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On the Politics of Coalition

Elena Ruíz and Kristie Dotson

Abstract

In the wake of continued structural asymmetries between women of color and white feminisms, this essay revisits intersectional tensions in Catharine MacKinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* while exploring productive spaces of coalition. To explore such spaces, we reframe *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* in terms of its *epistemological project* and highlight possible synchronicities with liberational features in women-of-color feminisms. This is done, in part, through an analysis of the philosophical role "method" plays in MacKinnon's argument, and by reframing her critique of juridical neutrality and objectivity as epistemic harms. In the second section, we sketch out a provisional coalitional theory of liberation that builds on MacKinnon's feminist epistemological insights and aligns them with decolonizing projects in women-of-color feminisms, suggesting new directions and conceptual revisions that are *on the way* to coalition.

Keywords: women-of-color feminisms, intersectionality, Catherine MacKinnon, coalitional theory

Historically, the discourse of allyship has been marked by asymmetrical conditions of exchange that ask women of color to work within the political projects of white feminism, even to have our difference recognized as such. Rarely do white feminists subsume the great feminist emancipatory frameworks of universal suffrage and freedom from heteropatriarchal oppressions to sexist racism and intersectional oppressions (based, for instance, on imperial, colonial, settler colonial, and neoliberal violence). Despite the rise of standpoint epistemologies, one standpoint continues to dominate political projects, academic discourses, and journal refereeing, such that women-of-color authors are asked to translate basic issues in women-of-color feminisms into terms the 'uninitiated' can always already understand. Every conversation between us thus becomes an act of translation through a settler language that grammatically forecloses this acknowledgement. And yet, when white feminism fails politically, as it did in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the spotlight falls on women of color's alleged failure to serve as its corrective, to sufficiently mobilize, turn out in even greater numbers, and stem the

tide of white women's enfranchised vote for authoritarianism. *Structural asymmetries* in coalitional work thus need to be brought to the foreground again, such that their systematicity can gain formal articulation in the basic conditions for negotiation and exchange between us.

In 2015, we were invited to comment on the twenty-fifth anniversary publication of Catharine MacKinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association. As women-of-color feminist philosophers working at the intersections of Black and Latina feminisms and social epistemology, we accepted the invitation with a critical awareness of the pressing need to continue generating constructive criticisms of asymmetrical allyship. We were troubled by how MacKinnon's work was being celebrated in ways that could be used to exclude women-of-color feminisms, and the seeming absence of critical awareness of this outside women-of-color feminisms¹. At the same time, we had witnessed her engaged commitment to intersectional feminisms at the level of scholarship and activism, her alacrity and willingness to respond to criticism emanating from intersectional concerns. And we were also long-time supporters of MacKinnon's legal advocacy projects to end gender-based violence domestically and abroad. It is not nothing, after all, to spend a lifetime advocating for the humane treatment of women and girls, just as it is not nothing to insist that the concept of humanism be decolonized, so that a Western feminist interpretive lens is not a conceptual precondition for intervention and mitigation of gender-based violence in all its forms across the Global South. Given the asymmetrical conditions of coalition, one way to proceed—one among many—was to reframe the historical reception of *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* in terms of its epistemological project, one that highlighted a synchronicity with liberational features in women-of-color feminisms.

And yet, while it is the case that MacKinnon and women-of-color feminisms share in many of the same concerns—the invisibility of gender-based harms in society, the erasure of women's lives in social institutions, and the need to generate correctives to the interpretive frameworks that license those erasures—the interstitial sites of those convergences are often fraught with logics and assumptions that still privilege the political projects and concerns of Anglo-American and liberal feminisms. One place this is evident is MacKinnon's feminist critique of the state, which retains a conceptual commitment to the founding categories of Western political theory even as it works to pluralize and transform them. The centralization of women's subordination in the exploitative social processes regulating women's sexual capacities and reproduction is predicated on the existence of a patriarchal

¹ See "Open Letters to Catharine MacKinnon" (1991).

state formation governing these processes, and thus in need of feminist reform. Under this dialectical framework, feminist jurisprudence may not be robust enough to capture harms enacted by colonial violence against racialized women. Indigenous feminisms, in particular, may face dauntingly asymmetrical challenges in critiquing the systematicity of gender violence and oppression using political categories imposed by coloniality, and which do not undermine the very legality of a state formation through which patriarchal power flows. Coalitional thinking between our feminisms is therefore precarious without a clear identification of the tacit prioritization of categories that may preclude the identification of gendered jeopardizations produced by the complicity between systems of colonial domination and liberal institutions, and which would form the basis for a decolonial feminist theory of the state. We hold that it is indeed possible to enact a productive coalition of difference *with this precarity in mind*.

This essay is divided into two sections. The first situates the major contributions of *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* beyond an applied critique of liberal jurisprudence by highlighting MacKinnon's broader epistemological project. This is done through an analysis of the philosophical role 'method' plays in her argument, and by reframing her critique of juridical neutrality and objectivity as epistemic harms. In the second section, we sketch out a provisional coalitional theory of liberation that builds on MacKinnon's feminist epistemological insights and aligns them with decolonizing projects in women-of-color feminisms, suggesting new directions and conceptual revisions that are *on the way* to coalition.

I. Reframing *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*

In the twenty-five years since the publication of *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (a work that took eighteen years to write), a great deal has changed. The feminist task of giving voice to exclusionary social practices has undergone significant developments beyond the book's landmark critique of liberal jurisprudence as normatively male. MacKinnon's claim that "feminism has no theory of the state" (as a specific theory of the *state form* of power) has been eclipsed by feminist political theorists across liberal, postcolonial, postmodern, and anarchic traditions (1989, 158).² The explanatory frameworks, the lexical and theoretical resources for understanding and talking about gender and sexuality, have also evolved to minimize reductive and biologicistic conceptions of selfhood, which can cover over the phenomenological complexity and diversity of women's speaking positions. Women-of-color feminists, whose critiques were already robust at the time, have developed even more inclusive analyses of women's lived experience as

² Cf. Brown 1995, Haney 2000, Allen 1990, Shanley and Narayan 1997.

structured by intersectional oppressions that operate along multiple axes of power beyond the sex/gender paradigm—like race, ethnicity, migratory status, and linguistic difference. In short, the centrality of sexual difference (as sexuality) underpinning the book’s main arguments—evinced through claims such as: “it is *sexuality* that determines gender, not the other way around” (111)—no longer holds as a methodological fulcrum for organizing feminist political projects. In fact, many of the criticisms the book originally garnered claimed it never did, and those criticisms can be seen as mirroring the growing debates within North American feminisms questioning propensities to subordinate all forms of domination and subordination that harm women to sex.

Drucilla Cornell, for instance, famously questioned MacKinnon’s reduction of sexual difference to the vulnerabilities enacted by reading the social construction of women’s identities as a purely victimized, sexualized femininity, and for promoting a hierarchy of oppressions in the book’s structural analysis of sex (1991). Legal theorists have similarly focused on MacKinnon’s treatment of liberalism by alleging a misadaptation of its underlying claims (due to a conceptual privileging of identity as grounded in gender) that result in a skewed picture of women’s lack of agency. Arguably, this is a misreading of MacKinnon’s project if we take into account the caveat she provides at the beginning of the book: “It must be said that this book does not try to explain everything. . . . To look for the place of gender in everything is not to reduce everything to gender” (xi). MacKinnon’s worry, and it is a good one, is that her readers will find the project of radical feminism inattentive to the ways race, class, and other historical categories of oppression work to produce systematic harms and social exclusions against women. “It is not possible to discuss sex without taking account of Black women’s experience of gender,” she writes. “To the considerable degree to which this experience is *inseparable from the experience of racism*, many features of sex cannot be discussed without racial particularity” (xi–xii, emphasis added).

Yet the question remains as to the veracity of MacKinnon’s worry in her own enactment of feminist theory; looking for the place of gender in everything comes, in part, from seeing gender as a centripetal force in the way the logic of domination plays out, or of understanding the central role gender plays as an organizing concept in one’s life. We only look for what we already theorize as missing, as ‘trackable’ by virtue of the prior cultural backdrop of interpretive resources that guide our theoretical projects and claims. This backdrop is not a timeless, monolithic perspective but rather an epistemic looking glass through which our concerns show up as such. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* reflects the looking glass of radical feminisms but within an Anglo-normative tradition of white feminisms, such that it is ‘sexism’ and not sexist racism, or settler colonial sexist racism that becomes the organizing concept in the analysis of oppression (itself a multistable phenomenon).

The book's structure follows the decades-long timespan of theoretical development in MacKinnon's published essays that begin, for instance, with classical themes in Western political theory (including an exegesis of John Stuart Mill) and a methodological section on feminist consciousness raising.

Consider now the criticisms generated in open letters written by women of color in response to a paper MacKinnon gave at the *Feminism in the 90s: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice* Conference, entitled "From Practice to Theory, or What Is a White Woman Anyway":

We disagree with your notion of an empirical reality which would pervade all experiences 'as a woman' in Third World and in white cultures. Your speech presents examples of gender oppression as if they are not mediated by race, thereby manifesting the limitations of your concept of women's experience. . . . We disagree with your definition of women's experience, which gives primacy to exploitation based on female reproductive and sexual capacity. You incorporate a limited concept of womanhood in your analysis, and thus misconstrue the criticisms women of color have made of feminist theory. . . . While you use women of color's experiences, you do not integrate the theories created by women of color as you seek to create theory. ("Open Letters" 1991, 179, 183–184)

Forming a coalition based on differences here means reading MacKinnon against MacKinnon, rehabilitating her argument by reframing it through a conceptual prism that is compatible with intersectional concerns rather than universalist tendencies in white feminism. Since one of the most fruitful points of coalition rests in MacKinnon's feminist epistemological project, we begin by recontextualizing the work's main arguments in terms of the *epistemic imperialism* sustaining "how social power shapes the way we know" (ix) rather than through its well-known historical reception within North American feminisms. While the latter has produced sustained criticisms of MacKinnon's view of gender—which situates feminine sexual difference as emerging from male power—as inadequate for building a feminist theory of the state that can accommodate differences, what is generally *underemphasized* is the connection between her theory of gender and the epistemological views that support it. This is not from lack of clarity or textual insistence, as MacKinnon tells us from the beginning of the book that she wants to "reconstruct feminism on the epistemic level," since she sees "epistemology and politics [as having] emerged as two mutually enforcing sides of the same unequal coin" (xi).

To do justice to MacKinnon's critique of liberal jurisprudence within a wider epistemological sphere, an analysis of the role *method* plays in her project is

warranted. In chapter six, “Method and Politics,” MacKinnon uses the notion of method as a conceptual tool to talk about causal relationships in social epistemology. Through it, she describes our prior social entanglement with cultural biases, normative valuations and pre-judgments that shape the contours of our attitudes, beliefs, and judgments in a patriarchal society, but which operate on stealth mode and become manifest in the prevailing account of social reality as normatively male. These biases are historical and form the basis of men’s privileged cultural positions and women’s unconscious conditioned reflections of oppression. Since feminism is a competing account of reality in patriarchal culture (and exponentially so at the time the book was written), MacKinnon needed a broader conceptual tool to pull the rug out from under the swarm of anti-feminist critiques, which often simply passed for the status quo. She also needed a tool to begin disarming male biases in liberal jurisprudence, which claims to be an objective arbiter in culture. Masculinist perspectives and concepts are not a natural state of affairs, she writes; whether in Marxism, feminism, or liberal jurisprudence, concepts “derive their meaning and primacy from the way each theory approaches, grasps, interprets, and inhabits its world. There is a relationship between how and what a theory sees” (107).

While the commonplace use of method in the social sciences is that of a value-free procedural technique that safeguards correct judgment between inner mental states and an objective, mind-independent reality, MacKinnon employs a view of method closer to its original Greek formulation as μέθοδος, a *particular way of journeying*, bodying forth or undertaking a path that can, but need not be reduced to a manner of inquiring within *knowledge* systems. To be sure, the way we partake along a path shapes how we encounter it and limits the range of meanings attributable to it, but it need not presuppose epistemic neutrality. She writes:

Method organizes the apprehension of truth. It determines what counts as evidence and defines what is taken as verification. Operatively, it determines what a theory takes to be real. ‘Method is not neutral, it establishes the criteria by which one judges the validity of conclusions, and consequently carries with it not simply technical skills but deeper philosophical commitments and implications.’³ (106)

Following the successes of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century and the rise of specialist research culture that accompanied this revolution, the explanatory power of the natural sciences began to dominate our understanding

³ MacKinnon is quoting Mary Lyndon Shanley and Victoria Schuck, “In Search of Political Woman,” *Social Science Quarterly* 55 (December 1974): 632–644.

of method as reducible to principles of disembodied objectivity and neutrality. Because knowledge in the context of scientific paradigms operates as falsifiable truth-claims, representational epistemologies and their accompanying view of language (as an impartial, representational system bound by rules of subject-predicate grammar) went from underpinning knowledge claims about the natural world to validating knowledge claims about our everyday experience of the world. Because this process is not made explicit as the result of socio-historical forces, it took on the character of a natural law-like developmental 'fact.' Thus, those lived perspectives that fell outside of this newly normative objective framework were seen as less reliable, subjective phenomena, to the detriment of women's experience of patriarchal culture:

Scientific epistemology defines itself in the stance of 'objectivity,' whose polar opposite is subjectivity. Socially, men are considered objective, women subjective. Objectivity as a stance toward the world erects two tests to which its method must conform: distance and aperspectivity. To perceive reality accurately, one must be distant from what one is looking at and view it from no place and at no time in particular, hence from all places and times at once. This stance defines the relevant world as that which can be objectively known, as that which can be known in this way. An epistemology decisively controls not only the form of knowing but also its content by defining how to proceed, the process of knowing, and by confining what is worth knowing to that which can be known in this way. (97)

It is this sense of objectivity that MacKinnon worries about, since the grounds on which sexual difference arises are mired in values and assumptions that produce negative asymmetries (which make male privilege self-confirming) as opposed to recognizing embodied specificities. Because what gets carried over into legal codes and values is the presumed intrinsic worth of categories of objectivity and neutrality, they may also fail to interpret different needs and lives, and, most importantly, to *hear* different perspectives. So representational epistemologies would not be problematic in her analysis were it not for the "methodological hegemony over the means of knowing" they play in liberal democracies, which feature "the objective standard—that standpoint which, because it dominates in the world, does not appear to function as a standpoint at all" (237). Juridical neutrality is one important example:

Neutrality, including juridical decision making that is dispassionate, impersonal, disinterested, and precedential, is considered desirable and descriptive. . . . Formally, the state is male in that objectivity is its norm.

Objectivity is liberal legalism's conception of itself. It legitimates itself by reflecting its view of society, a society it helps make so by seeing it, and calling that view, and that relation, rationality. Since rationality is measured by point-of-viewlessness, what counts as reason is that which corresponds to the way things are. (162)

For MacKinnon, there exists a discontinuity between the 'official' legitimating stories of fairness, justice, and equality underscoring public life in Western liberal democracies and the host of tacitly operative norms, values, and male-centered cultural assumptions that work against the internal coherency of those stories (by supporting gendered asymmetries in civic life) *at the same time that they propagate their dominance as objective public goods*. Distance and aperspectivity are not epistemic harms in themselves on this view; they are harms because they are conduits for gendered power asymmetries in culture. On her account, processes of *naturalization* shifted to procedures of methodological *neutralization*, so that over time "politics neutralized and naturalized becomes morality. Discrimination in society becomes nondiscrimination in Law." As law becomes legitimate, social dominance becomes invisible (237). This constitutes a form of epistemic violence against women because one's everyday experience collides with the public lexicons and resources available to describe it outside male norms; if she claims experiences of racism, sexism, and discrimination, she is likely to be met with objective counterfactuals of gendered equality, personified in statistics about the exceedingly high rates of women enrolled in law schools or colleges, perhaps even a Rosie the Riveter slogan that reminds her how far she's objectively come from 'true' inequality (238). Under MacKinnonian feminism, objectivity, aperspectivity, and juridical neutrality are thus *epistemic harms*.

MacKinnon's epistemic project is closely linked with her political project, allowing her theory of the state to come into focus. For MacKinnon, the state adopts the standpoint of power that establishes the relation between law and society. Jurisprudence in the liberal state thereby reflects the values of a historically patriarchal society, both in what it says and how it does it (i.e., under the guise of gender neutrality and legal objectivity). This process-driven account of the state differs significantly from traditional political interpretations of the state as form, as neutral arbiter of rights or sovereign that can be overthrown, or to whom appeals for intervention are made. The disembodied reason of liberal theories of law, she argues, cover-over the ways the state is a value-laden mechanism for systematizing gendered social dominance. She notes the state is not the actual *source* of male power but a powerful vehicle for its institutionalization through the very laws it sanctions. As a consequence, "the law becomes legitimate and social dominance becomes invisible" (237), leading to the pervasive character of gendered oppression.

At best, liberal jurisprudence extends rights to women through feudal-like ‘protections’ that reinforce its own power and rely on a picture of negative freedom that leaves women’s positive interests out. Thus, even when women seek rights previously denied to them, the state is always triangulating with male power, not advancing the positive laws and positive freedoms of women’s interests that may be independent of that power *on account of the structural inability to accommodate those epistemic standpoints*. Oppression is structural, all the way down. Under MacKinnon’s account, the law is the dominant arm of the state because it produces a systematic mechanism for retooling facts of social power into enforceable scripts the liberal state can arbitrate, keeping the production, arbitration, and mitigation of male power an internal affair (thereby reproducing the very basis of it in culture). Thus, “to the degree it succeeds ontologically, male dominance does not look epistemological: control over being produces control over consciousness, fusing material conditions with consciousness in a way that is inextricable short of social change” (238).

MacKinnon is caught in the difficult position of describing a way out of domination without fundamental social change at both the epistemic and institutional levels of culture. Undeterred, she notes that “the first task of a movement for social change is to face one’s situation and name it” (241). While she does not provide a competing theory of the state (outside of the state as a *function of power*), she is not immobilized by it, noting sexual harassment plaintiff Michelle Vinson’s statement that “if I fight, some day some woman will win” (237). MacKinnon’s theory of the state thus culminates in ways, through feminist theory, that “shifts in the episteme” can begin to take shape. “The first step is to claim women’s concrete reality. . . . The next step is to recognize that male forms of power over women are affirmatively embodied as individual rights in the law,” thereby expressing the need for theoretically informed legal interventions (244). Moving in this direction, MacKinnon’s *feminist jurisprudence* works to “comprehend how law works as a form of state power in a social context in which power is gendered. It would answer the questions: what is state power? Where, socially, does it come from?” (159), but in order to effect change, not solely reflect on it. Her work can thus be read as a contribution in *liberatory* feminist epistemology.

Just because MacKinnon’s epistemological project is underemphasized, does not mean that it was completely ignored. Sally Haslanger (2013) and Elizabeth Hackett (1996), among others, have drawn out MacKinnon’s feminist epistemological project as a constitutive feature of her political views and analysis of gender-based harms in liberal jurisprudence. Their conclusion of its salience, however, differs from ours. For instance, whereas we find MacKinnon’s critique of the “methodological hegemony over the means of knowing” (107) in liberal democratic societies paramount to the successes of her political project, Hackett

thinks MacKinnon's overall feminist project is hindered "by complicating her discussion of gender with discussion of irrelevant epistemological issues" (1). Haslanger, who endorses the basic aims of MacKinnon's project, thinks it falls flat, noting that without a normative theory of justice to adjudicate between good and bad judgment in feminist consciousness raising, "we will be left with a feminist project that encourages liberation *from* existing oppressive structures, but cannot distinguish our replacing them with new oppressive structures or from replacing them with structures that are truly unjust" (10). We will not know when "different" is "better."

Latin American liberation theorists have extensively addressed this stance as predicated on a theory of oppression that stems from predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon metropolitan cultural centers of knowledge production, since it is insufficiently attentive to the ways existing oppressive structures necessitate theoretical interventions that acknowledge the centrality of oppositional consciousness against domination and subordination (which is not the same as a de facto uncritical deployment of oppositional consciousness): "Feeling that the world is wrong does not necessarily mean that we have a picture of a utopia to put in its place. . . . We need no promise of a happy ending to justify our rejection of a world we feel to be wrong. That is our starting point: rejection of a world that we feel to be wrong, negation of a world we feel to be negative. This is what we must cling to," especially in the wake of unprecedented violence against women on the world stage (Holloway 2002, 2). MacKinnon, like us, does not need a utopia to strive for something better than the world at hand. MacKinnon's theory of liberation develops differently because her theory of oppression requires theorizing from below—from the perspective of those subordinated and dominated by, for example, patriarchal norms and the power inequalities they beget. We three hold this stance in common. On this account, we may start our analyses from the top down by looking at the ways patriarchal norms and values have worked their way into codified legal norms and statutes, operating and replicating male power on stealth mode. But *the perspective* remains with those harmed by the exclusionary logics they deploy, often in the name of inclusion (i.e., through egalitarian discourses).

Reframing her critique of liberal jurisprudence in terms of a larger epistemological project also helps us get a better grip on MacKinnon's choice of feminist consciousness raising as the methodological fulcrum of her liberatory program in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. According to MacKinnon, "the key to feminist theory consists in its way of knowing" (84), ways of seeing that can call out or name how "the state is male jurisprudentially, meaning that it adopts the standpoint of male power on the relation between law and society" (163). Rather than a primary perspective for describing the full complexity of women's phenomenological experiences, consciousness raising serves to counter to the

universalizing tendencies of liberal rationality, since “feminist method as practiced in consciousness raising, taken as a theory of knowing about social being, pursues another epistemology” (98). Given the feminist limitations of orthodox Marxism outlined in the first part of the book, MacKinnon needs the veil-lifting mechanism of ideology critique, but in such a way that does not reify representational epistemologies she critiques in the second part. Under this framework, “mind and world, as a matter of social reality, are taken as interpenetrated. Knowledge is neither a copy nor a miscopy of reality, neither representative nor misrepresentative as the scientific model would have it, but a response to living in it” (98). This is a powerful point for coalition building, as this insight is shared in much of Black feminist thought and Latina feminist thought. Coalitions, however, are dangerous places, and often require the symbiosis of distancing and bridge-crossing to be mutually respectful of differences.

II. The Politics of Coalition

In this section, we take a coalitional approach that positively highlights conceptual symmetries between the MacKinnon feminist project *in Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* and decolonizing projects in women-of-color feminisms by emphasizing the importance of the epistemic dimension of subordination, while respecting important asymmetries that threaten collaborative engagement. Insofar as MacKinnon’s feminist epistemology is able to see the ways legacies of domination, subordination, and oppression work their way into our value judgments through tacit cultural processes (that call for a feminist liberatory epistemology as part of any *political* project), MacKinnon feminisms are conceptually closer to those of women of color than many Anglophone strains. It is important to note that this is indeed a strong symmetry between our work and MacKinnon’s project in her book. However, this symmetry exposes instabilities at the site of this juncture. The instability of our coalition can follow a failure to account for the globalizing tendency in universalizing categories of gender, the inadequacy of European frameworks of statehood and the law to describe the oppressive effects of colonialism on non-European women, and the reality that oppression is a multistable phenomenon.⁴ To be clear, this is not an “I gotcha” commentary. Rather, we are here to contribute towards the difficult work of coalition-building—to building a coalition across time; a coalition across differences that make a difference all for the important project of producing a feminist theory of the state that is attentive to the colonial project of cultural subjugation through state-building.

⁴ Cf. Collins 2000, Narayan 1997, Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981, Mohanty 2003, Davis 1983.

In “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” Bernice Johnson Reagon (2000) gives a moving account of coalition work as a distinctly unstable and potentially dangerous phenomenon. It places individuals and communities in the precarious position of forming coalitions not only out of shared interest for positive projects of social justice, but often out of sheer life-saving needs. In coalitions, “people come together for a common interest but, in many cases, do not ultimately share a great number of assumptions that render the collaborations unstable” (343), though not necessarily unproductive. What is key is an awareness that coalition—in this case theoretical coalescing with shared feminist liberatory goals—is not a homogenous hermeneutic space that provides an equal sense of home for all involved. “It is very important not to confuse them—home and coalition,” Reagon cautions, particularly since “the women’s movement has perpetuated a myth that there is some common experience that comes just cause you’re women” (343). The most salient feature of a lived experience of harm or subordination can be *race*, for example, or even race coalescing in temporally indistinct ways with the experience of gendered subordination. But even that doesn’t mean that collaborating on the basis of race is not without its challenges. This is something women of color know well. We call ourselves “women of color”—enough said.

What is wonderful about MacKinnon’s feminism is her unrelenting advocacy of women’s situated subordination across cultural institutions and structures—her perceptually gifted ability to see sexual subordination in everything. This is not the same thing as reducing everything to sex in the same way modern-day Marxists can see the inner workings of capitalism coursing through every social practice—from scientific reasoning, to sexuality, to the race-based discrimination in Ferguson, MO, filling the coffers of municipal city authorities by way of for-profit policing. MacKinnon would perhaps highlight—among other things—how civil rights violations systematically targeted women when non-defendant children were barred from accompanying their defendant mothers into courtrooms, often resulting in child neglect charges when they were left outside the courtroom. So both account for all the ways a system or structure can exclude, partly by inclusion—by assimilating possible ways of being-in-the-world to a few limited possibilities, to be interpreted through discreet sets of (for MacKinnon, male-centered) epistemic norms. It is in this spirit that she contends, “What female epistemology can confront male ontology? What point of view can question the code of civil society? The answer is simple, concrete, specific, and real: women’s social inequality with men on the basis of sex, hence the point of view of women’s subordination to men” (1989, 241).

But the answer is not so simple if we’re building coalitions, because some people will have to work harder to be heard and have their needs met in ways that might reify inequality. This is especially the case if the coalitions are intercultural

and do not share in the same background assumptions for interpreting selfhood, identity, or gender—or where the resources of expression for *giving voice to the experience of subordination* are themselves the product of European colonialism and require prior decolonization. On this account, dismantling asymmetries of power and privilege that resulted from these impositions might require one to do so using the language of one's oppressions (as the resources of expression by which one comes to terms with these distinctions have themselves been colonized). Thus, if feminist consciousness raising is "the technique [that] explores the social world each woman inhabits through her speaking of it, through comparison with other women's experiences," and which serves "to unpack the concrete moment-to-moment meaning of being a woman in a society that men dominate" (86), the nature of the medium through which the collaboration takes place needs to be reformulated to accommodate legacies of imperial domination. Iris Marion Young famously questioned the neutrality of communicative practices to do justice to the embodied specificity of women's lived experiences; MacKinnon, too, excels at pointing out this dimension in the language of *juridical* neutrality, but less so in cross-cultural dialogue, where the neutrality of language as a post-conquest discursive practice (including the Western understanding of metaphor and nonliteral language) is taken as a methodological given. This is a place of instability. But it does not dissolve the possibility of coalition. It enhances our understanding of the differences that make a difference when proposing schedules for liberation.

Here is where this coalition becomes a place where no one is at home. You see, MacKinnon's commitment to a perspective following from those harmed by exclusionary logic (a definite place of coalition), in our estimation, also demonstrates that oppression and its many manifestations are exceedingly complicated (a definite site of instability). What critiques of *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* demonstrate is the reality that oppression is multistable, or, as Frantz Fanon might say, has a "polydimensional character." How a multistable phenomenon, like oppression, is interpreted *in space* will depend on a variety of factors, not the least of which will be one's 'perspectival perception' and goals, including, but not limited to, cultural inheritances, cognitive commitments, and embodied location. The way oppression is perceived will also depend on its social effect and one's relations to it (Dotson 2016, 51). So no matter how inclusive MacKinnon wants to be, and we believe she does have this desire, it is simply impossible to be so completely. There is only so much that can be seen from there or here or over there.

This means that the very thing that makes this particular coalition possible, a robust appreciation of the epistemic nature of the oppressive "state of things," is the very thing that makes this coalition unstable. But (and this is the point of our commentary) it is the very thing that makes coalition necessary. Oppression is multistable and provokes ways of knowing it that are neither reducible to each other

nor very far apart. Languages articulate lives in distinctly non-neutral ways that can distort our realities so that we no longer recognize ourselves in the telling of our own stories. Addressing either (or both) of these realities requires coalition. But coalitions, especially theoretical coalitions like this one, are not home spaces. They are unstable. Dangerous. But they are also necessary.

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