across empirical work on activist coalition politics from the 1960s through the turn of the century. In this way, I show that Reagon’s speech in fact echoes the ideas of other women of color feminist activists and scholars at the time.

Contemporaries of Reagon, Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde both appear in the anthology in which Reagon’s coalition speech was first published, thus putting Reagon’s work directly in conversation with a variety of other women of color feminist activists writing at the time. Smith is quite explicit about this connection and the important influence Reagon’s speech has had on these conversations in her introduction to the anthology (Smith 1983). Reagon’s thoughts on coalition politics both reflected and profoundly shaped conversations among women of color feminists during this period as they sought to unpack the difficult questions related to feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist political activism. This conception, I will show by engaging Chandra Mohanty’s more recent work, continues to shape the trajectory of feminist scholarship.

While there is an expansive list of scholars I could have selected from (some of this literature will be footnoted throughout these sections), I have chosen to focus explicitly on the work of Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and Chandra Mohanty because of the way in which their work both echoes and develops important aspects of Reagon’s notion of político-ethical coalition politics.

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Having studied pieces by Barbara Smith published across three important Black and women of color feminist anthologies completed during this period (1977-1983), I aim to make two broad points. By first examining the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement,” written by Barbara Smith and the other co-founders of the Collective (1977) and first published in *But Some of Us Are Brave* (co-edited by Hull, Scott, and Smith in 1982), I demonstrate that the turn toward coalition among women of color feminists predates Reagon’s 1981 speech. Indeed, by the time of Reagon’s speech, Barbara Smith and others had already acknowledged the absolute necessity in turning to coalition, the challenge of entering into coalitions with white women, and the crucial role that a self-reflexive political commitment to undermining oppression plays in guiding these encounters. Reagon’s coalition speech therefore echoes many dominant themes from women of color scholarship of this period. By then putting Reagon’s 1981 speech in conversation with Smith’s “Introduction” to *Home Girls* (1983), written and published the year after Reagon’s speech, I examine the rigid distinction Reagon draws between homes and coalitions, suggesting that for Reagon this distinction was a rhetorical, rather than an analytical, one.

While the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement” has been read as a quintessential example of “identity politics,” I read it instead as an illuminating example of the shift from identity to coalition politics that Reagon so vividly advocates. It is important to understand that this piece is an activist statement laying out the genesis, political commitments,

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11 See Diana Fuss (1989).
and trajectory of the Combahee River Collective—a Black feminist, lesbian group active in Boston from 1974 to 1980. It is therefore a piece of activist political theory rooted in the concrete reality of a particular activist group. In it, the collective sets out to define their project and to clarify what it is theoretically, analytically, and politically that guides their work. Due to the sophistication and depth of the analysis in this piece of activist literature, feminist scholars treat it as a rigorous and indeed canonical piece of feminist political theory. Unfortunately, however, some scholars seem to have missed the nuance of Combahee’s position.

The passage used to justify its “identity politics” credentials reads as follows:

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. […] We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression (Combahee 1983: 266-267).

In the first half of this passage, Combahee advocates a notion of a Black women’s community very similar to the notion of “home” outlined by Reagon. As they say, their politics evolved from a “healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.” In this sense, a community of Black women provides the nurturing that Reagon argues is characteristic of homes.

However, their politics—what they are doing in their collective—we will learn, arise not just from their “identity” as Black women, but from a particular “analytic” of Black feminism. This analytic—or way of perceiving their world, and particularly their oppression—and not an essential notion of identity, grounds their politics. The reason they feel that they must root their politics in “identity,” they tell us, is not because their politics will be defined by their identity as
Black women, but because history has proven that the only people willing to focus on their particular type of oppression are Black feminists such as themselves. While they use the word “identity,” I contend that what they are really getting at is a notion of positionality—or, one’s particular position vis-à-vis oppression.

All Black women, they tell us at different moments throughout the speech, are positioned at the intersection of multiple and “interlocking” forms of oppression. Only Black feminists, however, have committed to revealing and struggling against this multifaceted oppressive system.

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives [as Black women]. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (Combahee 1983: 264)

Their position at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression enables a certain analytical frame that shapes their political project. Feminism for them is both a “political analysis” and a “political practice” (266). As I will argue in Chapter Four, for women of color feminists such as Combahee, Smith, Reagon and many others, coalition politics was is anchored in this particular analytical frame (developed by others as a “coalitional consciousness”). For now, I mention this emphasis only to demonstrate a clear shift away from identity politics and toward a form of politics based in a particular understanding of interlocking oppressive systems. Their freedom, they tell us, would “necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (270). Their advantage, if you will, as Black women is that they are able to see these connections and fight against all forms of oppression simultaneously.

It is due to this particular analytic that Smith and the other co-founders of Combahee understand coalitional work as an essential component to their politics. In line with Reagon’s
distinction between homes and coalitions, Combahee makes an important distinction between consciousness-raising groups and coalitions. While consciousness-raising groups may be governed by an ethical orientation to receive the other’s otherness just for the sake of the interaction itself (in the sense Coles advocates), a coalition, they tell us, is governed first and foremost by a shared political commitment. While some of their initial organizing occurred in consciousness-raising groups, once they were ready to “move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group”—ready to leave the comfort of their home—Combahee turned toward more explicitly “political work” involving analyzing oppression more holistically and in coalition with other groups (Combahee 1983: 272) (emphasis added). As they turned to this more explicitly political work, Smith tells us in a dialogue with her sister, Beverly, any kind of “separatism” became a “dead end” politically (Smith 1981: 126). While separating into “Black women only” groups, or—in the context of the dialogue—into “lesbian only groups,” may prove useful for “forging identity and gathering strength” in the same way that Reagon believes “X-only spaces” provide a necessary kind of nurturing for coalitional activists, Smith states that the “strongest politics are coalition politics that cover a broad base of issues” (126).

Developing politically, it therefore seems, involves understanding the simultaneity of oppression, or the way in which a position against sexism must also be a position against racism, heterosexism, and economic oppression. What opened Combahee up to this position—what encouraged their “politics” to “evolve—was a self-reflexive political commitment to combatting at least two forms of oppression at once (267).

Due to their understanding of the simultaneity of oppression, Combahee, also like Reagon, is explicit in its commitment to a self-reflexive politics. The ability to work with others who are different, argues Smith and the other co-founders, is dependent upon the coalition’s
ability to continually examine its politics to ensure that its internal structure reflects this core political commitment to undermining oppression in all its forms. As Smith and the other co-founders of Combahee put it: “we are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice” (273). Instead of pursuing “correct” political goals that would justify merely “strategic” coalitions (273) doing whatever they must to achieve the goal they form to reach, women of color feminists such as Smith, Combahee and many others, pursue a form of prefigurative politics that call for *politico-ethical* coalitions. I call them *politico*-ethical coalitions to emphasize the importance of the external political commitment that brings coalition members to the space of coalition in the first place. For women of color feminism, a shared political commitment is absolutely foundational to coalition work. However, this political commitment also informs the internal functioning of the coalition itself—what I am calling the ethical component—to ensure that it follows a “collective” process with a “nonhierarchical distribution of power” (273). With their emphasis on continually examining their own politics through “criticism and self-criticism”

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12 See also Ransby (2000: 1218-1220); hooks (2000: 47-48); Davis and Martinez (1994); and Anzaldúa (2009: 149, and 152).

13 The idea of prefigurative politics was first developed by Sheila Rowbotham (1979). Her years of activism work in the Women’s Liberation Movement starting in the 1960s in Britain, the New Left of the 1950s to early 1960s, International Socialism, and libertarian Marxism in the 1970s taught her that forms of sexist oppression cannot be separated from all other forms of oppression. As she argues in “The Women’s Movement and Organizing for Socialism,” “the movement for women’s liberation is part of the creation of a society in which there are no forms of domination. This society cannot be separated from the process of its making” (Rowbotham 1979: 50). This latter point reflects the idea that the means they use to achieve their political goals must “prefigure” the ends they hope to achieve. This idea forms the basis of “prefigurative politics” (132-44). I believe this concept nicely captures the kind of self-reflexive coalitional work typical of women of color feminists during this period.

14 This theme appears over and over across women of color feminism literature. Smith speaks of “principled coalitions” (Smith and Smith 1983: 126). Barbara Ransby asserts that a “shared political vision” keeps bringing women of color feminists back together (Ransby 2000: 1216). hooks defines feminist solidarity simply as a shared political commitment to ending oppression (hooks 2000: 47). Nira Yuval-Davis and many others tell us that coalitional allies must be chosen based not on identity but on a shared political commitment (Yuval-Davis 1997: 126, Adams 1989: 32, and Clark 1983: 135). Charlotte Bunch concurs with women of color feminists in telling us that for coalitions to work—to do the hard emotional work of coalition—members must share a common political commitment (Bunch 1990: 50).
(273), Combahee demonstrates the self-reflexivity that makes these coalitions “principled” in the way Reagon describes.

Barbara Smith’s position on the absolute centrality of coalition politics to her particular understanding of “identity politics” is consistent across her work during this period (see Smith 1983: xxxv). Nevertheless, Smith is reluctant to give up on the metaphor of “home.” Indeed, she begins her anthology introduction with an unapologetic appeal to home, telling us “there is nothing more important to me than home,” (xxi). For a Black feminist activist who is clearly committed to coalition politics, it is perplexing that she starts with this line and ultimately decides on the title, Home Girls. Did Reagon not tell us that we must give up on the idea of a coalition feeling like a home? If Smith is subscribing to a similar notion of coalition politics as Reagon, which I believe she is, then why this emphasis on home?

The simple answer: because, like Reagon, Smith believes that for many young Black women their feminism is born and nurtured here. “Here,” for Smith, is the house where she grew up with her twin sister, mother, grandmother, and aunt. Smith’s experience of “home” echoes the particular, and distinctly positive, nurturing, and loving picture of home that Reagon uses to contrast with coalition. It is in these spaces that one finds the kind of giving that Coles speaks of:

The women in my grandmother’s generation made giving an art form. “Here, gal, take this pot of collards to Sister Sue”; “Take this bag of pecans to school for the teacher”; “Stay here while I go tend Mister Johnson’s leg.” Every child in the neighborhood ate in their kitchens. They called each other sister because of a feeling rather than as a result of a movement. They supported each other through the lean times, sharing the little they had. (Shakur in Smith 1983: xxiii)

As indicated in this passage—which Smith takes as representative of the Black women that “filled her childhood” (xxiii) —no commitment to a political “movement” was needed to inspire the sort of giving that occurred in the home. As Shakur states: “they called each other sister

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because of [a] feeling,” not because of a common political cause. For Smith, these were “Black women-only” spaces, safe spaces, exactly the kind of spaces out of which one’s politics may be born and nurtured. It was at home, she tells us, that she “learned the rudiments of Black feminism” (xxii).

In the pages of this anthology, Smith hopes to create a similar kind of home for other Black feminists (xxxiii). She hopes to counter the sense of loss of home that often accompanies Black women’s choice to pursue feminism as a political and analytical project (xxiv). Smith holds onto the language of “home” because she believes many of the contributors to this anthology also learned their varied politics at home (xxiv). She also holds onto the language of “home” because she believes a crucial aspect of Black feminism includes “home-based concerns” or “home truths” related to the private sphere of the home and household and touching the “basic core of our community’s survival” (xxix, xxxiii, and xxxvii). For Smith, a focus on home includes both a celebration of the this space as warm, loving, and nurturing alongside a critical awareness that compels one to simultaneously examine practices that take place here while protecting this space from external pressures. Indeed, the purpose of Home Girls is to create and protect this home space for other Black women so that they may begin to develop their own critical understanding of the way in which race, gender, sexuality, and other differences interact in oppressive practices; in short, to prepare them for politico-ethical coalition politics.

b) Audre Lorde: Coalitional Spaces as Angry, but Never Hateful

What is perhaps most remarkable about women of color activism and scholarship on coalition is the way in which, despite an unequivocal emphasis on a shared political
commitment, many of these scholars and activists also emphasize the importance of something that comes to sound like a kind of ethics\textsuperscript{16}. Nowhere is the symbiotic relationship between ethics and politics more eloquently depicted than in Audre Lorde’s work on the notion of difference. Many of the essays and speeches addressing this topic appear in \textit{Sister Outsider}\textsuperscript{17}. While she only raises the implications of difference for the possibility of “coalition” politics in a few instances across this text, it is quite clear that much of her discussion on difference is in the service of opening up possibilities for coalition politics marked by the hostile divides and disagreement vividly outlined by Reagon. Her attention to the theme of coalition is most explicit in two speeches in particular: “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (delivered 1981) and “Learning from the 60s” (delivered 1982).

Echoing Reagon’s challenge, Lorde depicts coalitional spaces as inherently uncomfortable, and often characterized by feelings of anger and hostility as individuals attempt to work across difference.

As Black people, if there is one thing we can learn from the 60s, it is how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be. For we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves. Through examining the combination of our triumphs and errors, we can examine the dangers of an incomplete vision. Not to condemn that vision but to alter it, construct templates

\textsuperscript{16} Certain women of color feminists are quite explicit in their appeal to developing an ethics of feminist coalition. However, this ethical turn is not to be mistaken with the ethical turn in political theory (via Levinas and others). There is not reason to believe that these scholars were influenced by Levinas. Patricia Hill Collins advocates a process of “ethical, principled coalition building” (Hill Collins 2000: 38). bell hooks emphasizes an “ethical commitment to feminist solidarity” (hooks 1990: 92), telling us that “feminist ethics” is one of the most important dimensions of feminist struggle (99). Other feminists use a range of signifiers to emphasize this ethical dimension. By appealing to a language of love, community, home, family, and empathy within the context of discussions about coalition, many women of color feminists also evoke this ethical feature. Whether it is an emphasis on love for women of color as that which underpins collective work (Combahee 1983: 267), a subtle reminder that “without community there is no liberation” (Lorde 1984: 112), the conviction that “there is nothing more important…than home” (Smith 1983: xxi), or depictions of scholarly and activist coalitions of women of color as \textit{families} (see Moraga 1983: xix and Anzaldúa 2009: 142), women of color feminists consistently appeal to an ethical language to describe coalition work.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Sister Outsider} was first published in 1984, though many of these speeches/essays were first written or delivered in the late 1970s and appeared in earlier publications such as \textit{Home Girls} and \textit{This Bridge Called My Back}. 170
This “complete” vision of coalition politics, while rooted in a political commitment to undermining oppression within society (on the outside) demands also that we root out (internal) oppressive inclinations within ourselves and against our potential allies—this is the ethical component. Maintaining a complete vision—that is, a politico-ethical vision—of coalitional efforts enables us to make important distinctions between enemies and allies as well as between hatred and anger. Anger “expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future,” Lorde states, “is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (127). Though a “painful” process, facilitating this translation between the political and the ethical enables us to harness our anger, which is “loaded with information and energy” (128), to distinguish between our “allies” and our “genuine enemies” (127).

Lorde therefore clarifies Reagon’s picture of coalitional spaces. While coalitional spaces may be dangerous, and are often marked by hostile disagreement, ideally they would not be filled with feelings of hatred. According to Lorde, hatred has no place in effective coalition building. Hatred persists between enemies, or those who do not share the same political commitment; anger, on the other hand, persists between peers and allies. Coalitions, we learn, are made up of the latter.

So we are working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people—against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action. (128)

While one may hate those who support oppression, one does not, or at least should not, hate her potential allies, or those also committed to fighting oppression. While differences of class, race, sexuality, etc. persist between differently situated women, these differences need not be shaped...
by hatred. The object of hatred is “death and destruction” (129). Anger, on the other hand, is “a
grief of distortions between peers” whose “object is change” (129). Anger, she continues,
“implies peers meeting upon a common basis to examine difference, and to alter those distortions
which history has created around our difference” (129). An ethic of anger therefore enables
women to come together across difference in order to use their differences as a creative force for
change. This is the potential of coalition when led by a complete politico-ethical vision.

Understood this way, coalition is about “unity” and not “unanimity” (135-137). A
political commitment to undermine oppression encourages an ethical commitment that is
antithetical to unanimity. Lorde defines coalition as the “coming together of elements which are,
to begin with, varied and diverse in their particular natures” (135),\(^1\) thus recalling the most
general definition of coalition outlined in the Introduction. For Lorde, coalitions are explicitly
political, not ontological, spaces—meaning spaces in which political commitments and not
identities meld together. As such, they are as complex and expansive as the oppressive system
they form to contest. One must move against oppression in a self-reflexive manner. She must
focus her actions against both external and internal oppression simultaneously. “We cannot,”
Lorde attests, “afford to do our enemies work by destroying each other” (142). Instead, we must
learn how to “make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures” and
how to “take our differences and make them strengths” (112). Perhaps one of the most well-cited
lines of Lode’s work, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (112), speaks
directly to the self-reflexivity that is inherent to politico-ethical coalition politics. One cannot use
oppressive means to undermine oppression. The master’s tools are soaked in oppression; to
dismantle the entire interlocking system, we must use tools that are not tainted by oppression. In

\(^1\) In this passage she is speaking of “unity.” She later goes on to equate “coalition” and unity on this front. See
this sense, a “complete” vision for radical coalition politics is needed: that is, a vision that severs all oppressive ties and that stands firmly against oppression in all its manifestations—in short, a politico-ethical vision.

c) Chandra Mohanty: Pushing Against a Rhetorical Distinction

Theorized in the early 1980s, a politico-ethical vision of coalition politics continues to inform contemporary feminist articulations of coalition politics. In this section, I turn to more-recent work by Chandra Mohanty (2003), in which she attempts to envision transnational feminist solidarity outside of hegemonic notions of White, western feminism. In this undertaking, Mohanty is explicit in her indebtedness to the work of U.S. women of color feminism (Mohanty 2003: 5). In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Mohanty revisits the important distinction Reagon draws between homes and coalitions in order to critically interrogate models of cross-cultural feminist solidarity rooted in notions of “sisterhood.” By contrasting Reagon’s speech with Robin Morgan’s introduction to *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women’s Movement Anthology* (1984), Mohanty vividly captures the danger in longing for feminist notions of home or community. Such notions, she demonstrates, are at work in visions of “global sisterhood” wherein women are unified by the sameness of their oppression, the sameness of their struggles, and a shared good will between them. By presuming both a false sense of commonality between all women on these fronts and a shared ethics of good will, such visions, she argues, flatten conflicts between women and necessarily conceal the politics of feminist solidarity. Instead of encouraging an engagement with difference and conflict, notions of global sisterhood require that women “transcend” these

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19 See Mohanty (2003), Bastian (2006), Stavro (2007), Showden (2009), and Cole and Luna (2010).
differences so that they can work together in an international women’s movement (114). Instead of collective action being defined on the basis of political choices made through interpretative analytical work—the hard work of coalescing—collective feminist action in a global sisterhood becomes “defined on the basis of personal intentions, attitudes, or desires” wherein women may be conceived as “well-intentioned” but never as political actors (114). As I argued was the case with the ethical vision of coalition on offer by Coles (1996) and Butler (2004, 2009, and 2011), Mohanty similarly demonstrates the ways in which visions of global sisterhood obscure the politics of collective action in favor of unexamined and naively optimistic notions of ethical sisterhood.

In its stead, Mohanty directs us toward an understanding of feminist solidarity as coalition (see 109 and 116). What is particularly interesting about Mohanty’s appeal to coalition here, however, is the fact that this is one of the only instances across the book in which Mohanty actually uses the language of “coalition” to describe feminist solidarity. She tells us here that the “unity of women” must not be given “on the basis of a natural/psychological [or even emotional] commonality,” but is rather something “that has to be worked for, struggled toward—in history” (116). Through this process of articulating the ways in which “the historical forms of oppression relate to the category ‘women’…a formulation of feminist solidarity or coalition makes sense” (116). Equating feminist solidarity with coalition here suggests that much of this book in fact in the service of articulating a contemporary notion of transnational or cross-cultural feminist coalition politics. While Reagon’s influence on this project is unmistakable, in many instances across the book, Mohanty uses the language of community, as opposed to coalition, to describe a form of feminist solidarity that resembles politico-ethical coalition politics. By examining some of these instances, I aim to unpack what this shift may indicate for contemporary women of color.
and third world feminist notions of coalition politics, and to revisit the rhetorical distinction Reagon draws between homes and coalitions.

In one of her earlier articles reprinted as Chapter Two of *Feminism without Borders*, Mohanty suggests that feminist solidarity ought to be rearticulated as “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” (46) (emphasis added). Like coalition, an imagined community provides a welcome alternative to visions of collective action that center on biological (commonality on the basis of being female) or cultural (commonality on the basis of a shared experience of oppression) bases for alliance (46). Instead, and again like coalition, imagined communities propose a political basis for alliance. “It is not color or sex that constructs the ground for these struggles”—i.e. these are not barred rooms of white feminists or Black men (46). “Rather,” she tells us, “it is the way we think about race, class, and gender—the political links we choose to make among and between struggles” that forms the basis of feminist solidarity (46). Her position here remains consistent across all chapters of *Feminism without Borders* (7). What fluctuates is the language Mohanty uses to describe this version of feminist solidarity; “community,” “political alliance,” “coalition,” “collective” and “network” are all used to describe enactments of feminist solidarity.

Of these slippages, the one that concerns me the most is her use of community, especially when juxtaposed with her endorsement of Reagon’s distinction between home and coalition (Mohanty 2003: 114). For Mohanty, the connection between home and community is in fact

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20 “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism” (Chapter 2 of *Feminism Without Borders*) was first published as the introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991) which Mohanty co-edited with Ann Russ and Lourdes Torres.

21 Interestingly, despite the fact that Chapter 4 is explicitly about “coalition,” the word “coalition” does not appear anywhere in the index, even though “collective” and “community” both do.
explicit. She tells us that she felt a sense of “home” and “community” with other “women of color” (128). As was the case for Smith, Mohanty’s feminist political consciousness emerged out of this space. Crucially, while Reagon’s speech was very much in the service of drawing a sharp distinction between these spaces, she too sees the value in home spaces. No one since Reagon has captured the point that the work required in homes is very different from the work required in coalitions as vividly and effectively as she does in her speech. However, I contend that distinguishing these spaces is not tantamount to privileging one over the other.

For Smith, Mohanty, Lorde and Reagon, I want to suggest, “home” or “community” is a crucial training ground for politico-ethical coalition politics. What they are each getting at, and what I will explore more thoroughly in the subsequent chapter, is the idea that politico-ethical coalition politics very much depend on a personal and individual journey that takes place in the most intimate of spaces. As Reagon argues, this is a journey that takes place both within one’s self (as she transforms from “Mary” to “Maria”) and within one’s community (as she chooses to join up with other communities) (345). Similarly, Mohanty draws attention to the role that a politics of location—attention to the multiple and fluid sites in which individual people and selves are situated—plays in discussions of feminist political solidarity.

But location, for feminists, necessarily implies self- as well as collective definition, since meanings of the self are inextricably bound up with our understanding of collectives as social agents. For me, a comparative reading of Morgan’s and Reagon’s documents of activism precipitates the recognition that 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, and it is at this moment that an understanding of the politics of location proves crucial. (Mohanty 2003: 122)

22 See Audre Lorde (1984: 112) for similar appeals to “community.” Indeed, for many U.S. women of color and third world feminists, despite the importance of distinguishing homes from coalitions, these scholars were not willing to part with the metaphors of home and community. See Moraga (1981: 106); Anzaldúa (1981: 196 and 2009: 142); Springer (2002: 382); and Walker (1983: 342).

Attention to the plurality that is characteristic of our own individual selves—our multiple and fluid identities—Mohanty suggests, may productively guide our thinking on feminist solidarity. In the same way that defining feminist solidarity in terms of “sisterhood” proves exclusionary because of its inattention to the many differences between women, defining our own individual identities in one-dimensional frames proves equally exclusionary precisely because the self, like a coalition, is equally “discontinuous and fragmented.” In this sense, for Mohanty, Reagon, and many others, despite the potential nurturing found in homes, these spaces are also sites of struggle.  

Part IV) Empirical Accounts of Politico-Ethical Coalition Politics

The notion of politico-ethical coalition politics sketched by Reagon and supported by many of her contemporaries is also the dominant notion of activist coalition politics supported by much of the empirical case study work coming out of sociology, women’s studies, and political science. This commonality is evident in the findings of one edited collection in particular (though I will cite similar findings across other journal articles and edited collections). *Forging Radical Alliances across Difference: Coalition Politics for the New Millennium* (2001) is a collection of empirical case studies of activist coalition politics from the 1960s through the 1990s, which is clearly indebted to the theorizations of coalition coming out of women of color feminism. As Jill M. Bystydzienski and Steven P. Schacht make clear in the introduction, this book is an attempt to theorize coalition from the ground up (i.e. from case studies) and in so doing to follow women of color activists and theorists to develop a “critical social theory of coalition politics” (BS 2001: 2, 3), an idea they borrow from Patricia Hill Collins (6, 2).

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24 We find a particularly vivid depiction of these kinds of home struggles across *This Bridge Called My Back*, which I engage more thoroughly in Chapter Five.
Influenced by the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Nira Yuval-Davis, Audre Lorde, and others, the editors seek to add “empirically grounded theory” to the growing body of knowledge coming out of women of color feminism – what Patricia Hill Collins calls “critical social theory” (6 and 2). Much of the collection therefore reiterates and empirically grounds the notion of politico-ethical coalition developed here.

Most centrally, these empirical findings further support the claim that activist coalition politics is fundamentally rooted in a political commitment to undermining oppression. Bystydzienski and Schacht are unequivocal on this point (see BS 2001: 7). Any suggestion that social justice coalitions form for a reason other than an explicitly political one is simply not supported by their findings.25 While the editors, and many contributors, may go on to discuss the importance of feelings and emotions such as empathy, mutual understanding, and a willingness to cross over into another’s world, they all proceed from the starting point of the inherent political nature of coalitional relationships. As the editors argue, developing attitudes of empathy and mutual understanding “allows people to coalesce around those aspects of their worldviews that come to be recognized as shared and mutually important” (8). Their ability to “act in concert,” they continue, “emerges from [both] respecting difference while also forging a common argument through a shared set of issues” (8). This central argument reappears across numerous empirical journal articles published since the 1980s.26 It is also one of the central

25 Also see Burack (2001), Bevacqua (2001), and Schacht and Ewing (2001).

26 I have surveyed eight different feminist theory and women’s studies journals (see footnote 14). Across these journals, most of the empirical work on activist coalition politics further corroborates this central argument. The coalitions these authors examine form around shared political goals, specific political issues or broad political commitments. See Petcheskley (1981) on new right coalitions; see Zimmerman (1984) on The Women’s Economic Agenda Project; see Pardo (1990) on the Coalition Against the Prison; also see Whitehead (2007) and Block, Wislanka, Pierson, and Fadem (2008) on women’s prison coalitions; see Eisenstein (1991) on abortion coalitions; see Connolly (1991) on Women Against Fundamentalism; see MacLean (1999) on affirmative action coalitions; see Ludwig (1999) on a student, faculty, employee coalition; see Statham (2000) on ecofeminism as a coalition between feminism and environmentalism; see Cock and Bernstein (2001) on the Women’s National Coalition in South
findings in Stephanie Gilmore (2008), *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*.  

What is required for disparate groups to come together, Bystydzienski and Schacht find, are “shared issues that engage members of two or more groups…in such a manner that the given issue becomes more important than existing differences” (8-9). Some of the issues addressed in the case studies presented in this edited collection include: rape (Bevacqua 2001), violence against women (Schacht and Ewing 2001), and environmental protection (Grossman 2001). These scholars find, and this becomes one of the main contributions of the collection, that when committed to a common issue, difference may be “negotiated in such a way that it becomes a strength in the pursuit of the given social justice goal” instead of a weakness (BS 2001: 9), thus recalling one of Audre Lorde’s central claims.

Forging alliances at the “interpersonal” level, they argue, is absolutely essential to successful coalition politics. This process of negotiating difference at the interpersonal level consists of three stages, and closely mirrors what I am calling a “self-reflexive” political commitment to undermining oppression. First, coalition members must accept the discomfort that comes with leaving one’s place of safety and comfort (Reagon’s “home”) “in order to reach out to one another” (BS 2001: 9). Next, members must conduct “an honest appraisal of how privilege based on gender, race, class, sexuality, age, or other factors is played out in the specific relationship or alliance” –that is, within the coalition itself (10). In the final stage they must reaffirm a “common ground by accepting and honoring those perspectives, experiences, and insights that are shared between them” and thereby allow a “shared commitment to social

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27 In Gilmore’s book, see chapters by: Estepa, Nadasen, Bevacqua, Kline, Valk, Neumann, and Kaminski. For an even more recent account, see Elizabeth Cole and Zakiya Luna (2010).
justice” to “become more important than potentially divisive identities” (10). By interacting with others within the space of a coalition committed to undermining oppression, members learn shared knowledge and mutual respect. However, this ethics—if we want to call it that—emerges out of a self-reflexive or prefigurative political commitment to undermining oppression.

Developing this internal ethics further enables them to achieve the external goals of the coalition. In this sense, forging alliances at the interpersonal (ethical) level—within the space of the coalition—comes hand-in-hand with working toward transforming external oppressive structures. Indeed, it seems this commitment to transforming external oppressive structures actually guides (or at least ought to guide) internal coalitional behavior.

One particularly helpful example from the case studies is Christopher Bickel’s account of the Student Coalition that formed at Indiana University in 1997. Bickel’s findings reveal that women of color feminist coalitions were by no means the only social justice activist groups approaching coalition politics as a kind of politico-ethical encounter. What is more, Bickel’s account also provides a nice contrast to the accounts given in Theory and Event (2012). Unlike the emphasis placed on “undecidability,” “unimaginability,” and “unpredictability” by many Theory and Event contributors, Bickel provides a full account of the motivation behind the coalition’s formation and its internal functioning.

As Bickel narrates it, having been an active participant, the students had a clear understanding of the interlocking nature of oppressive forces both on campus and in wider society. Echoing Reagon and Smith, Bickel recounts:

28 See case studies by Burack (2001) and Quintero (2001). For other empirical work on this ethical point, see Kline (2008), Neumann (2008), Nadasen (2008), Carroll (2008), Bevacqua (2008), Kaminski (2008), and Cole and Luna (2010).

29 See Lynes (2012), Al-Saji (2012), and Manning (2012).
From past experience, we knew that if we organized separately, and around single-issue platforms, our ability to restructure radically oppressive power relations at IU [Indiana University] would remain limited at best and counterproductive at worst. The institution that we were fighting against was far too powerful and complex for any one organization to confront. […] We decided that the way to contest the university was to develop a broad-based coalition, grounded in democratic, grassroots organizing that simultaneously confronted multiple forms of oppression at the university. (Bickel 2001: 212)

Their understanding of the interlocking nature of the oppressive systems at work required them to break out of single-issue platforms in favor of a more broad-based political commitment to social justice. Additionally, the Student Coalition was organized around what Paulo Freire calls “dialogics” (Bickel also cites Lorde 1984 and Anzaldúa 1990 when outlining this idea), or a “nonhierarchical method of praxis where people come together to speak with rather than for each other” (213). In this way, the political commitment of the coalition was turned in on the coalition itself. “The dialogical method of organizing illuminated not only how we were oppressed, but also how we were in complicity with oppressive systems of power…” (213). Their political commitment to social justice and democratic equality guided the formation, direction, and internal dynamics of the coalition. It therefore opened up possibilities for individual coalition members to engage in the emotional labor and transformation that is crucial to politico-ethical visions of coalition politics.

As Bickel reports, they started to “develop bonds that transcended boundaries of race, class, gender and sexuality” which compelled them to attend one another’s events (215). Drawing from his experience in this student coalition, Bickel captures the essence of a politico-ethical vision of coalition building.

If our goal is to have a democratic university that involves everybody in the decision-making process, then it is necessary to form coalitions that reflect this objective. In other words, the means we use must always coincide with the ends we want to accomplish. By creating a coalition that embodied the goals of the movement in its day-to-day activities, we were trying to provide an example of a radically democratic organization that crossed social identity lines. (215) (emphasis added)
Like Combahee, the student coalition acted as a prefigurative political space in which the political goals it forms to achieve were enacted in the space of the coalition itself.\(^{30}\)

The empirical work on activist coalition politics examined here further corroborates the vision of politico-ethical coalition politics sketched by Reagon in her 1981 speech. While Reagon and other women of color feminists often discuss coalition politics within the scope of feminist coalition politics, empirical findings suggest that this notion of coalition has by no means been limited to feminist-only coalitions. This finding should come as no surprise given the fact that one of the main points about feminist coalition politics for women of color feminists was that feminist-only groups must be reconceived in coalitional terms wherein feminist politics is always already practiced at the level of multiple and overlapping coalitional efforts. As we have seen here, such coalitional efforts have been under way since at least the 1970s.

**Conclusion**

By situating Reagon’s renowned coalition speech in relation to her women of color feminist contemporaries, I have located a theory of coalition politics that may attend to the practical problems confronting political theorists such as Coles, Tampio, Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, and others without obscuring politics in favor of ethics. In line with other post-Marxist coalition theorists, Coles proceeds from the “surplus of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 1)—or the insufficiency of categories such as “class” to contain the variety of social justice struggles in the current moment. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Coles takes seriously the practical challenges this surplus poses for a united leftist politics. Like the many women of color authors introduced here, Coles moves beyond the “surplus of the social” to the immediate

\(^{30}\) Articles across the journals I surveyed further corroborated this emphasis on activist coalitions being prefigurative political spaces. For a good example of this argument, see especially MacLean (1999).
challenge to coalitional efforts imposed by difference—what I have termed Reagon’s challenge. To overcome this challenge, and again in step with women of color feminists, Coles therefore conceives of coalition as a space marked by both political and ethical commitment.

However, I have shown that in turning away from Reagon and toward Nietzsche to interpret the relationship between politics and ethics, Coles misconstrues it. Specifically, he misreads Reagon on two important points. First, he underestimates the implications that follow from the distinction Reagon draws between homes and coalitions. Unlike what may occur in “home” spaces, Reagon is adamant that interactions between coalition members will likely not be characterized by love, acceptance, or generosity. Second, he misreads Reagon’s emphasis on giving as an ethical commitment to receptive generosity; I have argued that it should instead be read as a self-reflexive political commitment to undermining oppression. Through this critical engagement, I have uncovered a nascent theory of coalition as politico-ethical encounter situated at the very heart of Reagon’s coalition speech. Though I have followed Coles in turning away from Reagon in order to develop a more complete theory of coalition politics, I have parted ways with him in his march toward Nietzsche.

As I have argued here, the work of women of color feminists and other social justice activists supports a nuanced and rich vision of coalition as politico-ethical encounter. Taking seriously the challenge and danger of working in coalition with multiple subjugated groups, these scholars and activists are adamant that such spaces be marked by a fundamental political commitment to undermining oppression in its varied guises. Such a political commitment, they show us, necessarily engenders a coalitional ethics characterized by self-reflexivity. In addition to supporting the idea that left-oriented activist politics are rooted fundamentally in a self-reflexive political commitment to undermining oppression, this literature expands on an idea only hinted at
by Reagon; that is, that beyond the rhetorical advantage in distinguishing homes from coalitions, homes serve as an important training ground for politico-ethical coalition politics. As suggested by Reagon, Smith, Lorde, and Mohanty, the symbiotic movement between a coalitional ethics and a coalitional politics is best understood when the concept of coalition is infused at the level of “home” and “identity” – in short, at the level of ontology. It is therefore to questions of identity and consciousness that I now turn.
Chapter 4

Coalition from the Inside Out: Struggling Toward Coalitional Identity, Developing Coalitional Consciousness

There were people who came south to work in the movement who were not Black. Most of them were white when they came. Before it was over, that category broke up—you know, some of them were Jewish, not simply white, and some others even changed their names. Say if it was Mary when they came South, by the time they were finished it was Maria, right? It’s called finding yourself.


In the speech from which the above epigraph was taken, Bernice Johnson Reagon recounts her experiences working in coalition with multiple subjugated groups and white supporters during the civil rights movement, making a compelling case for engaging in the hard and, at times, dangerous work of social justice coalition politics. This “danger” for Reagon inheres primarily in the fact of working as a Black woman in coalition with people who may be invested in her continued subjugation—Black men on account of her gender, and white women on account of her race. Additionally, and particularly for those who occupy relatively privileged positions within society (for instance, white, college-educated men and women who came South to work in the civil rights movement), Reagon suggests here that this danger also inheres in the likelihood of losing oneself (or at least one sense of oneself) to the cause—i.e., losing “Mary” to “Maria.” While such a transformation certainly poses a certain existential threat to “Mary,” Reagon depicts this transformation as a positive thing: “it’s called finding yourself,” she tells us. This willingness to shift from one self to the other, I will argue here, is a crucial component—a prerequisite even—to successful social justice coalition politics.
In this brief passage, then, Reagon points us in the direction of an important aspect of successful politico-ethical coalition politics that I gestured toward in Chapter Three and wish to develop more fully in this chapter: that is, the ability, and indeed necessity, of cultivating a multiple and shifting *coalitional identity* and, in this sense, to engage in politico-ethical coalition politics from the *inside out*. Reagon, of course, is not the only woman of color feminist we have seen who points us in this direction. Both Barbara Smith (1983) and Reagon (1983) argue that coalition politics actually begins in the more intimate and familiar space of the “home.” While this “home” space may refer to women of color-only spaces wherein women gain the strength and critical consciousness to understand and contest multiple and fluid systems of power, this “home” space may also refer to an even more intimate space within oneself. This is why I suggested in Chapter Three that the distinction Reagon draws between homes and coalitions was rhetorical and not actual. She uses it as a metaphor to make the case for moving from identity politics to coalition politics. And yet, I also demonstrated that women of color have always been well aware of both the love and danger present in home spaces. Reagon picks up on this dual quality in her brief mention of Mary. Home spaces are crucial training grounds for coalition, precisely because they too are marked by struggle, a struggle that mirrors the intimate struggle that one experiences within her own psyche as she transforms from “Mary” to “Maria”.\(^1\) The danger inherent in such a process of existential transformation, I contend, speaks to at least one sense of “danger” evoked by Reagon when describing coalitional spaces.

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\(^1\) Audre Lorde (1984) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) also both seem to be gesturing in this direction. As Lorde states in “Learning from the 60s,” working in social justice activist coalitions requires us to “move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the *outside*, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take *into ourselves*” (Lorde 1984: 135) (emphasis added). Similarly, in *Feminism Without Borders* Mohanty tells us that “meanings of the self are inextricably bound up with our understanding of collectives as social agents” (Mohanty 2003: 122). We must, she insists, sit with the project and challenge of self-definition across the multiple, fragmented, and discontinuous components of who we are before we can imagine collective group politics.
Embedded in Reagon’s 1981 coalition speech we therefore find the beginning of an answer to the perceived crisis of Marxism in all three of its permutations. As I have argued, the crisis of Marxism is thought by many contemporary scholars to unfold on three distinct though interrelated levels: the (1) ontological unfixity of being and the (2) corresponding epistemological undecidability of the social this unfixity engenders, render all identity categories as forever in process, leaving (3) progressive collective politics with no stable identity (i.e., class) around which to unite. Politically, we find in Reagon a powerful call to action in the form of politico-ethical coalition politics that dispenses finally with class-only, race-only, or women-only politics and takes seriously the challenge of collective action among diverse subjugated groups. What has thus far been left unaddressed is how exactly we can be so sure that subjugated peoples are capable of entering into and working successfully within these coalitions. If the multiple, fluid, and “undecidable” structures of power leave subjugated groups permanently unstable or “unfixed,” why are we to believe that they are capable of stabilizing long enough for purposeful political action? Indeed, if all subjects are understood as forever in the process of discursive becoming, as thinkers such as Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe lead us to believe, how are they capable of decisive and directed political action? Does not the tension between the unfixity of being and knowing and the fixity of left-oriented social justice politics again rear its head?

I contend that Reagon points the way toward a possible answer to these ontological and epistemological challenges (note: not crises). Specifically, Reagon and other women of color feminists help us to locate politics within ontology: that is, within identity. However, the way in which they go about doing this profoundly reconfigures the notion of ontological unfixity on offer by thinkers such as Laclau and Mouffe, Deleuze and Guattari, and Butler. By reconceiving
ontological complexity and fluidity outside of notions of discursive unfixity, indeterminacy, or undecidability, this rich body of work by women of color feminists offers a vision of coalition politics that stretches well beyond Butler’s notion of coalition as spectacle. Refocusing on identity, I will demonstrate, need not confine us to notions of politics that center only on the possibility of unpredictable ontological disturbance. While such disruptions are certainly welcome and unequivocally political, the politics of ontology, women of color feminists help us to understand, centers on a decisive political struggle toward self-definition, toward unity, and toward coherence. “Being” (simply existing or living) for these women is itself a struggle, and specifically a political struggle across contradiction, violence, and ambiguity, and always toward coherence and self-definition. Learning to struggle toward unity, I will show, shapes their understanding (their epistemology) of the complicated and interconnected world in which they are situated. The coalitional consciousness they acquire through this process prepares them to confront the challenges inherent to politico-ethical coalition politics.

Politico-ethical coalition politics, I will argue here, both depends on and mirrors an internal (and psychological) journey that takes one through and across her multiple and shifting selves. By struggling toward an ontological center (toward a coherent self), despite the multiplicity, discontinuity, and contradictions that one encounters along the way, one becomes acquainted with her coalitional identity. This ontological state of being, I will argue, generates a corresponding coalitional consciousness, or epistemology, that guides one toward politico-ethical coalition politics with other subjugated groups working to undermine oppression. After developing notions of coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness in Parts I and II of this chapter, I end, in Part III, by turning to an example of how this struggle unfolds for a white woman, using Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiography of her coming to consciousness. Like
Reagon’s “Mary,” Pratt opens herself to self-transformation and in this way engages in politico-ethical coalition politics from the inside out.

**Part I) Coalitional Identity: Rethinking Ontological Unfixity**

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.

> – Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984: 120-121)

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the women’s, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web. Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.


In this section, I develop a notion of feminist *coalitional identity* that, I argue, is particularly exemplified in the work of early women of color feminism and those influenced by this scholarship. While this conception of identity shares some things in common with the ontology of multiplicity and complexity characteristic of other contemporary theorizations of coalition by Laclau and Mouffe, Nicholas Tampio, and Butler, I will argue that a coalitional identity remains distinct from such theorizations of ontological pluralism in its refusal to take on the characteristic of unfixity. Such a refusal, I will argue in the subsequent section, informs a corresponding resistance to epistemological undecidability.
Though I am certainly not the first to understand identity “coalitionally,”\(^2\) this project is an original attempt to both assert and refine a theory of coalitional identity as a necessary component of politico-ethical coalition politics, and to locate the origin of this notion firmly within women of color feminism. While certain contemporary scholars use the word “coalitional” to describe particular forms of identity, consciousness, and even feminist scholarship, few have taken the time to explain or justify why “coalitional” proves to be such an apt descriptor in such instances. Instead, it seems to be taken for granted by many scholars that this concept, even in its more peculiar adjectival forms, is already in circulation and adequate for describing identity. In this chapter, I will show why this concept proves so instructive for describing the kind of political subject and corresponding political consciousness that are required for successful politico-ethical coalition politics.

While it may strike one as odd to use the word coalition as an adjective—to describe identity or consciousness as “coalitional”—I believe something rather valuable is gained by holding onto the concept of coalition here. As I defined it in the Introduction to the dissertation, I am taking “coalition” to mean the intentional coming together of diverse or heterogeneous parts for the purpose of attaining a shared political goal. Two crucial components of this process when speaking specifically of social justice activist coalitions, I argued, are the notion of “choosing” to come together for a shared political commitment and the fact of profound “existential transformation” through such a process.\(^3\) As I developed in Chapter Three, other important components to this understanding of coalition include impermanence and struggle. It is precisely


\(^3\) See the Oxford English Dictionary online for “coalition,” definitions 1 and 4.
the emphasis on wholeness and focused or directed action that is lost in other contemporary articulations of the relationship between identity, political consciousness, and collective politics. “Coalition,” I will argue, attends to multiplicity and ambiguity without foreclosing ontological wholeness (fixity), epistemological decidability, and political determinacy (directionality).

I am aided in this endeavor by a recent Signs article by Anna Carastathis, “Identity Categories as Potential Coalitions” (2013), in which she also takes for granted that this concept is already in circulation. Carastathis follows Crenshaw (1991) in conceptualizing group identity categories, such as the identity group “African-American,” as coalitions (Carastathis 2013: 941). By this she means that such groups are “internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences and dissonances and by internal as well as external relations of power” (942). In instances such as these, then, a “coalitional identity” refers specifically to a group identity, not the identity of a particular individual. The value in conceptualizing such identity groups as “coalitions” rests in “coalition’s” ability to conjure up notions of difference and diversity and to thereby avoid the essentializing tendencies of traditional identity politics. While all group members may be African-American, even this identity group is not a homogenous unity; all identity categories, Crenshaw and others have argued, are shot through by multiple and shifting differences (race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, etc.). It is for this reason that groups such as African-Americans are best thought of as coalitions.

Group identity is not, however, the only way in which Carastathis uses the word “coalition” in this article. She argues that the same form of coming together, or coalescing, that occurs at the level of identity groups can also occur at the level of “one’s own embodied identity” (Carastathis 2013: 960). She states:

To the extent that our identities are constructed by oppression and by resistance, members of multiply oppressed groups face the existential challenge of constructing internal as well as external bridges. Bringing together the aspects of one’s identity that have been falsely separated
(both in the institutions of dominant society and in single-issue political movements) amounts to forming a *coalition of one*, in which one is aligned with all parts of oneself, especially those we are taught to deny, repress, or even annihilate. (960) (emphasis added)

By bringing together the multiple, and at times contradictory and even hostile, components of one’s identity (of her competing and shifting selves), Carastathis argues, she enters into a coalition with herself. This is something that “outsiders,” and especially those suffering from multiple oppressions, have learned to do by necessity as a kind of survival strategy (960). Such outsiders must fight against an imposed fragmentation of their multiple selves, and instead struggle toward a sense of wholeness or merging—of coalition—within themselves. This “coalition of one,” as Carastathis calls it, describes an alliance that mirrors the political alliance that one has entered into with others in the context of social justice coalitions.

By examining the solidarity activism of a US-based organization committed to struggling against multiple and interlocking systems of oppression—Somos Hermanas (We Are Sisters)—Carastathis concludes that these two levels of coalition form simultaneously: as one works in social justice coalitions with others, she learns to embrace her own coalitional self. Recounting her experience working in Somos Hermanas, one member says:

“I believe in coalitions because my survival is dependent on my ability to close the gaps between the different worlds that converge in me, and on my ability to cross over from my queer world or my Puerto Rican world or my women’s world and build alliances. It is only on the strength of those alliances that I can be whole—a Puerto Rican lesbian living in a straight, sexist, and racist world” (Vásquez 1993, 221). (quoted in Carastathis 2013: 960)

For Vásquez, the experience of working in Somos Hermanas helped her to form her own coalition of one. As she recounts elsewhere, “it integrated all of [her identities] in a living, joyful, experience” (in Carastathis 2013: 957). Additionally, it was her commitment to this process of forming a *coalitional identity* (a coalition of one) that also enabled Vásquez to remain committed

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to the hard work of coalescing with others within the space of Somos Hermanas. Indeed, the knowledge gained through this ontological experience—of integration across stark internal divides—both prepares and motivates her to engage in the hard work of coalescing with others. She believes in coalition work, she tells us, because her very survival depends on it. By evoking the language of “survival” here, Vásquez helps us to better understand at least one sense of the “danger” inherent in coalition politics; as she suggests here, Vásquez’s survival as a coherent self depends on her willingness and ability to embrace the work of coalition, both on an internal level and with other members of Somos Hermanas. Coalition therefore occurs simultaneous on these two levels.

If we understand activist social justice coalitions as occurring only between multiple and differently situated subjugated individuals or groups, then it certainly seems odd to imagine something called “a coalition of one.” How, we might wonder, does an individual actually enter into a “coalition” with her multiple selves? While for some it may seem that using “coalitional” in this context attenuates the meaning, it is significant that when social justice activists working in coalitions with other subjugated groups, such as Vásquez in the above passage, describe their experience within such spaces they speak of needing to “close the gaps” or “cross” “between the different worlds that converge” inside them. While Vásquez may be thinking here of actually crossing into the different political communities of which she is a part (Puerto Rican, lesbian, anti-sexist, anti-racist, etc.), there is also a sense that this crossing is occurring within the space of her own mind, within the space of her own psyche, and within the space of her own heart. For Vásquez, this internal merging cannot be separated from the external merging that takes place within Somos Hermanas.
As she says, making these connections made her feel “whole.” It is this struggle toward coherence and wholeness—this merging across deep and at times treacherous internal divides—that, I contend, conjures up the notion of “coalition.” The sense of “coalition” evoked in such instances is one that aligns with the first definition of the word, in nature as “the union or combination of separate parts or elements into one mass, body, or whole.”

Understanding this way, it seems less strange that the different parts that make up who we are would merge (in a coalition of one) to form a coherent sense of self. While it might seem at this point that every individual—insofar as we accept that all individuals are multiplicities in this way—necessarily forms a coalition of one, I resist this understanding. A coalitional self, I contend, is not just someone with multiple identities; a coalitional self is someone who is engaged in conscious and directed struggle toward coherence or wholeness and who is open to self-transformation through this process.

The fact that the example Carastathis draws from in this article is one of women of color feminists attempting to work across race, class, sexuality, and national barriers should not go unnoticed here. References to notions of multiple and plural identity are ubiquitous across women of color feminism. What is particularly remarkable about these theorizations of multiple identity, however, is the way in which these visions of multiple, discontinuous, decentered, and plural selves are understood as simultaneously multiple and whole. As we have already seen through Somos Hermanas, in their struggle toward unity or self-definition, women of color

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5 See the Oxford English Dictionary online for “coalition,” definition 1.

6 The authors and texts that could be referenced here are too large to cover. This theme is pervasive across women of color feminist anthologies such as Home Girls (Smith 1983), This Bridge Called My Back (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), But Some of Us Are Brave (Hull, Scott, Smith 1982), and Making Face, Making Soul / Hacienda Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color (Anzaldúa 1990) Also see: Lorde (1982 and 1984); Lee Yeun (1995); Sandra Harding (1995); Lisa Bowleg (1995); Anzaldúa (1983, 1987, and 2009); Lugones (2000); and Barvosa (2008).
feminists *exist* in an internal coalitional frame. While it may be the case that all individuals experience a sense of multiple identity, or of being multiple, and at times contradictory, selves at once—such as a mother, a daughter, a manager, a subordinate, an athlete, an academic, etc.—an experience of negotiating multiple and interlocking systems of oppression simultaneously, all while trying to hold onto a coherent sense of self, is particularly heightened in the case of women of color.\(^7\) Thus, I contend that the coalition selves developed by certain women of color feminists offer valuable insight into how to move beyond ontological unfixity without losing sight of ontological multiplicity, complexity, and fluidity.

Women of color feminists, I will show, become *fixed* in their multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction as *coalitional selves*. In this sense, the notion of coalitional identity put in circulation\(^8\) by women of color feminists such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa breaks the tension between unfixity and fixity characteristic of contemporary articulations of activist coalition politics. Such a notion, I will argue, is characterized by ontologies of both: (a) embodied multiplicity—or the notion that coalitional selves are whole, complete, and coherent *in their* multiplicity; and (b) ongoing *struggle* toward self-definition.

As Audre Lorde puts it in the first of the two epigraphs that began this section, women of color experience a multiple identity comprising many different selves. Despite attempts to “pluck out” different aspects of her self and have them stand in for the whole, the many different


\(^8\) I say “put in circulation by women of color feminists” because few women of color feminist authors actually use the phrase “coalitional identity” (“coalition of one,” or “coalitional self”). Nevertheless, it is precisely their inclination toward theorizing identity as a kind of coalition that I believe differentiates theories of multiple identity on offer by thinkers such as Anzaldúa, Lorde, and Lugones (“mestiza” or “border identity” for Anzaldúa and a sense of multiple or plural identity for Lorde and many others) from other contemporary articulations by thinkers such as Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, and those influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, and others. I am following Carastathis in naming this notion of identity a coalitional identity, though others have utilized similar phrases. See footnote 2.
“ingredients” or “parts” of her identity, she tells us, must and can be integrated into a meaningful,” even if somewhat uneasy, “whole” (Lorde 1984: 120-121). By bringing together her many different selves and allowing movement across these different “sources of her living,” she attests, she is able to present herself as whole so that she may work in the service of political struggle (121). Doing this, however, is never easy. Learning how to “hold onto all parts of [her]...in spite of the pressure to express only one to the exclusion of others” (143), has been a struggle for Lorde. However, the challenge does not seem to rest in the trauma of existing as internally heterogeneous. To the contrary, Lorde is “comfortable” with the many different “ingredients” of her “identity” (120). As was the case for Vásquez, the challenge for Lorde inheres in resisting “externally imposed” definition and fragmentation (120). In this sense, it is not ontological fixity (in the form of wholeness, coherence, or definition) that poses a problem for her; it is only resisting externally imposed definition, and struggling toward her own self-definition that proves challenging.

The kind of multiple identity Lorde is describing here bears a striking resemblance to the notion of border or mestiza identity developed by Anzaldúa also in the early 1980s. We can make out the first strokes of Anzaldúa’s theory of mestiza identity in the second epigraph that began this section, taken from one of the essays she wrote for This Bridge Called My Back, entitled “La Prieta” (1983). I want to examine this epigraph and the longer passage from which it was taken because I believe many of the key aspects of coalitional identity first emerge in this early rendition of mestiza consciousness. It reads:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. “Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,” say the members of my race. “Your allegiance is to the Third World,” say my Black

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9 While this book came out in 1987, many of the ideas on identity presented in it first appeared in articles/chapters published in the early 1980s, thus putting these concepts directly in conversation with the work of Audre Lorde and other women of color writing in edited collections such as This Bridge Called My Back (1983).
and Asian friends. “Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the women’s, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.


Anzaldúa is many-armed and many-legged, just as the spider woman metaphor demands.

Border dwellers such as herself have “multiple” or “dual” identities (Anzaldúa 1987: 16, 63, 79). Her face, like the reality in which she lives, contains a multiplicitous character: “Y mi cara, como la realidad, tenía un character multiplice” (44). Anzaldúa sees the world from multiple perspectives simultaneously and often these multiple identities seem to be at war with one another: her multiple allegiances, she describes above, seem to want to fragment her. However, like Lorde, Anzaldúa resists the external pressure to split or fragment the many pieces of her self. While she fears externally imposed fragmentation for the sake of definition, her refusal to accept external definition, she is quite adamant, does not leave her ambivalent or confused. Ambivalence and confusion, she clarifies, only emerge for her in moments of externally imposed definition, moments that refuse her embodied multiplicity.

As the metaphor of the “spider woman” suggests, despite the multiplicity inherent in her identity, Anzaldúa is an embodied whole, gravitating toward a center. The spider with many legs and many arms, each resting in a different reality, represents this embodied multiplicity. There is a center or whole (a “self”) and an acting agent. Inherent to being a “border woman,” we learn in Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, is the ability to keep “intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity” (Anzaldúa 1987: 16). Anzaldúa spends much of Borderlands recounting this very process of locating her center–of finding her “own intrinsic nature buried
under the personality that has been imposed on [her]” as a *mestiza* or border woman, straddling the *téjas*-Mexican border and two, sometimes three, cultures at once (16). While living within and embracing her multiplicity, Anzaldúa works toward a more whole perspective (79). Through the process of crossing over into the different parts of herself, and accepting her multiplicity, Anzaldúa “suddenly...feel[s] everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. *Completa*” (51). What makes Anzaldúa “whole” or “complete,” I am arguing, is her embodied multiplicity. Once she accepts this multiplicity and learns to move tactically within this space, she becomes whole. In this sense, her existence is not one of “unfixity”; on the contrary, it is one of “fixed” multiplicity.

While many women of color feminists have become comfortable with this process of coalescing toward multiple and shifting centers,¹⁰ they also recount this process as challenging, taxing, and at times even traumatic. For Anzaldúa, her very existence as a border woman is characterized by this “inner struggle” of her self toward a center, toward self-definition (Anzaldúa 1987: preface and 87). As such, her life is “plagued by psychic restlessness” (78). “To live in the Borderlands,” she tells us,

¹⁰ In “Purity, Impurity, and Separation” (1994), María Lugones captures this movement toward a center in the metaphor of curdling. As she reminds us, the process of curdling is not just the act of ingredients separating (such as in mayonnaise when the oil and water separate); instead, it is a process in which the ingredients “coalesce toward oil or toward water” (Lugones 1994: 459). In this sense, curdling is “a matter of different degrees of coalescence,” not simply separation (459). It is a process of coming together and separating simultaneously, an exercise, she tells us, in both purity and impurity. This process of coalescence or “multiplicity,” as opposed to “fragmentation,” follows the logic of curdling in which the “social world” is understood as “complex and heterogeneous” and each person as “multiple, nonfragmented, embodied” (463). Fragmentation, on the other hand, follows the logic of purity wherein the “social world is both unified and fragmented, homogeneous, hierarchically ordered” (463). Like Lorde and Anzaldúa, Lugones resists all metaphors of fragmentation or split-separation because they conjure up notions of distinct and separate parts. The metaphor of coalescing, or curdling, on the other hand, allows for coming together across multiplicity and heterogeneity. For Lugones, individuals are best thought of as multiple flowing particles that can and will coalesce, or curdle, into different and shifting formations (of self) that, in their creativity, may resist domination in the form of externally imposed definition (469).
“means you / are neither hispana indígena negra española / ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed / caught in the crossfire between camps / while carrying all five races on your back / not knowing which side to turn to, run from; / To live in the Borderlands means knowing / that the indígena in you, betrayed for 500 years, / is no longer speaking to you, / that the Mexican call you rajetes, / that denying the Anglo inside you / is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black; / [...] In the Borderlands / you are the battleground / where enemies are kin to each other; / you are at home, a stranger. (194-195) (emphasis in original)

As we can see here, living in the Borderlands is a traumatic experience because one is constantly caught in the crossfire between competing allegiances and competing logics. Such a place is an uncomfortable territory to live in because it is a place of contradiction, hatred, anger, and exploitation (16). To live as Anzaldúa does—as a “mita’y mita’” (a “half and half,” what queer women were called in South Texas)—she tells us elsewhere, is to embody contradiction, to live as “two in one body,” representing the coming together of opposites, which produces an ontological state of being “neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrifies, a work of nature inverted” (19). Embodying the contradictions of opposites, her existence is one of ontological struggle toward self-definition and wholeness, despite internal heterogeneity and contradiction. This struggle, we learn above, is in fact a “home” struggle; even at “home,” she tells us, she feels like a “stranger.”

This is the same struggle that Audre Lorde speaks of when she urges women of color to “sharpen self-definition” despite how painful and difficult this process may be (Lorde 1984: 122-123). For, she tells us, it is only through the “coming together of self-actualized individuals...that any real advances can be made” (Lorde 1984: 46) (my emphasis). As was the case for Vásquez, there is a sense here that struggling toward self-definition is very much part of, or even a kind of prerequisite for, social justice activism. Both Lorde and Anzaldúa live in a kind of battlefield, thus forcing them to develop the necessary coping skills to survive such an ontological state. The knowledge gained here, I will argue shortly, informs a coalitional consciousness that not only
helps one to struggle toward a center but also helps one to struggle in coalitions with others toward social justice.

The emphasis that Anzaldúa places on preserving the integrity of a center, despite how traumatic this process may be, deserves our attention. It is here that I believe Anzaldúa’s multiple self emerges as a *coalitional identity*. For something to be “coalitional” in the way I am using it, it must embody a political struggle of multiple, heterogeneous, and even discontinuous parts toward a center, or a shared political goal. The shared goal for women of color is self-definition (internal coherence or completeness); as Cynthia Burack has put it, it is to move toward “wholeness” through an “act of will and creativity” (Burack 2004: 147).

In this sense, this notion of identity parts ways with those articulated by Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, and many others insofar as it does not reject the notion of a fixed or defined self. Recall that Laclau and Mouffe follow Althusser in affirming the “incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity” (LM 1985: 104). Butler (1990) has a similar understanding of the self: following Nietzsche, she sees it as ultimately unstable and indefinable. As I argued in Chapter Two, this vision of strict ontological “unfixity” (LM 1985: 85), however, sits in tension for Laclau and Mouffe with strong appeals to a kind of political fixity in the form of Left-oriented coalitions through hegemonic articulation. Laclau and Mouffe assert that despite the incomplete character of all individuals, individual selves and groups of individuals will come together in decisive action to form “chains of equivalence” that will together make up a Leftist hegemony capable of contesting the hegemony of neo-liberalism (xvi).  

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12 We can find similar moments of recoil in Butler’s work wherein she suggests that despite the radical unfixity of the category women, women can and will come together to fight for women’s rights (see, for instance, Butler 1995: 49). Interestingly, however, Butler abandons any sense of political directionality when actually theorizing notions of antifoundational coalition politics. In this discussion, she applies unfixity consistently across her ontology and
What Laclau and Mouffe struggle to articulate, however, is why or how radically incomplete and unstable identities will come together in the first place. Butler has struggled with the same problematic, taking for granted that coalitions simply will form rather than articulating why and how this may occur (Butler 1990). Due to the discursive undecidability and ultimate unfixity of all identities, Laclau and Mouffe argue that this process, which results in momentary sutured or fixed groups, must originate in an “external democratic discourse” that is capable of temporarily arresting ontological unfixity (LM 1985: 154-155) (my emphasis). I contend that women of color feminists such as Anzaldúa and Lorde offer an alternative social ontology wherein the process of coalescing around a center may be thought of as an internal process. While this vision of coalitional identity is similar to Laclau and Mouffe’s insofar as identity is understood as “open” and “politically negotiable,” it parts ways with their notion of identity on two points: first, identity can be understood here as internally coherent, whole, or complete and in this way not eternally open; and, second, this coherence is only achieved by an internal struggle.

These discontinuous parts of oneself, I contend, do not just find themselves together; one must work and struggle toward a shared center, toward unity. These actions are chosen and directed. This ontological picture of multiplicity in unity therefore challenges ontological pictures handed down by Nietzsche, Althusser, and Laclau and Mouffe. It also parts ways with feminist articulations of antifoundational (Butler 1990) and inessential (Lloyd 2005 and Falbo 2008) coalition politics informed by similar theoretical commitments. Like Butler, Moya Lloyd (2005) attempts to move beyond essentialist identity politics and toward a notion of “inessential politics (Butler 1990). In later work, however, she adopts a kind of political directionality but only insofar as she has already abandoned the notion of ontological unfixity in favor of a notion of mutually shared precarity (Butler 2004, 2009, 2011). As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, Butler’s inconsistency here points to the philosophical tension that I have found to be characteristic of contemporary articulations of activist coalition politics that rely on notions of ontology of unfixity.
coalitions” that refuses both stable notions of identity as well as pre-given common causes or shared interests as the basis of group politics (see 2005: 151).\textsuperscript{13} The major difference between these articulations of coalition and those of women of color feminists is the willingness of the latter to embrace notions of ontological fixity, epistemological decidability, and political determinacy. While Lloyd acknowledges that Reagon’s work “prefigures” some of the major concerns motivating the notion of “the subject-in-process” that she develops,\textsuperscript{14} she refuses the sense of political direction embedded in Reagon’s, and other women of color feminist’s, notions of multiple, or as I have called it, coalitional identity (see Lloyd 2005: 153). Instead, Lloyd proceeds from what she calls a “loss of ontological certainty” that she believes is entailed in the notion of a “subject-in-process” (154). It is precisely this notion of uncertainty, however, that I have set out to challenge through the notion of coalitional identity.

Though she engages women of color feminism through the work of Chela Sandoval, Lloyd fails to appreciate the nuanced conception of coalitional identity on offer by women of color feminism\textsuperscript{15} by insisting that such a conception resists “completeness” or “wholeness” (155). On the contrary, and as I have argued here, this body of work is remarkable in its ability to hold onto completeness, and reimagine this wholeness in its multiplicity. If we move away from Butler, Mouffe and Laclau, Lloyd, and others\textsuperscript{16} understanding identity as permanently unfixed,

\textsuperscript{13} Falbo (2008) makes a similar argument in “On Iris Young’s Subject of inclusion: Rethinking political inclusion.”


\textsuperscript{15} Lloyd follows Donna Haraway in her assertion that if our conception of identity changes, then so too must our conception of politics. For Haraway, this leads to a notion of cyborg coalition politics, exemplified, she argues, in women of color feminism. There is some question to whether Haraway also fails to appreciate the nuance of notions of identity within women of color feminism in “A Manifesto of Cyborgs.” See Sandoval (2000: 174 and 208, footnote 32).

\textsuperscript{16} See Haraway (1990) and Falbo (2008).
and instead reconceive it coalitionally, an ontology of multiplicity makes possible both complete and fixed selves as well as directed group politics. This path, Anzaldúa tells us, is a two-way movement that involves “going deep into the self” and “expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society” (Anzaldúa 1983: 208). Such a path, I will now demonstrate, shapes a corresponding shifting, tactical, self-conscious, and purposeful coalitional consciousness.

Part II) Coalitional Consciousness: Rethinking Epistemological Undecidability

U.S. third world feminists must recognize that our learned sensitivity to the mobile webs of power is a skill that, once developed, can become a sophisticated form of oppositional consciousness. This is a form of oppositional consciousness which creates the opportunity for flexible, dynamic and tactical responses, it is another critical theory for political action which allows us no single conceptualization of our position in society. Rather, it focuses us instead upon the process of the circulation of power, on the skill of reading its moves, and on the recognition that a new morality and effective opposition resides in a self-conscious flexibility of identity and of political action which is capable, above all else, of tactically intervening in the moves of power in the name of egalitarian social relations.


As I argued in the previous section, women of color feminists describe an ontology of both multiplicity and contradiction and continuous struggle toward coherence and self-definition. In attempting this “synthesis” of one’s multiple selves, a unique epistemology—or way of understanding oneself, the world, and one’s place in the world—is born (Anzaldúa 1987: 79). Echoing Luxemburg, this consciousness is in fact born out of ontological struggle; it is one’s creative response to her inherent multiplicity and internal contradiction. This “mestiza consciousness,” as Anzaldúa calls it, works to break down binaries and rigid ways of understanding that fail to incorporate the multiplicity, ambiguity, and discontinuity that marks

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17 Lugones (2010) develops this point in “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” See especially page 755.
her existence as a coalitional self (Anzaldúa 1987: 79). This particular epistemology, I will argue, parts ways with the epistemology of undecidability characteristic of many contemporary articulations of activist coalition politics.

While this way of understanding and interpreting one’s place in the world demands that one “develop a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (Anzaldúa 1987: 79), it also guides one toward concrete self-understanding and decisive action.

The new mestiza ... learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode... Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (79)

A mestiza consciousness actually creates something out of contradiction and ambivalence. She learns to be different selves in different contexts. She learns to shift between her selves. She sits with contradiction, but only long enough to learn how to move creatively within, through, and outside of it. While women of color emphasize acquiring tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction, they do not, I contend, advocate an epistemology of undecidability. Just because the self is understood here as decentered, does not mean that it cannot and will not re-center itself. She does this by “remaining flexible” and shifting in and out of different “habitual formations” and different ways of thinking (79). Through such acts of “kneading,” “uniting and joining,” Anzaldúa emerges as “both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (81). The flexibility of coalitional selves, I am arguing, inheres not in their ability to permanently resist definition, but rather in their ability to move between multiple selves and to assume different mobile and tactical subjectivities depending on the demands of the situation. In short, it inheres in an acquired coalitional consciousness that enables them to decide within a context of
multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction. This emphasis on decisive action, I believe, distinguishes a coalitional consciousness from an epistemology of undecidability.

Women of color feminist theorists such as Anzaldúa and Lugones have variously described this epistemological process as one of “crossing,” “weaving,” and “world-traveling.” “It is only when she is on the other side,” Anzaldúa tells us, “and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts, that she sees things in a different perspective…It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch” (Anzaldúa 1987: 49). In order for one to assume a coalitional consciousness, one must be willing to “cross over” or travel between the different components of oneself, but also across the divides that separate her from others (49). Women of color, Lugones, Anzaldúa, Lorde, and Sandoval all argue, are particularly adept at such forms of traveling. The double or multiple consciousness that women of color develop due to their embodied multiplicity prepares them to embrace flexibility as a creative strength.\(^{18}\)

This capacity to see the “deep structure [of oppression] below the surface” first emerges out of necessity when one finds herself “up against a wall” with “all sorts of oppressions coming at [her],” helping her to discern “when the next person is going to slap [her] or lock [her] away” (Anzaldúa 1987: 38-39). It helps them, for instance, to know when to tone down or play up different aspects of their identity depending on the situation. In this sense, we can understand it as a “kind of survival tactic that people, caught between worlds, unknowingly cultivate” (39). While this faculty is required of the outsider by the logic of oppression, when such traveling becomes purposeful and tactical instead of a subconscious coping mechanism for surviving the conditions of one’s situation (see Lugones 2003: 77 and 89), it takes on a uniquely coalitional form. As Anzaldúa argues, women of color can and must “turn this fusion or confusion of the

individual/collectivity around and use it as a tool for collective strength” (Anzaldúa 2009: 144). This unique understanding (consciousness) emerges as an ontological core or center; in this sense, a coalitional identity is fixed simultaneously in its multiplicity and complexity and its ability to move creatively and tactically across this multiplicity—that is, in its coalitional consciousness.

In the epigraph that began this section, Sandoval writes that U.S. third world feminists’ “learned sensitivity to the mobile webs of power” may be understood as a “skill that, once developed, can become a sophisticated form of oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval 1990: 66). In this passage, Sandoval outlines what I understand to be the three primary components of a uniquely coalitional consciousness.19 Sandoval writes here as the secretary to The National Third World Women’s Alliance, a group of women of color who attended the 1981 NWSA conference and felt that a report documenting the work they had done within their allocated “‘Third World’ women only” consciousness-raising groups was necessary (Sandoval 1990: 60). Despite the conference theme, “Women Respond to Racism,” its hegemonic white structure left women of color marginalized into one homogenous category, “Third world women.” In this report, Sandoval both documents and analyzes their experience working in this group.

Sandoval’s main arguments may therefore be understood as reflecting wider sentiments across women of color feminism, and certainly across the U.S. third world feminists attending the 1981 NWSA conference. Sandoval hopes to develop a theory or, as she will later call it, a methodology, of U.S. third world feminism.20 Absolutely central to this methodology, we learn here, is the epistemological “common ground” discovered through the Third World meeting

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groups that took place there (63, 60). The consensus emerging then—the same year of Reagon’s coalition speech—is one that moves unequivocally in the direction of politico-ethical coalition politics and the coalitional consciousness on which it depends.

Like Anzaldúa, Sandoval recognizes that the particular way of understanding and interpreting the world (as well as the operation of power within the world) forced upon subjugated peoples (such as women of color) may be retooled for something else. This theme of an acquired consciousness that operates as both a blessing and curse is ubiquitous across the writings of people of color. In The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois famously recounts the moment when his “double consciousness,” or his acknowledgment of his “two-ness,” was first thrust on him as a young boy when one of his white classmates refused his visiting card (Du Bois 1999: 10-11). For Du Bois, there was a strong connection between ontology and epistemology. Du Bois’s double-consciousness (epistemology) that allows him to see himself both through his own eyes and through the eyes of others is rooted in an experience of his “two-ness” (ontology); that is, his double and contradictory existence as both an American and a Negro—“two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (11). As was the case for Du Bois, Anzaldúa’s embodied multiplicity (her coalitional identity) engenders a corresponding “mestiza,” or coalitional, consciousness. Such a consciousness, Sandoval recounts, attunes one to the mobile and shifting power structures that work to subjugate women of color on multiple, contradictory, and intersecting planes. This “learned sensitivity” (my emphasis) to the movement of power is the first component of coalitional consciousness (Sandoval 1990: 66). Directly rooted in an ontological experience of multiplicity and contradiction, this component, Anzaldúa, Lorde, and Du Bois all show us, is often experienced in a traumatic register.
Transforming this sensitivity into a learned skill of reading and mapping the “circulation of power” is the second component of coalitional consciousness, what Sandoval calls here a “sophisticated form of oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval 1990: 66). This particular epistemology, she argues in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, is a “mobile, flexible, diasporic force that migrates between contending ideological systems” (Sandoval 2000: 30). It is this acuity that would tell Anzaldúa, for instance, how to balance her multiple “allegiances—to her “Raza,” to the Third World, to women, to lesbians, etc.—in different contexts (Anzaldúa 1983: 205). Ultimately, it guides her toward resisting any one of these allegiances and to embracing, instead, a shifting *mestiza* consciousness. In this sense, it “operates as does a technology—a weapon of consciousness that functions like a compass” allowing us “to chart out the positions available and the directions to move in a large social totality” (30).

With the emphasis here placed on mapping, the connection to Deleuze and Guattari is immediately apparent. As we saw in Chapter Two, politics for Deleuze and Guattari is fundamentally about “diagramming” striated social formations (DG 1987: 140-141, 161). Sandoval similarly tells us that oppositional consciousness offers a “new cartography” or “topography of consciousness in opposition” that charts “psychic and material realities that occupy a particular cultural region” (Sandoval 2000: 54) (emphasis in original). Such diagramming processes, Deleuze and Guattari have argued, open up potential “lines of flight” (DG 1987: 161) wherein “micropolitical” disturbances by various minority groups may occur (469). Sandoval similarly tells us that this “cultural topography delineates a set of critical points within which individuals and groups seeking to transform dominant and oppressive powers can constitute themselves as resistant and oppositional citizen-subjects” (Sandoval 2000: 54)
(emphasis in original). Perhaps once constituted, we may imagine that these oppositional citizen-subjects will cause the kinds of “disturbances” that Deleuze and Guattari have in mind.

However, an important difference between Sandoval’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s epistemologies remains here. While the diagramming process may open up potential “lines of flight,” Deleuze and Guattari are quite explicit that it cannot predict or prescribe these disturbances; instead, it simply opens up possibilities. This is why, despite my strong sympathies with the political project he was attempting, Tampio’s endeavor to impose a left-oriented direction onto Deleuze and Guattarian coalitional assemblages seemed untenable to me. It is on this point of refusing directed (i.e. left-oriented) political action that I believe the epistemology of Deleuze and Guattari (and perhaps also those of Laclau and Mouffe and Butler) differs from the one on offer by women of color feminism; and it is on this point that the third component of coalitional consciousness emerges.

For Sandoval, the particular consciousness of U.S. third world feminists is not only flexible, mobile, and dynamic; it is also self-conscious, tactical, and directed. These latter three interrelated characteristics, I believe, distinguish a coalitional consciousness from notions of epistemological undecidability. As Sandoval states, an oppositional (or coalitional) consciousness, typical of U.S. Third world feminism, focuses us on the “recognition that a new morality and effective opposition resides in a self-conscious flexibility of identity and of political

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21 In his articulation of coalition as left assemblage, Tampio attempts to impose a left-oriented political directionality onto a Deleuze and Guattarian social ontology of unfixity in the form of matter movement. While a social ontology of matter movement can make room for the emergence of what Tampio (2009) calls protean coalitions committed to equality and liberty, I argued in Chapter Two that it certainly cannot prescribe them. What it can do, and especially if we follow Geoffrey Whitehall’s (2004 and 2013) understanding of Deleuze and Guattari, is point in the direction of an epistemology, or way of understanding and interpreting the social world. For Deleuze and Guattari, and scholars such as Whitehall who interpret their work as offering an epistemology (not an ontology), politics is understood as an epistemological process or an exercise in diagramming what exists in society. Such exercises can and will open up “lines of flight” wherein the topography of the social may suddenly be disrupted and redrawn by the actions of minority collectives or coalitions (DG 1987: 161). Tampio, however, does not understand protean coalitions of left assemblages in this register. Inherent to Deleuze and Guattari’s epistemology is a refusal of prescribed political directionality. Tampio seems to overlook this point.
action which is capable, above all else, of **tactically intervening** in the moves of power in the name of egalitarian social relations” (Sandoval 1990: 66) (my emphasis). The act of reading and mapping the circulation of power, we find, is a political act. But, not because mapping power is intrinsically political in the sense that thinkers such as Laclau and Mouffe, Deleuze and Guattari, and Butler may argue; it is political because it moves in a self-conscious and purposeful direction toward undermining oppression (see Burack 2004: 147).

According to Sandoval, this form of mobile consciousness is not “nomadic” in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari speak of (DG 1986: 52); it is instead “cinematographic” (Sandoval 2000: 44). Understood by Sandoval as an art form—as a creative process—coalitional consciousness acquires a sense of direction that is absent from an understanding of nomadic or simply mobile consciousness. It is, as Sandoval puts it, “a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates” (44) (my emphasis). In this sense, it is purposeful, clever, and creative. A coalitional consciousness is not just a sensitivity to the circulation of power, even if this sensitivity proves to be hugely instructive; it is also fundamentally preoccupied with turning this sensitivity into the skill of knowing when and how to disrupt current power structures and reconfigure the social in the name of egalitarian social justice. Echoing Luxemburg, a “theorizing edge” emerges here out of this sensitivity (Luxemburg 2004: 171, 181).

A coalitional consciousness therefore emerges when one self-consciously decides which tactical subjectivity to assume in order to bring about egalitarian social relations. In this sense, this consciousness is purposeful and directed (Sandoval 2000: 62); as Burack puts it, it is an “act of will” (Burack 2004: 147). The ability to read the movement and flow of power that subjugated people acquire out of necessity guides them in reading the “current situation of power”
and then creatively and “self-consciously” “choosing” the best ideological stance to push back against it (60).

To use this skill tactically and effectively, Sandoval tells us, one must have grace, flexibility, and strength (60). The strength to commit to different temporary identities and the flexibility to change these identities depending on what the situation demands are both skills women of color learned out of necessity by way of their embodied multiplicity, or their coalitional identities. This ontology (existence as coalitional selves) forms the basis of a coalitional consciousness that guides one toward a self-conscious, tactical, and collective mode of political engagement. It is in this sense that grace becomes important; the grace, that is, to recognize when to form alliances with others who are also committed to egalitarian social relations (see Sandoval 2000: 60). One’s ability to understand and harness her own shifting selves enables her to form coalitions with others (45). Such coalitional selves, I am arguing, resist an epistemology of undecidability and offer in its stead a decidable and directed epistemology of political movement, what I am calling a coalitional consciousness.

As Sandoval argues throughout her work, this form of coalitional consciousness is particularly exemplified in U.S. Third world feminism. They have used this consciousness, she argues, to tactically shift between different feminist ideological positions: such as between “equal rights” feminism (women are the same as men), “revolutionary” feminism (women are different from men and so society must be completely restructured in their likeness), “supremacist” feminism (women are superior to men), and “socialist” feminism (women are a racially divided class) (Sandoval 2000: 44-52). Sandoval argues that U.S. third world feminism is unlike other kinds of feminism in its ability to advocate all four of these positions at different

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22 See Sandoval (2000: 17) for a critique of epistemological undecidability.
times and different contexts, without committing themselves permanently to any one firm ideological framework other than that of “differential,” or what I am calling coalitional, consciousness. She understands this fifth mode of resistance as one which has “kaleidoscoped” the other four ideological positions into “an original, eccentric, and queer sight,” which can then be used as a “theoretical and methodological device” for discerning which of the above four tactical positions to assume in any given context (44).

Sandoval argues that, though often overlooked by white feminists, U.S. Third world feminism comprises a history of differential oppositional consciousness wherein they often enact one of the four other modes of oppositional consciousness, but rarely for long and without the “kind of fervid belief systems and identity politics that tend to accompany their construction” (Sandoval 2000: 58). In this sense, they treat each ideological oppositional stance “not as overriding strategies, but as tactics for intervening in and transforming social relations” (62). My brief discussion of the Combahee River Collective in Chapter Three may prove instructive. While critiqued by some feminists for advocating essentialist “identity politics,” Combahee makes it quite clear that their tactics changed depending on the stage of their politics, shifting between identity and coalitional politics as necessary, and ultimately settling on a form of identity politics that resembles politico-ethical coalition politics (Combahee 1983: 266). It is precisely this kind of tactical shift away from identity politics and toward coalition politics that Reagon (1983) also calls for in her coalition speech. As she states there and as discussed at length in Chapter Three, while there is a value in “homes” women must also be willing to enter into the hard work of coalition across race, class, gender, and sexuality divides and especially when their very survival depends on it.

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See Diana Fuss (1989) and Lloyd (2005).
This “differential” or coalitional, “praxis,” Sandoval argues:

...understands, wields, and deploys each mode of resistant ideology as if it represents only another potential technology of power. The cruising mobilities required in this effort demand of the differential practitioner commitment to the process of metamorphosis itself: this is the activity of the trickster who practices subjectivity as masquerade, the oppositional agent who accesses differing identity, ideological, aesthetic, and political positions. This nomadic “morphing” is not performed only for survival’s sake, as in earlier, modernist times. It is a set of principled conversions that requires (guided) movement, a directed but also diasporic migration in both consciousness and politics, performed to ensure that ethical commitment to egalitarian social relations be enacted in the everyday, political sphere of culture. (Sandoval 2000: 62) (emphasis in original)

There are a number of things about this passage that are worth emphasizing. We learn here that coalitional consciousness requires the kind of “cruising mobilities” that are no doubt made possible by U.S. third world feminists’ coalitional selves. A “commitment to the process of metamorphosis” of self is something that women of color learn first as a survival tactic (think here of Vásquez from Somos Hermanas). This process of metamorphosis, I am suggesting, is what enables them to hold on to a center (self-definition) in the midst of their multiple, shifting, and contradictory selves. Recall that existential transformation is also an important part of coalescing under the OED’s first definition of coalition. This ontological state provides a kind of training ground for women of color to later “practice subjectivity as masquerade.” These “trickster” activities, first developed as coping skills to survive the shifting currents of their being, have since been utilized as tactics for collective resistance. Once developed into a sophisticated and tactical form of coalitional consciousness, these “tricks” and “metamorphoses” take on a new register. They become self-consciously “principled,” “guided,” or “directed” toward a politics of resistance and intervention in the name of egalitarian social relations. It is precisely on this latter point, then, that a coalitional consciousness describes a unique epistemology not of undecidability, but of concerted and directed political action.24

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24 Though Sandoval refers to this guiding commitment to egalitarian social relations as an “ethical” commitment, it shares much with the notion of politico-ethical commitment I develop in Chapter 3. It is, she tells us, an “ideological
In this discussion, Sandoval cites a wide literature, including, among others, work by Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Smith, Bonnie Thorton Dill, bell hooks, Maria Lugones, Gayatri Spivak, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian, and Alice Walker, as well as Black feminist anthologies such as *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) and *But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982). This is, of course, the same literature I have engaged in this dissertation. While differences between this variety of authors are important, I believe, like Sandoval, that attention must be paid to the similarities, and particularly to the tendency among these authors toward coalition: toward coalition as a preferred mode of political engagement; toward coalition as a philosophical concept to aid us in rethinking identity, subjectivity, and consciousness; and, as I will argue in the subsequent chapter, toward coalition as a methodological commitment that reshapes how women of color feminists do political theory. Their resistance to any one mode of opposition created the conditions for an at best strained affiliation between U.S. Third world feminism and the women’s movement, as their behavior was often misinterpreted as “disloyalty, betrayal, absence, or lack” (Sandoval 2000: 58). The nuance of Third world feminism’s shifting and tactical coalitional consciousness, it would seem, has gone unnoticed and unappreciated by many white feminists. It is not surprising that it has also gone unnoticed by contemporary political theorists.

In an effort to demonstrate the potential reach these notions of coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness may have for social justice coalition politics, I want to end by examining an autobiographical account of a *white* woman’s journey toward coalitional

code that is committed to social justice according to egalitarian redistributions of power across such differences coded as race, gender, sex, nation, culture, or class distinctions” (Sandoval 2000: 112). I continue to opt for the *polito-ethical* construction, emphasizing a self-reflexive political commitment, in an effort to foreground what I see as a unique aspect of women of color feminism and to differentiate it from other contemporary articulations informed by a “neo-Nietzschean” turn to ethics as in Coles (1996: 375).
consciousness. Such an exercise brings us back to where this chapter began by giving a narrative account of the kind of personal journey that white women such as Reagon’s hypothetical “Mary” must undergo when attempting to coalesce with diverse subjugated groups committed to undermining oppression. While a coalitional identity—along with its corresponding coalition consciousness—emerges as a survival strategy for many women of color feminists, this ontology (and its corresponding epistemology) may also emerge for white women and men if they self-consciously and self-reflexively examine their own positionality vis-à-vis oppression.

Part III) Confronting One’s Complicity in Oppression: A White Woman’s Struggle Toward Coalitional Consciousness

In “Identity: Skin Blood Heart” (1984), Minnie Bruce Pratt recounts her coming to consciousness as a white, middle-class, rural, Southern, Christian, lesbian woman committed to fighting all forms of oppression and injustice. To do this, Pratt walks us through different periods in her life: her present adult life living in a predominantly Black neighborhood with her lesbian lover in Washington, D.C., in the 1980s; moments from her early childhood years in Alabama; moments from the time she spent with her husband and children in an eastern North Carolina town; and moments from the time she spent both alone and with other women in North Carolina after her husband took the kids and left her. Her autobiographical narrative does not unfold in chronological order; instead, it recounts different and discontinuous moments of her coming to consciousness, of her “trying to figure out [her own] responsibility and [her] need in struggles against injustice” (Pratt 1984: 15).

I choose to end with Pratt’s story because it helps us to understand how even white women may struggle toward coalitional identity and develop coalitional consciousness. One does
not have to be non-white to engage in politico-ethical coalition politics. As we saw with Reagon’s emphasis on “Mary” changing to “Maria,” in such cases, self-reflexivity becomes hugely important. For Pratt, this journey depended on her ability to discover and confront her “negative identity,” or her own implication in racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ethnocentrism, among other oppressive structures. Once her sense of self is self-reflexively decentered, she is able to begin to reconstruct a positive and, I argue, truly coalitional identity. By traveling to the other side of her family history as a middle-class, rural, Southern, Christian, white woman, Pratt discovers the many facets of her multiple and contradictory self. Despite the devastation of arriving at the other side, Pratt is able to use this self-discovery to redefine her identity in coalitional terms, which necessarily prepares her to engage in social justice coalitions with other women. In this sense, Pratt’s autobiography leads us across the three levels of politico-ethical coalition politics—across the ontological level, the epistemological level, and the political level.

Moments leading her to coalitional consciousness occurred in those instances in which Pratt felt threatened or unsafe, in which her privilege could no longer protect her. It should not be overlooked here that it was “dangerous” or life-threatening moments that brought Pratt to her coalitional consciousness. As Reagon (1983) has argued, social justice coalitional work is always dangerous; and if you do not feel threatened to your core, then you are probably not doing any real coalescing. One of these dangerous moments occurred for Pratt when living in an unfamiliar eastern North Carolina town in which her family ties carried no weight or armor of protection against misogynist sexual violence against women. It was here, she recounts, that for the “first time in [her] life, [she] was living in a place where [she] was afraid because [she] was a woman,” and where she first thought of herself as “belonging to an oppressed group” (Pratt 1985: 22).
A second and profound moment in which “the shell of [her] privilege was [again] broken” occurred when Pratt’s husband discovered her lesbianism and took custody of their children (27). It was at this point, she tells us, that in her grief she “became obsessed with justice” and active in women’s liberation (27). It was in these years that she experienced her “expanding consciousness of oppression as painful but ultimately positive” (35) (my emphasis). In this sense, it was not yet traumatic for her. She was “breaking through to an understanding of [her] life as a woman” (35). This was a process toward her own liberation, a process of “freeing [her]self” (35). From the experience of being hated and punished for being who she was as a lesbian, Pratt developed a heightened and urgent political consciousness toward “justice” and setting things “right” (35). However, and as I will demonstrate below, it was not until she struggled toward a coalitional self that this consciousness took on a truly coalitional form. It was then that her understanding of injustice would extend beyond her own “narrow circle of being” and toward all subjugated peoples (35).

In her initial work with other women in women’s liberation action, Pratt kept her lesbianism a secret. She recounts that in these years she was “in fact, not seeking liberation as [her] particular, complex self” (33) (my emphasis); on the contrary, she was “denying publicly a basic part of [her]self, while not seeing the subtle and overt pressures on other women to also deny their different aspects, in order to exist in the outside world, and in order to come to our place” (33). It was at this moment of realization, I contend, that Pratt began a concerted struggle toward a coalitional self. By this I mean to suggest that it was here that she began to appreciate herself as a multiple, internally discontinuous, and even contradictory self. As she puts it, it was after this moment that she learned to see herself and the world as a series of “overlapping circles.” This gave her, she says, a more “accurate, complex, multi-layered, multi-dimensional,”
and “more truthful” understanding of the world. (17). In this sense, Pratt’s coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness emerge together. Part of a coalitional consciousness involves becoming acquainted with one’s coalitional self; that is, to begin to appreciate one’s internal contradictions and to struggle toward coherent and positive self-definition despite this multiplicity and contradiction. As she puts it, she expanded her “constricted eye” (17), or her “circle of self” (18), by “jumping” from her “edge and outside herself, into radical change” (19). In this sense, Pratt begins the painful journey of “world-traveling” (Lugones 2003).

It was at this point that she “set out to find out what had been done or was being done in [her] name” as a white, middle-class, Southern, Christian woman (Pratt 1984: 34). This painful process of self-discovery included learning that both sides of her family owned slaves and that much of her family’s wealth was “stolen from the lives of others” (34). It was in these difficult moments that Pratt’s identity takes on a self-reflexive form as she considers the ways in which she and “her people” are implicated in the oppression of others. For this, she held herself and her people responsible, projecting her into a long and difficult “struggle with” and “against [her]self” (35-36). It is in this process of struggling with and against herself toward a positive and whole vision of who she is that, I believe, a coalitional self emerges.

This “breaking through,” she states, “did not feel like liberation but like destruction” (36). In this sense, it shares much with the “psychic restlessness” and shock experienced by Anzaldúa as she recounts her struggle toward mestiza identity (Anzaldúa 1987: 78). “During the time that I was first feeling all of this information,” Pratt recounts, “I lived in a kind of vertigo: a sensation of my body having no fixed place to be: the earth having opened, I was falling through space” (Pratt 1984: 35). Women of color feminists have recounted their experiences of a plural and

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25 In their co-authored essay, “What’s Home Got to Do with It?” (2003), Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin also emphasize the self-reflexivity of Pratt’s autobiographical essay. See especially 94 and 101.
decentered sense of self as they confront the many different and contradictory ways in which they are positioned vis-à-vis oppressive structures. Pratt narrates here a similar process of becoming decentered. Through this process of “expanding” her “limited being,” she tells us, an “upheaval” took place; an upheaval, however, that was less like a “catastrophe” and more like a “shedding” of one’s skin or outer layers in order to make room for an “expansion” or “growth” toward coalitional identity and its corresponding coalitional consciousness (39).

As I have argued, movement toward coalitional identity necessarily involves struggling toward a center. We can understand the first step of this process as the decentering Pratt recounts above. However, coalitional selves do not remain in this space of unfixity or undecidability for long. Instead, they learn to move between their multiple and contradictory selves, thus creating a new and positive coalitional self. Pratt “recreates” this “positive” and whole self by learning to travel between her multiple selves, between the multiple facets of her past and upbringing. This is the next step. By exploring the positive components of what she has “carried with [her] from [her white, Southern] culture,” she discovers that there are alternative ways of being a white, Southern, woman. Drawing inspiration from white women such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké of South Carolina who organized both for the abolition of slavery and for women’s rights, Jessie Daniel Ames of Texas who led an anti-lynching campaign, and Lillian Smith of Georgia who was a novelist, essayist, and anti-segregationist speaker, Pratt learns to tactically take on different components of her multiple identity for the sake of action toward social justice.

The new understanding or “consciousness” opened up by way of this decentering and directed re-centering is one wherein she understands that she is “entrapped as a woman, not just by the sexual fear of the men of [her] group, but also by their racial and religious terrors” (Pratt 1984: 38). This helps her to understand the deep connection between her oppression as a lesbian
and as a woman and that of others. She learns that when white men of her culture condemn her “as a lesbian and a free woman for being ‘dirty’, ‘unholy’, ‘perverted’, ‘immoral’,” this is “a judgment that has been called down on people of color and Jews throughout history by the men of [her] culture, as they have shifted their justification for hatred according to their desires of the moment” (38). Such an understanding makes a coalitional self possible: a self, that is, who can not only navigate tactically between her contradictory and multiple selves in an effort to strive toward a coherent center, but one who can navigate tactically between ideological positionings in an effort to strive toward coalition with other “justice-seeking” coalitional identities (Caraway 1991: 111). In this sense, one is thought to be “coalitional” both on the inside, as a “coalition of one” (Carastathis 2013: 960), and on the outside, as one working with others in coalitions to fight social injustice (see Pratt 1984: 46, 47, 48). For Pratt and for the women of color feminists addressed throughout this chapter, the connection between the inside and outside is indissoluble: when she “passively witnesses the repetition of the old ways of doing things” and does “nothing,” she confesses, she feels her “rigid circle close around [her], tightening, painful” (Pratt 1984: 52). Her coalitional self is very much tied to her coalitional work for social justice. They feed each other. She is the fullest and widest sense of her self, it seems, when her actions are directed toward social justice in coalition with other subjugated people.

Before closing, and in an attempt to further emphasize the role of political commitment within politico-ethical coalition politics, I want to address the place of love in Pratt’s struggle toward coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness. She tells us that she began the process of internal change and political commitment to fighting for social justice when,

...I jumped from my edge and outside myself, into radical change, for love: simply love: for myself and for other women. I acted on that love by becoming a lesbian, falling in love with and becoming sexual with a particular woman; and this love led me directly, but by a complicated way, to work against racism and anti-Semitism. (Pratt 1984: 19)
She goes on to clarify that she did not arrive at this position of political commitment because she knew it was the “right” thing to do, or even out of a sense of “justice” or “general principles” (19-20). Instead, she learned to work against racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism by loving and becoming sexually intimate with a woman.

It therefore seems that one could interpret this as a challenge to the _polito-ethical_ conception of coalition politics I developed in Chapter Three. There I argued that it was not an ethical commitment, rooted in feelings of love and respect for others, that brought women such as Reagon, Smith, Lorde, and others to social justice struggles. It was rather a self-reflexive political commitment to undermining oppression and to upholding egalitarian social justice. This framework of self-reflexivity challenges other contemporary articulations of coalition politics that suggest that the glue that holds us together in coalition is an ethical commitment to receptive generosity (Coles 1996, also see Butler 2004, 2009, and 2011). As I argued in Chapter Three, what may appear to be an emphasis on ethical comportment, or how to treat others in the space of coalition, is better understood as an instance in which one has taken her political commitment to undermining oppression and turned it in on herself to examine her own interpersonal relationships within the space of coalition. On my view, what motivates coalition is always fundamentally rooted in this firm political commitment to undermining oppression. In the passage above, one might argue that Pratt suggests that it was not in fact a political commitment to justice that brought her to change; it was, instead, love for other women, thereby implying that for her an ethical or emotional commitment ultimately drives her politics. I would, however, like to offer an alternative reading.

While it is certain that love plays a pivotal role in Pratt’s journey toward self-discovery and political commitment, we must be careful to understand what about her love propelled her in
this direction. I think it is fair to suggest that her intimate or romantic love for other women helped Pratt to be more generous, giving, and accepting with women in coalitional spaces. Lesbian women of color feminists such as Lorde (1984), Anzaldúa (1983), Moraga (1983), and others have similarly attributed their ability to work effectively in coalition at least in part in their love for other women. However, to suggest that Pratt’s self-discovery and political commitment to fighting social injustice is fundamentally rooted in her sexual or romantic love for women generally (that she then extended to women of color and Jewish women) is to miss an important nuance in this autobiographical account of her coming to consciousness.

Only a few paragraphs after the above passage, Pratt tells us that it was not that she loved women that brought her to consciousness (extending feelings of love to all women regardless of race, religious orientation, or other differences), but rather “how” she loved that brought her to change (Pratt 1984: 20). It was in reflecting on the ways in which she was reviled for being a lesbian that she became aware of the multi-layered and interconnected workings of power. Because of how she loved—as a lesbian, that is—she learned what it was to “lose a position of safety” and to be “despised for who [she was]” (20). It was at this stage of her development that she expanded her understanding of social injustice. It was this breaking through that allowed Pratt to understand how her struggle was connected to the struggles of other oppressed groups (20). In this sense, it was in fact a self-reflexive political commitment that propelled her to action.26 Her lesbian love is highly political due to the marginalization it has brought with it. So, yes, her lesbianism did bring her to political commitment, but not because an ethics of love

26 While here this self-reflexive political commitment alerted her attention to the ways in which she was oppressed as a lesbian and the connection between this oppression and being oppressed on account of one’s race, ethnicity, religion, etc., I have already addressed the ways in which this self-reflexivity also guides her toward discovering her negative identity, or the ways in which she has been implicated in the oppression of others. Being self-reflexive in our commitment to social justice enables us to uncover both the layers of our own oppression as well as our own implication in the oppression of others.
motivates her political actions; rather, the fact that she was condemned and oppressed for how she chose to love alerted her attention to the interconnected and sophisticated maneuvering of power. In this sense, her coming to consciousness shares much with accounts we have seen from women of color feminists and further supports, I contend, a notion of politico-ethical coalition politics.

**Conclusion**

By infusing the very concept of coalition into philosophical discussions related to reimagining multiple and fluid identity and better understanding shifting power structures, I have shown that we are able to avoid the unworkable tensions that have emerged for other contemporary coalition scholars as they try to hold in play two untenable positions: ontological unfixity and epistemological undecidability, on the one hand, and a left-oriented coalition politics, or political fixity, on the other. Be reconceiving identity coalitionally, I have offered an alternative way of theorizing identity that attends to multiplicity and fluidity without subscribing to permanent unfixity. Coalitional selves, I have shown, are fundamentally preoccupied with struggling toward a coherent and definable whole, or center. This center, I have argued, is fixed both in its multiplicity and in the coalitional consciousness that emerges to guide one in navigating this multiplicity.

Parting ways with thinkers such as Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, and others, I have located politics in the very heart of ontology, but *not* because the discursive production of all ontological categories must be thought of as a political process. Rather, for women of color feminists, ontology (or existence) has always been a political struggle toward fixity and wholeness and against externally imposed definition and erasure. It is precisely for this reason that women of
color feminists are willing to hold onto a notion of ontological fixity as a sophisticated consciousness that emerges through this internal struggle and helps them to move creatively and tactically across their own multiplicity and contradiction. This attention to struggle within lived experience, I believe, aligns women of color feminists with the vision of coalition politics on offer by Luxemburg. This ontology of coalitional identity and its corresponding coalitional consciousness, I have further shown, helps women of color feminists, and anyone else willing to engage in this internal and self-reflexive journey, to develop the skills necessary to become comfortable with ambiguity even as they move in purposeful directions. It helps them to tactically assume different subjectivities and ideological positions depending on what the current structure of power demands. In short, it prepares them for the hard work of politico-ethical coalition politics.

As I have argued here, politico-ethical coalition politics dissolves the perceived crises of Marxism through its ability to address its interconnected components: ontologically, it allows us to retain a sense of multiplicity and complexity while refusing permanent unfixity; epistemologically, it allows us to appreciate the complicated, interconnected, and mobile systems of power that subjugate variously positioned individuals, while refusing undecidability; and politically, it allows us to think more rigorously about how to engage in directed social justice coalition politics across diverse subjugated groups (Reagon’s challenge). By thinking with the concept of coalition within the context of ontological and epistemological discussions about multiple identity and political consciousness, I have acquainted my readers with some of the levels on which politico-ethical coalition politics unfolds. If one understands individuals within the space of coalitions as coalitional selves who have developed a corresponding coalitional
consciousness, one begins to see how these individuals have already learned the skills necessary to coalesce across stark, hostile, and contradictory divides.

In the final chapter of my dissertation, I want to turn to one final way in which women of color feminists think with and, in this case, through coalition. So far, I have addressed three interrelated levels of coalition: coalition on an ontological level, coalition on an epistemological level, and coalition on a practical group politics level. In Chapter Five, I turn to a fourth level of coalition by examining how women of color feminists do political theory. In turning my attention to this methodological level, I seek to uncover a unique mode of feminist coalitional scholarship.

I will follow Sandoval in her contention that what makes U.S Third world feminism particularly exemplary is the unique “methodology” on offer. However, I will part ways with Sandoval slightly insofar as I set out to develop a different component of this methodology. Instead of focusing on the five oppositional technologies of power used to read the mobile webs of power (semiotics), deconstruct ideology (deconstruction), create higher levels of signification built onto older dominant forms of ideology (meta-ideologizing), tactically maneuver between these other technologies (differential movement II), all the while informed by an ethically democratic imperative (democratics) (Sandoval 2000: 92-112), I focus on the unique methodology of feminist scholarship on offer in early women of color feminist anthologies such as This Bridge Called My Back.
Chapter 5

Feminism in Coalition: Writing Feminist Theory, Doing Feminist Politics

The reparativeness of black feminist thought is most plainly revealed precisely in the dimension that is so often celebrated by scholars and commentators of black feminism: coalition-building and coalition politics. It would be easy to assume that coalitions are, for black feminist theory and practice, merely an indispensable instrumental tool of minority politics. But close examination suggests another plot behind the instrumental necessities of politics. Black feminist theory is a coalitional discourse, not only because it insists upon the political expediency of coalitions, but because it constitutes itself in and through a persistent discussion of the ubiquity of difference and the necessity of intellectual, political, and emotional work across difference.


At the end of Healing Identities: Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Groups (2004), Cynthia Burack astutely identifies the unique political and theoretical contributions of women of color feminism to political and social theory invested in theorizing activist group politics. I am in agreement with Burack that this contribution resides in the thinking women of color feminists from Bernice Reagon to Chela Sandoval have done around the theory and practice of coalition politics, best captured, I have argued, in the notion of politico-ethical coalition politics. Like Burack, I too maintain that both the sophistication and promise of this concept lies in its multidimensionality. As I have demonstrated across the last two chapters, this multidimensionality helps us to rethink a number of important political, ontological, and epistemological questions to do with theorizing a post-Marxist notion of left-oriented collective politics. In this final chapter of the dissertation, I would like to pick up on and further develop

1 Burack is not the only one to identify a unique contribution of black feminist thought to political and social theory. Chela Sandoval’s main argument across The Methodology of the Oppressed (2000) centers on a similar kind of claim regarding the unique epistemological and methodological contribution of U.S. Third world feminism (see Sandoval 2000: 70-71). Similarly, in her “Introduction” to Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, Barbara Smith (1983) locates this unique methodological and ideological contribution of Black feminist thought in the “concept of the simultaneity of oppression” which forms the basis of politico-ethical coalition politics (Smith 1983: xxxiv). Some have even gone so far as to say that this concept of intersectionality (which emerges out of the notion of the simultaneity of oppression) is the single most important “theoretical contribution” that women’s and feminist studies has made thus far (McCall 2005: 1771).
one final component of this multidimensionality. In addition to alerting us to the “instrumental necessities” of coalition politics, this literature, I will show, points us in the direction of developing a unique “coalitional discourse” (Burack 2004: 159) that not only arrives at coalition as the answer to the politics question provoked by the perceived crisis of Marxism, but also enacts a form of politico-ethical coalitional scholarship.

In a recent article examining women of color feminist writing from the 1970s and 1980s, Erica Townsend-Bell (2012) challenges conventional knowledge that women of color feminists only turned to coalition in the 1980s. On the contrary, she shows that the theme of coalition politics has been central to women of color feminist writing since the 1970s. Nevertheless, Townsend-Bell finds that there was something unique to 1980s women of color feminism. Not only did writing in this decade focus “even greater attention” on the question of coalitions and challenging the basis for assumed feminist unity, Townsend-Bell argues that the form this writing took resembled a “literal written coalition of women of color among authors and readers” (Townsend-Bell 2012: 130).

With the emergence of women of color-only presses such as Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, this period saw a shift in control over writing spaces that brought with it a number of women of color feminist anthologies that were written, compiled, edited, and published by women of color. Some of these include: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, (Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith 1982), *Home Girls: A Black Anthology* (Barbara Smith 1983), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa 1983), and *Making Face, Making Soul / Hacienda Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminist of Color* (Gloria

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2 Think here of Shirley Chisholm’s (1972) article, “The Politics of Coalition,” that I began with in the Introduction.
Anzaldúa 1990). “Activist collections” such as these, Townsend-Bell argues, both sought to and succeeded at creating “text-based coalitions that mapped activism on the ground and encouraged further reflection and activity around the possibilities and the difficulties of coalitions” (144) (my emphasis). “Beyond their writing about alliance,” she continues, the “collective orientation of the edited texts created a written coalition in and of itself” (145) (my emphasis). It is this notion of a “textual” (133), “text-based” (144), or “written” (145) coalition that interests me here.

While it will most certainly strike some of my readers as odd to describe a material object such as a book as a coalition, I maintain that Townsend-Bell’s casual reference to “textual” or “written” coalitions should not be passed off as careless or less than rigorous. The fact that this notion seemed appropriate to Townsend-Bell in 2012 speaks to both the prevalence and multidimensionality of the notion of politico-ethical coalition politics emerging out of this period. As I have argued here, for women of color feminists, coalition has always been understood in a wider scope than those used across either classic political science or contemporary political theory. For many women of color feminists, coalition is understood as the merging or coming together of different parts—not necessarily people, political parties, or groups—for the sake of a shared, self-reflexive politico-ethical commitment to undermining oppression. While these “parts” refer to different individuals or groups of people in the case of coalition politics on the ground, I have also shown that these “parts” may refer to the shifting and contradictory components of one’s own internal psyche (through the notion of coalitional identity).

In the case of a “textual coalition,” I am now suggesting, these parts refer to the different authors and their respective pieces of writing that come together in the pages of a single text. The manifestation of this merging is the anthology itself. Though Townsend-Bell never specifies
exactly what she means by “textual” coalition, I will argue here that for a text to take on a truly “coalitional” character it must represent a coming together of diverse voices in the service of a shared politico-ethical commitment to undermining oppression. In this sense, the text itself becomes a kind of living coalitional conversation that not only arrives at coalition as the best way of carrying out collective politics but also depicts, enacts, and encourages a collective struggle toward coalitional consciousness.

While the anthology format is particularly conducive to achieving these goals, it is certainly not the case that all political theory anthologies are driven by a clear political, let alone politico-ethical, purpose. Indeed, the most common anthologies found within political theory are those that cover either broad portions of the canon of political thought, or attempt to cover the canon in its entirety. Feminist anthologies that are committed to using the anthology in the service of a clear political goal therefore stand apart from other anthologies within political theory. For this reason, feminist anthologies provide an interesting space in which to explore the possibilities of textual coalition politics.

In this chapter, I argue that Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back* is an indispensable resource for theorizing social justice activist coalition politics.

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3 Taken from Greek word, *anthologia*, meaning “collection of flowers,” anthology took on its more conventional meaning as a collection of literary works (most often poems) chosen by the compiler when the compiler of one of the earliest known Greek anthologies (*Garland*) compared each of his anthologized poets to a flower. This format has been extended to a variety of other literary collections, especially paintings, songs, and other “art” forms. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* for “anthology.” See Gallop (1992), Norman (2006), and Willet (1998) on the ways in which anthologies may function to achieve certain political goals.

4 Some of these titles include: *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology* (Goodin and Pettit 1997), *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought* (Bailey, Brennan, Kymlicka, Levy, Sager, Wolf 2008), and *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology* (Kramnick and Lowi 2008).

5 There are many different issue-specific anthologies out there, covering topics such as: conservatism (Muller 1997), democratization (McIvor, Barker, and McAfee 2012) and multiculturalism (Willet 1998). For some references on feminist anthologies, see: Drake (1997), Gallop (1992), Lee (2010), Norman (2006), Siegel (1997), and Townsend-Bell (2012).
insofar as it comes to function as a textual coalition, offering an exemplary enactment of the coalitional scholarship that was unique to women of color feminism of this period. I argue that the text itself functions as both a “symbol” of and a “tool” for politico-ethical coalition politics by chronicling and encouraging a shift toward coalitional consciousness. In this way, the text is “performative” insofar as it both enacts and “summons” politico-ethical coalition politics (Sandoval 2002: 25).

To make this argument, I contrast This Bridge with two other feminist anthologies, one appearing the decade before This Bridge—Robin Morgan’s (ed.) Sisterhood Is Powerful (1970)—and one appearing the decade after it—Rebecca Walker’s (ed.) To Be Real (1995). I have chosen to focus on the progression from 1970s feminist anthologies to 1990s feminist anthologies in order to isolate what is unique to the coalitional scholarship of 1980s women of color feminism. I am in agreement with Brian Norman (2006) that feminist anthologies tend to “enact the collectivity for which they call” (39). For this reason, I closely examine what kind of feminist collectivity each anthology seeks to enact, and the extent to which it is successful in doing so. This examination allows me to both differentiate coalitional scholarship from two other modes of collective feminist scholarship (what I call textual sisterhood and textual mosaic), and to revisit the advantages of politico-ethical coalition politics over other forms of feminist collectivity.

While I will demonstrate that all three of these anthologies seek to redefine how contemporary thinkers do political and social theory, this resistant act in and of itself, I contend, does not suggest that all three can be treated as “textual coalitions.” I argue that only This Bridge emerges as a true textual coalition. While it shares certain characteristics with other activist

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6 AnaLouise Keating, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Chela Sandoval make these arguments when reflecting on the purpose and value of This Bridge in the introductory material for a follow-up collection, entitled this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). See Anzaldúa in Keating (2002: 1), Sandoval (2002: 25), and Keating (2002: 6).
feminist anthologies exploring notions of feminist solidarity, it remains distinct from them in its commitment to self-reflexively undermining all forms of oppression; a commitment, I argue, that This Bridge succeeds in enacting between the pages of a book.

Part I) Sisterhood Is Powerful: On the Limitations of Textual Sisterhood

In this section I examine one of the first feminist anthologies published during the women’s liberation movement.⁷ Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement, edited by Robin Morgan and published in 1970, both depicts and enacts key components of early second-wave feminism. As I will argue below, while Sisterhood is unapologetically political in both its form and content and in this way embodies some components of coalitional scholarship, it neither reflects nor incites true politico-ethical coalition. Instead, Morgan attempts to chronicle and encourage feminist collectivity in the form of “sisterhood.” Informed by an un-self-reflexive goal of sisterhood, the text takes a strictly additive approach to difference that effectively forecloses coalitional possibilities.

The clear political motivation animating this text is unequivocal. Feminism, according to Morgan, is fundamentally about identifying and contesting sexist oppression, which, she believes, is the root of many other forms of oppression. The book, she asserts, is itself an “action” (xv), a form of resistance against sexist oppression. The entire book, start to finish, she asserts, was “conceived, written, edited, copy-edited, proofread, designed, and illustrated by women” (xv). Morgan positions this project within an industry-wide women’s group forming to protest gender inequities in the publishing world at the time—women were eighty percent of the

⁷ Some other anthologies that came out during this period include: The Black Woman (1970), Voices from Women’s Liberation (1971), and Women in Sexist Society (1972).
work force but all at the bottom of the pyramid (xiii-xix). Publishing an anthology completely under the control of women was in itself a political act of resistance.

What is more, throughout this process, Morgan and the women published in *Sisterhood* both challenge and transform how political theorists *do* political theory. Rejecting a “certain kind of linear, tight, dry, boring, male super-consistency,” the collection celebrates multiple forms of writing—articles, poems, graphics, and sundry papers—combining “well-documented, statistically solid pieces” alongside “intensely personal experiences” (xx). With this variety of pieces of writing, these authors begin to define a specifically feminist mode of political theory. Such an approach to theory, Morgan argues, not only includes a wide spectrum of forms of writing, but, most profoundly, it theorizes out of human experience and human feeling and not out of “textbook rhetoric” (xx). Such an act of scholarly defiance and resistance, she argues, is “truly revolutionary” (xx).

An important element of this “revolutionary” scholarship entails bringing “the personal” into the writing and publishing process. Informed by the feminist rallying call, “the personal is political,” Morgan invites her reader to feel the effects of the personal and material sacrifices that these women have made in the service of pulling this anthology together. She recounts:

During the year that it took to collectively create this anthology, we women involved had to face specific and very concrete examples of our oppression, with regard to the book itself, that simply would not have occurred in putting together any other kind of collection...there were not a few “reprisals”: five personal relationships were severed, two couples were divorced and one separated, one woman was forced to withdraw her article, by the man she lived with; another’s husband kept rewriting the piece until it was unrecognizable as her own; many of the articles were late, and the deadline kept being pushed further ahead, because the authors had so many other pressures on them—from housework to child care to jobs. More than one woman had trouble finishing her piece because it was so personally painful to commit her gut feelings to paper. We were also delayed by occurrences that would not have been of even peripheral importance to an anthology written by men: three pregnancies, one miscarriage, and one birth—plus one abortion and one hysterectomy. Speaking from my own experience, which is what we learn to be unashamed of doing in women’s liberation, during the past year I twice survived the almost-dissolution of my marriage, was fired from my job (for trying to organize a union and for being in women’s liberation), gave birth to a child, worked on a women’s newspaper, marched and picketed, breast-fed the baby, was arrested on a militant women’s liberation action, spent some
time in jail, stopped wearing makeup and shaving my legs, started learning Karate, and changed my politics completely. That is, I became, somewhere along the way, a “feminist” committed to a Women’s Revolution. (Morgan 1970: xv-xvi)

There are a number of important things about this long passage. First of all, we see here an important component of activist scholarship motivated by a clear feminist political commitment: that is, a self-conscious and transparent account of the writing and publishing process. I maintain that there is something uniquely feminist about exposing these personal sacrifices and “reprisals.” Morgan shows us that even the process and experience of publishing an anthology was a gendered one (perhaps it still is forty-five years later). In this way, Morgan enacts her feminist politics by putting the personal and private on display and by refusing to let us ignore it.

The fact that she shares these personal, material sacrifices and consequences of writing in the introduction to the anthology, as opposed to other introductory material—such as the acknowledgments, a foreword, or preface—I argue, is also significant. By putting this in the introduction, she forces her reader to see these personal events as part and parcel to the anthology itself, thereby further dissolving the public/private distinction. In this way, she helps us to understand feminist scholarship itself as an intensely personal and material struggle. Political theory scholarship, she effectively argues, is not produced by disembodied, cool, rational, and distanced “theorists”; it is produced by complexly situated, embodied, individuals who are struggling to make sense of the politics—the arrangements of power—that define their daily lives. The clear implication here is that one cannot do political theory without accounting for these happenings. In addition to this explicitly political platform, Morgan brings the public back to the personal by insisting that the monies from the book’s sales go to the women’s movement to help cover the cost of day-care, abortion projects, bail and defense funds, and other support mechanism. (xix). This is, most certainly, an activist text.
In addition to functioning as a highly political piece of writing through enacting an important political slogan of the women’s movement—“the personal is political”—Morgan emphasizes that *Sisterhood* was a collective project. While Morgan addresses her own individual sacrifices, the focus in the above passage is on the collective, as opposed to individual, sacrifices that brought the anthology into being. There is no sense here that Morgan’s own sacrifices matter more than those of the other women. Instead, she positions herself in solidarity with the other women involved in the anthology. As she puts it in the acknowledgments:

> The collectivity, cooperation, and lack of competition (even from sisters who were also putting together collections on women’s liberation) that marked the process of creating this book are proof of how radically different the women’s movement is from male-dominated movements. Sisters, all over the country, some of whom I have not yet met in person, were of invaluable help in acting as regional contacts, and as sources of information, material, encouragements, and editorial suggestions... (Morgan 1970)

The collective political project she and the other *Sisterhood* women are involved in extends beyond this single anthology. Indeed, Morgan seems to be working in solidarity with other women in the publishing world also seeking to bring feminist anthologies to print; in this sense, its activist credentials continue to reverberate.

Reflecting another important component of coalitional scholarship, Morgan insists that no one article in the anthology is meant to be “‘representative’ of anything other than some part of all women” (xx). Morgan argues that as a “non-hierarchical” movement, women’s liberation, insists on doing things “collectively and experimentally” (xx). It is precisely this spirit of collectivity and experimentation that Morgan aims to reflect in the production of the anthology by bringing together multiple and diverse individual women’s voices that nevertheless speak as a united front, as a united sisterhood. To emphasize their individuality, Morgan has each contributor write her own short biography in the Contributor’s Notes (xxi). In so doing, Morgan self-consciously resists positioning herself in a hierarchical relationship to the other women.
involved. Instead, she asserts that through such acts, she intends to position herself in a collaborative effort with them (xxi).

What is more, Morgan also attempts to be transparent about aspects of the selection process, using “we” instead of “I” as she recounts various editorial decisions, suggesting again that these decisions were made in conversation with other women. For instance, in an attempt to include the voices of black women in the anthology—and in this way to reflect the ways in which the women’s movement had expanded from a mostly young white, middle-class women’s movement to a racially diverse women’s movement—Morgan specifies that three articles written by “black sisters” have been included in the anthology. She chose three black women, she explains, because “it was important to have more than one or two voices speak for so many sisters” (xxx). By being both transparent and somewhat self-reflexive about aspects of the editing process, Morgan positions her anthology at least loosely within feminist coalitional scholarship. What I would like to consider more critically, however, is to what extent *Sisterhood* may itself be understood as a kind of politico-ethical textual coalition. On this score, I will demonstrate, it falls short.

While it is clear that *Sisterhood* is motivated by a clear political purpose, it is not clear that the political purpose motivating Morgan and the other contributors was a politico-ethical one. A politico-ethical purpose involves turning one’s political commitment to undermining oppression in on oneself—that is, to self-reflexively (and therefore also self-critically) commit oneself to a feminist project of undermining all forms of oppression. While *Sisterhood* was

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8 There are other examples of this transparency and collaborative commitment. For instance, the reason they chose to include a piece on the Catholic Church and not other religious groups, she explains, is because of the immense power the Catholic Church carries in directly affecting many woman’s lives by its stand on birth control and abortion (xxi). The reason they chose to do a piece on China and not some other post-revolutionary country, Morgan explains, is because China is the largest revolutionary nation in the world, China has experienced an ongoing revolution, and because of the astonishingly poor treatment of women in pre-revolutionary China (xxii).
certainly committed to enacting a form of feminist textual collectivity, I maintain that it was more interested in celebrating common ground through the universal notion of “sisterhood” than confronting conflict and differences between women. Such a project is what we might expect to find from a 1970s feminism more interested in gaining momentum than confronting its own internal challenges and contradictions. Nevertheless, I argue that while Morgan and the other authors certainly display sensitivity to the existence of multiple oppressions, there is no sense that they are interested in self-reflexively addressing the challenge this poses to “sisterhood.”

_Sisterhood_ enacts a feminism that is committed to identifying and undermining sexist oppression. It even goes so far as to acknowledge the ways in which sexism exists in constellation with other forms of oppression, such as racism and classism (xxxi, xxxv-xxxvi). Paying attention to these divisions, Morgan argues, has opened the women’s movement to new ways of understanding the multiple forms of oppression suffered by women (xxix). Morgan believes that this anthology is engaged in a similar process of analyzing race, class, age, and sexuality divisions in the women’s movement. _Sisterhood_, she contends, depicts and enacts a new “revolutionary feminism” that attempts to avoid the trap of bourgeois feminism, which refused any real analysis of race and class (xxvi). Instead, Morgan seeks to bring together many different female voices—young women, middle-aged women, older women, white women, black women, Chicana women, college-educated women, working class women, professional women—in a united sisterhood committed to fighting oppression.

Across fifty-seven entries, besides her own introduction, and fourteen historical documents from the women’s liberation movement, far more than one hundred different women’s voices find a platform in this anthology. The anthology is organized thematically in
five broad sections,\(^9\) in addition to the introductory material by Morgan, Connie Brown, and Jane Seitz. In this sense, *Sisterhood* succeeds in bringing together multiple voices. Section (i), for instance, includes a number of pieces on the conditions of living under sexism, with special attention to experiences across different job sectors. By including pieces by women working within diverse professions (medicine, publishing, television, military, journalism, secretarial work, academia, factory work, pastoral work, legal work), including one essay by a Black professional woman, the anthology seeks to speak across, at least, class and race divisions within the women’s movement. By adding the voices of lesbian women in section (ii), the anthology continues to expand this diversity. The section that most explicitly aims to address difference within the movement is section (iii), which includes three articles by Black women, three articles by high school women, and two articles by Chicana women. Discussions of redefining feminism in light of such interventions continue in section (iv), which includes another article by a Black woman.

Despite the presence of at least some diversity here, I will argue that both Morgan’s introduction and the rest of the anthology fail to engage it from a truly politico-ethical perspective. While *Sisterhood* certainly engages difference, I maintain that it does so additively, as opposed to intersectionally.\(^{10}\) By this I mean to suggest that while the anthology may speak to multiple forms of oppression and even attempt to put other forms of oppression—racism, classism, heterosexism—in conversation with sexism, it does so only to the extent that it reveals the ways in which a poor, Black, lesbian, woman may be oppressed by four oppressions at once: corporate capitalism, racism, heterosexism, and sexism. These analyses do not attempt to

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\(^{10}\) For a good discussion of the difference between additive and intersectional approaches, see Deborah King (1988).
consider the ways in which these oppressions may interact with one another. Instead, *Sisterhood* sees other forms of oppression only as symptoms of one root or primary oppression, which is sexism (xxxix-xl). Morgan argues in the introduction that all women essentially play the same role in patriarchal society, but with different “sets and costumes” (xx). While these sets and costumes may add new dimensions to their oppression, they do not, it would seem, fundamentally alter their experience of sexism.

This additive approach to understanding multiple oppressions lends itself to analogies such as the race-sex analogy.¹¹ At the time, such analogies proved useful for women’s rights activists when confronted with blatant gender inequities. As Laura Furman argues in her *Sisterhood* article on gender inequities in the publishing world, while the justification that “women simply don’t make that much money” still seemed acceptable to many men in the profession, the equivalent raced statement would never have been acceptable: “If I were a black man,” she recounts one woman saying, “you wouldn’t dare say that to me” (Furman 1970: 72).

As Morgan states in the introduction, the women’s movement was born at least partially out of the civil rights movement. “There’s something contagious,” she asserts, “about demanding freedom” (Morgan 1970: xxiii). Experiencing one form of oppression—such as sexism—she suggests, will incline one toward both understanding and contesting other forms of oppression—such as racism. However, I contend that while this inclination may occur, there is no guarantee that it will occur, and especially if one refuses to see the differences between forms of oppression or the ways in which multiple forms of oppression interact with one another. An understanding of this more complicated picture may in fact make liberation struggles much more challenging (recall Reagon’s challenge). By assuming that the oppression endured by Black (women) slaves

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under slavery parallels the oppression that (white) women experience within a patriarchal society dangerously obscures the particular experience of Black women. In this additive approach to multiple oppressions, the experience of Black women is thought to be synonymous either with that of Black men or that of white women.\(^{12}\) Such an approach fails to consider the ways in which racism and sexism interact with one another.

I maintain that all of the articles written by white women that address race in the anthology do so in this additive sense. While they may, for instance, point to statistics, facts, and figures on race and/or class differences between women, it is not clear that these authors understand or address the implications of the interaction of multiple forms of oppression at once.

For instance, while Joreen acknowledges that the highest unemployment rate exists among non-white women between the ages of 18 and 20 years old, she does not spend time addressing how multiple oppressive forces interact to create a particularly difficult situation for women of color besides stating that they are victims of two forms of oppression at once (Joreen 1970: 40). She does not, for instance, consider what work-place justice may mean to poor, non-white women and whether their experience of work or un- and under-employment may challenge or reshape other priorities within the feminist movement. Morgan takes a similar position in the introduction when she states that one thing that seems unequivocally clear to her is that “the nuclear family unit is oppressive to women” (Morgan 1970: xxxvi). Such an assumption fails to consider the particular relationship that women of color may have to the family unit. Having been denied the right to create and nurture a nuclear family while enslaved to white plantation owners, Black women may want to preserve rather than dismantle the nuclear family.\(^{13}\) Similarly, in Lucina

\(^{12}\) See King (1988: 47-49).

\(^{13}\) For a discussion of the importance of the family to women of color, see Smith (1983), hooks (1981 and 1984), and Roberts (1997).
Cisler’s celebration of sterilization as another liberating form of birth control, she resists emphasizing the extent to which Puerto Rican women were forcefully or coercively sterilized (Cisler 1970: 285-287).^14

Across the fifty-eight contributions to the anthology (including Morgan’s introduction and excluding the historical documents), seven are written by women of color (five by Black women and two by Chicana women). In this sense, the representation of race difference across the pages of this book is rather underwhelming. While some representation is better than no representation, and while the need to speak to race, class, and other differences was clearly on Morgan’s radar as she set out to compile this anthology, it seems fair to say that the anthology itself, even if we approach it from a strictly additive sense, fails to adequately accommodate difference—and in this way necessarily fails to offer a model of feminist politico-ethical coalitional scholarship. However, and as I will argue next, this failure is not simply one of lack of sufficient representation of women of color among the contributors to the anthology. If we look closely at the articles that were published by women of color, other disturbing trends emerge.

In a subsection entitled “Women in the Professions,” Morgan includes an article by Sheila Smith Hobson, a Black woman working in the television business. As Hobson recounts

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^14 We may add to these examples a few others. In her discussion of women and the welfare system, Carol Glassman acknowledges the difference in attitudes toward being on welfare between white women and Black women, but she does not consider how these differing attitudes and experience may challenge and reshape feminist political solidarity (Grossman 1970: 122-123). In Beverly Jones’ article on marriage and motherhood she presumes that all married women share a common identity—they all, she says, carry the same “little bundle of secrets” with them regarding their particular situation as a married woman (Jones 1970: 65). While she states that there is some diversity within the group “married women,” she does not consider how the needs and demands of married women may shift depending on one’s race and socio-economic status. In Roxanne Dunbar’s discussion of whether we can hope for solidarity between white and Black women she states that Black women will “continue to fight as blacks alongside black men...in order for him to gain his ‘due’ masculine status according to the prevailing masculine ideology” (Dunbar 1970: 549-550). Dunbar seems completely unaware of the ways in which the racism of the women’s movement may also account for why Black women would choose to fight for Black liberation over women’s liberation.
her experiences working in television, she too deals with the multiple oppressions she experienced on account of her race and sex in an additive way. She shows us the ways in which the television world was both racist and sexist, emphasizing the ways in which even Black-controlled television programs were equally sexist (Hobson 1970: 78-79). The focus here is on sexism in the television world, and while it may be compounded by racism for Black women in the profession, the focus of her critique is the television industry itself. Her critical eye is not on feminism or women’s liberation; it is on sexism and on racism within the television industry. While articles such as this one do reveal multiple layers of oppression, they do not yet address how feminism may be affected by a truly intersectional analysis.

A similar kind of externally focused critique emerges across the subsection entitled “Women in the Black Liberation Movement: Three Views.” While this section is devoted to the views of Black women, it is not focused on the ways in which interconnected oppressions may incline Black women to challenge or critique aspects of women’s liberation. Instead, Morgan selected articles by Black women in which they only take to task Black men on account of their sexism (382-406). In its most explicit form, the Mount Vernon Black Women’s Liberation Group’s “Statement on Birth Control” is addressed to Black men (“Dear Brothers”) (404).

None of the pieces that Morgan has selected for this section demand a contentious dialogue between white and non-white women. While each piece certainly focuses on oppressions of racism simultaneously, they only do so in an additive sense. As Frances Beal has famously put it, the Black woman is doubly oppressed as “the slave of a slave” (Beal 1970: 385). Though Beal does go on in her article to turn her critical eye on feminism, it is not clear that the other women in *Sisterhood*, or even Morgan herself, have adequately heard Beal’s critique. For example, Beal’s discussion of forced sterilization of women in Puerto Rico (Beal 1970: 389-393)
has clearly done little to sway Cisler’s enthusiastic endorsement of sterilization as another liberating form of birth control for women. While Morgan attempts to make up for this oversight by adding an editorial note in Cisler’s piece directing the reader’s attention to Beal’s article for “an analysis of the racism in many birth-control programs” (Morgan 1970: 287, editorial note), it is not yet clear that either Morgan or Cisler are aware of the ways in which women’s liberation would need to alter its stance on reproductive justice to adequately accommodate an intersectional analysis of the ways in which racism, corporate capitalism, and sexism intersect to control the reproductive capacity of women of color.15

As Sutherland states at the end of her introduction to the “Colonized Women: The Chicana” (another subsection of “Go Tell It In the Valley”): “Let Anglo women listen for her [the Chicana’s, Vasquez’s] voice, not merely for echoes of their own” (Sutherland 1970: 426). Similar to Beal, Sutherland challenges white women to listen, and to finally hear, the Chicana’s voice and to allow it to trouble their own understandings of patriarchy and feminism. While this is a clear invitation to enter into a kind of coalitional conversation, it does not seem Morgan has fully accepted it. Despite Vasquez’s clear call to rethink the ways in which the family is an absolutely essential component to liberation struggles for Mexican-American men and women, Morgan insists in the introduction that the one thing she knows with absolute certainty is that the nuclear family is oppressive to women (see Vaquez 1970: 432 and Morgan 1970: xxxvi). Which women, we must ask, does she have in mind here? The point of an intersectional, as opposed to an additive, approach to multiple oppressions is precisely its ability to trouble both our understanding of oppression and, even more importantly, our approach to dismantling it. By taking firm stances on things such as dissolving the family and advocating sterilization as a form

15 For a good discussion of this, see Roberts (1997).
of birth control, Morgan and other white contributors are closing down rather than opening up fruitful coalitional conversations.

As was the case with notions of coalition as ethical encounter, what gets obscured in a project centered on “sisterhood,” I am arguing, are the arrangements of power (that is, the politics) that situate encounters between “sisters.” Relying on a shared ontological experience of sexist oppression coupled with a shared ethics of good will and care toward one’s “sisters,” Morgan believes she can additively and un-self-reflexively struggle toward feminist unity across profound race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality differences.\(^\text{16}\)

In the introduction, Morgan is self-reflexive enough to acknowledge the ways in which she has in the past identified herself with the oppressor by “nurtur[ing] a secret contempt for other women who weren’t as strong, free, and respected (by men) as [she] thought [she] was” (Morgan 1970: xvii). Moving away from this oppressor subject position entailed learning to understand the ways in which she was not above other women but actually needed other women. This process gave Morgan a more complete understanding of oppression (xviii). With this more complete understanding, she believes that the women’s movement, unlike other movements toward social justice, has the potential of “cutting across all class, race, age, economic, and geographical barriers” (xx).

However, while Morgan and even Sisterhood is self-reflexive up to a point, neither Morgan nor the anthology exhibits the level of self-reflexivity that would be required of truly coalitional scholarship. The anthology seems uninterested in beginning a conversation about how to change feminism or, more specifically, about troubling the notion of “sisterhood.” Sisterhood is interested in diversity in the service of challenging multiple systems of oppression but not

interested in turning this critical eye against the internal oppressive forces within feminism. The struggle these women are collectively engaged in is a struggle against an external threat that Morgan misidentifies as a single primary oppression—sexism. What this accounting of sexism necessarily prevents, unfortunately, is the kind of feminist struggle that is required of politico-ethical coalition politics. Minus this more self-reflexive project, I have argued, *Sisterhood* remains a project in the service of (unsuccessfully) building textual “sisterhood,” and in so doing necessarily foreclosing possibilities for textual coalition.

**Part II) This Bridge Called My Back: Feminist Theory Through Textual Coalition**

Where 1970s anthologies such as *Sisterhood* fail in enacting politico-ethical coalitional scholarship, 1980s anthologies such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (co-edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1983), I will now argue, succeed emphatically. There are a number of factors that contribute to this change. The 1980s brought with it a profound shift both within the broader political climate and within the publishing world. On the one hand, activist coalition politics was simply on a lot of people’s minds during this period. As I argued in the Introduction, many left movements entered a period of decline in the 1980s as the Reagan administration set out to dismantle the progressive gains of the 1960s and 1970s. The movements that survived were those willing to confront diversity and form coalitions across multiple subjugated groups (also see Townsend-Bell 2012: 142). In the publishing world, not only had the book-length anthology format become very popular, but autonomous women of color presses were becoming the new norm for women of color authors looking to publish their work—as opposed to the minority controlled (so Black press) or white-feminist controlled presses that they turned to in the 1970s (Townsend-Bell 2012). Gaining editorial control over women of color publications allowed women of color authors the freedom to honestly address the
challenges of difference within both the women’s movement, on account of its racism, and within the civil rights movement, on account of its sexism.

What is more, the women of color who came together in the pages of these books were often already working in coalitions with other women of color and Third World peoples. These were the groups that had already learned that entering into coalitions with other subjugated groups was a necessary survival tactic. Bernice Reagon’s 1981 coalition speech offers a good example of the mindset that many women of color had begun to adopt at this point. Both This Bridge and Home Girls were published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, an independent women of color-controlled press started by Barbara Smith, and at the request of Audre Lorde. One of the original founders of the Combahee River Collective, well known for its call for coalition politics, Barbara Smith is exemplary of the type of woman of color coming to the publishing world at this time who was already active in coalition politics.

In their original description of the press (1981), Smith, Lorde, and the other women of color involved at its conception, wrote: “Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is the only publisher in North America committed to publishing and distributing the writing of Third World women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes” (Smith 1989: 12). Echoing the activist tone of Sisterhood, in 1984 they added: “Our work is both cultural and political, connected to the struggles for freedom of all of our peoples. We hope to serve as a communication network for women of color in the U.S. and around the world” (12). “We publish work,” Smith continues, “not simply because it is by a woman of color, but because it consciously examines, from a positive and original perspective, the specific situations and issues that women of color face” (12). Kitchen Table is clearly invested in the kind of activist-oriented scholarship that motivated 1970s anthologies such as Sisterhood. Not only do they seek to bring
new voices to the publishing world, but they also see such acts as part of a wider political movement. In this sense, This Bridge continues in the spirit of Sisterhood by being unapologetically political in its intentions, by bringing the personal and material conditions of women’s lives to their writing, by challenging masculine styles of scholarship, and by engaging in a transparent, non-hierarchical, and truly collaborative editing process. However, I will argue this commitment to activist publishing takes on a new form in the 1980s as women of color-controlled presses more honestly and self-reflexively confront the challenge of working together across race, class, and sexuality divides.

The outcome of these political and material changes in both the publishing world and the wider political context resulted in a handful of successful politico-ethical textual coalitions in the form of women of color feminist anthologies. I take This Bridge as a model here. While Townsend-Bell argues that the 1980s brought with it a surge in content focused on coalition particularly among autonomous women of color-controlled presses,¹⁷ this content-driven focus alone does not explain why This Bridge succeeds in creating “a written coalition in and of itself” (Townsend-Bell 2012: 145). Originally, This Bridge sought to challenge the limited depictions of sisterly community offered in texts such as Sisterhood by provoking a difficult conversation with white feminists on their unselfconscious racism. However, I will demonstrate how the book quickly morphed into a project that was instead focused on both creating and interrogating notions of Third World women and Third World feminism (Townsend-Bell 2012: 144, and Moraga October 1983).

¹⁷ See Townsend-Bell (2012: 136, Table 1 and 143, Table 2). Tracing the themes addressed within each kind of publishing space, these tables show that in the 1970s: 11 percent of the content in minority controlled presses addressed coalition, 1 percent of the content in white feminist controlled presses addressed coalition, and 13 percent of the content in autonomous women of color presses addressed coalition. In the 1980s, these percentages went down to 9 percent in the case of minority controlled presses, up to 12 percent in the case of white feminist controlled presses, and up to 53 percent in the case of autonomous women of color presses.
In this way, not only is *This Bridge* unambiguously political through its activist publishing location in Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and its explicit content-driven focus on coalition politics, but the text itself, I argue, takes on a politico-ethical coalitional form in its overt self-reflexivity and its firm commitment to stand collectively against all forms of oppression. In addition to entering into difficult and self-reflexive conversations with other women of color about their own differences within the pages of the book, *This Bridge* adopts a self-reflexive and radically transparent editing process that prefigures the anthology itself as an egalitarian and coalitional space. The book itself, I contend, can be understood as a journey toward coalitional consciousness, both through the individual journeys chronicled there and through the form of the anthology itself.

The self-reflexive politics of *This Bridge* are conspicuously present in almost every aspect of the text and its production. While reprinted in 1983 by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, *This Bridge* was originally published by a white women’s press in 1981. Moraga and Anzaldúa alert us to this history in a note in the 1983 edition. When its original publisher ceased operation, Moraga and Anzaldúa were able after months of negotiations to retrieve control of their book and find a new home for it at Kitchen Table.18 On the adjacent page to the first Foreword to the second edition, they state: “the following, then, is the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, conceived of and produced entirely by women of color.” Echoing Morgan, the editors assert here that the very production of the book is itself a political act of resistance by incorporating previously excluded voices from the publishing world.

What is more, Moraga is explicit in stating the unequivocal political purpose of the book. This book, she asserts, was originally conceived out of a dream for a “unified Third World

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18 The version of this text that I am working from is the 1983 edition. Any citation to this text will use the 1983 date, not the 1981 date.
feminist movement.” In the same moment that she states this political purpose, however, she self-consciously examines the challenges that such a project poses. Between the time of its first publication in 1981 and its second publication in 1983, Moraga reflects on what she has learned:

Third World feminism does not provide the kind of easy political framework that women of color are running to in droves. We are not so much a “natural” affinity group, as women who have come together out of political necessity. The idea of Third World feminism has proved to be much easier between the covers of a book than between real live women. There are many issues that divide us: and, recognizing that fact can make that dream at times seem quite remote. Still, the need for a broad-based U.S. women of color movement capable of spanning the borders of nation and ethnicity has never been so strong.

If we are interested in building a movement that will not constantly be subverted by internal differences, then we must build from the insideout, not the other way around. Coming to terms with the suffering of others has never meant looking away from our own.

And we must look deeply. We must acknowledge that to change the world, we have to change ourselves—even sometimes our most cherished block-hard convictions. As This Bridge Called My Back is not written in stone, neither is our political vision. (Moraga, October 1983) (emphasis in original)

A number of important aspects of politico-ethical coalition politics emerge in this passage. Moraga and Anzaldúa’s commitment to Third World feminism is not built on ontological, or “natural” affinity, but is instead born out of the necessity of shared political commitment. This shared political commitment, however, is not one that is easily nurtured. It is one that is struggled for and continuously reaffirmed. “There are issues,” she explains, that continue to divide even women of color feminists. The challenge of shared political commitment, however, does not deter her or other contributors from continuing to struggle toward it.

In order to struggle successfully, we also see here, this political commitment must take on a politico-ethical character: that is, it must be consciously self-reflexive. They must, Moraga argues, build their movement from the “insideout.” As I argued in Chapter Four, this journey starts on an internal level. One does not have to choose between attending to either her suffering or to the suffering of others; one can attend to both simultaneously. To do this, however, one must be willing to be fully self-reflexive: that is, one must look deeply inside herself and prepare
for radical transformation. The change that emerges out of this internal journey guides one as she struggles toward coalition with others.

As Moraga and Anzaldúa state in the introduction, the purpose of the anthology is to make a connection across women. While it was originally meant to be an invitation to white women to begin a difficult conversation about feminism’s internal racism, classism, and heterosexism, the project quickly became a “positive affirmation of the commitment of women of color to [their] own feminism” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983: xxiii). In this sense, they continue, This Bridge “intends to reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the U.S.” (xxiii). This definition first appears in the introduction to the third section, “And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You: Racism in the Women’s Movement,” the only section of the anthology that was explicitly directed toward white women in the feminist movement. Moraga begins this section with a quotation from Barbara Smith:

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement (Smith 1980 in Moraga 1983: 61) (emphasis in the original)

The definition of feminism on offer here is a simple one. The emphasis on all is an important contribution of women of color feminism. If feminism is about freeing all women, then feminists must finally start to understand the multifaceted system of oppression that denies freedom to so many women. I argue that by adopting this simple definition of feminism, Barbara Smith, and the women of color feminists writing here, define the parameters of the politico-ethical commitment that brings feminists together in coalition. While women are separated by a variety of differences, what brings feminists together is a self-reflexive political commitment to fighting oppression in its multiple forms.
Moraga argues that the point of convergence between the women of color writing in *This Bridge* and the white women reading it is precisely this shared politico-ethical commitment. The women of color writing here equate what I am calling a politico-ethical commitment to the “love” that *feminists* may have for one another.

The women writing here are committed feminists. We are challenging white feminists to be accountable for their racism because at the base we still want to believe that they really want freedom for *all* of us. The letter from Audre Lorde to Mary Daly appearing in this section is an example to all of us of how we as feminists can criticize each other. It is an act of love to take someone at her word, to expect the most out of a woman who calls herself a feminist—to challenge her as you yourself wish to be challenged.

As women, on some level we all know oppression. We must use this knowledge as, Rosario Morales suggests, to “identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt.”

…For “We are all in the same boat.”
And it is sinking fast. (Moraga 1983: 62)

After many failed attempts to connect to white women and despite the anger and rage that such failures have generated, women of color acknowledge that the one possible point of connection between them is not around a shared identity as women but rather a shared political commitment as feminists to freeing all women through fighting oppression in its many forms.

This attempt at connection, this invitation to white women, is not one born out of naïve aspirations of communal or sisterly love between all women. Whereas feelings of love, empathy, and compassion appear across the other sections of the anthology when women of color talk to and about one another, these feelings all but vanish when women of color talk about and to white women. The dominant sentiments expressed across this section of the anthology are those of anger, rage, frustration, and disappointment. The type of connection that becomes possible in this context, I am arguing, is a *feminist* one. While developing an inclusive women’s community characterized by love and mutual respect seems unlikely, feminists can hope to form feminist coalitions committed to undermining all forms of oppression. Within these spaces, and between like-minded *feminists*, love and mutual respect may be possible. However, it seems
unequivocally clear at this point that only a genuinely self-reflexive political commitment to undermining oppression is capable of engendering such acts of love.

What at this point has only been hinted at is stated explicitly in a dialogue between Beverly and Barbara Smith appearing in the next section of the anthology, “Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia.” While this discussion may seem well overdue by this point, it is fitting that the first real mention of “coalition” politics emerges in the anthology’s fourth section wherein the contributors turn their attention away from external relations with white women and toward internal relations between women of color. As doris davenport puts it, they must give up on their white sisters for now, or at least until white women “evolve” to adopt a “feminist” consciousness in the way Smith defines feminism, and instead “re-channel [their] energies toward [them]selves” (davenport 1093:89). It is within this context of turning inward and examining their own politics with a spirit of love and reflexivity that the contributors learn the most about collective feminist politics. It is no surprise that coalition emerges here as the best way forward. In this way, This Bridge troubles the notion of “home” rhetorically contrasted with coalition by Bernice Reagon. As I argued in Chapter Three, women of color feminists have always articulated a complicated relationship to notions of “home” and Black sisterhood. This Bridge is one of the most thorough and self-conscious critical engagements with these concepts to date. Its clear investment in this kind of internal critique, I believe, helps us to understand This Bridge as an enactment of transforming even “home” spaces—a women of color-only space—into “coalitional” spaces.

In “Across the Kitchen Table A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue,” the Smith sisters address the challenges of working across race, class, culture, and sexuality differences in the feminist movement. At the end of the dialogue, Barbara Smith makes a strong appeal to “coalition politics
that cover a broad base of issues” as the best form of politics for the feminist movement (Smith and Smith 1983: 126). Echoing arguments she and the other co-founders of The Combahee River Collective made in their “Black Feminist Statement” (reprinted in the final section of This Bridge), as well as arguments made by many of the other contributors to This Bridge,\(^{19}\) Barbara Smith argues that the reality of interlocking oppressions in fact necessitates coalition politics between different subjugated groups. “There is no way,” she asserts, “that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don’t necessarily have to like or love the people you’re in coalition with” (126). In the same way that coalitional selves struggle toward a center out of necessity, subjugated peoples must struggle toward coalitions with one another. While love may exist in these spaces between feminists, love is not a necessary prerequisite. A political commitment to undermining oppression, however, is absolutely essential. Such a commitment, when adopted self-reflexively, will, as Moraga has argued, incline one toward loving acts with other women in coalition.

The political commitment driving this anthology, I am arguing, in its overt self-reflexivity differs from the one driving Sisterhood. While originally centered on the promise of autonomy and community for women of color (a home space), and necessarily in opposition to white women, through an intensely self-reflexive process the focus of the anthology shifted. As Toni Cade Bambara puts it in the original foreword to the anthology, This Bridge documents “particular rites of passage” and “coming to terms with community–race, group, class, gender, self–its expectations, supports, and lessons” (vii). This is a particularly apt way to describe the anthology. Indeed, I believe one could read the anthology itself as a sustained treatment of community, and specifically the transition from community (home) or “sisterhood” to coalition.

These authors call out white women for their desire to coalesce only on their own white feminist terms. Community, or “sisterhood,” within this space proves unworkable. For this reason, women of color seek autonomous community with one another.

It is through this process of seeking connection with one another that I believe the anthology takes on a coalitional form. As women of color feminists confront difference within this group, they learn the valuable lessons of politico-ethical coalition politics, which compel them to critically interrogate notions of community or sisterhood even among women of color. This Bridge, as Bambara puts it, provides the planks for this crossing: it can, she argues, “coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other’s ways of seeing and being” (vii). Such a project, she asserts, in fact needs no Foreword. “It is the Afterward,” she states, “that’ll count. The coalitions of women determined to be a danger to our enemies...and the contracts we creative combatants will make to mutually care and cure each other into wholesomeness” (viii). In this way, the anthology seems to function in the service of encouraging politico-ethical coalitions.

In addition to the explicit politico-ethical commitment grounding this text, another important component of this coalitional project, I will now argue, is the way in which the text both chronicles individual journeys, and enacts its own collective journey, toward coalitional consciousness. As Moraga reveals in the first lines of the Preface, compiling the anthology has brought her on her “own journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color” (Moraga 1983: xiii). This anthology, and the women in and around it, she continues, “have personally transformed [her] life, sometimes rather painfully but always with richness and meaning” (xiii). Moraga’s journey has been one of confronting difference and contradiction, and of longing for a feminist movement that can make
sense of the complicated intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It was “through” the passage of making this anthology, she recounts, that her growing consciousness emerged (xiv). She hopes that the book will lead those encountering it on a similar kind of journey of self-transformation (xv). It is precisely this kind of profound internal shift that Moraga and Anzaldúa hope their readers will experience while reading This Bridge. For them, the anthology itself seems to function as a vehicle toward coalitional consciousness.

We are first introduced to the emerging coalitional selves that populate this book in section one, “Children Passing in the Streets: The Roots of Our Radicalism.” This section offers a collection of four poems and two stream-of-consciousness journal entries by six different women of color authors. Together, these pieces tell stories of the contradictions inherent in growing up non-white and female. Moraga begins the section with a quotation from Maxine Hong Kingston, illustrating the authors’ shared experiences of confronting contradiction that shaped their lives as young girls: “I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (in Moraga 1983: 5). As I argued in Chapter Four, such an experience is an important part of one’s journey toward coalitional identity. By choosing to start with these stories, I am arguing, Moraga and Anzaldúa offer depictions of the fist steps for a woman moving toward coalitional consciousness.

In the introduction to this section of the anthology, Moraga describes its purpose in the following way:

We are women from all kinds of childhood streets: the farms of Puerto Rico, the downtown streets of Chinatown, the barrio, city-Bronx Streets, quiet suburban sidewalks, the plains, and the reservation.

In this first section, you will find voices from our childhoods, our youth. What we learned about survival—trying to-pass-for-white, easy-to-pass-for-white, “she couldn’t pass in a million years.” Here, we introduce to you the “color problem” as it was first introduced to us” “not white enuf, not dark enuf”, always up against a color chart that first got erected far outside our families and our neighborhoods, but which invaded them both with systematic determination.
In speaking of color and class, Tillie Olsen once said: “There’s no such thing as passing.” Here are women of every shade of color and grade of class to prove that point. For although some of us traveled more easily from street corner to corner than the sister whose color or poverty made her an especially visible target to the violence on the street, all of us have been victims of the invisible violation which happens indoors and inside ourselves: the self-abnegation, the silence, the constant threat of cultural obliteration. […] We were born into colored homes. We grew up with the inherent color contradictions in the color spectrum right inside those homes: the lighter sister, the mixed-blood cousin, being the darkest one in the family. It doesn't take many years to realize the privileges, or lack thereof, attached to a particular shade of skin or texture of hair. It is this experience that moves light-skinned or “passable” Third World women to put ourselves on the line for our darker sisters. We are all family. […] We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root of our radicalism. (Moraga 1983: 5) (emphasis in original)

Moraga achieves a number of things by introducing this section in this way. First, she reveals the diverse range of voices that will appear there. This diversity, she makes clear, transcends shades of color, national boundaries, geographical location, and socio-economic status. Second, she prepares her readers for the stories of struggle that will follow—stories, that is, of struggling for survival against the color line. This emphasis on “survival” echoes the sense of survival found in Reagon, where a crucial component of the danger of coalition inhered in the likelihood of losing oneself in the process of coalescing. The stories in this section, Moraga seems to be suggesting, will recount similar experiences of internal struggle and existential transformation. The “root of their radicalism,” she asserts, rests in these accounts of lived, internal or home struggle.

20 In Nellie Wong’s poem, “When I Was Growing Up,” she confesses to her readers of her own longing to be white and of the ways she tried to scrub the darkness off her skin in the bathtub. Conversely, in “on not being,” mary hope lee shares her desire to be darker. This is the nature of the color contradiction; while in some contexts one will desire to be lighter, in others one will wish to be darker. Rosario Morales’ stream-of-consciousness journal entry, “I Am What I Am,” repeats this theme of contradiction as she grapples with the many aspects of who she is as Puerto Rican, U.S. American, New York Manhattan, and New York Bronx. Naomi Littlebear’s stream-of-consciousness journal entry, “Dreams of Violence,” continues this theme of contradiction, detailing the violence attached to these contradictions. She recounts stories of getting beaten up by whites on the way home from school, simply for existing on the street as a Native American, only to arrive home to endure further beatings at the hands of her parents for getting into fights with white people on the street in the first place.

21 Think here of Smith’s edited anthology, Home Girls. See my discussion of this in Chapter Three. Smith chose the title “home girls” because she believes that Black feminist consciousness first develops at “home” (Smith 1983: xxi-xxii). While home here could mean the house one grows up in, it seems to also mean, for Smith and others, a
It is an experience of living these color contradictions, Moraga is asserting, that will enable these women to “put [them]selves on the line for [their] darker sisters.” They do this because “they are all family.” In a family—a space defined by at least some component of love, compassion and empathy—these women learned to live with these contradictions. This capacity, we are led to believe, gives these women the strength and love to connect to one another, and to forge their own coherent centers across their internal contradictions. However, I say that we are introduced here only to “emerging coalitional selves” because it is not yet clear that the multiple selves on display here, ones who are actively struggling to learn how to cope with the contradictions and paradoxes that define their plurality, have succeeded in making these connections.

In Moraga’s poem, “For the Color of My Mother,” she—a light-skinned girl who could pass for white—seeks a connection to her dark-skinned mother. “I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother speaking for her” (Moraga 1983: 12-13), Moraga repeats throughout the poem. There is a strong sense across this poem of the challenge inherent in making such a connection. As a fair-skinned child, Moraga did not experience the same kind of pain and suffering as her mother. Nevertheless, she tries to connect to the pain her mother endured getting her lips caught in a seam as she sewed a child’s linen by comparing this to her own experience of her upper lip splitting open at the age of two. Moraga desperately seeks a connection to her mother and struggles to accomplish this. Similarly, in Chrystos’ poem, “He Saw” she attempts to connect to her Native American father who “cut off his hair / joined the government / to be safe” (Chrystos 1983: 18). Across this poem, Chrystos laments the loss of a community of strong Black women. Black women need such spaces, Smith suggests, in order to develop a critical political consciousness. However, and as we will see across This Bridge, even these safe “home” spaces must confront internal contradictions. While I believe Home Girls also adopts many aspects of coalitional scholarship, I am choosing This Bridge as my example precisely because of its emphasis on confronting internal struggles related to encountering difference and danger even within home spaces.
connection to her father’s Native American past. In his efforts to give her “all the whitest advantages,” she believes he has put into jeopardy a deeper connection to this past. Chrystos seeks a connection to that from which her father has separated. Despite the optimism Moraga expresses in the introduction, I am arguing that these poems instead reveal the difficulty in making connections across difference. However, I also contend that exposing the challenge of this internal struggle is an important component of coalitional scholarship.

It is not until section two of the anthology, “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” that these multiplicitous selves begin to achieve connection and coherence across difference, discontinuity, and contradiction. In her introduction to the section, Moraga writes:

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience [...] Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers’ heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from the knowledge of ourselves. (Moraga 1983: 23)

Many of the themes introduced in Chapter Four emerge here. Their “theory in the flesh,” Moraga states, is one that will attempt to move across contradiction and difference and toward completeness or wholeness. Together, these authors will bring together—“fuse”—the many and discontinuous realities of their lives. This coming together, Moraga suggests, is one that forms the basis of “a politic born out of necessity.” I contend that “this politic” is rooted in a coalitional consciousness that forms as these women share their stories of struggling toward knowing their complete selves and resisting the external pull of fragmentation.

Moraga’s own essay, “La Güera,” is exemplary here. Moraga begins with a quotation from Emma Goldman. The experience of an event alone, Goldman argues, is not enough to give us a “philosophy” or “point of view” (Goldman in Moraga 1983: 27). “It is the quality of our response to the event,” she continues, “and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that helps us make their lives and experiences our own” (Ibid). I argue that this section of the anthology is
invested in facilitating this kind of crossing. The ability to travel to another’s world and even across ones own discontinuous selves, I argued in Chapter Four, is a crucial component to forging a coalitional consciousness. Moraga’s essay, I contend, maps her own crossing.

The title of the essay, “La Güera,” refers to the name Moraga was given as the “fair-skinned: born with the features of [her] Chicana mother, but with the skin of [her] Anglo father” (Moraga 1983: 28). According to her mother, Moraga had it made as a fair-skinned girl, and her mother did what she could to further “bleach [her] of what color [she] did have” (28). Moraga explains her mother’s intentions: “It was through my mother’s desire to protect her children from poverty and illiteracy that we became ‘anglocized’: the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future” (28). Through such a process, Moraga was differentiated from her dark-skinned mother.

Nevertheless, the profound familial connection Moraga had with her mother enabled her to connect to her mother’s experiences of poverty, racism, and oppression.

From all of this, I experience, daily, a huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become. Because (as Goldman suggests) these stories my mother told me crept under my “güera” skin. I had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother. I had no choice. I took her life into my heart... (Moraga 1983: 28) (emphasis in original)

The love Moraga had for her mother, she asserts here, made it impossible for her not to take her mother’s life, and her mother’s experiences of oppression, into her heart. However, this connection between Moraga and her mother despite their differences of race and class was not complete for Moraga until something else happened.

When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn’t until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother’s oppression—due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana—was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings. (Moraga 1983: 28-29)
As is evidenced here, it was not only love that allowed Moraga to enter into the life of her mother. As a young child, the love Moraga had for her mother and proximity to her mother’s world through repeated stories helped Moraga to empathize with her up to a point. However, because Moraga’s light skin helped her to avoid being marked by race, and because her mother did everything she could to remove any other markers of race attached to class, ethnicity, or access to education, it was not until Moraga was old enough to comprehend the one marker of difference that her mother was not able to wash away—that of being a lesbian—that Moraga was truly able to connect to her. It was her “love of women,” Moraga states in the Preface, that “drew [her] to politics” (Moraga 1983: xiv). Echoing Minnie Bruce Pratt, it was not just the fact of her love for other women that compelled Moraga to enter into coalitions with other women; instead, Moraga’s lesbianism acted as a marker of difference and oppression that enabled her to connect to the oppressions endured by other women.

In this sense, I argue that it was her lesbianism that compelled her to turn inward and to begin to negotiate across her multiple and contradictory selves. While Moraga may have loved her mother all along, it was the flesh and blood experience of being a lesbian—of knowing she could be “beaten on the street for being a dyke” (Moraga 1983: 29)—that helped her to connect to her mother’s experiences of oppression. Through this self-reflexive process—through her journey “under the skin” (30)—I am suggesting, her coaltional consciousness is born:

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. 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 1983: 29) (emphasis in original)

Despite the privileges she may have experienced because of her lighter skin and educational attainment, Moraga was unable to avoid the oppressions attached to being a lesbian. It was this
component of her identity, I argue, that, like Minnie Bruce Pratt, cracked “the shell of [her] privilege” and thus compelled her to turn inward (Pratt 1984: 27). This turning inward enabled her to connect to other women by reconciling her own multiple and shifting selves and coming to appreciate the ways in which all oppressions are interlocking. Moraga arrives at this political consciousness, however, neither simply through love or through abstract theoretical analysis. Echoing Luxemburg and Pratt, Moraga’s lived struggle as a lesbian brings her to it.

As she says when reflecting on this experience, “the real battle with...oppression for all of us, begins under the skin” wherein we ask ourselves how we may have internalized our oppression and even oppressed others (Moraga 1983: 30, 32). At this point, Moraga’s discussion about her mother quickly transforms into a discussion about the feminist movement. As she argues in the Foreword to the second edition, change must be built from the “insideout” (Moraga 1983: Foreword). As I argued in Chapter Four, it is by turning inward and focusing on one’s own contradictions that she learns how to deal with the contradictions and challenges that emerge as she tries to coalesce with other women. I maintain that Moraga tells this story about her mother in an effort to negotiate her own contradictory selves and to reflect on how these discontinuous parts have kept her from connecting to her mother.

This theme of struggling toward a coherent self despite the contradictions that make up multiple selves reverberates across the anthology. Indeed, this seems to be the very purpose of the anthology. This act of writing–this act of pulling the anthology together–Anzaldúa argues, is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think as “other”–the dark, the feminine. Didn’t we start writing to reconcile this other within us? (Anzaldúa 1983: 169).

Anzaldúa, and the many of other women of color contributing to this anthology, write precisely in order to undo the fragmentation that society attempts to impose on them. They write in order to “discover” their coherent selves, to “preserve” these selves and to “achieve self-autonomy”
261. These women embark on a “trip back into the self, travel to the deep core of [their] roots to discover and reclaim [their] colored souls,” rituals and religions (Anzaldúa 1983: 195). As I argued in Chapter Four, it was on this journey that Anzaldúa first introduces us to her coalitional self, a self that refuses to fragment her multiplicity and instead struggles toward a coherent center (see 205).²²

In addition to tracing their own individual journeys toward coalitional consciousness, I am also arguing that the text itself can be understood as a kind of coalitional conversation, or, as Townsend-Bell has called it, a “textual” or “written” coalition and not only because the content of their collective conversation turns ultimately toward coalition as the answer to the challenge of collective feminist politics across difference. I will show that the text itself enacts many important components of politico-ethical coalition politics and in this way moves well beyond the project of textual sisterhood attempted in Sisterhood Is Powerful.

Almost everything about this text reinforces a self-reflexive conversational character. In “Refugees Of A World On Fire,” Moraga’s foreword to the second edition (October 1983), she begins the text in a spirit of collective conversation by turning attention to the words of Alma Ayala, a nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican woman, in a letter she wrote to Gloria Anzaldúa about the impact This Bridge has had on her life. “Your introduction or even reintroduction,” Moraga tells her readers, “should come from the voices of women of color who first discovered the book.” Unlike what occurred in Sisterhood, here both the editors and contributors frequently quote one another. This dialogue helps to remind us that the text itself offers a kind of written record—a “living entity,” as Moraga and Anzaldúa call it in the introduction (xxiii)—of this

²² In her essay, “Brownness,” Andrea Canaan makes a similar kind of claim to unity and wholeness. She argues there that she must “nurture and develop brown self, woman, man, and child” (Canaan 1983: 234); she must “address the issues of [her] own oppression and survival” for when she “separates[s]...isolate[s]...and ignore[s] them, she separates, isolates, and ignores “[her]self” (234). “I am a unit,” she asserts; “a part of brownness” (234). Much like Moraga, Canaan refuses to rank her multiple selves.
ongoing collaboration. As their new home at Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press makes even more vivid, this anthology is the product of collaboration and struggle both between the women of color contributors as well as between them and their white and non-white readership.

What is more, Moraga and Anzaldúa–like Morgan, though pushing slightly farther than she did–go out of their way to challenge the traditional editorial hierarchy within anthologies by being remarkably transparent regarding the selection process and organization of the book and by positioning themselves both as editors and contributors. As Townsend-Bell notes when surveying texts from this period, one of the most striking things about women of color anthologies such as This Bridge, is their “candor about selection processes, the difficulty with submissions, and the number of first-time and nonprofessional writers” (Townsend-Bell 2012: 130). In the spirit of the original mission of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, editors such as Smith, Anzaldúa, and Moraga are thoroughly self-reflexive regarding the production of the anthology: In addition to including their own work in the main body of the anthology—a notable divergence from both Morgan and, I will demonstrate next, Walker—they present a lengthy introductory material (including three forewords, a preface, a poem, and an introduction) in which they include the voices of the other women of color involved in the anthology and, as we have seen, even the voices of their readership.

Their investment in a more collaborative process, however, does not preclude them from taking ownership over the structure of the text. As they explain in the introduction, Moraga was primarily responsible for the “thematic structure and organization of the book as a whole” (xxiv), writing the introductions for the first four sections of the book (Anzaldúa wrote the introductions for the final two sections of the book). Challenging the notion of “editor as leader,” we can therefore see, does not necessarily entail giving up on an organizational structure: quite the
opposite, actually. Refusing the “hands-off” approach that will come to define later feminist anthologies in the 1990s (I turn to this shortly), Moraga and Anzaldúa were heavily involved in conceptualizing the structure and direction of the book. They did this planning, however, in conversation with the other contributors. This collaboration inclined them to come to know the other contributors quite well, to puzzle over the major themes and messages of their collective works, and to map the evolving political consciousness emerging out of these discussions at the beginning of each section.

By being self-reflexive and transparent about this process, they challenge the traditional hierarchy of editor and contributor. This Bridge includes far more introductory material than either Sisterhood or, I will demonstrate next, To Be Real. What is more, by including their own biographies in the “Biographies of the Contributors” section, instead of in a separate section “on the editors,” Moraga and Anzaldúa further resist the hierarchical demarcation of editor vs. contributor in favor of a more egalitarian relationship among the women involved in the books’ production.23 Yes, the book requires organization, structure, proofreading, editing, a variety of other administrative tasks, as well as emotional and spiritual support, but Moraga and Anzaldúa show us that these tasks can be performed in a spirit of collaborative social justice. In this sense, the very format of the text itself takes on a politico-ethical coalitional character. They succeed, that is, in “enacting the collectivity for which they call” (Norman 2006: 39).

A further enactment of their textual coalition politics reemerges in Anzaldúa’s Foreword to the second edition, in which her political commitment is reflected in her language by choosing to write in a combination of English and Spanish, an overtly political act that has become characteristic of much of Anzaldúa’s work and is prevalent across This Bridge. Having followed

23 Similar to Morgan, they insist that each contributor write her own biography to further celebrate each other’s self-determination.
in the footsteps of Morgan, Moraga and Anzaldúa take their activist scholarship to a deeper and more self-reflexive level. In her introduction to “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” Moraga tells us that the value in bringing “flesh” to their writing lies precisely in its ability to invite the reader into the material lives of women of color. “This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our ‘wounded knee’ (Chrystos)” (Moraga 1983: 23) (my emphasis). The women of color writing in This Bridge not only bring “flesh and blood experiences” to their writing by writing about the material conditions and struggles of their lives, but they also do so through their particular linguistic style. Whether it is in writing in a combination of English and Spanish, in insisting on lower-case names (see doris davenport, hatie gossett, and mary hope lee), in spelling “women” in the colloquial form “wimmin” (davenport 1983: 85-90), or in refusing to punctuate their writing (see Chrystos 1983: 68-70), the women of color writing across This Bridge bring their own styles to the text that reflects their sex, their race, their class, their ethnicity, and their sexuality loud and clear. I contend that this style is meant to serve a purpose—to draw attention to the material reality of these authors’ lives, not only as poor women of color but also as truly coalitional selves.

This form of “resistant writing,” Maria Lugones has since argued, not only helps us to “rethink the task of political philosophy” (Lugones 2003: ix), but it also enables the contributors to “write within resistance” as opposed to only about it, by “playfully” putting on display both their multiplicity and their materiality as poor and working class women of color (30 and 41). While Morgan also sought to bring elements of women’s material lives to the writing process, her anthology failed to engage the intersectional differences present among women. By bringing flesh to their writing as poor and working class women and lesbians of color, the contributors to
This Bridge concretize the contradictory and paradoxical experiences of both the interlocking oppressions and the strength that mark their lives.

In their introduction to the collection, Moraga and Anzaldúa include a section on “Time and Money” in which they further emphasize the materiality of writing. “How do you concentrate on a project when you’re worried about paying the rent?” they ask (xxv). Through this process of pulling the publication together they have learned why it is that so few women of color attempt such tasks: “no money to fall back on,” they state (xxv). As Moraga and Anzaldúa explain, most of the women appearing in the book are “first-generation writers” and some don’t even see themselves as writers at all (xxiv). The form their writing takes further reflects this informality and diversity, by ranging from “extemporaneous stream of consciousness journal entries to well thought-out theoretical statements; from intimate letters to friends to full-scale public addresses...poems and transcripts, personal conversations and interviews” (xxiv). When editing the anthology, Moraga and Anzaldúa state that their “primary commitment” was to “retaining this diversity, as well as each writer’s especial voice and style” (xxiv). The book, they continue, “is intended to reflect our color loud and clear, not tone it down” (xxiv). The purpose of the text is a political one: to offer a window into the material reality of these women’s lives. Instead of trying to fit within the academy they aim to disrupt it; instead of suppressing the material conditions that mark their lives, they sought to enliven them.

As Anzaldúa aptly puts it in her essay “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers:”

Forget the room of one’s own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you’re wealthy or have a patron—you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floors or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you’re depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write. (Anzaldúa 1983: 170)
Anzaldúa offers here a vivid example of what I mean by the materiality of writing present across this text: one, that is, which emphasizes the material circumstances and sacrifices that one makes in order to bring pen to paper; and these sacrifices are complexly shaped by interlocking class, race, and gender considerations. She and Moraga make sure that this materiality is front and center in the book by including the brief section on time and money. The women writing here are not privileged academics; they are poor and working-class women of color. This is an activist-edited collection that is meant to reflect the materiality of their lives as struggling activist/writers. Their overt transparency regarding this process of writing is one of the many ways in which this text enacts politico-ethical coalition politics. This commitment to an egalitarian editorial process all but vanishes only a decade later.

Part III) To Be Real: On the Limitations of Textual Mosaic

The textual coalition on display in This Bridge, I have argued, diverges from the textual sisterhood attempted in Sisterhood Is Powerful. In this final section of the chapter, I will differentiate This Bridge from another form of feminist scholarship emerging out of the 1990s and what is called “third wave” feminism. The “third wave” refers to a brand of feminism that emerged in the 1990s by young women who were born in the 1960s or 1970s (many were daughters of second wave feminists).24 Though a number of feminists argue that the wave metaphor is an unhelpful way to understand feminism,25 for our purposes, we can understand “third wave” feminism as the third temporal phase of feminist activism: the “first wave” is regarded as corresponding to feminist activity at the end of the 19th century and into the early


25 See Marso (2010), Springer (2002), and Hemmings (2005) for some of these critiques.
20th century (think of the Suffrage Movement); the “second wave” to feminist activity from the 1960s through the early 1980s (think of the Women’s Liberation Movement); and the “third wave” to feminist activity since the 1990s. For some, a fourth wave began around 2010, primarily characterized by the new technological mediums used to transmit third wave feminist ideas (blogs, Twitter and other online media).

Unlike first and second wave feminism, which were both tied to larger social justice movements (abolition and civil rights, respectively), the third wave is understood as a much more decentralized brand of feminism. Though difficult to define (Snyder 2008), this feminism is often explicitly anti-intellectual, favoring highly individualized first-person accounts of defiant feminist lifestyle choices. While attention to difference continues to be central here, the spirit of politico-ethical coalitional politics, I will argue, has all but vanished. In its stead, we find a dangerous push away from feminist politics rooted in self-reflexively working to undermine oppression and toward a highly individualized lifestyle feminism that echoes strongly with the political indeterminacy grounding Butler’s notion of coalition as spectacle. In exposing this troubling shift, I further distinguish the unique form of coalitional politics and scholarship emerging out of 1980s women of color feminism, suggesting that contemporary scholars invested in theorizing coalition would do well to revisit texts such as This Bridge.

As members from the Third Wave Direct Action Corporation stated in April of 1996, “third wave practice seeks to create what Angela Davis calls ‘unpredicted coalitions’ (quoted in Siegel 1997: 58). Building on this definition, Deborah Siegel (1997) argues that third wave feminist anthologies actually function as unpredicted coalitions (58). Other treatments of third wave feminism have similarly argued that this kind of feminism is particularly well suited to

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coalition.\textsuperscript{27} The collective politics of “third wave feminism,” argues Claire Snyder (2008), replaces exclusionary “attempts at unity” on display in \textit{Sisterhood} with a “dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition” by indiscriminately celebrating all women’s individual lifestyle choices (Snyder 2008: 176). An infinitely “welcoming” politics of coalition – i.e. this inclination toward accepting all kinds of feminist lifestyles – is clearly evident, scholars such as Siegel have argued, in the numerous third wave anthologies that were published in the years following Rebecca Walker’s coining of the phrase, “third wave” feminism (Walker 1992).\textsuperscript{28}

The voices appearing in Barbara Findlen’s (ed.) \textit{Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation} and Rebecca Walker’s (ed.) \textit{To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism}, Siegel argues, “coalesce in the space between differences” (Siegel 1997: 58). While “united in the ‘goal’ of postfeminist feminist defiance,” Siegel argues that the emphasis on “multivocality” – or the presence of diverse women’s voices – across both anthologies necessarily “troubles the conventional understanding of an anthology as an ‘organized chorus’” (Gallop 1992,8) (58). For Gallop (1992), an “organized chorus” means to refer to a kind of political collectivity, and specifically to the diverse voices coming together in a feminist anthology that nevertheless share common political interests and are located together (8). So, if not centered on a shared political commitment, then what is it that brings these diverse voices together for Siegel?

\textsuperscript{27} See Drake (1997), Snyder (2008) and Stone (2007).

What is unique and helpful about third wave anthologies, Siegel argues, is the way in which they replace traditional notions of unity—i.e., the organized chorus of earlier anthologies such as *Sisterhood* which advocated the goal of sisterhood rooted in a shared experience of patriarchal oppression—with an understanding of anthology as “unpredicted” textual coalition now united in the goal of “postfeminist feminist defiance” and an indiscriminately welcoming politics of coalition. Given her aversion to the “organized chorus” metaphor, we are left to believe that the goal of “postfeminist feminist defiance” must not be understood as a kind of teleological political goal. I contend that for Siegel postfeminist feminist defiance instead refers to a methodological commitment to resisting political fixity. These texts, she argues, are rightly understood “as feminist anthologies without the fixity of one feminist agenda in view” (53). It is precisely this political indeterminacy, Siegel believes, that allows these anthologies to be understood as *unpredicted* coalitions.

Siegel’s willingness to understand third wave anthologies as “unpredicted coalitions” deserves our attention. What kind of textual coalitions are these? In attempting to move away from notions of feminist unity, it would seem that third wave anthologies certainly seek to avoid problematic versions of “textual sisterhood” found in *Sisterhood*. Can we then understand them as “textual coalitions” in the way that Townsend-Bell (2012) describes *This Bridge*? It is precisely this question that I take up in this final section of the chapter. Calling on Angela Davis’ notion of “unpredicted coalitions,” it seems that Siegel believes third wave anthologies share something in common with at least the 1980s women of color feminism of Davis. It is this implicit assertion that I wish to take to task here.
Davis’ call for “unpredictable or unlikely coalitions” emerges in an interview she does with Lisa Lowe in July of 1995 (Davis 1997: 322). As Davis argues when discussing the challenges prisoners have faced in organizing labor unions within prisons,

...there is a place for coalitions. While I find identity-based coalitions problematic, I do concur with Bernice Reagon when she says that coalition work must be central in late twentieth-century political organizing. However, I think that we should focus on the creation of unpredictable and unlikely coalitions grounded in political projects. Not only prisoners, immigrant workers, and labor unions, but also prisoners and students, for example. (Davis 1997: 322)

Following Reagon’s lead, Davis calls on progressive activists to continue the hard work of coalition politics. For Davis, this form of collective politics was just as necessary in the 1990s as it was in the 1980s. In this call, however, Davis also implores activist to be wary of coalitions centering on identity. What she calls “unpredictable or unlikely coalitions” are those coalitions that may emerge between multiple subjugated groups committed to a common political project. Davis spends much of this interview thoughtfully reflecting on the important difference between coalition politics rooted in essentialist notions of identity (or ontology) and coalition politics rooted in shared political commitment. When Davis emphasizes the need for “unpredictable” coalitions, she means to emphasize the necessity of unlikely allies gaining a critical coalitional consciousness that would help them to understand the ways in which multiple and interlocking oppressive forces act on all of them simultaneously. Such an understanding, Davis argues, would help them to identify a common political project that seeks to undermine at least one aspect of the entire oppressive system. The sense of coalition politics she advocates here therefore closely resembles the notion of politico-ethical coalition politics developed in Chapter Three and depicted across This Bridge.

With this understanding of “unpredictable coalition” in mind, I seek to challenge Siegel’s interpretation of To Be Real, and to a lesser extent Listen Up, as unpredictable textual coalitions. If not “unpredictable” coalitions in the way that Davis understands them, then what kind of
“unpredictable” coalitions do Siegel and others have in mind when appealing to this now oft-cited phrase? As I argued in Chapter Two, notions of “unpredictability” have become ubiquitous across contemporary political theory and particularly dominant in theories of activist coalition politics. However, the notion of “unpredictability” in this scholarship is not one that aligns with Davis’ understanding of “unpredictable or unlikely coalition.” Instead, it is one that takes its roots in poststructuralist critiques of stable notions of identity, power, and the social world. One form of coalition politics emerging out of such critiques, I showed in Chapter Two, is “coalition as spectacle” (see Butler 1990).

Angela Davis, it is worth noting, wrote the Afterword to To Be Real. Nowhere in it, however, does she use the phrase “unpredicted” or “unpredictable” “coalition” to describe what is taking place within the pages of this book. Instead, she appeals to the metaphor of “mosaic.” While I would agree that this anthology may be understood as a surprising, or even unpredictable, and colorful “mosaic,” the only sense of coalition compatible here is one centered on spectacle. If the goal of “unpredictable coalitions” in the way Butler theorizes them is to cause a kind of ontological trouble, then we may understand To Be Real as a manifestation of this kind of disturbance, except here what is being disrupted is the very notion of feminism itself. While This Bridge was also invested in challenging conventional understandings of feminist solidarity, a clear political project rooted in a self-reflexive commitment to undermining all forms of oppression guided their intervention. As I uncover what coalition as spectacle, or mosaic, may look like between the pages of a book, the severe limitations of this notion of coalition are immediately apparent. It is precisely such limitations, I believe, that may have prevented Davis from comparing this text to her notion of unpredictable coalition.
Walker and Findlen believe that the type of feminism presented in their anthologies has moved beyond previous generations of feminism and is one that embraces difference, diversity, complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity. To illustrate this emphasis on difference, both editors are careful to include work by white women, women of color, men, bisexual women, lesbian women, and women with disabilities. With this show of diversity, one might think that these anthologies differ from earlier anthologies such as *Sisterhood* by resembling a colorful mosaic of feminists, rather than a homogenous picture of sisterhood. However, I will demonstrate that both anthologies (though *To Be Real* more so than *Listen Up*) offer a rather narrow depiction of difference once we factor in other identity markers such as class and age.

As both authors make unequivocally clear, these anthologies are meant to represent a collection of feminist voices from a specific generation. These are the voices of “young” feminists (Findlen 1995: xvi and Walker 1995: xxxii); feminists, that is, who grew up within feminism (so born in the 1960s or later). These are young women and men who feel “entitled” to the gains of the women’s liberation movement (Findlen 1995: xii). They are, as Findlen puts it, “the first generation” for whom second wave feminism has been “entwined in the fabric of [their] lives” (xii). As such, Walker insists, these young women have “a very different vantage point on the world [and on feminism] than that of [their] foremothers” (Walker 1995: xxxiii).

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30 Rebecca Walker—herself the mixed-race daughter of an African-American mother and a Jewish American father—includes in her anthology work by a number of other African-American women, a mixture of white men and women, a Filipina-American woman, and an Indian woman. Barbara Findlen’s anthology (herself a white woman) reflects a similar kind of diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, including work by African-American women, a Native American woman, a Korean American woman, an Indian woman, and a Cuban American woman.
Both authors are unapologetic in terms of narrowing the field of voices to this younger generation of feminists.  

In addition to narrowing the voices engaged across these texts by age, Walker (more so than Findlen) has also clearly narrowed her pool of contributors by class, educational attainment, and geographical location. Perhaps most striking across both anthologies, though even more pronounced across To Be Real, is the sheer number of college-educated, and often elite college-educated, women appearing in these collections. While Listen Up certainly includes a wider range of young women’s voices by including working class and even poor women among the contributors, To Be Real seems to have conspicuous class and education bias. As Walker discloses in the introduction, when compiling the book she was looking specifically for other young feminist voices that echoed her own experiences and struggles with the feminism of her mother’s generation.

A quick look at the contributor biographies confirms this pattern. Not only did almost all of the contributors attend elite colleges (many receiving post-graduate degrees in addition to bachelor’s degrees), but almost all of them reside in major urban centers such as New York, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. One gets the sense that this anthology is comprised of essays by Walker’s Ivy-league (herself a Yale graduate) peers – so all multiply privileged in terms of socio-economic status, as well as the educational privileges this status often bestows, and exposure to feminism. These biographies offer a marked contrast from what we saw in both This Bridge and Sisterhood.

Though seemingly committed to offering a diverse range of voices, what we find instead is a rather narrow brand of privileged feminism. Findlen speaks of this privileged feminism in

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31 Walker makes a couple of exceptions in her anthology by including people such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Gloria Steinem.
terms of “entitlement” (Findlen 1995: xii). It is precisely this sense of entitlement, I believe, that would lead Walker in the first line of her introduction to describe her life as a kind of “feminist ghetto” (Walker 1995: xxix). While Findlen seems to be aware of her feminist privilege—seemingly grateful to have encountered feminism at the young age of eleven (Findlen 1995: xii)—Walker appears to be disturbingly unaware of the privileges her upbringing in a “feminist ghetto”—where she was raised by feminist celebrities such as her own mother, Alice Walker, as well as Gloria Steinem and Angela Davis (both appearing in her edited collection)—have bestowed upon her. Feeling that she is already well versed in the workings of power, the intersection of racism, classism, sexism, and other structures of oppression, and the importance of incessant critique, Walker seeks to escape the old-style, boring, or uninteresting feminism of her mother’s generation that defined childhood (Walker 1995: xxxix-xl).

Instead of interrogating systemic interlocking oppressions, Walker uses the anthology to justify as “feminist” her individual choices despite the fact that they may not correspond to previous feminist projects centering on analyzing, critiquing, and dismantling interlocking oppressive forces. This brand of individualistic lifestyle feminism, I argue, is reflected across the various contributions to To Be Real, wherein the authors focus on recounting their own individual struggles against feminist dogma that tells them: they shouldn’t be “girly” (Delombard); they shouldn’t wear lipstick (Senna); they shouldn’t get excited about planning a wedding (Wolf); they shouldn’t embrace violence (Cabreros-Sud); they shouldn’t be self-serving (Mitchell); they shouldn’t get turned on by rape and torture (Minkowitz); they—men in this case—shouldn’t plan bachelor parties that include strippers (Schultz); they shouldn’t listen to misogynistic rappers like Snoop Dog (Eisa Davis); they shouldn’t take their husband’s last name in marriage (Allyn and Allyn); they shouldn’t be upper-middle-class (Bondoc); they shouldn’t be
supermodels (Webb) or strippers (Taylor); they must be full-time activists (Bondoc); they must be permanently angry (Bondoc); and they must continue to work after becoming mothers (Abner). The men and women across this anthology all choose to live how they want to live and assert that this kind of self-determination and defiance defines feminist empowerment. Also known as “choice” feminism (see Snyder-Hall 2010), for this generation of feminists, feminism is about choosing to live however one wants.

In this sense, I concur with Davis that the anthology resembles a “mosaic” of diverse feminist lifestyle choices (Davis 1995: 280). As the title suggests, To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism, the anthology is invested in a kind of “feminism as ontology”—feminism, that is, as a way of being, feminism as an identity that can be worn or put on display.\(^{32}\) When compiling the anthology, Walker included essays that explored individual struggles against feminism. She sought out young men and women who felt stifled by feminism in the same way she had been in the “feminist ghetto” of her childhood, wherein everything she did had to “measure up to an image [she] had in [her] mind of what was normally and political right according to [her] vision of female empowerment” (xxix). Walker rejects this exacting vision of feminism by offering alternative ways of living as feminists. It is for this reason, I contend, that the “mosaic” metaphor is an apt one. The anthology gives us a static allusion of snapshots of diverse “feminist” lifestyle choices, and in this sense it shares something in common with the notion of “coalition as spectacle.” The purpose of the anthology, much like the

\(^{32}\) Findlen’s title, Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation, is less overt in its attention to ontology. With her emphasis on listening to new feminist voices, we might even understand the anthology as a kind of conversational piece focused less on redefining the “face” of feminism and more on revisiting the project of feminist politics. Nevertheless, and as she makes clear in the introduction, her anthology is similarly focused on depicting feminist identity, and specifically on showing the many different types of individual “identities” that may “coexist with feminism” (Findlen 1995: xiv).
purpose of coalition when understood as spectacle, is none other than to exist in a spectacular moment (performance or incarnation) of ontological disturbance.

Lisa Jones’ article, “She Came With the Rodeo,” offers an example of what this spectacle may look like in practice. Recounting her experience in the “Rodeo Caldonia High-Fidelity Performance Theater” traveling conceptual art piece on Black female representation (255), Jones emphasizes the ways in which this group worked to challenge stereotypical images of Black women. “There was this assumption,” she recalls, “that being black and a woman carries with it a responsibility to be dire and remorseful” (257). Her group worked to challenge these assumptions by performing contradictory images of Black women having fun, and being happy, playful, and unabashedly sexual: “We are smart-ass girls with a sense of entitlement, who avail ourselves of the goods of two continents, delight in our sexual bravura, and live womanism as pleasure, not academic mandate” (255). In performing spectacles of unexpected Black womanism, Jones and the other members of the group challenged stereotypical images of Black femininity. In so doing, Jones embraces a form of performative feminist empowerment that is explicitly anti-intellectual and infinitely open to redefinition. Given her insistence on this kind of feminism being non-academic, however, it is at least noteworthy that Jones herself attended Yale University in addition to the New York University’s Graduate School of Film and Television. It is also worth mentioning that Butler’s *Gender Trouble* came out in 1990. Given this context, it is hard to imagine that Jones was not already well versed in the academic arguments behind carrying out defiant feminist politics in the form of group spectacle.

Just like the Rodeo Caldonia High-Fidelity Performance Theater, I am arguing that *To Be Real*, understood as unexpected or unpredictable mosaic, attempts a similar kind of ontological trouble by disrupting traditional notions of what feminists are supposed to look like. In this
sense, it enables its reader to “behold a mosaic of vastly different ways” to wear feminist consciousness (Davis 1995: 280). In it we find a “gathering of ‘introspective’ voices” (281), and an “ever-expanding” picture of the multiple ways to live as feminists (Walker 1995: xxxv). However, neither a “mosaic” nor a “gathering,” I maintain, is equivalent to a textual coalition in the way I understand it. A mosaic does not act, it simply is. While the anthology certainly achieves a kind of ontology of limited (by class, age, education, and ideology) multiplicity, and in so doing influences our conceptions of what it means to be feminists; it does not, I argue, achieve any sense of coalition outside of group spectacle.

“It is not surprising,” bell hooks argued back in the early 1980s, “that the vast majority of women who equate feminism with alternative lifestyle are from middle-class backgrounds, unmarried, college-educated, often students who are without many of the social and economic responsibilities that working-class and poor women who are laborers, parents, homemakers, and wives confront daily” (hooks 1984: 29). Though hooks wrote these words a decade before third wave feminist anthologies first appeared, and the women she speaks of here are second-wave white feminists, her critique proves to be remarkably appropriate when applied to Walker’s anthology. Instead of unpacking where narrow images of feminism may have come from, including structural or institutional forces that work to reproduce them, Walker seeks to collect essays by men and women who struggle against feminism. Instead of interrogating the

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33 An important exception here is the essay by bell hooks wherein she considers how the intersection of racism and poverty may produce a need for beauty in the lives of black people. However, she is careful to distinguish this need for beautiful things from the “hedonistic consumerism” of contemporary African American culture (hooks 1995: 161). Another exception is Danzy Senna’s article wherein she self-reflexively finds her way back from power, or individualistic, feminism and to feminism as dismantling all oppressive forces (Senna 1995: 18-20).

34 By positioning her project against feminism, Walker’s To Be Real represents a radical shift both from what we saw in Sisterhood Is Powerful and even from what we see in other third wave anthologies such as Listen Up. Unlike Walker, who seems most interested in moments in which a younger generation finds itself up against feminism, Findlen makes it clear that the essays appearing in her collection are those in which a younger generation first encounters sexism and patriarchy. While these instances will no doubt look different from those of previous
emergence of lifestyle feminism, Walker and the other contributors seek only to expand the range of possible feminist lifestyle choices on offer. In this sense, like the privileged white feminism decades before them, the third wave feminism of Walker and her contributors fails to see the ways in which treating “feminist” as a “pre-packaged role women can now select as they search for identity,” even when these roles are infinitely wider than what they were in the 1970s, nevertheless reinforces feminism ontology in the place of feminism as political commitment (hooks 1984: 29). In so doing, it also effectively replaces coalition as politico-ethical encounter (via Bernice Reagon) with coalition as spectacle (via Judith Butler).

Instead of sincerely confronting difference in the way that authors from This Bridge have done, Walker simply puts limited and additive difference on display. It is this sense of being only on display that again makes the “mosaic” metaphor apt. Unlike the living coalitional conversation enacted across This Bridge, To Be Real does not seem to be conversational at all. The pieces do not explicitly engage, let alone reference, one another, and Walker does very little in the introduction to encourage this kind of engagement. Neither is the anthology organized into categories or discussion points. Instead, all twenty-three contributions (including Steinem’s Foreword, Walker’s introduction, and Davis’ Afterword) appear one after the other with no

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35 See bell hooks’ Feminist Theory From Margin to Center for a good critique of the brand of lifestyle feminism that emerged during the second-wave. See especially hooks (2000: 29-31).
demarcations whatsoever—just one list of authors and titles. Unlike Moraga and Anzaldúa, Walker offers no guidance on how to read the text or what kind of purpose the text may serve beyond putting additive and indiscriminating difference on display. This resistance to categorizing, structuring, or organizing the text seems reminiscent of the epistemological undecidability and political indeterminacy that grounds coalition as spectacle and effectively refuses foundational claims to identity, categorization, and shared political goals and directions. This hands-off approach to editing and structuring the anthology stands in marked contrast to what we saw in both Sisterhood and This Bridge.

We must ask ourselves whether Walker’s project and its focus on a kind of internal critique of feminism shares much in common with the self-reflexive account of feminism offered in This Bridge. While some of the essays in To Be Real are certainly much more self-reflexive than Walker’s introduction in terms of understanding how one is complexly positioned vis-à-vis power (see essays by Danzy Senna, Gina Dent, bell hooks, and Anna Bondoc for moments of this kind of self-reflexivity), the anthology as a whole, I argue, fails to achieve a truly self-reflexive feminist critique.

In the one moment of self-reflexivity in the anthology, Walker asks herself what she meant to do in creating it: “Am I a bad feminist by making a book that isn’t about welfare reform, environmental racism, and RU486? What about the politics? What about the activism that people need to hear about?” (Walker 1995: xxxix). Unfortunately, however, Walker quickly brushes off these important and potentially self-critical questions, by instead defending the type of book that she wanted to create for herself.

This question came up early on when I found myself feeling internal pressure to make a book I really wasn’t all that desperate to read. That book was filled with incisive critique of the patriarchy, plenty of young women from every background fighting against all manner of

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36 Findlen’s anthology is similarly laid out in this undifferentiated list format.
oppression, and inspirational rhetorical prose meant to uplift, empower, and motivate. It would be a great book to buy one day, I thought to myself after a friend sagely warned me to stay true to my passion and not succumb to “should,” but would it pull me along a journey that captivated and intrigued me, would it get at what was most relevant in my life and the lives of others I talked to, forcing us to face and embrace, confront and understand? Would it help me to learn more about myself, and thus help me to learn more about the nature of female empowerment? Doubtful. (xxix-xl)

There are a number of things worthy of mention here. While Walker enters into a moment of acknowledging her own internal pressures and contradictions, she does not sit with these uncomfortable feelings for long, nor does she challenge herself to confront components of her privileged feminism. Instead, she goes on to defend the type of feminist book that she wants to make by turning it into a individualistic, and even self-indulgent, project.

As a privileged young feminist, it is not surprising that a book about intersectional oppressions did not “intrigue” her. The stories of oppression that would have filled that book were stories she was probably unable to relate to given the many facets of her privilege. Because she takes solace in the fact that there are many other privileged feminists out there—and especially on elite college campuses—she feels justified in instead editing an anthology of stories and perspectives similar to her own. There is absolutely no sense here that Walker is engaged in a collective project with other feminists on a journey toward a more self-reflexive kind of feminism aimed at undermining oppression. Instead, we get a strong sense from Walker’s introduction that the book is there to serve her—that is, to justify a type of feminism that fails to resemble the kind of structural analyses of complicated and interlocking systems of power that earlier forms of feminism have been built on.

In this endeavor, a clear hierarchy emerges between herself, as the editor, and the rest of the contributors who are there to echo the vision of feminism that Walker sets out to defend. Taking on a more conventional editorial role in the production of this anthology—and in this way parting ways with the editors of both Sisterhood and This Bridge—Walker functions as the
anthology’s gatekeeper. While every editor may play this role to a certain extent, there is no sense here that Walker did this in conversation with others or even with the help of others.

Instead of allowing each contributor to write her/his own contributor’s biography, as has been the practice in other collective feminist modes of scholarship and seen in *Sisterhood* and *This Bridge*, we are left to assume that Walker writes these herself. The biographies are written in the third person and even though organized alphabetically, Walker positions her short biography in a separate section entitled, “about the editor.” In this sense, Walker aims to preserve a clear demarcation between herself and the other contributors. Unlike Moraga and Anzaldúa, who both write essays for their anthologies and in this way entered into a collective conversation with the other authors, Walker’s only written contributions come in the form of her introduction to the anthology, the contributor’s biographies, and the editor’s biography. These organizational choices work to reinforce her role as the editor.

In the Foreword to *To Be Real*, Gloria Steinem begins by painting a picture of ten different people in a room, taking the time to give her reader what may seem to be superfluous detail on what each person in the room *looks* like. There is a “white married couple, both lawyers in their twenties, wearing jeans and carrying briefcases” (Steinem 1995: xiii). There is a “tall black man in a suit who runs an urban antipoverty organization” (xiii). There is an Irish-looking “round ladylike executive in a print dress” and pearls; a “rounder black woman editor in a tunic”; three “youngish women,” one with a lesbian slogan on her T-shirt, another wearing a sexy transparent blouse; a “white writer with long hair and a short skirt”; and a “energetic, thirtyish

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37 It is worth noting that while Findlen also reproduces a clear hierarchy between herself, as the editor, and the contributors to the anthology by both writing the contributor’s biographies and separating her biography from theirs—and given herself an entire page, with a photo!—there is a stronger sense in her introduction that the anthology was the result of a kind of group or collective effort. She uses “we” instead of “I” when reflecting on its production. There is also a strong sense that Findlen learned from the contributors’ essays and was even changed by them. See Findlen (1995: xiv).
black woman in a maid’s uniform complete with frilly apron” (xiii-xiv). The question she poses her reader: “who is the feminist?” (xiv). The answer she gives us: “all of them” (xiv).

This question and answer, I believe, are particularly apt ones for To Be Real. As Steinem goes on to argue, feminists “as human beings” have often defied our expectations of what they ought to look like (xiv). The room Steinem was describing, we learn, was an actual room in which she found herself (as the writer in the short skirt) twenty-two years ago. The woman in the maid’s uniform, it turns out, organized the gathering of friends and activists in an attempt to break down stereotypes surrounding what feminists, or activists committed to working on household worker’s rights, or even household workers themselves, were supposed to look like. As Steinem puts it, that woman used the diversity of the people in that room to “instruct [them] in the tyranny of expectation” (xiv). For some, it may seem Rebecca Walker was interested in a similar kind of project.

However, the point for Carolyn Reed (the group’s organizer) went beyond expanding our conceptions of what household workers or activists working on household workers’ rights look like. More so, the meeting was the beginning of the creation of a household workers’ campaign that eventually grew into a coalition that successfully fought for various household workers’ rights. Harkening to the origin of that coalition, then, Steinem invites us to consider whether To Be Real may be engaged in a similar kind of project. At first glance, the book seems to resemble Steinem’s room of ten. However, unlike the coalitional possibilities that emerged out of that room of household workers’ rights and feminist activists, I contend that the essays in this anthology are locked into a static, though colorful, mosaic of limited, additive, and individualistic difference. They succeed at ontological disruption in the way that one might
expect coalition as spectacle to play out. They do not, I have argued, succeed in enacting, or even encouraging, politico-ethical coalition politics.

**Conclusion**

As I have argued here, *This Bridge* is an indispensable resource for contemporary feminist and political theorists interested in theorizing social justice activist coalition politics. This text embodies key components of politico-ethical coalition politics and offers an instructive guide for contemporary scholars interested in either theorizing coalition or attempting collective, activist, and certainly coalitional modes of scholarship. I am in agreement with Sandoval (2000), Mohanty (2003), Burack (2004), and Townsend-Bell (2012) that the great theoretical insights of 1980s women of color feminism come to us in the unconventional approach to political theory vividly captured across texts such as this *This Bridge*. In it, we not only find a sustained treatment of the value of coalitional politics, but we bear witness to how this mode of feminist solidarity may be put into practice between the pages of a single text. This value becomes even more apparent, I have shown, when *This Bridge* is juxtaposed against *Sisterhood Is Powerful* and *To Be Real*.

As I argued in Part I, Robin Morgan’s edited anthology, *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, embodies many components of “activist” feminist scholarship. By being unapologetically political in its purpose, by actively challenging traditional objective and rational modes of doing political theory, by exploding single Master narratives with a cacophony of voices employing a range of writing styles, and by challenging traditional hierarchical editing processes, Morgan certainly takes important steps toward reconceiving how political theory is carried out. However, I have argued that this text ultimately fails to resemble a politico-ethical textual coalition, on
account of both the un-self-reflexive notion of “sisterhood” on which it rests and its additive approach to difference. While one could claim that this text attempts a kind of textual community (not coalition) in the form of sisterhood, it ultimately fails to achieve any form of feminist solidarity that is not in some way exclusionary.

In addition to doing those things that mark an activist feminist text such as *Sisterhood, This Bridge*, on the other hand, overtly and self-reflexively confronts the challenge of difference. Not only do the many pieces in this anthology ultimately arrive at the notion of coalition, but the book itself, I argued in Part II, comes to resemble a struggle toward unity across the internal differences that divide, even, women of color feminists. This internal journey toward political unity—one that turns a critical eye on women of color feminism itself—I have argued, resembles a journey toward coalitional consciousness. The authors in the book not only embark on their own individual journeys in the stories chronicled there, but the book itself reflects this transition from visions of solidarity built on problematic notions of home, community, and sisterhood toward visions of solidarity built on the notion of politico-ethical coalition politics. In both the content appearing in this anthology and the very form it takes, I have shown that the text comes to resemble an exercise in *textual* coalition politics.

In Part III I challenged Deborah Siegel’s (1997) claim that 1990s feminist anthologies such as Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real* succeed in functioning as “unpredictable” textual coalitions (Siegel 1997: 58). To use the label “coalition” to describe any feminist anthology that captures what Siegel calls “multivocality” (51)—that is, multiple variations of feminist voices—and in this way attempts to attend to the challenge of difference, I have argued, is to profoundly misconstrue what women of color feminists such as Angela Davis meant by “unpredicted coalitions” (Davis 1997). While an interest in attending to limited difference animates *To Be
Real, the collective “we” of politico-ethical coalition is dangerously replaced here by a defiant and highly individualized lifestyle feminism, wherein juxtaposing an infinite number of individual lifestyle choices in the form of “mosaic” comes to stand in for feminist collectivity. A collective feminist project centered on the metaphor of textual mosaic, I have argued, suffers from many of the same limitations as Butler’s notion of coalition as spectacle by obscuring the concrete politics of feminist solidarity in favor of the ontological disruption staged by this unexpected depiction of “feminism” that eschews many key components of what feminism was thought to mean only a decade prior to its publication.

This shift toward mosaic and spectacle, I contend, should be critically interrogated so the coalitional possibilities opened up by women of color feminist anthologies such as This Bridge are not foreclosed. The advances in feminist theorizing brought on by This Bridge were no doubt well overdue in response to the limited visions of “sisterhood” that characterized women’s liberation activism and scholarship in the 1970s. While many scholars are quick to applaud 1980s women of color feminism for its important intervention into conversations about feminist solidarity across difference, it seems that some of these most valuable lessons about feminist coalitional politics and scholarship were carelessly abandoned only a decade later.

Insofar as contemporary feminism is defined by a turn to coalition, I contend that retrieving some of our most insightful texts on theorizing coalition politics is a worthwhile endeavor. Not only does This Bridge offer instructive lessons on how to coalesce across stark differences, it also provides an invaluable illustration of how to bring these commitments into our scholarly practices. While some more-recent anthologies—and most notably, this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation (2002)—have clearly continued in the spirit of

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38 See the Introduction for these references (footnotes 29-31).
coalitional scholarship animating *This Bridge*, others seem to replicate the problematic trends emerging across *To Be Real*.\(^3^9\) For this reason, I conclude by suggesting that contemporary feminist anthologies invested in theorizing coalition and attending to difference ought to be assessed against the exemplary accounts of true coalitional scholarship coming out of the 1980s and vividly captured in *This Bridge Called My Back*.

\(^3^9\) See footnote 28 in this chapter for references.
Conclusion

The preceding five chapters have provided an account of the challenge facing contemporary coalition theorists: rather than being located in a perceived theoretical crisis of post-Marxist collective politics, this challenge centers on how to accommodate the social complexity that results from multiple, and at times hostile, differences while not subscribing to ontological unfixity or the political indeterminacy that unfixity engenders. These chapters have also constructed a two-part response to this challenge: reconceiving coalition as a politico-ethical encounter with difference, and reconceiving identity, consciousness, and the very practice of political theory itself in coalitional terms.

My analysis has challenged popular approaches to theorizing coalition politics dominant across political science and political theory. Within political science, discussions of coalition still center on predicting the formation of formal governmental decision-making bodies (such as coalitional government, cabinet coalitions, legislative coalitions) and measuring their success at winning voting games. I have shown that such discussions sideline attention to (extra-governmental) social justice activist coalitions that form outside of formal governing bodies and often with the expressed purpose of contesting them. Coalitions in these contexts form out of necessity—as a means for survival—not out of strategic advantage. These high stakes, I have argued, are not effectively accommodated within the rational choice theory paradigm that has come to dominate discussions within political science. However, scholars attempting to move outside of this paradigm have been severely marginalized within the field. The preceding chapters have revived some of the key insights from especially race and gender scholars in order to develop a theory of coalition politics that adequately attends to both the possibilities and the dangers of social justice activist coalition politics.
While attention to theorizing coalition within contemporary political theory is focused on social justice activist coalitions, my analysis has shown that scholarship here is beset by a false crisis. Rooted in theories of discursive unfixity, contemporary political theorists are at an impasse. Those thinkers (i.e., Laclau and Mouffe and Tampio) who want to push theories of coalition in explicitly leftist directions are unable to square this clear political commitment with a theoretical position that requires political indeterminacy. For those thinkers who have consistently embraced political indeterminacy, theories of coalition are reduced to descriptive accounts of unplanned and unpredictable collective disruptive acts: coalition emerges here as spectacle, and a clear leftist political direction falls by the wayside. In a curious final move, recent attempts to recover a leftist coalition politics have done so by foregoing any sense of ontological complexity at all in favor of a peculiar brand of ontological fixity in the form of a universal and shared experience of precariousness of all that is thought to generate an ethical community committed to undermining the forces of global market capitalism. However, what gets obscured in each of these attempts at theorizing coalition are the politics—the arrangements of power—that both demand and frustrate all social justice coalitional efforts. To adequately account for the challenge of coming together across at times hostile divides for the sake of egalitarian social justice, I have argued that political theorists must look outside of notions of coalition that are rooted either in ontological disruption or ethical community.

To move these discussions forward, I have turned to 1980s women of color feminism to develop a notion of coalition as politico-ethical encounter. On my view, coalition is understood as the merging or coming together of different parts for the sake of a shared politico-ethical commitment to undermining all oppressive forces. A politico-ethical commitment to undermining oppression parts ways with contemporary approaches that look only to a shared
ethics—either rooted in precarious community (Butler 2004, 2009, and 2011) or in receptive generosity (Coles 1996)—as the cementing force behind coalition politics across diverse and at times hostile subjugated groups. Because social justice coalition politics can be a dangerous affair in which one finds herself having to team up with others who may be invested in her continued subordination and even domination (what I have termed Reagon’s challenge), ethical ties alone will fail to cement such efforts. What makes coalition possible within such contexts, I have shown, is a shared politico-ethical commitment to undermining all forms of oppression.

Moving beyond naively optimistic visions of universal ethical community, my conception of coalition only applies to contexts in which members have self-reflexively committed to undermining oppression. To self-reflexively commit to undermining oppression, coalition members must interrogate their own behavior within coalitional spaces to ensure that they are not unwittingly reviving oppressive forces in their encounters with others.

Though for some maintaining this diligent self-reflexivity will seem implausible, my analysis has offered a way to meet this challenge by reconfiguring political subjectivity and political consciousness in coalitional terms. In doing so, I have appealed to the more general understanding of coalition that emphasizes both existential transformation and conscious choice as essential to the process of coalescing. As Reagon has argued, those people who are best suited to social justice coalition politics are those who are open to changing from “Mary” to “Maria.” Profound internal transformation, I have argued, is an important part of politico-ethical coalition politics. To remain open to such transformation, one must become acquainted with her multiple selves. Women of color feminists offer a depiction of identity that emphasizes multiplicity, complexity, and even ambiguity without arriving ultimately at unfixity. On the contrary, identity is depicted here as an internal struggle toward coherence, unity, and self-definition. In this way, I
have argued that identity is reconfigured coalitionally. Existing as a woman of color, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and others have shown, is an intensely political act insofar as it embodies a constant struggle against externally imposed definition and toward self-understanding.

As women of color develop the ability to navigate their own shifting selves while resisting externally imposed definition, a new way of understanding emerges. Unlike notions of epistemology that center on undecidability, women of color feminists use this sophisticated form of knowing to tactically and purposefully assume different political subjectivities and ideologies depending on what any present situation demands. Though first developed as a kind of coping mechanism, when these tactics are self-consciously chosen for the purpose of undermining oppression, a coalitional consciousness is born. Following Chela Sandoval, I have argued that this coalitional consciousness prepares women of color for both the challenges and the dangers inherent to social justice activist coalition politics. As my discussion of Minnie Bruce Pratt has demonstrated, this sophisticated and tactical form of knowing can be developed by those other than women of color; it is available to anyone prepared to self-reflexively choose to stand against all forms of oppression. Looking to women of color feminism to develop notions of coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness, my project has offered a way to accommodate ontological complexity without subscribing to ontological unfixity, epistemological undecidability, or political indeterminacy.

Lastly, I have argued that what has enabled women of color feminism to arrive at new and creative ways of reconceiving political subjectivity, political consciousness, and social justice activist coalition politics is the unique approach to scholarship guiding such efforts. In addition to arriving at politico-ethical coalition as the best way to meet the practical politics
challenge of collective politics across multiple subjugated groups, my analysis has shown that women of color feminism enacts a mode of coalitional scholarship that is vividly on display in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1983 edited anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. For this reason, I have argued that this text is an indispensable resource for contemporary coalition theorists. Not only does it ultimately advocate politico-ethical coalition politics, but it also both depicts individual struggles and enacts its own collective struggle toward coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness. In so doing, it demands a reconsideration of *how we do* coalition theory. By contrasting *This Bridge* with two other feminist anthologies, my analysis also comes full circle by considering again the severe limitations of visions of collectivity that center either on naively optimistic notions of ethical community (through textual sisterhood) or dangerously apolitical notions of ontological disruption (through textual mosaic). In this discussion, *This Bridge* emerges as exemplary of the politico-ethical coalition politics that my analysis has shown may answer the fundamental challenge of leftist collective politics in a contemporary moment marked by proliferating differences.

The concepts I have developed here carry important implications for a number of ongoing debates within contemporary political theory. The first of these implications applies to discussions regarding the political consequences of multiple identities. While theories of multiple identities have a long history tracing back to David Hume,¹ it was the theories emerging in the

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¹ See Barvosa (2008). She traces the beginning of this line of flight to David Hume’s argument that “inner consciousness involved only a rapidly flowing multiplicity or ‘bundle’ or disconnected perceptions.” (Barvosa 2008: 3). Personal identity, on this view, amounts to the “imagined connections between our multiple—and otherwise radically disconnected—perceptions” (Ibid). See Hume *Human Nature* (251-262).
wake of the “linguistic turn”\(^2\) that were thought to bring with them the death of the unitary subject and, with that, possibilities for agency and self-guided political action. As I discussed in Chapter Two, theories of collective group politics have been frustrated by the absence of this subject ever since. As I will demonstrate here, my notion of coalitional identity accords with recent attempts to revisit these questions.

In *Wealth of Selves: Multiple Identities, Mestiza Consciousness, and the Subject of Politics*, Edwina Barvosa (2008) turns explicitly to Chicana feminism (among other disciplinary influences) and specifically to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa to offer new ways to accommodate multiplicity and contradiction without giving up on the possibility of political agency and self-guided action. Similar to the argument I made in Chapter Four (though here putting Anzaldúa in conversation with a wide and interdisciplinary literature), Barvosa uses Anzaldúa’s conception of identity in order to demonstrate how identity may be reconceived simultaneously as multiple and contradictory *and* as cohesive and whole (Barvosa 2008: 11). Again according with my own analysis, Barvosa draws on Anzaldúa’s notion of mestiza consciousness to argue that unique modes of understanding and thinking emerge out of learning to manage one’s multiple and contradictory selves.\(^3\) A cohesive, acting agent—one who is capable of political judgment, political agency, and political action—emerges through this process of self-management. Though Barvosa never uses the phrase *coalitional* identity, she does state that the notion of multiple

\(^2\) Within discussions of multiple identities, Barvosa traces the linguistic turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion that the meanings of concepts, social practices and the qualities of human nature are socially constructed in and through linguistic processes. I have already discussed the implications of such arguments for the unitary subject in Chapter Two. A range of theorists were influenced by this turn to language. As we have seen, notions of ontological unfixity are built on it. The challenge for political theorists after the linguistic turn has been how to discuss political agency and self-guided action without a unitary subject to drive such actions. See Barvosa (2008: 6-9).

\(^3\) See Barvosa (2008: 54-108 and 175-206).
identities emerging out of Chicana feminism opens up possibilities for building progressive political coalitions (8).

In addition to matching my own treatment of Anzaldúa’s unique understanding of identity, Barvosa’s analysis opens possibilities for instruction in multiple identity cultivation that my analysis has only hinted at. Also turning to Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical essay, Barvosa develops a notion of “selfcraft” that not only explains how Pratt, Anzaldúa, and others emerge as simultaneously multiplicitous and self-conscious acting agents, but also provides an instructive lesson in how others may engage in similar practices of “selfcraft.” With this development, Barvosa moves discussions forward in productive directions. If collective social justice politics demands either coalitional selves or multiple identities that are capable of “selfcraft” (I understand these to be very similar ideas), then the next step for contemporary scholars will be to consider how we might cultivate coalitional consciousness for others. This is precisely the task that Cricket Keating and María Lugones are currently undertaking in their forthcoming book, Educating for Coalition: Popular Education and Political Practice. The analysis I have offered here, I contend, will be germane to these ongoing discussions.

Vital to the possibility of feminist alliance, Aimee Carrillo Rowe argued in the same year, is the notion of a “coalitional subject” (Carillo Rowe 2008: 3). Building from Sandoval’s argument in Methodology of the Oppressed (2000), Carillo Rowe advocates “decentering individualistic notions of self as author” in favor of “centering a coalitional subject as a series of contingent moments of (non)belonging, a Chicana falsa as a relational point of departure for such theorizing” (15). As I have already shown, living as a woman of color may be characterized by profound internal contradiction and ambiguity. Out of these at times traumatic moments,

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4 See Barvosa (2008), pages 175-192, and 217-226.
however, a coherent subject emerges. This subject, a coalitional subject, is one already acquainted with managing her own internal contradictions and even using them in the service of political commitment. Similar to my argument in Chapter Four then, Carrillo Rowe argues that this kind of subject both emerges out of and makes possible feminist alliance (3).

In addition to corresponding with recent treatments of theorizing political subjectivity, my analysis yields valuable insight to the ongoing debates about possibilities for progressive forms of collective politics. Indispensable to these discussions, my analysis has shown, is the concept of coalition. Reviving “coalition” not just as a practical answer to the question of collective progressive politics, but also as a sophisticated concept in its own right, marks an important point of departure encouraged by the analysis I have offered here. In Carrillo Rowe’s recent intervention, she turns explicitly to the notion of “alliance” in place of “coalition.” Following Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer’s (1990: 3-4) definitions, Carrillo Rowe concurs that “alliance” signals a longer-lasting and deeper political relationship that is built on trust. Coalition, on the other hand, her view holds, is a short-lived and strictly strategic relationship. Following this distinction, Carrillo Rowe argues that an “alliance analytic” will prove most useful to a project of theorizing possibilities for feminist solidarity and feminist politics (5). My analysis, however, forces the question: Why this turn away from coalition, and especially when we already know that Carrillo Rowe contends that the “coalitional subject” is central to the subject of feminist alliance?

I have shown that the concept of coalition was central to 1980s women of color feminism. It is certainly worth noting, however, that women of color feminists at that time used coalition and alliance interchangeably. What is more, and as my argument has demonstrated, despite the tendency to understand Bernice Johnson Reagon as advocating coalition only in its
short-lived and strategic incarnation (Carrillo Rowe 2008: 5), there is much reason to believe that this concept has always contained far more analytical currency than has been acknowledged. If not from within women of color feminism, then, perhaps this aversion to coalition can be explained from its treatment across political science more generally. As my analysis has shown, the way in which political scientists define and theorize “coalition” effectively excludes any consideration of social justice activist coalition politics. On this view, “coalition” politics are low stakes voting games where winning strategies become paramount. Political relationships emerging out of these kinds of coalitions are often short-lived, and even if not short-lived they are strictly strategic. This is not, however, the only way to understand coalition.

As I outlined in the introduction, the concept of coalition, taken in its broader organic or natural uses, opens a range of possibilities for thinking through important questions and problematics that arise within progressive collective politics. At least one of these ways certainly accords with Carrillo Rowe’s understanding of the coalitional subject. Another corresponds with the modes of self-management that make possible the project of “selfcraft” in Barvosa’s recent analysis. As I argued in Chapter Four, Anzaldúa’s notion of mestiza consciousness—on which Barvosa bases her own understanding of “selfcraft”—is best understood (following Sandoval) as a kind of coalitional consciousness. A willingness to hold on to the concept of coalition and to explore it in its more curious adjectival forms is also reflected in some of the most recent scholarship on this topic. Karma Chavéz (2013) argues that coalition is a vital concept to “queer migration politics”—that is, “activism that seeks to challenge normative, inclusionary perspectives at the intersection of queer rights and justice and immigration rights and justice” (Chavéz 2013: 6). The concept of coalition is vital to such analysis not only because this is the form of political engagement that activists are undertaking on the ground—in the fourth chapter, she examines in
particular two Tucson-based organizations working in coalition to jointly fight oppression—but also because it functions as a conceptual tool in its own right.

In such analyses, Chavéz employs “coalitional” as an adjective that may be productively applied to certain terms. To call something “coalitional,” she argues, is to imply an “intermeshed understanding of identity, subjectivity, power, and politics located on the dirt and concrete where people live, work, and play” (7). Chavéz’s understanding of “coalitional” therefore accords with ways I have used it here. Absolutely crucial to both concrete coalition politics and coalitional understandings of identity and consciousness, my analysis has shown, is an appreciation of interlocking or intermeshed⁵ oppressions, which also produce what we might call intermeshed understandings of identity, power, politics, and subjectivity. Such an understanding accommodates complexity without insisting on fragmentation. Instead, it invokes a sense of wholeness or coherence in complexity and multiplicity. The ability to do this, I have argued, is captured in the notion of “coalitional.”

It is in relation to the second part of Chavéz’s understanding of “coalitional,” however, that my analysis may prove instructive to interventions such as these. While Carrillo Rowe, Barvosa, and Chavéz all remain open to theorizing notions of subjectivity and consciousness that correspond (and for Carrillo Rowe and Chavéz explicitly so) with the notions of coalitional identity and coalitional consciousness that I have outlined here, my analysis pushes “coalitional” into new territory with the notion of coalitional scholarship. Chavéz gestures toward this idea in her definition of coalitional as involving a type of understanding that one acquires on “the dirt and concrete where people live, work, and play” (7). Here Chavéz advocates “theory in the

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⁵ This is María Lugones’ term. Following Marylyn Frye, Lugones sought to question the metaphor of “interlocking” oppressions because of the way in which it implies that there are still separate things, oppressive forces, that are interlocking. Lugones prefers “intermeshed” because it “captures inseparability” (Lugones 2003: 233n2).
flesh” (7), drawing from Moraga and Anzaldúa’s understanding of it as a way in which activists/scholars bring the concrete material experiences of their lived struggles to their writing. Lugones’ notion of “streetwalker theorizing,” Chavéz argues, accomplishes a similar thing (Chavéz 2013: 149, Lugones 2003: 207-237). The emphasis in both of these approaches is on the idea of theorizing from below and from within lived struggle. Though overlooked by Chavéz here, what is also central to these concepts, and exemplified in Moraga and Anzaldúa’s This Bridge Called My Back, is the way in which such approaches to theory activate a coalitional discourse that becomes the basis of coalitional scholarship.

To return briefly to Carrillo Rowe’s analysis, I contend that the notion of coalitional scholarship that I have offered here may incline scholars such as Carrillo Rowe and others to rethink the value of a coalition analytic over an “alliance analytic” (Carrillo Rowe 2008: 5). The approach to collective politics on offer by women of color feminists, I have argued, was always already on display in the approach they took to their scholarship in the form of textual coalition. While Chavéz too is aware of something unique to the way in which women of color feminists do political theory, my analysis has demonstrated that it is worthwhile to actually name this unique methodology “coalitional scholarship” precisely because it points to the creative potential of coalition not only as a thing or practice on the ground (Chavéz 2013: 146-147) or as a way of rethinking important related concepts (identity, consciousness), but also as a way of doing political theory. If the notion of politico-ethical coalition politics that I have developed here corresponds with Carrillo Rowe’s understanding of feminist alliance, which I believe it does, then why not emphasize the remarkable continuity of thought found within women of color feminism by reviving and defending the promise of this term, “coalition”? This is precisely what I have set out to do in this project.
As my analysis has shown, certain questions within contemporary political theory demand new ways of thinking. And, indeed, if theory comes to us from the ground up then political theorists ought to become comfortable with the idea that answers to certain questions and the way or method of arriving at these answers might already be intricately connected. Feminist political theory taught us these lessons centuries ago–think here of the very different approach Mary Wollstonecraft takes to political theory in comparison to either John Locke or even Jean-Jacques Rousseau. If feminist political theory is now moving unequivocally in the direction of coalition, which I contend that it is, then we feminist political theorists must embrace new, coalitional ways of thinking that will include interdisciplinary work, mixing genres of writing, rigorously engaging activist texts such as speeches and manifestos, being explicit in the political interventions we seek to make, and being both collaborative and intensely self-reflexive in our thinking.

As I have shown, This Bridge is an indispensable resource for coalition theory. To see this value, however, one must be open to reading it as political theory and to looking for theory in unexpected places. Women of color feminists had to arrive at politico-ethical coalition politics in their own way. This way did not involve theorizing from abstract principles or rules of reason nor from neo-Nietzschean reflections on difference. Women of color theorized out of lived struggle. By sharing that experience with us in, for instance, This Bridge, they offer a map for engaging in social justice activist coalition politics. To follow it, I maintain, we must remain open to entertaining unfamiliar concepts and new ways of thinking about conventional notions of “coalition.”

Recent interventions, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating’s (2002) edited anthology, this bridge we call home: radical visions of transformation, continue in this spirit of
coalitional scholarship as they confront again the challenges difference poses to visions of collective feminist politics. In the introduction to this text, Keating references an interview in which Anzaldúa associates her work as an anthologist explicitly with activism:

Making these anthologies is also activism. In the very process of creating the composition, the work of art, the painting, the film, you’re creating the culture. You’re rewriting the culture, which is very much an activist kind of thing. Writers have something in common with people doing grassroots organizing and acting in the community: It’s all about rewriting culture” (Anzaldúa in Keating 2002: 9).

I contend that the writers/scholars/activists appearing in these anthologies are creating a unique kind of political theory (see Sandoval 2002: 25). Such theorists theorize for “survival” and for “transformation” of both the self and the world (Keating 2002: 14). In so doing, they show us that to effectively theorize about coalition politics, one must write from deep within coalition.

Unsurprisingly, those theorists who have remained most open to rethinking the “how” of political theory have been those who study the forms of extra-governmental politics practiced within oppressed and marginalized groups. The very nature of such practices, it seems, demand new ways of studying and analyzing them. The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Forum: Critical and Ethnographic Practices (2007) offers an instructive example here. Chicana/o cultural studies, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian argues, announces a new set of terms including “a new vocabulary, social constituency, and coalition” (2). To capture this complex sensibility, she advocates an “alternative venue of representation” in the format of a “wide-ranging, multivoiced, practitioner-centered narrative” (7). For this reason, she stages a virtual forum in which various Chicana/o scholars are imagined to be together in a room discussing various issues related to Chicana/o cultural studies. She creates this forum by piecing together portions of answers from transcribed interviews on a range of different topics with a number of different scholars and activists in order to create an ongoing dialogue between them. The goal is to “foreground the contentious debates that give birth to grassroots intellectual movements and practice” (9). The
best way to do this, she argues, is by theorizing collaboratively and from within lived struggle, not from abstract principles, metanarratives, founding texts, or famous personages (9).

As Rosa Luxemburg argued almost a century ago, abstract theories of progressive collective politics cannot be imposed on activists from the outside; they must and will emerge from within the space of lived struggle. As political theorists invested in theorizing these forms of extra-governmental politics, it is therefore incumbent upon us to invest in new ways of locating, hearing, analyzing, and learning from these activist theorists. My analysis has offered one such way. On my view, the concept of politico-ethical coalition politics is not only an improvement on other contemporary attempts to theorize leftist activist coalition politics insofar as it exposes the myth of the crisis of Marxism and effectively dissolves the tension between unfixity and fixity, but also because it encourages this kind of methodological rethinking. Disregarding some of our most rigorous—though massively underappreciated—coalition theorists, I have shown, moves us dangerously away from the discerning politics and activist scholarship that are required in a contemporary moment marked by proliferating differences as well as complex and shifting forms of social injustice. Thinking with and through the concept of coalition in the ways in which I have done here, I conclude, will be indispensable to future projects invested in theorizing possibilities for left-oriented collective group politics.
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