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Bernice Johnson Reagon

Coalition Politics: Turning the Century¹

I've never been this high before. I'm talking about the altitude. There is a lesson in bringing people together where they can't get enough oxygen, then having them try to figure out what they're going to do when they can't think properly. I'm serious about that. There probably are some people here who can breathe, because you were born in high altitudes and you have big lung cavities. But when you bring people in who have not had the environmental conditioning, you got one group of people who are in a strain – and the group of people who are feeling fine are trying to figure out why you're staggering around, and that's what this workshop is about this morning.

I wish there had been another way to graphically make me feel it because I belong to the group of people who are having a very difficult time being here. I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing.

I'm Bernice Reagon. I was born in Georgia, and I'd like to talk about the fact that in about twenty years we'll turn up

another century. I believe that we are positioned to have the opportunity to have something to do with what makes it into the next century. And the principles of coalition are directly related to that. You don't go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive.

A hundred years ago in this country we were just beginning to heat up for the century we're in. And the name of the game in terms of the dominant energy was technology. We have lived through a period where there have been things like railroads and telephones, and radios, TV's and airplanes, and cars, and transistors, and computers. And what this has done to the concept of human society and human life is, to a large extent, what we in the latter part of this century have been trying to grapple with. With the coming of all that technology, there was finally the possibility of making sure no human being in the world would be unreachable. You couldn't find a place where you could hide if somebody who had access to that technology wanted to get to you. Before the dawning of that age you had all these little cute villages and the wonderful homogenous societies where everybody looked the same, did things the same, and believed the same things, and if they didn't, you could just kill them and nobody would even ask you about it.

¹ Based upon a presentation at the West Coast Women's Music Festival 1981, Yosemite National Forest, California. – Anmerkung der Herausgeberinnen: Der Text erschien zuerst in: Barbara Smith (Hrsg.) (1983): *Home Girls. A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York: Kitchen Table – Women of Color Press.

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. Even when we have our »women-only« festivals, there is no such thing. The fault is not necessarily with the organizers of the gathering. To a large extent it's because we have just finished with that kind of isolating. There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up.

Now every once in a while there is a need for people to try to clean out corners and bar the doors and check everybody who comes in the door, and check what they carry in and say, »Humph, inside this place the only thing we are going to deal with is X or Y or Z.« And so only the X's or Y's or Z's get to come in. That place can then become a nurturing place or a very destructive place. Most of the time when people do that, they do it because of the heat of trying to live in this society where being an X or Y or Z is very difficult, to say the least. The people running the society call the shots as if they're still living in one of those little villages, where they kill the ones they don't like or put them in the forest to die. (There are some societies where babies are born and if they are not wanted for some reason they are put over in a corner. They do that here too, you know, put them in garbage cans.) When somebody else is running a society like that, and you are the one who would be put out to die, it gets too hard to stay out in that society all the time. And that's when you find a place, and you try to bar the door and check all the people who come in. You come together to see what you can do about shouldering up all of your energies so that you and your kind can survive.

There is no chance that you can survive by staying inside the barred room. (Applause) That will not be tolerated.

The door of the room will just be painted red and then when those who call the shots get ready to clean house, they have easy access to you.

But that space while it lasts should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take the time to try to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society. In fact, in that little barred room where you check everybody at the door, you act out community. You pretend that your room is a world. It's almost like a play, and in some cases you actually grow food, you learn to have clean water, and all of that stuff, you just try to do it all. It's like, »If I was really running it, this is the way it would be.« Of course the problem with the experiment is that there ain't nobody in there but folk like you, which by implication means you wouldn't know what to do if you were running it with all of the other people who are out there in the world. Now that's nationalism. I mean it's nurturing, but it is also nationalism. At a certain stage nationalism is crucial to a people if you are going to ever impact as a group in your own interest. Nationalism at another point becomes reactionary because it is totally inadequate for surviving in the world with many peoples. (Applause)

Sometimes you get comfortable in your little barred room, and you decide you in fact are going to live there and carry out all of your stuff in there. And you gonna take care of everything that needs to be taken care of in the barred room. If you're white and in the barred room and if everybody's white, one of the first things you try to take care of is making sure that people don't think that the barred room is a racist barred room. So you begin to talk about racism and the first thing you do is say, »Well, maybe we

better open the door and let some Black folks in the barred room.« Then you think, »Well, how we gonna figure out whether they're X's or not?« Because there's nothing in the room but X's. (Laughter) You go down the checklist. You been working a while to sort out who you are, right? So you go down the checklist and say, »If we can find Black folk like that we'll let them in the room.« You don't really want Black folks, you are just looking for yourself with a little color to it.

And there are those of us Black folk who are like that. So if you're lucky you can open the door and get one or two. Right? And everything's wonderful. But no matter what, there will be one or two of us who have not bothered to be like you and you know it. We come knocking on your door and say, »Well, you let them in, you let me in too.« And we will break your door down trying to get in. (Laughter) As far as we can see we are also X's. Cause you didn't say, »THIS BARRED ROOM IS FOR WHITE X'S ONLY.« You just said it was for X's. So everybody who thinks they're an X comes running to get into the room. And because you trying to take care of everything in this room, and you know you're not racist, you get pressed to let us all in.

The first thing that happens is that the room don't feel like the room anymore. (Laughter) And it ain't home no more. It is not a womb no more. And you can't feel comfortable no more. And what happens at that point has to do with trying to do too much in it. You don't do no coalition building in a womb. It's just like trying to get a baby used to taking a drink when they're in your womb. It just don't work too well. Inside the womb you generally are very soft and unshelled. You have no covering. And you have no ability to handle what happens if you start to let folks in who are not like you.

Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition. You don't get a lot of food in a coalition. You don't get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time. You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more.

It is very important not to confuse them – home and coalition. Now when it comes to women – the organized women's movement – this recent thrust – we all have had the opportunity to have some kind of relationship with it. The women's movement has perpetuated a myth that there is some common experience that comes just cause you're women. And they're throwing all these festivals and this music and these concerts happen. If you're the same kind of women like the folk in that little barred room, it works. But as soon as some other folk check the definition of »women« that's in the dictionary (which you didn't write, right?) they decide that they can come because they are women, but when they do, they don't see or hear nothing that is like them. Then they charge, »This ain't no women's thing!« (Applause) Then if you try to address that and bring them in, they start to play music that ain't even women's music! (Laughter and hoots) And you try to figure out what happened to your wonderful barred room. It comes from taking a word like »women« and using it as a code.

There is an in-house definition so that when you say »women only« most of the time that means you had better be able – if you come to this place – to handle lesbianism and a lot of folks running around with no clothes on. And I'm being too harsh this morning as I talk to you, but I don't want you to miss what I'm trying to say. Now if you come and you can't handle that, there's another term that's called »woman-identified.« They say you might be a woman but you're not woman-identified, and we only want women who are »woman-identified.« That's a good way to leave a lot of women out of your room.

So here you are and you grew up and you speak English and you know about this word »woman« and you know you one, and you walk into this »woman-only« space and you ain't there. (Laughter) Because »woman« in that space does not mean »woman« from your world. It's a code word and it traps, and the people that use the word are not prepared to deal with the fact that if you put it out, everybody that thinks they're a woman may one day want to seek refuge. And it ain't no refuge place! And it's not safe! It should be a coalition! It may have been that in its first year the Michigan National »Women-Only« festival was a refuge place. By the fourth year it was a place of coalition, and it's not safe anymore. (Applause) It ain't safe for nobody who comes. When you walk in there you in trouble – and everybody who comes is trying to get to their home there.

At this festival [Yosemite] they said: whatever you drink, bring it with you – tea, honey, you know, whatever it is – and we will provide hot water. Now I understand that you got here and there was no hot water. Can't get nothing! That is the nature of coalition. (Laughter) You have to give it all. It is not to feed you; you have to feed it. And it's a monster. It never gets enough. It always wants more. So you

better be sure you got your home someplace for you to go to so that you will not be come a martyr to the coalition. Coalition *can* kill people; however, it is not by nature fatal. You do not have to die because you are committed to coalition. I'm not so old, and I don't know nothing else. But you do have to know how to pull back, and you do have to have an old-age perspective. You have to be beyond the womb stage.

None of this matters at all very much if you die tomorrow – that won't even be cute. It only matters if you make a commitment to be around for another fifty more years. There are some grey haired women I see running around occasionally, and we have to talk to those folks about how come they didn't commit suicide forty years ago. Don't take everything they say because some of the stuff they gave up to stay around ain't worth considering. But be sure you get on your agenda some old people and try to figure out what it will be like if you are a raging radical fifty years from today.

Think about yourself that way. What would you be like if you had white hair and had not given up your principles? It might be wise as you deal with coalition efforts to think about the possibilities of going for fifty years. It calls for some care. I'm not gonna be suicidal, if I can help it. Sometimes you don't even know you just took a step that could take your head off cause you can't know everything when you start to coalesce with these people who sorta look like you in just one aspect but really they belong to another group. That is really the nature of women. It does not matter at all that biologically we have being women in common. We have been organized to have our primary cultural signals come from some other factors than that we are women. We are not from our base acculturated to be women

people, capable of crossing our first people boundaries Black, White, Indian, etc.

Now if we are the same women from the same people in this barred room, we never notice it. That stuff stays wherever it is. It does not show up until somebody walks into the room who happens to be a woman but really is also somebody else. And then out comes who we really are. And at that point you are not a woman. You are Black or you are Chicana or you are Disabled or you are Racist or you are White. The fact that you are a woman is not important at all and it is not the governing factor to your existence at that moment. I am now talking about bigotry and everybody's got it. I am talking about turning the century with some principles intact. Today wherever women gather together it is not necessarily nurturing. It is coalition building. And if you feel the strain, you may be doing some good work. (Applause) So don't come to no women's festival looking for comfort unless you brought it in your little tent. (Laughter) And then if you bring it in your tent don't be inviting everybody in because everybody ain't your company, and then you won't be able to stand the festival. Am I confusing you? Yes, I am. If coalition is so bad, and so terrible, and so uncomfortable why is it necessary? That's what you're asking. Because the barred rooms will not be allowed to exist. They will all be wiped out. That is the plan that we now have in front of us.

Now these little rooms were created by some of the most powerful movements we have seen in this country. I'm going to start with the Civil Rights movement because of course I think that that was the first one in the era we're in. Black folks started it, Black folks did it, so everything you've done politically rests on the efforts of my people – that's my arrogance! Yes, and it's the truth; it's my truth. You can take it or leave it, but that's the way I see

it. So once we did what we did, then you've got women, you've got Chicanos, you've got the Native Americans, and you've got homosexuals, and you got all of these people who also got sick of somebody being on their neck. And maybe if they come together, they can do something about it. And I claim all of you as coming from something that made me who I am. You can't tell me that you ain't in the Civil Rights movement. You are in the Civil Rights movement that we created that just rolled up to your door. But it could not stay the same, because if it was gonna stay the same it wouldn't have done you no good. Some of you would not have caught yourself dead near no Black folks walking around talking about freeing themselves from racism and lynching. So by the time our movement got to you it had to sound like something you knew about. Like if I find out you're gay, you gonna lose your Job.

There were people who came South to work in the movement who were not Black. Most of them were white when they came. Before it was over, that category broke up – you know, some of them were Jewish, not simply white, and some others even changed their names. Say if it was Mary when they came South, by the time they were finished it was Maria, right? It's called finding yourself. At some point, you cannot be fighting oppression and be oppressed yourself and not feel it. Within the Black movement there was also all of the evils of the society, so that anything that was happening to you in New York or the West Coast probably also happened to you in another way, within the movement. And as you became aware of that you tried to talk to these movement people about how you felt. And they say: »Well let's take that up next week. Because the most important thing now is that Black people are being oppressed and we must work with that.«

Watch these mono-issue people. They ain't gonna do you no good. I don't care who they are. And there are people who prioritize the cutting line of the struggle. And they say the cutting line is this issue, and more than anything we must move on this issue and that's automatically saying that whatever's bothering you will be put down if you bring it up. You have to watch these folks. Watch these groups that can only deal with one thing at a time. On the other hand, learn about space within coalition. You can't have everybody sitting up there talking about everything that concerns you at the same time or you won't get no place.

There is not going to be the space to continue as we are or as we were. There was a time when folks saw the major movement force coming out of the Black community. Then, the hottest thing became the Native Americans and the next, students' rights and the next, the anti-war movement or whatever. The movement force just rolled around hitting various issues. Now, there were a few people who kept up with many of those issues. *They are very rare.* Anytime you find a person showing up at all of those struggles, and they have some sense of sanity by your definition, not theirs (cause almost everybody thinks they're sane), one, study with them, and two, protect them. They're gonna be in trouble shortly because they are the most visible ones. They hold the key to turning the century with our principles and ideals intact. They can teach you how to cross cultures and not kill yourself. And you need to begin to make a checklist – it's not long, you can probably count on your two hands. When it comes to political organizing, and when it comes to your basic survival, there are a few people who took the sweep from the 60's to the 80's and they didn't miss a step. They could stand it all. If they're painters, there's a picture about everything as best

they can do it. And if they're singers, there's a song showing that they were awake through all the struggles. Now the songs and the pictures and poems ain't all right, cause you ain't dealing with people who are free from bigotry. I remember a song I wrote about Vietnam. It wasn't about Vietnam, it was about the whole world. And it started, of course, with Black people – I don't start nothing except with Black people:

*Black people taken from an ancient land
Suffered trials by cruel white hands
In the circle there's gotta be room for them
Move on over. Make a little room for them
We're in trouble cause there's no room for them...*

By that time I'd been listening to the Vietnam war, right? And we called them the Viet Cong. I started to pull for the Viet Cong to win. I didn't know at that time that they were all the same people, but just before I wrote the song, somebody hit on me that Viet Cong are Vietnamese. So I say, »Oh,« cause I wanna be correct whenever I write a song, so my next verse was:

*The Vietnamese with slanted eyes
Fighting for their land, not standing by
They can't make it cause there's no room...*

Okay, did you see what I did? Reduced these people to the slant of their eyes. If I ran into a Vietnamese who didn't have slanted eyes, I'd be in trouble. They may not have even had slanted eyes, but you know when people talked about them, they had slanted eyes. The next verse was:

*Little brown boy with straight black hair
Fighting in India land, there's no food there...*

Reduced all of the people in India to straight hair! Do you understand? Brown skin. Then I ran into some of them who were so black and some of them got kinky

hair. Do you understand what I'm talking about? So all of these people who hit every issue did not get it right, but if they took a stand, at least you know where their shit is.

It must become necessary for all of us to feel that this is our world. And that we are here to stay and that anything that is here is ours to take and to use in our image. And watch that »our« – make it as big as you can – it ain't got nothing to do with that barred room. The »our« must include everybody you have to include in order for you to survive. You must be sure you understand that you ain't gonna be able to have an »our« that don't include Bernice Johnson Reagon, cause I don't plan to go nowhere! That's why we have to have coalitions. Cause I ain't gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there's danger in that, but there's also the possibility that we can both live – if you can stand it.

I want to talk a little about turning the century and the principles. Some of us will be dead. We won't be here. And many of us take ourselves too seriously. We think that what we think is really the cutting line. Most people who are up on the stage take themselves too seriously – it's true. You think that what you've got to say is special and that somebody needs to hear it. That is arrogance. That is egoism, and the only checking line is when you have somebody to pull your coattails. Most of us think that the space we live in is the most important space there is, and that the condition that we find ourselves in is the condition that must be changed or else. That is only partially the case. If you analyze the situation properly, you will know that there might be a few things you can do in your personal, individual interest so that you can experience and enjoy the change. But most of the things that you do, if you do them right, are for people who live long after you are

long forgotten. That will only happen if you give it away. Whatever it is that you know, give it away, and don't give it away only on the horizontal. Don't give it away like that, because they're gonna die when you die, give or take a few days. Give it away *that* way (up and down). And what I'm talking about is being very concerned with the world you live in, the condition you find yourself in, and be able to do the kind of analysis that says that what you believe in is worthwhile for human beings in general, and in the future, and do everything you can to throw yourself into the next century. And make people contend with your baggage, whatever it is. The only way you can take yourself seriously is if you can throw yourself into the next period beyond your little meager human-body-mouth-talking all the time.

I am concerned that we are very short-sighted, and we think that the issue we have at this moment has to be addressed at this moment or we will die. It is not true. It is only a minor skirmish. It must be waged guerrilla-warfare style. You shoot it out, get behind the tree so you don't get killed, because they ain't gonna give you what you asked for. You must be ready to go out again tomorrow and while you're behind the tree you must be training the people who will be carrying the message forward into the next period, when they do kill you from behind the tree.

You must believe that believing in human beings in balance with the environment and the universe is a good thing. You must believe – and I'm being biased and bigoted here again – that having a society that doesn't solve everything with guns is a good thing. You must believe that when they sell bread to Russia and then go to El Salvador and say that the biggest problem in El Salvador is Russia, that they're pulling your leg. And you must not let them pull your leg. There are

some people who have a problem with people killing people, and people robbing people, and people raping people, and people exploiting people, and people not giving people jobs because of the way they look and because of the way they're born. Some of you are in here trying to change all of that right now. The thing that must survive you is not just the record of your practice, but the principles that are the basis of your practice. If in the future, somebody is gonna use that song I sang, they're gonna have to strip it or at least shift it. I'm glad the principle is there for others to build on.

I had never left Georgia until after the Civil Rights movement, so I didn't know nothing about all of these people in the world. I knew two people. White people and Black people. When I went to New York, the white people were not the same white people. I was being very sensible at this time. They were too dark. I tried to make them become Black. They didn't like that at all. I would try to ask them: Who are you and where are you from? They say: Well, what do you mean? And I say: Well, you don't look white. And they say: Well, we're white. And I say: But you don't look white-white. If you all had let me run it, we would all be colored. Because I grew up in Albany, Georgia, and I knew, what white people looked like, and they looked like none of them dark-skinned white folks I saw up in New York who got mad at me when I tried to bring them over. Respect means when somebody joins you and they need to be white, you give it to them. You turn it over and you say: Okay you got it – you are white. I could save your life, but okay you got it – you are white. That's called allowing people to name themselves. And dealing with them from that perspective. Shaking your head in your little barred room about it, or if somebody's crazy enough to let you sit on the stage for a

little while will not help the situation. It won't stretch your perimeter.

I didn't have anything to do with being alive at this time, but if I had been running it I couldn't have picked a better time. I have lived through the brilliant heat of the Civil Rights struggle. I have lived through a war that was stopped. I mean they talked about these women who tell these men that if you go to war we won't sleep with you, right? That is not how Vietnam got stopped. Not that they have told us. I've lived at a time when people stopped a country from beating another country. Of course they don't tell you *you* did that and so you are still trying to figure out where you went wrong! I hear it on TV all the time. Jane Pauley was talking to this man who wrote this book about what was wrong with the 60's – he had been in Washington when they closed down Washington that May – (they closed the city down!) and she leaned over to him, and she said, »Where did we go wrong?« And I say, You fool. You wouldn't be on the Today show to even ask the question, if we had gone wrong! We have not gone wrong! The period I have lived through saw a president of a country come down and he was not assassinated. That is the way we like to do things. And if you want to know the other side of it, take a look at Iran, or take a look at the way they took care of all of those leaders years back. When you don't like who's in power, you kill'em. That is not what happened with Nixon. And we did it. We did that. Any of you who have jobs that your mama didn't have, we did that. Nobody else did that!! It is a very good time to be alive – to be in this place, complete with its racism, and its classism, and its garbage trucks running through.

People who think that the only »women-only« there are are lesbian women give me a big problem, cause I

would have to leave too many of my folk out cause they ain't gonna take that for one second. *And if they came in they would be homophobic.* And you'll have to challenge them about it. Can you handle it? This ain't no nurturing place no more. Cause we're taking over. Anything that says »Women,« we're gonna come. You can forget it. Now if you clean it up and name what it is you want, then you might be able to have it – but we might storm *that* if we don't think it should exist. Cause like it is, it is our world, and we are here to stay. And we are not on the defensive. We are not on the defensive.

There is an offensive movement that started in this country in the 60's that is continuing. The reason we are stumbling is that we are at the point where in order to take the next step we've got to do it with some folk we don't care too much about. And we got to vomit over that for a little while. We must just keep going. The media says that the Civil Rights movement was a dream. The media says that nothing happened in the 70's, and most of us get up on stage and we talk as if that in fact is the case, and it's a lie. The only way it will be true is if you believe them and do not take the next step. Everybody who is in this space at this time belongs here. And it's a good thing if

you came. I don't care what you went through or what somebody did to you. Go for yourself. *You* give this weekend everything you can. Because no matter how much of a coalition space this is, it ain't nothing like the coalescing you've got to do tomorrow, and Tuesday and Wednesday, when you really get out there, back into the world: that is ours too.

These festival weekends are places of crisis and you can do wonderful things in a crisis. I remember when I got to Michigan one year and they were talking about how these women during this thunderstorm held down the stage, right? And it was lightning, and they thought »We're Big Amazons,« right? That's crisis and it ain't that important what you do in a crisis. You go beyond yourself anyway, and you talk about it for years. In fact, that's all you pay attention to: when that great day happen. You go wishing everyday was like that. Everyday ain't like that, and what really counts is not what you do this weekend, but take what this weekend has meant – try to digest it. And first thing, Monday, Tuesday morning at work, before twenty-four hours go around, apply it. And then do it every day you get up and find yourself alive. Thank you.