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# Towards a New Theory of Feminist Coalition: Accounting for the Heterogeneity of Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality through an Exploration of Power and Responsibility

Holly Jeanine Boux, Georgetown University

**Abstract:** This paper develops a novel theory of feminist coalition that centers and redefines the concepts of power and responsibility. After outlining several key ways in which feminist coalition work has been addressed by both theorists and practitioners, it goes on to explore how accounting for the complex experiences of identity rooted in factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality continues to complicate the process of coalition building and theorizing. From these foundations, the article develops a theory of feminist coalition that speaks to how such a movement—or organizations within such a movement—can drive the political will for transformation *and* turn this will into political action without glossing over vital differences in people’s daily experiences of gender as it intersects with other systems of domination and oppression. The key argument made herein is that an explicit focus on power and responsibility can help us develop more functional answers to critical and still pressing questions, such as: Who is included—explicitly or implicitly—in feminist coalitions? And what issues, or agendas, are we working towards changing through these coalitions?

**Keywords:** feminism, coalition, intersectionality, power, responsibility, feminist theory

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This paper begins by outlining several key ways in which feminist coalition work has been addressed by both theorists and practitioners, and goes on to explore how accounting for the complex experiences of identity rooted in factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality continues to complicate the process of coalition building and theorizing. Building upon a detailed exploration of the germinal coalitional theories of Kimberly Christensen and Patricia Hill Collins, as well as more recent coalition-focused literature, I also incorporate suggestions from other sources, in particular Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres’s work, into my synthesized theory of feminist coalition. My goal in this essay is to develop a theory of feminist coalition that speaks to how such a movement—or organizations within such a movement—can drive the political will for transformation *and* turn this will into political action without glossing over vital differences in people’s daily experiences of gender as it intersects with other systems of domination and oppression. I develop a novel theory of feminist coalition that centers and redefines the concepts of power and responsibility as they are applied in traditional feminist coalitional theory. My key argument is that an explicit focus on power and responsibility can help us develop more functional answers to critical and still pressing questions, such as: Who is included—explicitly or implicitly—in feminist coalitions? And what issues, or agendas, are we working towards changing through these coalitions?

To preserve the impact of Guinier and Torres's nuanced arguments, this project focuses on synthesizing theories of race and gender in the United States in lieu of taking a broader lens to explore the multiplicity of lived experiences of identity, and the theorization of these experiences, as they exist internationally. The theory and proposals made herein are intended as building blocks in the larger project of developing feminist coalitions and coalitional theories that integrate all intersections—including race, class, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, and nationality—in a detailed and comprehensive way.

### **Why Do We Need to Continue Theorizing about Feminist Coalitions?**

This paper focuses on raced and gendered identities in the United States because they are the cornerstones of the theories discussed herein, and because questions relevant to coalition building remain pressing in this context. One glaring and high-profile example of how questions such as “Who is included in feminist coalition?” remain contested within the United States is Patricia Arquette's highly problematic acceptance speech at the 2015 Academy Awards. From the perspective of many feminists, Arquette's night began promisingly with her statement that “it's our time to have wage equality once and for all” (Arquette 2015). However, when interviewed backstage, she continued: “It's time for all the women in America and all the men that love women, and all the gay people, and all the people of color that we've all fought for to fight for us now” (Hod 2015). In follow-up interviews, Arquette noted her poor phrasing, stating, “You can't go back in time. But, I guess I would have chosen my words a little more carefully. I think the way people perceived it is not the way at all I intended” (Hod 2015). While not representative of the many women who understand and account for intersectionality in practicing feminist and/or coalitional activism, Arquette's comments are important because they are a very clear example of how many high-profile American women who speak on behalf of the feminist movement continue to answer the question “Who is included in feminist coalition?” in very exclusionary ways. For Arquette, this group does not include those she is inviting to join “us”—therefore, not gay people, men, or people of color. As was noted by many observers, Arquette distanced not only allies; she also seemingly excluded women of color and lesbian women. This is one anecdotal example, but that it happened at the Oscars nods to how, in the American context, feminist coalitional work remains a pressing and high-profile matter. Reiterating the endurance of this issue, in early 2016 the #OscarsSoWhite hastag trended on Twitter as it had in 2015. In both years this happened in response to the fact that all 20 acting nominees for the Academy Awards were White. Thus, in the context of the return of the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag in 2016, Arquette's comments were also revisited. Critics clearly connected the issues of wage inequality and racial underrepresentation within the industry in a way that Arquette had not, expressing a hope for coalitional work, in particular from powerful White actors who have already spoken out on issues of gender inequality. These critics' hope is that

stars like Emma Watson, Jennifer Lawrence, Lena Dunham and Bradley Cooper, who are outspoken advocates for gender equality, connect that racism and sexism are intertwined; there are people who are subjected to one or the other, and there are so many people who are subjected to both. (Kirst 2016)

Of course, failing to move beyond a monocular analysis that accounts for only one facet of identity is not limited to Hollywood (Carastathis 2013). Among feminist writers, these questions remain powerful and challenging. For instance, in reviewing a biography of Helen Gurley Brown (Scanlon 2009), Naomi Wolf asserted:

The fact is, we know the answers to Western women's problems: The way is mapped out, the time for theory is pretty much over. We know the laws and the policies we need to achieve full equality. What we lack is a grass-roots movement that will drive the political will. (Wolf 2009)

This statement, made by a highly visible feminist and printed in *The Washington Post*, is problematic on several levels. Firstly, critical readers might ask, who are the men that “we”—most likely we as women—will be equal to if we follow Wolf's unspecified plan? As Estelle B. Freedman notes, “when Betty Friedan called for liberating women from the home through employment, women of color who had always worked knew that joining the men of their race on the job meant they would still encounter discrimination” (Freedman 2008, 10). Presumably, men of color, oppressed by American racial hierarchies, are not those Wolf has in mind when she asserts that “we” can achieve equality with them, because they do not have access to the privileges White men enjoy. Disabled men, poor men, and gay men are also likely not who Wolf is talking about, because they do not enjoy the social privileges that come with being on the “ability” side of the ability/disability system, being economically advantaged, or being heterosexual.

Critical readers might further note that this criticism—that striving to be equal with men is deeply problematic because all men are not equally advantaged—has been made repeatedly by feminist theorists and activists over the past several decades. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks “question[ed] the homogeneity of the ‘sisterhood,’ stressing the perspective of race” (Cole 1999, 72) and characterized the notion that all women are similarly oppressed as fictitious. hooks noted that this false homogeneity is problematic for feminism in general, but that it is especially challenging for coalition building (hooks 1984, 44).<sup>1</sup> Though she observed this failing over 30 years ago, to judge by Arquette's and Wolf's comments, false conceptualizations of women's homogeneity have endured in many powerful feminist quarters (Carastathis 2013), as have their powerful and persuasive critiques. For instance, Darnell Moore and Monica J. Casper argue against gender-focused feminisms that are seemingly oblivious of race:

It is imperative to us that feminisms continue to engage racism in all its forms and to understand that gender and sexual oppression are intimately interwoven with racial oppression and racialized state violence. Because, of course, the United States is far from post-racial. Just ask Renisha McBride. Or Marissa Alexander. Or the family of Trayvon Martin. Or the families of migrants left to die in the Sonoran Desert or assaulted by militarized US border patrol agents. For some feminisms to unfold as if race has receded as an issue is not only disingenuous; it perpetuates epistemic violence against people of color. (Moore and Casper 2014)

Similarly powerful and important critiques of these failings have emerged from Black Lives Matter, the critical contemporary Black liberation movement (Garza 2014), which has both “put police reform on the policy agenda [and] demanded that American society reconsider how it values black lives” (Harris 2015, 34). In her writings on the genesis of Black Lives Matter, its founder Alicia Garza rebukes progressive movements that engage in “the worn out and sloppy practice of drawing lazy parallels of unity between peoples with vastly different experiences and histories” (Garza 2014, 3). Rather, she argues that freedom-focused movements and activists must learn from these mistakes of the past, and she sets out a clear mandate: that Black Lives Matter must affirm “the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum” (Garza 2014, 2).

Critical readers will also note that even if we were to assume (fallaciously, as feminist theorists and activists have highlighted) the existence of a standard “man” that “we” could work towards being equal to, if only we did not lack a grass-roots political movement, the question would still remain: “Who is *we*?” (Rich 2001, 82; original emphasis).<sup>2</sup> Does the “we” of this American political project of equality include

women of color as well as White women? This is a question to which both academics and activists have frequently answered “No.”<sup>3</sup> Does “we” include lesbians, bisexual or trans women, or only straight women? Does it include women of all classes, and not simply those who belong to the middle and upper class? Returning to Wolf’s comments, she claims elsewhere in her review that Brown’s biography is “revelatory” because it forces women to “think back to a time when bright young women were locked out of the good jobs in advertising, publishing, law and other fields and herded into such appallingly underpaid secretarial or research roles that they could scarcely make ends meet” (Wolf 2009). Thus, I would assume that lower-class women of all races, especially women of color, who (often along with men occupying similar locations in the American matrix of domination) are still being herded into appallingly underpaid jobs, are not necessarily included in Wolf’s definition of the “we” that could access “full equality.” Finally, if we truly did “know the laws and policies we need to achieve full equality” (Wolf 2009), if such equality could be ours if “we” simply developed a grass-roots movement, and “if unity on the basis of sexual oppression is something natural”—as Wolf seems to indicate by casually claiming that women as a unified group have one political project—“then why do we women, the majority people on the planet, still have a problem?” (Jordan 1985, 46).

As theorists and activists from bell hooks to Alicia Garza have highlighted, the same questions that arise in response to Arquette’s and Wolf’s statements also frame much of the debate surrounding feminist coalitions. It is these coalitions that Wolf is implicitly addressing when she observes that “we” need a grass-roots political movement. The need for coalition building has been noted by earlier feminist theorists, who have underlined that “we’ve pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is ‘yours only’—just for the people you want to be there” (Reagon 1983, 357). Questions about the identity of the “we” that feminist theory and action is designed to speak to, and work on behalf of, have become especially important in this emerging literature, as have questions of what issues or agendas “we” are working towards. Given the high-profile status of Arquette’s and Wolf’s comments, and the loud backlash they have sparked among contemporary activists, including those within film industry and those within the Black Lives Matter community—who are themselves struggling to accommodate the lived heterogeneity of the Black liberation movement—it is clear that false conceptualizations of homogeneity and inclusion continue to pose real challenges to coalitional organizing.<sup>4</sup> Further, these false conceptualizations need to be explicitly contested not only by activists in their praxis but also in contemporary feminist theories. Because four short sentences in a book review can spawn so many questions about feminism and feminist organizing, and further, because they reflect key questions that remain unresolved by theories surrounding feminist coalitions, I believe Wolf’s statement that the “time for theory is pretty much over” is clearly and fundamentally incorrect. It is theory, especially feminist theory, that “can find a way between the merely personal and the mostly political”—which Wolf argues is essential for the feminist political project. As proposed herein, this work can be done through analyzing and exploring feminist coalition building, and developing responses to questions such as those raised by Wolf’s comment and those that emerge from the extant literature concerning feminist coalitions.

Before delving into the literature concerning feminist coalitions, it is important to note that theory has a vital role not only in the development of feminist knowledge but also in conceptualizing possible coalitional strategies. In this way, theory can serve several purposes, all of which are key to the conceptualization and evaluation of discussions related to feminist coalition. Theory allows us to see patterns that we would have otherwise missed, “showing the forest as well as the trees” (Rich 2001, 5). The role that theory plays in feminist knowledge production is illuminated by Donna Haraway’s assertion that “feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (Haraway 1988, 581; original emphasis). According to this epistemology,

“none of us alone has a comprehensive vision of how race, class and gender operate as categories of analysis or how they might be used as categories of connection”; rather, “our personal biographies offer us partial views” (Collins 2004, 540). Thus, it is theory that can give us a lens to illuminate and understand what is going on in the world beyond our own position, helping us to see our lives as part of a continuum and, ultimately, to decide on concrete steps to be taken based on our position. In this way, theory plays an especially important part in developing a grass-roots movement or coalition, such as that advocated by Wolf. Though theory does not give us an “all-seeing” perspective, it makes us see and engage with the experiences of those in different positions than ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Although we will never experience life from a position other than that which we individually occupy in society’s matrix of domination, we can develop strong cultural critiques of oppression as allies, and the more sympathetic and engaged we are with people unlike ourselves, the more we can see things from their perspective and be allies with them, increasing the possibility of coalition. Theory is further useful in the project of coalition building because it is a powerful tool with which we can see or imagine what could be, or theorize a situation that does not yet exist. In this way, political and social theorists and strategists are enabled to work through possibilities and their normative implications—e.g., how the answers to questions such as who is “we” and what “we” are working towards could have concrete political and organizational results. More specifically, with theorizations of feminist coalitions, we can develop theories that acknowledge the intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, and dis/ability, and address how the lived complexities of daily experience complicate these mythically homogeneous categories—exposing them as deeply and inextricably affected by the differences across people’s lives and positionalities. Such theories not only allow us to “develop awareness about a whole spectrum of subordinated histories and struggles [but also] to form coalitions that are potentially broader in impact than those who do not do so” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013, 801).

In light of the potential gains that theory has to offer for the conceptualization of feminist coalitions, and the important developments that have already been made by feminist theorists on this topic, as noted above, my goal in this essay is to develop a theory of feminist coalitions that speaks to how such a movement—or organizations within such a movement—can “find a way between the merely personal and the mostly political” (Wolf 2009). Ultimately, this theory seeks to develop a way for feminist coalitions to drive the political will for transformation *and* turn this will into political action. However, such a theory can only be successful if it avoids becoming so universalizing that it glosses over important differences in people’s daily experiences of gender as it intersects with other systems of domination and oppression, including race, class and sexuality, or so fragmented that it prevents any coalescing between and among oppressed groups. This project—of acknowledging the unique ways in which overlapping and intersecting systems of oppression impact the people who are differentially positioned within them—was importantly advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality. In 1989, Crenshaw noted that because “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism,” theories that analyzed these experiences using only a single axis (race or gender but not both) were insufficient to “address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw 1989, 140). Similarly, Judith Butler highlights that feminist theories must question how our current mobilizing reinforces existing configurations of discourse and power, because too often they replicate rather than challenge these configurations. Instead, we must consciously mobilize in a way that reworks the matrix of power within which we operate, as well as its legacy (Butler 1992, 13). These arguments clearly resonate with the goals of coalition work and theory development, as building coalitions and developing coalitional theory necessarily involves bringing together people and issues that are not exclusively feminist, and acknowledging how intersectional identities complicate (sometimes

problematically) unitary analyses and political movements. Thus, the theory developed in this paper attempts to take heed of Crenshaw's admonitions.

### **Nuancing Theories of Feminist Coalition with Race, Class, and Sexuality**

Recent theories of feminist coalition have addressed the potential development of coalitions and partnerships in ways that are explicitly cognizant of the lived complexities of daily experience. In assessing what feminist coalitions are, a useful definition describes them as productive partnerships forged not only among those explicitly identifying as feminists but also among women and men who are oppressed by systems of domination other than (or in addition to) gender—such as race, class, sexuality, and dis/ability—but who do not necessarily identify as feminist. These relationships can be characterized as goal-oriented, as those who enter into them work toward “forming political coalitions that have the political power to fundamentally change this country—[for example,] to feminist as well as antiracist ends” (Christensen 1997, 644). Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson provides a useful description of feminist theory, describing it as “a collaborative, interdisciplinary inquiry and a self-conscious cultural critique that interrogates how subjects are multiply interpellated: in other words, how the representational systems of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and class mutually construct, inflect, and contradict one another” (Garland-Thomson 2002, 3). Reflecting the continuities between these functional definitions, and building upon an understanding of feminist theory as a fundamentally coalitional endeavor, in this paper, coalitional theories are broadly understood to be theories that explore, critique and propose political coalitions that focus on multiple axes of domination and that use the tools of feminist theory. The lived complexities that have begun to be addressed by these coalitions and theories about them include various self-interests that cut across the mythically homogeneous categories of gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, and dis/ability, among others.<sup>6</sup> These complexities have often hindered efforts at building cross-oppression coalitions, as well as the development of coalition between feminists. However, the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberly Christensen has centered these explorations, and as such will be explored in detail herein.

Before this in-depth examination, it is important to note that while theories specifically addressing coalition work have not fully accounted for the reality of how various self-interests can intersect and complicate coalition formation, feminist theories outside of this limited area have for many years eloquently and explicitly addressed the importance of intersectional identities for feminist theory and organization. Working for, and theorizing about, feminist coalitions that acknowledge the intersecting, overlapping, and sometimes oppositional interests of race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, and gender is not a new development in feminism. Black women and other women of color, as well as lesbian women and feminists focusing on integrating dis/ability into feminist theory, have argued for decades that feminism must pay attention to intersectional interests, not merely those of upper- or middle-class straight White women.<sup>7</sup> During the second wave, Black feminists, such as those in the Combahee River Collective, undertook this project (of paying attention to intersectional women's interests) in their 1977 “Black Feminist Statement,” which provides an important example of early feminist theory that accounts for the intersections of race, class, and gender.<sup>8</sup> However, it is critical to look at the specific language used in the statement, because it was not an optimistic call for feminist coalition. Rather, it states the authors' realization “that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us” (Combahee River Collective 1977, 365). This accurately reflects the reality in which “white-dominated feminist organizations have devoted less energy to issues that disproportionately affect low-income women and/or women of color (e.g., sterilization abuse, AIDS, access to medical care) than to those issues that disproportionately affect middle-class women or that have a broad

cross-class impact (e.g., abortion rights, sexual harassment)” (Christensen 1997, 634). Unfortunately, this reality has continued in the years since Christensen eloquently described it, with the “continued exclusion of nonwhite women from mainstream feminism” (Loza 2014) and the frequent dismissal of women of color from feminist spaces and discussions “in favor of a brand of solidarity that centers on the safety and comfort of white women” (Kendall 2013). Multiracial feminist theorists have made similar observations, and from this fertile theoretical ground feminist arguments for and about coalitions have emerged.<sup>9</sup> The diverse theories of multiracial feminists, including Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Williams, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, have all made important contributions to this project, and the “multiple strategies for social justice embedded in multiracial feminism” (Thompson 2002, 349) have been used as sources of information for coalitional theory and praxis.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the important contributions made by feminist theorists about the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, the junctures between gender and interests that are often seen as class-, race- or sexuality-based continue to be a source of much disagreement among theorists of feminist coalitions. While theoretical disagreement is often productive, and is an important part of knowledge production, especially on such contentious issues as coalition building, the answers to the questions of “who is ‘we’?” and “what issues or agendas are we working towards?” remain uselessly murky.

### **What Is Being Undertheorized in Contemporary Theories of Coalition Work?**

The continued inadequacy that feminist theories of coalition have demonstrated in dealing with intersecting identities and interests is made especially evident by a comparative review of the theories of Kimberly Christensen and Patricia Hill Collins and by the evaluation of their respective prescriptions for feminist coalition building. I focus my discussion on these fundamental works because the two authors’ views differ in several key ways, allowing me to illustrate with relative parsimony the multidirectional nature of coalitional theorizing.<sup>11</sup> Further, a goal of this paper is to avoid building my alternative theory upon mischaracterized analyses of other theorists’ work, or “straw feminisms.” Such misrepresentation is deeply problematic for the feminist project, as it is the “feminist imperative to decompartmentalize, or build bridges, in response to a masculinist agenda, which encourages divisiveness in all forms, especially among feminists” (Purvis 2004, 101).<sup>12</sup>

In her 1997 article, “‘With Whom Do You Believe Your Lot Is Cast?’ White Feminists and Racism,” Christensen has two main projects: to explore “some of the reasons that the white-dominated feminist movement has been less than successful in dealing with institutionalized racism” (Christensen 1997, 618) and to launch a discussion into how feminists can “change this situation, to develop a truly antiracist feminist theory and practice” (Christensen 1997, 618). Specifically positioning her argument to account for how gender and race cannot be seen as homogeneous categories but instead as interests that cut across each other, she notes that the “influence of postmodernism on feminist theory has contributed to the ‘decentering’ of the feminist subject, drawing attention to the vast differences in life experiences by women of different races, classes, sexual orientations, and dis/abilities” (617). However, despite this progress,

feminism has not emerged as a significant force against racism in the United States ... [because of] the inadequate, individualistic definition of racism prevailing among white feminists (and in the country as a whole). This definition of racism, which focuses on racist attitudes rather than on institutionalized inequalities of wealth and power by race, has led many feminists to misallocate their antiracist energies. (Christensen 1997, 618)



In light of this finding, Christensen makes several significant and specific suggestions about building feminist coalitions. These suggestions must be considered in order to build upon the foundation established by her germinal work in order to develop a theorization of feminist coalition that accounts for the lived complexities of daily experience in a more nuanced way than these issues are characterized by the extant literature on coalition work. Firstly, Christensen notes that in order to be allies with those unlike ourselves we need to listen carefully to those occupying positions different from ours. Noting how men can be allies with the feminist cause, she implores feminists to undertake a similar project of careful and attentive listening in order to build coalitions with those whose experiences and goals we may not immediately see and embrace as our own. The end goal of such diverse coalitions is concrete, material change. Thus, Christensen asks men who seek to ally themselves with feminists, to “listen—listen carefully to the diverse experiences and writings of feminists—and to take our words seriously. Taking our words seriously would mean acting to change the material reality of women’s lives” (620). She also argues that it is White women’s responsibility to do similarly with the words of feminists of color. Secondly, Christensen directly addresses what issues these coalitions should focus on, arguing that coalition building needs to coalesce not only around specific predetermined causes but that “shared interests ... will have to be constructed through working together and coming to trust each other as political allies” with the goal of building a “political community dedicated to the eradication of patriarchy and racism (and other forms of oppression)” (633).

Christensen’s theory is an important contribution to the debates concerning feminist coalition-building; however, it is also problematic in several ways. Firstly, she focuses overwhelmingly on how the effects of race and gender are intertwined, but does not fully incorporate discussions of how these structures of oppression are further complicated by class, sexuality and dis/ability. When she does discuss the effects of class- and sexuality-based oppressions on gender- and race-based systems of subjugation, Christensen notes that “oppression by race, class, culture, sexual orientation, and gender, as well as along other axes of difference are all *fundamental* and interact with each other in complicated ways” (Christensen 1997, 632; emphasis added). She further argues that “it is only by acknowledging and theorizing about the origin and contradictory nature of our more privileged class positions that middle-class women of all sexual orientations can begin to dream of and build an economy that meets the needs of all women—and all people” (635). While this is an important argument, Christensen does not adequately explain this theorization as her text remains focused on engaging specifically with race and gender. Though she notes that discussions of class and sexuality are, to use her description, of “fundamental” importance, she does not heed her own advice and largely does not engage with these issues. They remain ancillary to her principal theses, which situate gender- and race-based oppressions as primary and those rooted in class and sexuality as secondary, rather than giving them equal treatment and thus recognizing them as truly fundamental. This complicates Christensen’s concrete suggestions for how coalitions should specifically address policy change. She argues that antiracist feminist coalitions must focus not only on issues which are clearly feminist or raced, but that they also must work to change policies that “may not be labeled as ‘racial’ but that have a vastly disproportionate impact on people of color” (639). She is right to suggest that issues such as educational funding, campaign spending, congressional redistricting, health care, and welfare must be part of a comprehensive coalitional project. Indeed, when trying to address inadequacies in these public policies, many organizations and social movements persist in framing their analyses “to address primarily the concerns of individuals who, but for one marginalized status, are otherwise privileged” (Cole and Luna 2010, 75). Yet Christensen fails to account for the reality that these issues are not only raced and gendered but also classed and heterosexed.

Secondly, Christensen makes the following important point:

Being an antiracist [feminist] means more than “raising one’s consciousness” about racism and struggling to reduce interpersonal racism within the women’s movement. It means engaging in political struggles to change the basic economic and political power relations of this society.... It means working in coalitions where feminist issues are not always first on the agenda. (643)

But this theoretical conceptualization of “feminist issues” is troubling. By saying that they may not be first on the agenda, Christensen is defining feminist issues as distinct from antiracist issues—which presumably are what feminist issues may be taking a back seat to in these coalitions. In other words, she separates feminist issues from racial issues. From an intersectional perspective, this statement is problematic because Christensen is defining some issues that impact women as nonfeminist and treating “race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw 1989, 139). Even if gender isn’t the *primary* axis of difference or oppression on a particular issue, saying that such an issue is not feminist seems to contradict Crenshaw’s argument that intersectional problems such as racism are impacted by more than one axis of oppression; for example, in discussing racism, Crenshaw notes that “gender subordination does contribute significantly to the destitute conditions of so many African Americans” and that “it must therefore be addressed” (Crenshaw 1989, 162). If we are to accurately account for lived complexities and the ways in which multiple forms of domination overlap and intersect in the lives of people subjugated by these systems, we must learn from the arguments of feminists such as those in the Combahee River Collective and recognize that antiracist issues *are* feminist issues, as all women are affected by race, whether they are privileged or oppressed by their own racial identities.

Consistent with Christensen’s approach, in “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection” (2004), Collins also directly addresses how race, class and sexuality complicate feminist coalition work, and how they trouble the notion that gender can be characterized as a homogeneous category around which coalitions can be built. In this work, Collins asks two basic questions: “First, how can we reconceptualize race, class and gender as categories of analysis? Second, how can we transcend the barriers created by our experiences with race, class and gender oppression in order to build the types of coalitions essential for social change?” (Collins 2004, 530). She answers these questions by arguing that

we must acquire both new theories of how race, class and gender have shaped the experiences not just of women of color, but of all groups. Moreover, we must see the connections between these categories of analysis and the personal issues in our everyday lives, particularly our scholarship, our teaching, and our relationships with our colleagues and students. (530)

Collins’s paper is especially valuable as a building block for theorizations of feminist coalition because of her direct and nuanced treatment of the lived intersections between race, class, gender, and sexuality. She insightfully addresses how our own location and self-interest can blind us to others’ experiences, noting that while we often “have little difficulty assessing our own victimization within some major system of oppression, whether it be by race, social class, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or gender, we typically fail to see how our thoughts and actions uphold someone else’s subordination” (Collins 2004, 529). As she elaborates, “each group identifies a type of oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all other types as being of lesser importance” (529). Thus Collins’s theory importantly reveals how coalition work can be developed that pays heed to the complexities of overlapping and intersecting oppressions:

For middle class white women, gender may assume experiential primacy unavailable to poor Hispanic women struggling with the ongoing issues of low-paid jobs and the frustrations of the welfare bureaucracy. This recognition that one category may have salience over another for a given time and place does not minimize

the theoretical importance of assuming that race, class and gender as categories of analysis structure all relationships. (Collins 2004, 532)

Building upon this characterization of self-interest, Collins prescriptively suggests that “we must transcend these barriers by moving toward race, class and gender as categories of connection, by building relationships and coalitions that will bring about social change” (Collins 2004, 537). However, the notion that we can “transcend” our differences is problematic. As Guinier and Torres assert in *The Miner’s Canary* (2002), sustainable collective action that crosses the narrow boundaries of these self-interests requires “a willingness to engage with internally embedded hierarchies of race and class privilege” (137–38), and that we must not try to simply transcend these barriers without exploring how we are implicated in, participating in, and potentially supporting, the continued maintenance of hierarchies of oppression.

Collins’s and Christensen’s theories are foundational pieces in the extant literature on coalition work. To varying degrees, both authors engage with the reality that race, class, gender, and sexuality transect each other and complicate coalition work around all of these issues. Thus, the difficulties present in Collins’s and Christensen’s theories not only reflect the challenges of capturing how the multifaceted and concurrent systems of oppression complicate organization on the basis of the mythically homogeneous categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They also reflect how difficult it is to resolve issues relating to these competing and intersecting self-interests, which have caused profound difficulties in forming and theorizing about feminist coalitions. Furthermore, the points of disagreement and confusion between their theories are also representative of broader disagreements within the coalitional literature. These key fault lines can be identified as follows: disagreements between trying to transcend difference and engaging with it directly; viewing difference as a source of potential connection versus seeing it as a source of irreconcilable disconnection; and focusing coalitional work around specific policy issues or developing these connections around groups of people. Ultimately, while difference and disagreement are vital to feminism, these elementary dissensions about the nature of coalition have prevented cohesive answers to the questions of “who are ‘we’?” and “what are we working for?” from being formulated by those seeking to engage in coalitional work, as theorists including Christensen and Collins, but also others such as Adrienne Rich and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, have answered these fundamental questions in essentially divergent ways.

While the topics named above have generated much dispute, other issues have remained largely unaddressed in the feminist literature focused on coalition building. The theory I propose in this paper cannot completely resolve the divisions listed above—indeed, I am unsure if any one theory can. But by theorizing on the issues that have been left out of explicit discussion by the extant feminist literature on coalition building—power and responsibility—we can develop more nuanced and unified answers to some of the fundamental questions of coalition building, including “who are ‘we’?” and “what are we working towards?”

### **Towards a Novel Intersectional Theory of Feminist Coalitions**

In this paper, I critique several current theories of feminist coalition, but my fundamental goal is to build upon existing literature to develop a “generative” theorization of this type of coalition. This theory is “generative” insofar as it is constructive, instead of exclusively critical. Similarly, while it is intended to be informative for both praxis and theorization, it is not necessarily prescriptive (Mack-Canty 2004). This understanding of “generative” theory is related to Erik Erikson’s conceptualization, as both Colleen Mack-Cantey and Erikson describe generative theory as theory developed for the future, often in the political arena

and built through engaging in the process of ideologically motivated activism. However, unlike Erikson's "psychosocial generativity, which is defined as the desire to contribute to future generations" (Duncan 1999, 630), herein "generative" describes a theory that both contributes to future theorization about coalition and can be used constructively while engaging in coalitional development and politics. By engaging in generative theory building, this section illustrates a way forward in feminist coalition building that deals with the gaps outlined above. In particular, I describe a path that addresses the roles power and responsibility must play in theories of coalition work to more fully account for the ways that gender, race, class, and sexuality cut across each other and derail the development of coalition around these mythically homogeneous categories.

### *Power*

As Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill note, "power is the cornerstone of women's differences. This means that women's differences are *connected* in systematic ways" (1996, 327; original emphasis). Although she fails to explicitly incorporate discussions of power into her prescriptions concerning feminist coalition, Christensen also mentions the importance of power in feminist theories, arguing that "much of the power of the second wave of feminism came from the insight that our 'personal' problems were, in fact, political—the result of power differentials created and reproduced in the broader society and acted out in every facet of our 'personal' lives" (1997, 621). Indeed, despite the primacy given to this issue in broader theories of feminism, and the "myriad different, and in many cases contradictory, definitions of power [that] are influential in contemporary social and political theory" (Allen 1999, 121), the way power can be used as a tool in feminist coalitional theory and praxis is undertheorized. Amy Allen expands upon the critical importance of the concept of power for feminist theory at length in her book, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (1999), arguing that "we have yet to develop a satisfactory account of this central concept" (1) and that its past conceptualizations have been incomplete. Allen addresses this gap by formulating a broad definition of power that characterizes it "simply as the ability or capacity of an actor or set of actors to act" (1999, 127).

Usefully, Allen's work does address the centrality of power for the practice of solidarity and coalition building; she highlights that this feminist conception of power is not only important for definitional clarity but also necessary "to be able to adequately theorize empowerment and resistance" (1999, 2). That adequately conceptualizing power is critical for feminist work, particularly that which involves diverse individuals, is a theme to which Allen returns with her observation that "we have an interest in theorizing the kind of collective power that can bridge the diversity of individuals who make up the feminist movement" (122). However, rather than discussing how this understanding of power might facilitate such bridging, Allen's book is focused on arriving at this definition. While her understanding of power relates clearly to the feminist coalitional project, she does not theorize how this type of power could function in coalitional work.

The role of power in the process of empowerment and resistance has been usefully theorized, however, by theorists of coalition work, notably by Guinier and Torres in *The Miner's Canary* (2002). Similarly to Allen, they point out that power has traditionally been a central concept in feminist theorizing:

In the 1970s feminist scholars, working out the links between the personal and the political, began to redefine power as collective energy and realization. Resisting the idea that feminists should address only questions surrounding personal changes, they called instead for recognition that change takes place along multiple axes of human interaction.... Thus feminists say that it is critically important to change the context in which ... relationships occur. (Guinier and Torres 2002, 139)

Guinier and Torres explicitly chose “not to stress the link between gender and power, although it is a potentially important site of struggle,” albeit they invited “others to explore it further” (163). In light of this suggestion, I argue that their feminist definition of power as collective energy and realization can be usefully incorporated into theories of feminist coalition in order to develop more powerful answers to the questions of who “we” are, and what we seek to accomplish through coalition. This conceptualization of power is especially relevant to social movements and coalitions because it challenges the zero-sum definition of power that is commonly, if implicitly, used to describe power in society. Guinier and Torres describe this hegemonic conceptualization of power as “power-over” (2002, 141), where if one person or group has power, another by definition cannot. When power is understood in this way, the lived complexities of daily experience of self-interests such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, necessarily undermine coalitional possibilities, for if one group—for example, women—are gaining power, or reducing their oppression, other groups—such as racial minorities—are necessarily losing out. This characterization of power is further problematic for intersectional identities: As women gain power, women who are racial minorities or from a lower socioeconomic class are torn between their gendered improvement and their increased oppression along race- or class-based lines. It appears that Christensen, for example, implicitly conceptualizes power as such “power-over” in her theory. As she separates feminist from antiracist issues, she indicates that either can be advanced by coalitional work, but that in coalitions, although they can have shared interests, only one set of issues at a time can be primary. Returning to Allen’s understanding of power, we can see that her arguments on behalf of a broad definition of feminist power echo these concerns about narrow “power-over” conceptualizations. In rejecting this common understanding, she reinforces the idea of power being connected to solidarity and points out that

the goal of the feminist movement is not to put women in a position to exact at long last our revenge for the suffering we have endured under a heteropatriarchal society. Thus it does not make sense to view the solidarity that enables the feminist movement to formulate and achieve its objectives as merely an instance of power-over. (Allen 1999, 126)

Wary of giving primacy to this domination-focused understanding of power, Allen includes both “power-over” and “power-with” in her definition of power, noting that “power-with” can be understood as “the ability of a collectivity to act together for the attainment of an agreed-upon end or series of ends” (126–27).

Rather than including both “power-over” and “power-with” in their conceptualization of power, Guinier and Torres focus upon the latter, and further, they define it in a profoundly different way than Allen, as “the psychological and social power gained through collective resistance and struggle and through the creation of an alternative set of narratives” and as “relational and interactive” (2002, 141). Guinier and Torres’s definition of power is particularly promising as a useful tool for feminist coalition building precisely because of this focus on “power-with” rather than “power-over.” While Allen’s comprehensive definition is useful because it highlights that feminist praxis and theorization often involves the illumination of or the fight against “power-over” exercises of power—both inside and outside our coalitions—in coalitional work the use of “power-over” strategies is problematic. Indeed, exercise of “power-over” runs the risk engaging in what Butler argues we must not do if we are to challenge existing configurations of discourse and power—that is, “adopt the very models of domination by which we were oppressed” (1992, 14) and use our theories and praxis to reify previous power structures, rather than to challenge them.

Although Guinier and Torres’s model of power is useful for the development of theory and for building political coalitions, as the authors themselves note, their reconceptualization is particularly helpful in understanding how power can function in social movements, as in this arena “prospects for social change

do not always depend upon strategies that pit one oppression against another in a competing hierarchy of power”: “Rather, those who hold a vision of transformation can learn ways to move outside and apart from the current models of power” (2002, 143). This additive, rather than zero-sum, definition of power allows antiracist issues to be considered *as* feminist issues, because when one group (e.g., women) gains this type of power, other allied groups (e.g., racial minorities) do not necessarily lose out. Thus, this conceptualization suggests “the possibility of shared and circulating power” (Guinier and Torres 2002, 142), which is essential to make feminist coalitions work.

Redefining power using Guinier and Torres’s “power-with” definition seemingly addresses Christensen’s problematic use of “power-over” in her theory. Further, this redefinition points to a more potent answer to the question of “who are we?” because in this model “we” is defined not only by competing ascriptive identities but also by not “what you call yourself but with whom you link your fate” (Guinier and Torres 2002, 10). Similarly, the issues that we are working towards do not have to be exclusively feminist *or* antiracist (or nonheterosexist, or aimed at abolishing class divisions) because these can be addressed in overlapping ways. Such coalitions would still be feminist and deal with issues that concern or affect many women, but by employing this redefinition of power they could also be antiracist, anticlassist, and so on.

### *Responsibility*

Several feminist theorists mention accountability and responsibility as important to the achievement of feminist goals; however, as with power, responsibility’s significant role in shaping feminist coalitions has been undertheorized. Despite this neglect, a sense of responsibility plays a clear role in shaping feminist behavior. Jennifer Purvis underscores that

by enabling feminists to see themselves as distinct from other generations, rather than admit to continuities, the generational divide [between second- and third-wave feminism] serves as a kind of inoculation against confronting the persistence of these forces.... The result is that we perpetuate such problems. Younger feminists, feminists with new strategies, or any feminists who persist in separating themselves from patterns of racism and classism, in effect, refuse to engage in critical appraisals of their own privilege and internalized prejudices, or conscientiously locate and eradicate the racism and classism within feminist discourses and practices. (2004, 107)

Certainly, this type of perpetuation of oppressive hierarchies is not the sole purview of younger feminists, as traditionally “U.S. and European women’s studies have challenged the seemingly hegemonic ideas of elite white men [while] ironically ... also suppress[ing] Black women’s ideas” (Collins 2000, 5). Collins underlines that not all White women participate in such suppression, and that “some do try to build coalitions across racial and other markers of difference, often with noteworthy results” (6). However, replication of oppressive structures in feminist work is an important reason to argue for a “politics of engagement rather than a politics of transcendence” (Mohanty 2003, 469) in order to require that the members of the dominant group acquire knowledge of the practices of the dominated groups (Narayan 1989, 256) and prevent further marginalization of those more (or differently) oppressed than themselves. This is especially important during the theorization and building of feminist coalitions, because “we need theory that will enable us to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting upon) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them” (Scott 1988, 33). Thus, it is the responsibility of all those who benefit from their positionality in some way to *engage* with differences between feminists and among other social-justice activists as well, instead of attempting to transcend these differences and risking to become part of someone else’s problem by refusing to deal with issues of race or class (Collins 2004).

Ultimately, this means that each of us must seek to learn how we are implicated in the oppression of others, and we have to take responsibility for understanding our privilege *and* how our privilege oppresses others in order to effectively work in coalition without oppressing those we are in coalition with.

Responsibility is also an important attribute for theories of feminist coalition because of its connection to self-interest. JeeYeun Lee emphasizes how responsibility and self-interest are connected in describing how they affect the issues we choose to address in our theorizations of coalition: “such an overwhelming array of problems can numb and immobilize us, or make us concentrate our energies too narrowly. I don’t think that we have to address everything fully at the same time, but we *must* be fully aware of the limitations of our specific agendas” (Lee 1995, 72; original emphasis). Through noting that one cannot possibly address every issue of oppression, Lee illuminates how our personal agendas cannot get in the way of seeing the bigger picture of our connection. She underlines that this responsibility to pay attention not only to how we are marginalized but also to how we marginalize others is in our best interests because as “progressive activists [we] cannot afford to do the masters’ work for them by continuing to carry out oppressive assumptions and exclusions” (72).

While feminist theory has engaged with the connections between responsibility and self-interest, coalitional theory is largely quiet on this nexus. However, the connection is already driving coalitional praxis. In interviews with practitioners of feminist coalition in the United States, both Jean East (2000) and Elizabeth R. Cole and Zakiya T. Luna (2010) found that the activists with whom they spoke explicitly highlighted the role that self-interest *and* responsibility had in shaping their work. Speaking with welfare advocates, East found that responsibility for self and others was a key theme in their organizing effort. Similarly, in response to the question “what, other than perceptions of basic self-interest, motivates groups that define themselves as different to work together?” (72), Cole and Luna found that activists such as Andrea Smith (whose work focuses on Native Americans and violence in communities of color) identified mutual responsibility as a driving factor in their getting involved in coalitional work. As Smith highlighted, “everyone has a responsibility, I feel, to be engaged in collective action in some regards” (Cole and Luna 2010, 77).

Emphasizing the connection between responsibility and personal self-interest makes clear that it is not an act of charity to help others: We must help them struggle against their oppression out of a sense of personal connection and, as those working in feminist coalitional praxis have argued, because of how our privilege is supported by the oppression of others around the globe (Cole and Luna 2010). Prominent feminist theorists of color have long argued that the intersection of privilege means that feminist organizations must also address issues of race and class (and, more recently, sexuality) in order to truly represent the interests of *all* women. Notably, Collins forcefully made the point that “doing intellectual work of the sort envisioned within Black feminism requires a process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs” (Collins 2000, 15). However, by exploring this issue through the lens of responsibility and self-interest it is possible to reframe it from one of justice (Collins 2000) to one of self-interest. In this way, it becomes clear that it is not only hypocritical for feminists in locations of class-based, racial or sexual privilege to implicitly maintain their White, upper-class, or heterosexual advantage while dedicating important time and energy to erasing male privilege—it is also against their own self-interest.

Importantly, this connection helps to resolve the question asked of us by feminists from Judith Butler to Adrienne Rich: “Who is we?” (Butler 1992; Rich 2001). This question is often complicated by the reality that gender, race, class, and sexuality include necessarily heterogeneous groups of people with identities

that intersect across all of these forms of oppression. Explicitly acknowledging how responsibility and self-interest affect feminist coalitions sheds some needed light on a possible answer. For example, it undermines Naomi Wolf's narrow focus on Western women's interests, exposing how the interests of women who can be considered "Western" (whoever those women may be) do not stand alone, but instead rely on the connected subjugation of women and other oppressed people in non-Western regions, as well as non-Western women within the borders of the United States. Thus, because of our responsibility as well as our self-interests, "we" cannot be exclusively Western women, or White upper-class women, because the interests of all women are interconnected. And, if we (as members of feminist coalitions, which could include men who are also oppressed by racial, sexuality and dis/ability issues and committed to working against these oppressions in coalition with feminists and using feminist methodologies) ignore this form of connection, we risk working against our own interests by oppressing others.

Furthermore, the connection between responsibility and self-interest speaks directly to the issues that feminist coalitions must work towards. More specifically, it profoundly affects whether individual choice should be the ultimate goal of feminist coalitions, or whether group interest must also play a role. This is an important and deep-seated divide in feminist theory, which I do not propose to resolve herein; however, I agree with Guinier and Torres's assertion that we can no longer afford to overlook public values in the name of private decision making. This is not to say that choice is not important. Choice clearly plays an important role in responsibility. As Collins points out, "while we may not have created this situation, we are each responsible for making individual, personal choices concerning which elements of race, class and gender oppression we will ... work to change" (Collins 2004, 540). However, the privileging of choice, often associated with the priorities of third-wave feminism (Shugart, Waggoner and Hallstein 2001, 195), is deeply problematic as the ultimate or exclusive feminist end. For example, Christensen (1997) locates the source of the White feminist movement's inability to effectively deal with racism in its continued focus on racist attitudes of individuals, rather than on dealing with racism as a system of institutionalized inequalities. Furthermore, the "modal 'person' in feminist theory still appears to be a self-sufficient individual adult" (Flax 1987, 640). Norma Alarcón (1990) argues that this is already a position of domination as it does not reflect the experiences of women or people of color. Ultimately, the privileging of choice is problematic in coalitional work because it assumes that all are free to make whatever choices they want. This assumption, however, does not reflect the lived reality of gender, class, race, and sexuality, and ignores how "women and men throughout the social order experience different forms of privilege and subordination" (Zinn and Dill 1996, 327) and ultimately have their range of choices constrained by their positionality (Hirschmann 2010). Thus, while agency and choice are important in coalition, because of the heterogeneous nature of categories of oppression and overlapping self-interest, as well as our responsibility to engage with this difference as feminists, personal choice cannot represent the entirety of goals towards which feminist coalitions work, and the advancement of group rights must also be primary.

In order to connect this theorization of responsibility, and its relationship with self-interest and (to a more limited extent) choice, to the possibilities of effective praxis grounded in these concepts, it is instructive to turn to Koritha Mitchell's article "Love in Action: Noting Similarities between Lynching Then and Anti-LGBT Violence Now" (2013). Herein, she observes that those in positions of power within society and within movements (including movements that strive to achieve feminist goals) often do not recognize their responsibility to engage with issues that may not have an immediately deleterious impact on their life. Rather, she points out, the unfortunate reality is that "until issues 'hit home,' too many Americans avoid the greater challenge that justice requires: acknowledging one's own privilege" (Mitchell 2013, 707).



In the current theorization of coalition as grounded in “power-with” and responsibility, what Mitchell is describing is essentially the shirking of responsibility. Yet, can this shirking be avoided when working towards common justice-focused goals in feminist coalition? How does a theorization of coalition grounded in responsibility push those with power to recognize and act against injustice, even when these issues have not fully “hit home,” and when other theorizations, such as those centered on choice, have failed to achieve this objective?

While Mitchell’s focus is not directly on the implications of responsibility for feminist coalition, her work nevertheless promisingly starts to answer these questions by highlighting how responsibility for engaging in the work of a coalition can be made explicit to all involved without simultaneously conflating intragroup differences. This theory pushes back against shirking and productively highlights how responsibility could be incorporated into feminist activist practice by suggesting that

One way to tackle the mentalities that support current conditions is to change our language. Language is not simply a way of communicating what one thinks; it actually shapes what one is capable of thinking. I therefore propose using language that focuses less on the disadvantage of oppressed groups and more on the *unearned advantage* of privileged ones. (Mitchell 2013, 706; original emphasis)

This suggestion to focus not only on disadvantage but on unearned advantage makes a more universal conceptualization of responsibility explicit. Responsibility to engage with an issue is no longer something of which privileged individuals can opt out in relative comfort until the issue “hits home.” Rather, this linguistic reframing makes it abundantly clear with whom responsibility lies—it makes the issue “hit home.” In Mitchell’s argument, if the question is, “For whom do issues of injustice necessarily ‘hit home?’” (just those suffering their most deleterious effects, or all of those working in coalition?), the answer is “the latter”—and this is clear even from the way we speak about the issues and the inequalities we want to change.

Indeed, Mitchell’s prescription provides a useful starting point for a praxis that builds upon a foundation of both “power-with” and responsibility and does not reinforce old hierarchies, as Scott (1988) and Butler (1992) warn against. It accomplishes the latter by placing responsibility for engagement with those in positions of privilege instead of overburdening the unprivileged. Further, it encourages engagement rather than withdrawal by both those with privilege and those without by highlighting the interconnected nature of unearned advantages and by setting the responsibility to speak out against them explicitly at the feet of those for whom they might not otherwise “hit home” (Mitchell 2013, 706). In making this suggestion, that coalitional praxis start from a place of linguistic shift, Mitchell does not conflate intragroup differences, nor does she privilege some identities over others. But she does point out that she is truly calling for a revolutionary type of change by even noticing privilege

because recognizing privilege is what Americans are most discouraged from doing. Clearly, then, refusing to identify privilege helps keep our society the way it is. When we refuse to acknowledge long-standing, unearned advantage, we fortify the status quo. Therefore, any hope of disrupting the unjust status quo—any hope of making real change—will involve noticing privilege. (Mitchell 2013, 708)

However, in order to work in coalition without obfuscating that this involves negotiating the daily experience of multiple differences, such a revolution is worthwhile.

## **Conclusion**

In their work on feminist coalitions, theorists such as Collins and Christensen usefully problematized the “mythically homogeneous” categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Accurately reflecting how varying

self-interests have multifaceted and shifting effects on us all, these complexities have been challenging for coalition building and theorizing, as “often the multiplicity and contradictions of our identities [have been] disregarded by social movements that have failed to grasp the social totality and lived experiences of multiple oppressions” (Carastathis 2013, 961). This paper builds upon these important theories of feminist coalition by centering the concepts of power and responsibility to develop a theory that more powerfully accounts for how the lived complexities of daily experience complicate the mythically homogeneous categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality, ultimately impacting the formation of coalitions. While I agree with June Jordan’s assertion that “when these factors of race and class and gender absolutely collapse is whenever you try to use them as automatic concepts of connection” (1985, 46), these complexities do not mean that coalition is impossible. With a non-zero-sum understanding of power and by paying explicit attention to the role of responsibility in feminist action and theory, coalitions that make important room for the real differences between the lives of people who occupy many positions of self-interest can be built. Further, they can engage with these multiple identities without the need for complete organizational disaggregation around individual self-interests. My theory is not proposing “a full-blown theory of social movements” (Guinier and Torres 2002, 31), nor am I arguing that acknowledging the key roles of power and responsibility will resolve disagreements among and within social movements. Instead, like Guinier and Torres, what I *am* proposing is that by linking our fate to those of our allies through theorizing about power and responsibility, we can “struggle together for larger social justice ideals ... [such as] more democratic forms of relationships and of power itself” (Guinier and Torres 2002, 289–90), instead of focusing on defining hard and fast limits to which issues are feminist and which are not. Using Mitchell’s suggestion that we reconceptualize how we think and speak about advantage and disadvantage, we can also begin to determine how to put the current theorization of feminist coalition into action while discouraging avoidance of responsibility. With alternative conceptualizations of feminist activism, such as those centered around “choice,” choosing not to engage when an issue does not hit home can be considered a legitimate option. As choice feminists “believe that any mistakes that a feminist might make are less pernicious than the restraint of others on her decision-making” (Kirkpatrick 2010, 242), even in coalitional work, the choice not to engage might be considered acceptable. However, by highlighting unearned advantage, rather than focusing exclusively on disadvantage, and by founding feminist coalitional activism around responsibility rather than choice, issues “hit home” for those with relative advantage and disadvantage, and all are responsible for working toward change instead of being given an opening to choose to “opt out.” This theorization reflects what is at the heart of feminist coalitional work—working together to challenge unjust and hegemonic power structures. As Jordan forcefully asks, we need to more consciously assess “why should [others] give a shit about [my rights, freedoms and desires] unless I do something, for real, about [theirs]?” (1985, 41). Or, “as community organizer Mandy Carter puts it, ‘Are we about justice? Or, are we about just us?’” (Mitchell 2013, 690).

Ultimately, this theory, like those that came before it, is incomplete. It does not capture the infinite complexities of how people interact on a daily basis with systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability, interactions that are multiple and ever-changing. For example, this paper has not explored the unique ways in which dis/abilities could contribute to feminist coalitional efforts, or how feminist arguments and theories could make an in-depth contribution to the emerging field of dis/ability studies. As Garland-Thomson has pointed out, this is an unfortunately common problem, as “feminist theories all too often do not recognize disability in their litanies of identities that inflect the category of woman” (2002, 2). I also cannot provide hard and fast answers to the questions raised by Wolf’s comments, namely, who are “we” and what do we stand for? However, I do address these questions by making room for the complexities

of race, class, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability in feminist theory, and arguing that it is not necessary that “we” be a group narrowly defined by a single set of interests. With a non-zero-sum conceptualization of power and a true responsibility to engage with difference, “we” can work together on varying interests. Conflicts will inevitably still occur; however, they do not need to be fatal because gains for some will not necessarily mean losses for others.

As they are primarily theoretical, my suggestions are a tool to imagine what could be; they do not indicate such coalitions will come to fruition nor that coalition building will be easy. This is clearly underlined by Bernice Johnson Reagon, who points out that one of the reasons why “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 folk we don’t care too much about” (1983, 368). On this, current feminist theories largely agree, and I do as well. As Lee highlights, this is “one of the primary hallmarks of young feminists’ activism today: We realize that coming together and working together are by no means natural or easy” (1995, 73). Coalition work may not be easy, but in order to struggle against oppression, an intentional engagement with difference and a responsibility to not perpetuate the oppression of others are essential: “If it takes head-on collisions, let’s do it. This polite timidity is killing us” (Moraga 1983, 58–59)—as is our failure to engage with difference.

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## Notes

1. A similar challenge to false homogeneity among women can be found in Patricia Hill Collins’s “matrix of domination.”

2. JeeYeun Lee similarly asks: “Whenever someone says the word ‘women’ to me, my mind goes blank. What ‘women’? What is this ‘women’ thing you are talking about?... Sisterhood may be global, but who is in that sisterhood?” (1995, 73). In the case of the social movement Wolf advocates for, “we” cannot include non-Western women, who are cut out by her description of the women she speaks of as “Western.” But who is Western? Can all women living in North America and Europe be characterized as Western women? Probably not, if it is laws, policy changes, and a single grass-roots movement that could grant them full equality—it is more likely that by “Western” Wolf means “American women.”

3. In particular, Judith Butler highlights this as a longstanding criticism, as even “[i]n the early 1980s, the feminist ‘we’ rightly came under attack by women of color who claimed that the ‘we’ was invariably white, and that the ‘we’ that was meant to solidify the movement was the very source of painful factionalization” (Butler 1992, 15). Indeed, with these types of exclusions, both in definition and effect, rather than reworking the very matrix of power being fought against, mobilization is occurring on the basis of existing configurations of discourse and power (Butler 1992). In their fight for equality, Black Lives Matters activists have also demonstrated that contemporary feminist projects often do not include women of color and that this failure is deeply problematic (Moore and Casper 2014).

4. Despite the important victories won by Black Lives Matter, and the critical projects its activists continue to pursue, in this respect the movement has struggled with living up to Garza’s ambitions. Garza herself has noted that “hetero-patriarchy and anti-Black racism within our movement is real and felt” (Garza 2014, 4). This assessment has been echoed by others, including Kaavya Asoka, who observed that while Black Lives Matter has paid attention to intersectionality, when it comes to fighting back against police brutality it has primarily remained focused on the experiences of Black men (Chatelain and Asoka 2015). Meanwhile, Marquis Bey has critiqued the Black Lives Matter movement as “largely androcentric” and noted the irony of racialized violence experienced by Black women and girls being “elided from media coverage and thus relegated to a space of nonimportance in the social imagination, despite the fact that the very Black Lives Matter movement was started by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi—Black queer women” (Bey 2015, 11). Bey goes further in directly connecting his criticism of Black Lives Matter’s heterosexist androcentrism with others’ critiques of White feminists who ignore race. In particular, he highlights the lack of attention Black Lives

Matter has paid to the killing of Black trans people: “In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, to critique it even further, pulling a maneuver similar to Black feminists’ critique of white feminists’ white solipsism—essentially a critique of a critique—it seems that all Black lives do not truly matter, considering the veritable erasure of the murders of Black trans people” (Bey 2015, 12).

5. Committing to the contextual nature of knowledge permits us “to argue that it is *easier* and *more likely* for the oppressed to have critical insights into the conditions of their own oppression than it is for those who live outside these structures” (Narayan 1989, 264; original emphasis).

6. Herein, “self-interest” is intended to denote issues that are of interest to a person, but not in an exclusionary or exclusive way where “self-interested” refers to interests pursued without regard for others or in exclusion of others. Within this conceptualization, self-interests can (and often do) align with the interests of others. It is important to note that often these interests are connected to aspects of our individual identities, and that an individual’s self-interest is often not determined solely by what they may choose to be interested in. Rather, and much like choice, which can also be conditioned and constrained (Hirschmann 2010), self-interest too can be conditioned and influenced by the matrix of domination and existing power structures in which we live.

7. For example, Sojourner Truth was a Black woman born into slavery in late 1700s, who later became a free Black woman. Her theories stood at the intersection of abolitionism and women’s rights, especially as expressed in her germinal speech “Ain’t I a Woman” (1851). As Freedman notes, Truth’s message serves as an early and important reminder to feminists that middle-class White women’s experiences do not encompass the full range of women’s subordination (Freedman 2008, 4). In 1920, Truth’s words were echoed by Charlotte Hawkins Brown in her speech to a YWCA conference in Memphis, in which she forced the White women in attendance to look outside of their own experience when thinking about the nature and character of women’s oppression in the United States, to put themselves in Black women’s place in order to reconceptualize womanhood as a more complicated entity, and to build a politics of coalition across the racial divide (Freedman 2008, 1–2).

8. The Combahee River Collective’s statement is dated April 1977.

9. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill note that multiracial feminism “is an attempt to go beyond a mere recognition of diversity and difference among women to examine structures of domination, specifically the importance of race in understanding the social construction of gender” (1996, 321).

10. A notable example can be found in Audre Lorde’s assertion that “homophobia and heterosexism mean you [Black women] allow yourselves to be robbed of the sisterhood and strength of Black Lesbian women because you are afraid of being called a Lesbian yourself. Yet we share so many concerns as Black women, so much work to be done” (Lorde 1988, 24).

11. Because of the breadth of influential theories on the topic and in order to balance conciseness with allowing for a nuanced discussion of complicated and important theories, in this paper’s discussion of the works of feminists of color as they relate to coalitional theory I chose to focus on several key works while not fully delving into others. Because this paper focuses on the works of feminists of color that directly deal with coalitional theory and efforts at coalitional building, such as Guinier and Torres’s book, discussions of other germinal works by feminist theorists of color are necessarily brief. However, the influences of other feminist theorists of color—especially Anzaldúa and hooks—upon coalitional theory and practice should not be underestimated.

12. While many other theorists have also put forth important accounts of feminist coalition—including Donna Haraway, Jennifer Purvis, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, whose works are addressed briefly herein—their focus has not been on how lived identities such as race, class, gender, and sexuality complicate coalition building and theorizing. Christensen and Collins center their discussions on building feminist coalitions *across* issues and groups that touch on

gender, race, class, and sexuality, and thus detailed discussion of their work is essential to formulate a theorization of feminist coalitions that acknowledges these issues.

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