Coalitional Pedagogy: Educating for Intersectional Social Justice

Liza Taylor
California State Polytechnic University Pomona
Department of Political Science
Email: etaylor@cpp.edu

Cricket Keating
University of Washington
Department of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies
Email: ckeating@uw.edu

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Turning to Coalition

As Liza Taylor (2022) has recently argued, an explicit turn to social justice activist coalitions has been central to contemporary feminist theory at least since US Women of Color feminists first championed it in the 1970s (Chisholm 1972). Our paper proceeds from the conviction that the variety of ways in which feminist activists and theorists think with and through the conception of coalition usher in new and creative ways to think through challenges related to Left-oriented collective politics across differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Such notions challenge the narrow definition of coalition operative across political science literature (one that is focused primarily on formal governmental decision-making bodies) and movement activism (which is often focused primarily on short-term, interest-based coalitions) (see Taylor 2015). Feminist theories of coalition throw into question the dominant

[1] This is very much a draft version of this material. We taught the two courses used in the discussion back in 2016 and began the initial drafting of this paper in 2016-2017. The project had to be put on hold for several years as both authors had to prioritize other projects. We are now returning to the project and recognize there is still much work that needs to be done to turn it into a stand-alone article or book chapter. Liza will address some of the changes and additions we would like to make in the panel discussion (Cricket is not able to make it to the APSA Teaching & Learning conference). We both look forward to any feedback people have on the general direction of the project. Thanks for reading!

theoretical paradigm of rational choice theory for interpreting coalitional behavior. Further, as Taylor (2018 and 2022) has shown, early US Women of Color feminist theories of coalition challenge the stronghold that poststructuralist 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, we believe, may be located in the work of early U.S. Women of Color feminism, referring to a wide range of scholars whose work first emerged in academic spaces in the early 1980s with the publications of a variety of Women of Color and Black feminist anthologies (Smith 1983; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; and Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982). Following Sandoval (2000) and Mohanty (2003), we understand "Women 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 or analytic (Taylor 2018 and 2022). As such, even feminists who are not themselves women of color can engage in key components of what we understand as Women of Color feminism. Minnie Bruce Pratt's work is exemplary here (Pratt 1984).

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 "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, Women of Color feminists are particularly well suited to this form of political engagement.

However, whereas Women of Color feminists writing in the 1980s discussed coalition politics as a necessary and effective way for feminists to organize politically, since its arrival in the texts, pamphlets, and anthologies published in the early 1980s, the concept of coalition has undergone several interesting permutations (see Taylor 2015, 2018 and 2022). For instance, the word "coalition" has been used to describe a *method* for doing theory in discussion with others, often in the form of published anthologies. The phrases commonly employed here are "a coalition of authors," a "written coalition," or a "textual coalition" (see Townsend-Bell 2012 and Taylor 2022). Versions of the word "coalition" have also been used to describe what some see as a distinctively postmodern notion of subjectivity and what others see as a distinctively Women of Color feminist notion of subjectivity (Barvosa 2008, Carastathis 2013, Taylor 2022), as well as the particular epistemology (consciousness) that results from this (Anzaldúa 1987, Keating 2005, Sandoval 2000, and Taylor 2022). The phrases commonly employed here include: "coalitional identity," "coalitional subjectivity," and "coalitional consciousness." Similarly, the term coalition has been used to describe multiplicity within groups, such that identity groups such as "women or "African-American" might be understood as coalitions (Crenshaw 1991).

Among those feminists who discuss coalition in the more traditional form as a model for feminist political organizing, disagreements abound over what it is that brings feminists together in the space of coalition. For some of these thinkers, coalition comes to describe something like a

community of women characterized by an ethic of love and mutual respect. For others, coalition comes to describe a form of politics compatible with the antifoundational feminism typical of Judith Butler (1990 and 2011). While still for others, the space of coalition is understood in more political, and therefore also agonistic, terms characterized by conflict, struggle, anger, and fear. Despite the varied contexts in which the concept of coalition has emerged as well as the variety of meanings it has come to adopt, one thing remains constant across contemporary feminist theory literature: the concept of coalition seems to offer the way forward for feminism (see Howard and Allen 2000). Indeed, one walks away from this literature understanding coalition as the catchall answer to the variety of challenges and problems feminist theory has confronted since the 1980s (see Taylor 2015, 2018, and 2022).

Teaching Through Coalition: Key Features of Coalitional Pedagogy

> Central to popular education approaches to social change is a process of coming to critical consciousness through collective analysis and critique. . . . Popular education challenges [the] relationship between "organizers" and organized. In defining and working together towards social change, we need to take up the authority of our own knowledge, the authority of our voice, and move with it, changing our situation as we see fit, after taking distance to engage in collective critical and complex mutual understanding. In popular education, we turn towards each other to do this work, jointly constructing a vision for our future. We determine its direction.
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> —María Lugones and Cricket Keating, *Educating for Coalition: Popular Education and Contemporary Political Praxis*

> The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. . . .I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.
>
> —bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

> Putting the politico-ethical understanding of coalition elaborated by early US Women of Color coalition feminists in conversation with Paulo Freire's (1970) understanding of praxis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and bell hooks's (1994) elaboration of it in *Teaching to Transgress*, I am proposing that we experiment with what we might understand as coalitional pedagogy, which shares much in common with what Keating and Lugones (forthcoming) call "coalitional popular education." […] It is precisely this interplay between what I have called the politics and ethics of coalition–and what Friere calls the reflection and action of praxis–that might shape an understanding of coalitional pedagogy as a *feminist praxis.* […] To say that a coalitional pedagogy is a feminist praxis is therefore to suggest that the professor infuses both action toward and reflection on undermining interlocking oppressive forces into the very design of the course and into her approach within the classroom space by (1) being explicit (and

> transparent) about the political commitments that have shaped the design of her courses, including the syllabi associated with them, remembering that when constructing her syllabi she is creating the very "citational chains" that defines her discipline; (2) continuing to (as feminist scholars have often done) decenter the authority of canonical white, male voices in favor of highlighting the unique knowledge and tactical know-how of the oppressed, including the unique know-how of students in our classrooms who sit at the intersection of multiple oppressions; which might also lead her to (3) decentering the teacher-as-leader model to teaching in favor of pedagogical practices that emphasize "learning with" as opposed to "teaching for" students (Freire 1970) while also complicating the teacher-student hierarchy to reveal the variety of ways in which students and teacher move in and out of oppressive relationships; (4) remaining committed to a "problem-posing" (Freire 1970) approach to teaching about intersectional social justice that continuously "asks the other question" (Matsuda 1996) as a way to help students learn to dialogically map intersectional oppressions; (5) embracing and experimenting with exercises in "world-traveling" (Lugones 2003) as a necessary part of this mapping process; and (6) encouraging and providing space within the classroom for critical reflection on exercises in "word-traveling" so that students and teacher might embrace the existential transformation that results from this process.
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> —Liza Taylor, *Feminism in Coalition: Thinking with US Women of Color Feminism*

Among the innovative uses of the concept of coalition traced above, the one that has caught our attention here is the notion of a coalitional consciousness, and by this we mean a particular epistemology, or mode of understanding, geared towards working with others in challenging interlocking oppressions across lines of difference. We are interested in considering whether a coalitional consciousness can be taught; and if so, how. While both of us have considered this question before (Keating 2005 and 2018; Taylor 2022), here we want to explore it in more detail and specifically within the context of a classroom setting. When teaching about collective activism toward dismantling intersectional injustices, might it be useful, or even politically and ethically necessary, to infuse elements of what Taylor calls "politico-ethical coalition" into the very course design and pedagogies that shape our classroom settings? We had an opportunity to think and work together with students towards this practice in our separate but linked political theory classrooms in Spring 2016, one at Loyola Marymount University and the other at Ohio State University. In both classes, our students examined theories on which feminist coalitional activism have been built, analyzed the notions of political subjectivity and consciousness that are necessary for successful coalescing, and explored the possibilities and challenges of feminist coalition politics across race, class, sexuality, gender, and other divides. In

exploring this question, and building from the epigraphs above, this paper draws upon our experiences in our classrooms and the work of US Women of Color coalition theorists such as María Lugones, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Mari Matsuda, and Aurelia Levins Morales, as well as on the work of educational theorist Paulo Freire to develop a pedagogical praxis geared to the development of coalitional consciousness. While our work here is still ongoing, we would like to offer in these brief remarks some key features of what we are calling *coalitional pedagogy*.

Disrupting Intersectional Power: Challenging the Teacher-as-Leader Framework

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Paulo Freire writes that liberation pedagogy–or, the pedagogy of the oppressed–is a "task for radicals" insofar as it unapologetically denounces oppression in favor of human liberation (Freire 1970, 37 and 39). For Freire, the political commitment to undermining oppression driving the pedagogy of the oppressed is simultaneously an analytical orientation toward developing a critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, of the situation of oppression alongside a commitment to transformation for liberation. "This pedagogy," Freire states, will make "oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in this struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade" (Freire 48). The objective of our epoch, Freire asserts, is liberation (103) and such a goal cannot be pursued through a pedagogy that replicates in the teacher-student hierarchy the power hierarchies in the society at large. To do so, he suggests, would be to train people in the practice of domination; whereas what he calls a liberation education trains students in the practice of freedom (Freire, 78). Indeed, in the critical pedagogic approach to teaching that he advocates, the teacher/student dichotomy is decentered so that the hierarchical relationship between the two is challenged (79).

A central insight of feminist coalition theory, however, is that there are many intersecting and interlocking hierarchies to be challenged in any given situation, educational or otherwise. Further, although one may be in the position of "the oppressed" along one particular line of power, one might be in the role of "oppressor" in another. For example, if a professor is a woman of color, she might hold power over a student given her subject position as a professor, but she also may be vulnerably positioned vis-à-vis her white male students given her racial and gender subject position. The reverse also holds: the white male students hold race-gender power and privilege in this professor's classroom but are in a subordinate position to her as students. Feminist theorists of coalition stress that classrooms geared, in the words of Paulo Freire, to the "practice of liberation," must work to highlight, complicate, and challenge such multiple lines of power and privilege and the complexly relational ways that we each are inserted in them.

Mapping Intermeshing Oppressions & Becoming Interdependently Resistant via "World"-Traveling

In our classrooms, we drew upon María Lugones' praxis of "'world'-traveling" as an inter-subjective approach to learning about the multiple power relations in play in the classroom (Lugones 2003). Her approach highlights the critical role of our context and location in shaping who we are as well as the power relations within and between our worlds. We linked both our classes work on these questions through an interactive google map exercise in which students across both courses were asked to drop a pin on a shared map in a place that was meaningful to them. Once they dropped their pin on the map, they were asked to answer the following questions in a written entry that would accompany their pin: What are the power relations at play here (for example you could write about particular ways that race, gender, sexuality, class,

ability, age, etc. operate.)? How are you inserted within these multiple relations of power? Next we asked students to give a concrete example of a way they resist or resisted these relations of power (either resisting the dominant position or the subordinate position)? Who was your resistance seen by? Was it concealed from anyone? Once they completed their own entry, students were asked to "world"-travel to two other students' pins and answer the following questions: Who would you be in that person's world? How might you back up or "echo" (in Lugones's words) their resistance in your own life/world?

Intersectional Problem-Posing

Another central tenet of a Freire's approach to critical pedagogy is the importance of what he calls "problem-posing." Instead of "banking" information into students, Freire advocates a problem-posing method in which the "teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and reconsiders her earlier considerations as the students express their own" (Freire 82). In our courses, the problems we posed were ones having to do with undermining intersectional oppressions through coalition. In particular, we encouraged students to undertake the practice of what Mari Matsuda calls "asking the other question" (Matsuda 1996). Often when we think about a situation, we are trained to think about it along one axis of power. For example, when we think about questions of violence against women, we might first notice the gendered hierarchies at play. Matsuda, however, encourages us to "ask the other question," that is to ask about the not-so-obvious power relations that are also operative in a situation. If a situation seems primarily to be about one line of power—gender, for example—asking about how other lines of power—race and/or class, for example—help us to understand how the lines

of power work together? This practice encourages an analysis of ways that multiple relations of power interact and intersect in a given situation (Matsuda 1996).

Another problem-posing practice that we used in our classrooms is what Aurelia Morales calls "asking the bigger question" (Morales 1998). If "asking the other question" helps students to *see* interlocking oppressions at work, we might think of "asking the bigger question" as a way to advance toward collective activism to undermine interlocking oppressions. Such a question, Morales explains, works to develop our skills in thinking coalitionally about political alternatives. Often conflicts between two or more groups seem intractable. Similarly, oppressed groups are often pitted against each other in the struggle for scarce resources so that a "win" for one group would mean loss for another. In situations such as these, can we imagine a "bigger" alternative solution that could work for both (or for multiple) groups? What would be barriers to this solution? What kinds of political, economic, or social transformations would need to occur for such a solution to be possible?

Centering Intersectional Feminist Praxis

At the heart of both feminist coalition theory and critical pedagogy is a commitment to praxis, the "action and reflection of women and men upon the world in order to change it" (Freire 51). In our linked classes, we are encouraged such praxis by asking our students to form coalitions themselves. Reflecting two different approaches to coalition, each class took a different path towards this task. At Loyola Marymount University, for example, Taylor asked the students to begin coalition simulation exercise from a shared political commitment, in the spirit of Bernice Johnson Reagon's appeal to what Taylor (2018 and 2022) calls a politico-ethical coalition politics. To find such a shared political commitment, the students' first task was to

identify an issue that they would tackle across the duration of the semester. The first assignment for the group was therefore to choose what this might be. Once identified (the group originally chose the issue of human trafficking), students were asked to spend many sessions reflecting on their own subject positions relative to the issue they had selected, including sessions wherein they were asked to travel to one another's worlds in order to understand how they might be positioned in the unique power dynamics at play in other contexts. The idea behind such exercises was that through sharing these different perspectives, students would come to a fuller understanding of the form of oppression they were attempting to tackle. Once they gained this fuller understanding, students would be asked to identify how they plan to address/fight this issue within the space of their coalition (i.e., draft a mission statement or manifest for the coalition).

Keating's class at Ohio State took a different approach to coalition, one grounded in a Maria Lugones' notion of a coalition as a praxis of becoming "interdependently resistant" (Lugones 2003). Instead of beginning from a shared political commitment, the OSU coalition group worked towards identifying each others' context-based practices of resistance and thinking through what it would mean to back up or echo these practices across contexts. In Lugones' framework, generating coalitional social change is intimately linked to people's everyday resistance to oppression. Such resistance can be enacted in public, on large scale, but is most often enacted in everyday modes of being and relating. This everyday resistance is often quite hard to see or to recognize because of two reasons: first, those enacting the resistance might want the resistance to stay hidden in order for it to be successful; and two, those in the dominant position have a stake in not having resistance be recognized as such. In Lugones's words, "resistance hardly every has a straightforward public presence. It is rather duplicitous,

ambiguous, even devious. But it is also almost always masked and hidden by structures of meaning that countenance and constitute domination" (2003, x). Given these conditions under which resistance is so often hidden, a particular challenge for building coalition is learning to see each other's—and our own-- modes of resistance in oppressive situations. Through biweekly meetings, the students worked to foster coalitional solidarity by learning about each others' varied contexts and resistant practices, and thinking together about how to connect these practices so as to better sustain and to amplify their effects in challenging oppressive conditions.

"True reflection," Freire insists, "always leads to action" (66); similarly, for action to constitute a genuine praxis, one's actions must also "become the object of critical reflection" (66). Without critical reflection, Freire asserts, action is mere activism (66). Praxis requires this back and forth between action and reflection. For the Loyola Marymount students, reflection was built into the course; in addition to participating in the weekly coalition simulation exercise, students were asked to keep a weekly coalition journal (on a common blogging platform) in which they would reflect on their experiences within the coalition exercise and relate these experiences back to the readings from the semester. By anonymously cataloguing their reactions to the coalition simulation each week, students created a written record of the coalition experience. In addition to airing grievances or frustrations as well as sharing gratitude, hope, or excitement with their coalition members, students also used the forum to make connections between the course readings and the experiences they were having in the coalition simulation and to make concrete suggestions for strategies to be tried in upcoming meetings. Students were informed at the beginning of the course that the coalitional journal would be treated as a core empirical "text" to be used, in conjunction with other empirical and theory course readings, in their final papers.

In part due to the reflective work encouraged by the coalitional journal, the LMU students changed their topic from human trafficking to tackling oppression more generally about a third of the way through the semester. This was in response to the experiences of one student who shared with the group that the issue of human trafficking was much more immediately relevant to her life than to those of her classmates thereby making her feel uncomfortable in a setting wherein she was sharing with the group in a way that could not be reciprocated by her peers. Her classmates decided unanimously that given how uncomfortable the situation became for this student that they would change topics. At this point, they switched to the general topic of oppression and spent the remainder of the coalition simulation unpacking what this meant and how they might go about addressing it. The tone of the simulation shifted at this point, wherein students dispensed with the impatient persistence that they must quickly identify goals/directions/actions, and embraced the process of learning from one another's experiences as it relates to oppression. Students did not arrive at the point of being ready to outline their goals/directions/mission statement/manifesto until the final two sessions, leaving their final session with the beginnings of a manifesto that they would later complete collaboratively online in time for their final written assignment.

Coalition and Affect: Love, Trust, and Risk

In their theories of coalition, Bernice Johnson Reagon and Audre Lorde remind us that coalescing is hard work. Most of the time when doing coalition work, Reagon asserts, you have to team up with people you don't really like, let alone love (1983, p. 343). Similarly, Lorde affirms that feelings of anger are part and parcel to the process of coalescing across race, class, gender, sexuality, and other divides (Lorde 1984, p. 127). While anger may have a rightful place

within coalitional spaces, hatred, Lorde clarifies, does not (128-129). While love is achievable in the presence of anger (between "peers" and "allies"), love is not achievable in the presence of hatred (between "enemies") (128). The distinction Lorde draws between hatred and anger is illuminating. She teaches us that while love may be cultivated between peers and allies, it must not be presumed in advance. Instead, it must be cultivated in and through dialogue with each other, across non-dominant differences.

Fostering an orientation towards trust, and even love, towards each other is an important part of building coalition. Both courses were geared to help develop this capacity in students and teachers. While cultivating love in the context of a classroom may strike some pedagogues as a strange or even inappropriate task, in the context of a class focused on identifying, unpacking, and challenging systems of oppression we believe it is absolutely crucial. Indeed, moments in which this love emerged among students were some of the most surprising and rewarding moments of the course. For example, while every professor has no doubt witnessed loving friendships form among their students, the Loyola Marymount seminar provided Taylor with a rare opportunity to witness the cultivation of love between students wherein they came to understand one another as similarly positioned, even if uniquely so, relative to intersecting oppressive forces. Emotions ran high in the class of only 13 students. It was not uncommon to witness tears and even screaming within the space of the coalition simulation. While these moments were difficult, in and through them, and especially with the help of traveling exercises, students who were involved in heated disagreements that verged into harmful personal attacks both inside and the outside of the classroom/simulation (including on the online blogging platforms) were able to not only identify some common ground but even developed a loving compassion for one another. Some students even used the language of love to describe their

feelings toward their fellow coalition members. Once these feelings emerged, students seemed to make more progress not only toward understanding oppression and resistance but also in their ability to understand and grapple with the texts of the course.

Both feminist and critical pedagogy praxis has long emphasized the importance of transforming our everyday modes and practices of relating to one another. For Freire, for example, undercutting hierarchies between teacher and student and practices of decision-making in educational settings and elsewhere hold the possibility of deeply transforming our social and political life. Coalition theorists such as Lugones, Lorde, Reagon and others hold that social change takes place in the transformation of our relations to each other and that changing the homophobic, racist, sexist, and economically oppressive conditions that we face requires the creation of different ways of thinking about and treating each other.

A coalitional pedagogic practice draws on both of these traditions in its commitment to resistant relationality and to creating environments in which non-hierarchical—and even loving— relationships can be sustained. Key to the process of coalition building is the challenging work of rethinking who we are and what our relations to each other are and should be. The feminist political theory classroom is a place where such coalitions can be initiated, reflected upon, and fostered.

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