

I have reprinted just a few of the questions and answers found in the original interview for our discussion. The interview as a whole can be found at the following website:

http://www2.ucsc.edu/culturalstudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_7/Davis.html

Coalition Building Among People of Color

*A discussion with
Angela Y. Davis and Elizabeth Martínez*

Angela Y. Davis and Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez are authors and longtime activists in struggles for social justice. Ms. Davis is currently Professor of History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and working on alternatives to prison for women. Ms. Martínez writes on Latino issues and works with the Women of Color Resource Center in Berkeley, as well as with youth groups. On May 12, 1993, Ms. Davis and Ms. Martínez spoke at the University of California, San Diego on "Building Coalitions of People of Color." They discussed this topic and related issues with students, staff, and community members. What follows are edited comments from the transcripts of that presentation. The questions posed are from audience members present at the forum.

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How can different people of color come together to build a coalition when their communities have different needs?

DAVIS: (As Betita has pointed out,) we need to be more flexible in our thinking about various ways of working together across differences. Some formations may be more permanent and some may be short-term. However, we often assume that the disbanding of a coalition or alliance marks a moment of failure, which we would rather forget. As a consequence, we often fail to incorporate a sense of the accomplishments, as well as of the weaknesses, of that formation into our collective and organizational memories. Without this memory, we are often condemned to start from scratch each time we set out to build new coalitional forms.

This is not the first period during which we have confronted the difficult problem of using difference as a way of bringing people together, rather than as incontrovertible evidence of separation. There are more options than sameness, opposition, or hierarchical relations. One of the basic challenges confronting women of color today, as Audre Lorde has pointed out, is to think about and act upon notions of equality across difference. There are so many ways in which we can conceptualize coalitions, alliances, and networks that we would be doing ourselves a disservice to argue that there is only one way to construct relations across racial and ethnic boundaries. We cannot assume that if it does not unfold in one particular way, then it is not an authentic coalition.

There do seem to be a lot of problems with that idea of coming together across differences. For example, some people want to spend more time just on African American issues, which might not be the priority of a multicultural coalition.

DAVIS: Some people may want to do work specifically around African American issues. But this approach does not have to exclude working across and beyond racial boundaries as, for example, the National Black Women's Health Project focuses on Black women's health issues and, at the same time, is involved in the Women of Color Coalition for Reproductive Rights. At the same time, this idea of "spending more time with one's own group" needs to be interrogated. How would you define "one's own group"? For African Americans, would that include every person who meets the requirements of physical appearance or every person who identifies as African American, regardless of their phenotype? Would it include Republican African Americans who are opposed to affirmative action?

I think we need to be more reflective, more critical and more explicit about our concepts of community. There is often as much heterogeneity within a Black community, or more heterogeneity, than in cross-racial communities. An African American woman might find it much easier to work together with a Chicana than with another Black woman, whose politics of race, class, gender and sexuality would place her in an entirely different community. What is problematic is the degree to which nationalism has become a paradigm for our community-building processes. We need to move away from such arguments as "Well, she's not really Black." "She comes from such-and-such a place." "Her hair is..." "She doesn't listen to 'our' music," and so forth. What counts as Black is not so important as our political coalition building commitment to engage in anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic work.

Do you think it's necessary to have ideological unity to build a coalition? And if we do not use ideology as a basis to build coalitions, what's the basis that we use?

DAVIS: First of all, people who subscribe to similar ideologies can and do come together. Historically, the particular formations within which they work have been called political parties. Until a few years ago, I was a member of the Communist Party, for example. However, ideological affinity is not essential to coalition work, and that is what we presently are concerned with. For twenty years I was co-chairperson of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (I am presently chair emeritus). Our work initially was framed by a project to free political prisoners. This work raises questions. How do you develop campaigns to free political prisoners? Does one have to identify, for example, with the philosophical nationalism of a Black nationalist political prisoner in order to join the effort to free her? Or can one articulate a position of opposition to political repression, while disagreeing with the prisoner's particular politics?

Take the movement that developed around my case. My communist politics did not deter the vast numbers of people, and the over 250 separate committees, in this country and abroad, many of whom may have absolutely disagreed with my politics, from becoming active in the "Free Angela Davis Campaign." There are many ways of configuring networks, alliances and coalitions, departing from

people's commitment to social change. Again, I want to emphasize the importance of historical memory in our contemporary efforts to work together across differences. I raise the importance of historical memory not for the purpose of presenting immutable paradigms for coalition-building, but rather in order to understand historical trajectories and precisely to move beyond older conceptions of cross-racial organizing.

How can the successful coalition of gay and lesbian communities be extended to a broader coalition of the entire human race, where all of us can be included in one broad coalition, fighting for the day when none of us will be recognized as African American, or as an Anglo American, or as a Spanish American, but as a human being, and as one race, one person, one body?

DAVIS. Your moves are a little too fast for me. I am not sure that I would want to end up at a place where everybody is the same. I do not take a common future to mean a homogeneous future. While I absolutely agree with the importance you place on challenging compulsory heterosexuality, homophobia, hate crimes against lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, I don't know whether we can assume that multiracial coalitions have already been successfully constructed within gay communities. Racism is still a factor both within the gay movement and in the way the gay movement is publicly perceived. The ideological question of gay and white is still very much a problem. This is not, however, to underestimate the significant anti-racist work in predominantly white gay circles, nor is it to ignore the important work on multiple fronts by gay women and men of color.

In building alliances and coalitions, we have to consider carefully how to articulate issues so as to encourage racial boundary crossing. I personally am concerned about the way this question of lifting the ban on gays and lesbians in the military seemingly has moved to the top of the political agenda in a relatively uncomplicated articulation. Homophobia in the military should be opposed, unquestionably. The ban should be lifted. But to base this demand on formalistic arguments equating the soldierly abilities of gays and lesbians with those of straight people is extremely problematic.

In this context, the question would be: How is it possible to vigorously oppose the ban on gays and lesbians in the military and at the same time to principally oppose the military? This is especially important within the context of coalitions involving African Americans since for young Black men, the military, with its authoritarian structure and imperialistic projects, has become one of the only escape routes from joblessness, drugs, and prison. In the course of organizing against homophobia in the military, it should also be possible to raise demands for jobs, education, etc.

Angela Davis, I'd like to know your definition of a feminist.

DAVIS: I don't think I would propose a single definition of the term "feminist." It is one of those categories/commitments that can have a range of definitions and I don't think that it is helpful to insist on prescriptions for feminism. But I do think we can agree that feminism in its many versions acknowledges the social

impact of gender and involves opposition to misogyny. In my opinion, the most effective versions of feminism acknowledge the various ways gender, class, race and sexual orientation inform each other.

Some women, especially women of color, see feminism as anchored to a particular historical experience of white middle-class women and they consequently are reluctant to use "feminist" as a self-referential term. Among these women, some have opted, along with Alice Walker, to call themselves "womanists." That's fine. This does not mean they are unwilling to work with "feminists." Coalitional efforts among women of color should not require the self-reference of womanism anymore than they should require the self-reference of feminism. And it should not be a question of who is "more feminist" because of sexual orientation, location in the academy or the factory, and so forth. We should seek a point of junction constructed by the political projects we choose to embrace. Even though feminism may mean different things for different women (and men), this should not prevent us from creating movements that will put us in motion together, across all our various differences.

Personally, it was only after many years of political involvement that I decided to embrace the term feminism. I now feel very comfortable calling myself a feminist. But the way I am a feminist tomorrow may be different from the way I am a feminist today. My own conception of myself as a feminist constantly evolves as I learn more about the issues that women's movements need to address. It is more productive, I think, not to adhere to rigid categories, to the idea that there is something called "African American woman-ness," some essence we can discover. A vast range of identities can be encompassed by "African American woman." What is important, I think, is to fight on and not about political terms, such as: agendas for jobs, student funding, health care, child care, housing, reproductive rights, etc. Empowerment will remain powerless if we do not change power relations. Ways of feeling are very important, but we have to focus on substantive, radical institutional transformation as well. Empowerment will remain powerless if we do not change power relations.