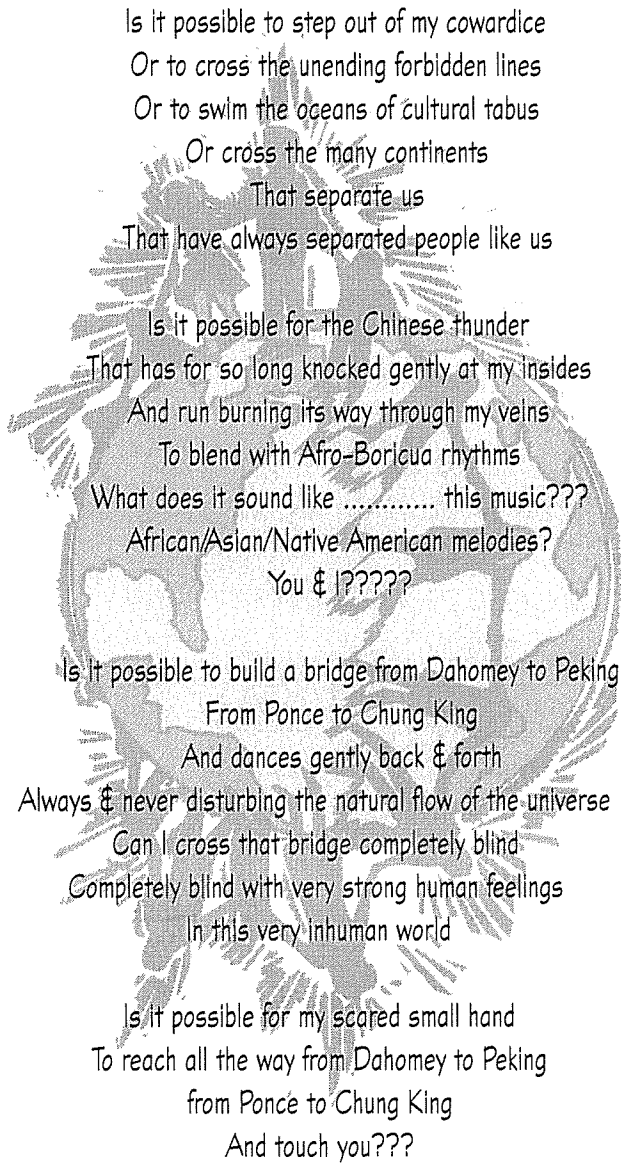


Summary :

I begin with a discussion of globalisation, of New Social Movements and a critique of "identity politics". Taking for granted that actors in social movements want to create alliances, I identify domination/subordination as a possible common bond among actors. Then, I discuss the obstacles to the building of alliances: anger and guilt, denial of responsibility, inability to really listen and hear, rejection of difference. I end by proposing that to build alliances, we engage in dialogue, that is collective and individual self-reflection, within beloved communities.

# Building alliances in social movements



Is it possible to step out of my cowardice  
 Or to cross the unending forbidden lines  
 Or to swim the oceans of cultural tabus  
 Or cross the many continents  
 That separate us  
 That have always separated people like us

Is it possible for the Chinese thunder  
 That has for so long knocked gently at my insides  
 And run burning its way through my veins  
 To blend with Afro-Boricua rhythms  
 What does it sound like ..... this music???  
 African/Asian/Native American melodies?  
 You & I?????

Is it possible to build a bridge from Dahomey to Peking  
 From Ponce to Chung King  
 And dances gently back & forth  
 Always & never disturbing the natural flow of the universe  
 Can I cross that bridge completely blind  
 Completely blind with very strong human feelings  
 In this very inhuman world

Is it possible for my scared small hand  
 To reach all the way from Dahomey to Peking  
 from Ponce to Chung King  
 And touch you???

--Avotcja, 1987

**Inside:**

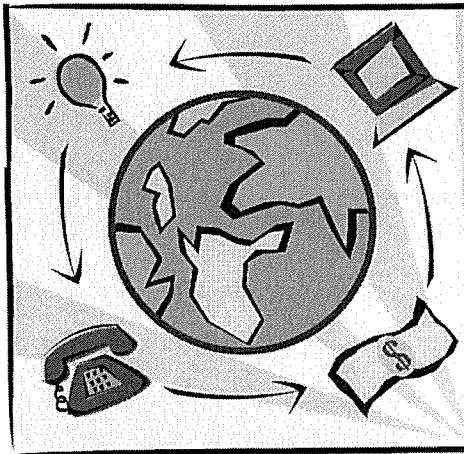
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The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterised by rapid-fire transformations of the global economy on the one hand, and increasing alienation, fragmentation and misery of the people of the world on the other.

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterised by rapid-fire transformations of the global economy on the one hand, and increasing alienation, fragmentation and misery of the people of the world on the other. The capitalist system, regulated “à la néo-libérale”, has resulted in a war between the nation states and the transnational corporations (TNCs). The TNCs are winning the battle (as exemplified by the signing of larger and larger free-trade agreements), and are forcing governments around the globe to strip their welfare states to the bare bone and to loosen labour and environmental standards. To top it all off, the boom of information technology has transformed time and space as we knew it, and white supremacist patriarchal capitalism’s ability to intervene globally within short periods of time has made it very difficult to organise resistance, to transform our society, to make history.

Although history is made by people, as Marx pointed out, history in turn “makes people”. Paulo Freire (1970) shows that when the majority are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects, they become dominated and alienated. The white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that is our Western society is based on a politics of domination, “one in which the belief in a notion of superior and inferior and its concomitant ide-

ology – that the superior should rule over the inferior” is primary (hooks, 1990b, p. 185). The values most of us espouse, competition, individualism, domination, separation, hierarchy, stem from the ideology of domination/subordination, and are constantly being shoved down our throats via the advertising industry, the mass media, and the educational institutions. Anne Bishop refers to these systems that keep peo-



ple in unjust and unequal positions, as various expressions of “power-over”: “political power, economic power, physical force and ideological power” (1994, p. 36). This is not to say that we are passive automatons with no control over our own thoughts or destiny. We must recognise Foucault’s insightful argument that “where there is power, there is resistance”. Human beings, Foucault argues, are intransigent, they are constantly resisting complete absorption into the dominant ethos. Nevertheless, the sheer power of the dominant systems to surround us with the messages that competi-

tion and individualism are “human nature” and that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is here to stay, leave us feeling overwhelmed, useless, and hopeless.

The dominant ethos of domination/subordination is manifest in dynamic exploitative relations as well. Exploitation of Blacks by Whites, of women by men, of poor people by rich people, of gays and lesbians by heterosexuals, is manifested materially in all spheres of our lives, in our families, in our welfare system, in our justice system. These relations are manifested every time a Black man goes to jail, every time a woman gets beaten by her partner, every time a gay man is killed for his sexuality, every time a politician claims that mothers on welfare spend all their money on beer, every time a lesbian couple’s request for adoption is refused, every time a new building is constructed without ramps for people with physical disabilities...

And, even our social movements have been sites of domination and subordination. Social movements of the Fordist era, characterised by broad-based work-place organising, are well documented to have been racist, sexist, and homophobic. New Social Movements of the Post-Fordist era stemmed in part

from a reaction to the unresponsiveness of trade unions to the concerns of women and people of colour. Whereas the old social movements reproduced the dominant patterns of domination within their very structures, the new social movements attempted to create a space for "similar" people, or people with similar "identities" to come together, exchange, and develop their own action plans.

In creating separate groups based on rights or identities, New Social Movements have institutionalised "safer" spaces for dialogue among people who share similar oppressions. There is no doubt that feminist consciousness raising groups, and the development of collective feminist organisations, led to the an increased empowerment of women. Similarly, the welfare rights movement of the 1970s, in its attempts to put participatory democracy into practice, gave poor people a voice (Kruzynski & Shragge, 1999). These movements were also successful in gaining reforms that made people's lives better in the short term. The civil rights movement led to increased pride in blackness, as reflected in slogans of the time: "black is beautiful", and "black power". Organisations of the new social movements experimented with new ways of organising, and in doing so, provided opportunities for the oppressed to speak and be heard.

New social movements, however, have not been immune to the reproduction of patterns of domination/subordination. The women's movement has been criticised widely by Black, Chicana, Latina, Aboriginal and other feminists as reproducing the white supremacist, middle class patterns within its organisations (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1990; Wilson, 1996). Similarly, the civil rights movement has been criticised by many to have been sexist (e.g., hooks, 1994b; Lorde, 1984c), and the welfare rights movement as sexist and racist (e.g., Stout, 1996). The tendency of groups to reproduce within their structures the dominant patterns of domination led people to separate and organise based on even more specific identities: lesbian Latinas, Black lesbians, Black welfare rights, Aboriginal women.

**A**s social movements become increasingly fragmented, critiques of this form of organising are mounting. Audre Lorde, as does bell hooks (1995b), highlights the tendency within our respective groups to fight other groups for a larger piece of the "freedom" pie, instead of focusing our combined energies on the source of the problem, to our detriment and to the benefit of the system: **"the tactic of encouraging horizontal hostility to becloud more pressing issues of oppression is by no**

**means new [...] energy is being wasted on fighting each other over the pitifully few crumbs allowed us rather than being used, in a joining of forces [...] it is the structure at the top which desires changelessness and which profits from these apparently endless kitchen wars"** (Lorde, 1984b, p. 48).

hooks (1995b) makes the link with society's Eurocentric vision of multiculturalism, where white middle-class ideals are presented as the norm, and where people are encouraged to live with an identify within their own self-contained group. She argues that the institutionalisation of multiculturalism in this form, without a questioning of, and struggle against white supremacist patriarchal capitalism, can only lead to:

**"a breeding ground for narrow nationalism, fundamentalism, identity politics, and cultural, racial and ethnic separatism. Each group will then feel that it must protect its own interest by keeping outsiders at bay, for the group will always appear vulnerable, its power and identity sustained by exclusivity"** (p. 201-202).

Beyond the infighting is the issue of multiple oppressions. "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde, 1984h, p.138). As groups become increasingly segregated, people

**New social movements experimented with new ways of organising, and in doing so, provided opportunities for the oppressed to speak and be heard.**

White supremacist power is always weakened when people of colour bond across differences of culture, ethnicity, and race. It is always strengthened when we act as though there is no continuity and overlap in the patterns of exploitation and oppression that affect all our lives.  
— bell hooks

are finding it more and more difficult to identify with any one group. Moreover, this fragmentation forces people to choose one identity as theirs, thereby restricting people and forcing them to put themselves into categories. The following excerpts share the experiences of two women who live multiple oppressions:

“Being a mestiza queer person, *una de las otras* (‘of the others’) is having a living in a lot of worlds, some of which overlap. One is immersed in all the worlds at the same time while also traversing from one to the other. The mestiza queer is mobile, constantly on the move, a traveller, *callejera*, a *cortacalles*. Moving at the blink of an eye, from one space, one world to another, each world with its own peculiar and distinct inhabitants, not comfortable in anyone of them, none of them ‘home’ yet not of them ‘not home’ either” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 217-218).

“As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of

energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definitions. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living” (Lorde, 1984f, p. 120-21).

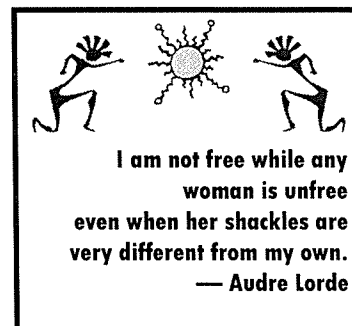
Finally, segregation into small groups based on identity and rights without meaningful interaction with other groups, ignores the fact that different forms of oppression are inter-related, connected. Audre Lorde (1984h) calls out to us to unite:

“Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust. If we are to keep the enormity of the forces aligned against us from establishing a fake hierarchy of oppression, we must school ourselves to recognise that any attack against Blacks, any attack against women, is an attack against all of us who recognise that our interests are not being served by the systems we support. Each one of us is a link in the connection between anti-poor legislation, gay shoot-

ings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and resurgent violence against Black people [...] Can any one of us here still afford to believe that efforts to reclaim the future can be private or individual? Can any one here still afford to believe that the pursuit of liberation can be the sole and particular province of any one particular race, or sex, or age, or religion, or sexuality, or class?” (p. 141).

hooks (1990b) agrees, claiming that because all forms of group oppression share an ideological foundation, that of domination/subordination, it is impossible to eradicate one without eradicating the others.

Gloria Anzaldúa, recognising our differences and our divisions, calls out to



us to unite in our struggle:

“we’re all in this together, *juntas*, that the ground of our being is a common ground, *la Tierra*, and that at all times we must stand together despite, or because, of the huge splits that lie between our legs,

the faults among feminists are like the fractures of the earth. Earthquake country, these feminisms. Like a fracture in the Earth's crust splitting rock, like a splitting rock itself, the quakes shift different categories of women past each other so that we cease to match, and are forever disaligned – coloured from white, Jewish from coloured, lesbian from straight. If we indeed do not have one common ground but only shifting plots, how can we work and live and love together? Then too, let us not forget *la mierda* between us, a mountain of *caca* that keeps us from 'seeing' each other, being with each other" (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 217).

We must take heed of the growing critique of the identity politics model of organising. We must find new ways of building unity while respecting diversity. Our ability to unite is all the more urgent given the white supremacist patriarchal capitalism's ability to organise and coalesce effectively and quickly. We need to pay close attention to the fact that nation states that spent decades, even centuries, fighting each other, have, since the second world war began working together (in coalitions like the OECD or the G7-8). It hasn't been easy for them, but they have persisted in their attempts to coalesce, they have lived with the contradictions, all in the

name of international capitalism. They have even decided to expand one of their most powerful coalitions, the G7, to include their long-standing enemy, Russia! The G7-8 understands that to fight a battle it is better to be united than divided. The goal of uniting the world in the name of global white supremacist patriarchal capitalism, for the benefit of the few, on the backs of the many, is fast becoming a reality. We must step-up our resistance to white supremacist patriarchal capitalism. We must unite. To succeed, we need to fight the white supremacist patriarchal capitalism's coalitions with alliances of our own.

In an effort to develop a practice of alliance building, we must first ask ourselves what unites us. bell hooks has written about this issue widely, and has come to the belief that what unites us is our paradoxical experiences as both oppressor and oppressed:

**"To understand domination, we must understand that our capacity as women and men to be either dominated or dominating is a point of connection, of commonality [...] I understand that in many places in the world oppressed and oppressor share the same colour. I understand that right here in this room, oppressed and oppressor share the same gender. Right now**

**as I speak, a man who is himself victimised, wounded, hurt by racism and class exploitation is actively dominating a woman in his life – that even as I speak, women who are ourselves exploited, victimised, are dominating children. It is necessary for us to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalised)" (hooks, 1990b, p. 187).**

Moreover, I believe, as bell hooks adamantly states in her numerous writings, that: "all of us across our different experiences [are] expressing this longing, this deep and profound yearning, to just have [...] domination end. And what I feel unites you and me is: we can locate in one another a similar yearning to be in a more *just* world" (hooks, 1994a, p. 217). Linda Stout, long-standing welfare rights activist and founder of the Piedmont Peace Project, agrees: "I believe the proper and achievable goal of such a unity group would be to build a new world, a world that honours people over money, a world with true equality and justice" (1996, p. 188). Anne Bishop, a community development worker on the East coast of Canada, claims that our common struggle is to overturn the dominant ideology of "power-over" into one of "power-with" (1994).

**I believe the proper and achievable goal of such a unity group would be to build a new world, a world that honours people over money, a world with true equality and justice.**

**— Linda Stout**

If we can agree that we all share the experiences of domination and subordination, and at the same time share a profound yearning to have domination end, then we have established, at least for now, a common bond.

A second step in developing a practice of alliance building is to reflect on prior experience in order to learn from our mistakes and our successes. The obstacles encountered within the social movements of the past and present are revealing.

**A**nger, isolation and defiance on the part of the oppressed and guilt, dullness and confusion on the part of the oppressor (Pheterson, 1990) often interfere with alliance building among different people. Anger of the oppressed can lead to feelings that the oppressor is the enemy, cannot understand, cannot help thereby leading to a break from the alliance. Making reference to the failure of the civil rights movement to put an end to racism, hooks (1993) argues that black people lost hope that real social change would ever occur, and with this pessimism came "a great welling up of bitterness and hatred toward white people (conservative and liberal alike) who showed themselves unwilling to divest of white supremacy and fully resist racism. That bitterness has lingered in the collective psyche of black people and

poisons our relationships with one another" (p. 165). These complex feelings are the direct result of the internalisation of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism:

**"Manifestations of internalised domination for many white women include their inability to understand and accept all but a narrow range of white experience. On the other hand, internalised oppression often causes marginalised women to feel angry, isolated and defiant. Compounding these differences, some women experience internalised oppression and domination simultaneously, since their identities include both oppressor and oppressed in different situations"** (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990, p. 3).

While the oppressed experience anger, the oppressor experiences feelings of guilt that often lead to paralysis (Pheterson, 1990). The following excerpts tell the story:

**"as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow women of Colour to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex"** (Audre Lorde, 1984f, p. 118).

**"The 'guilty' [...] fail to see**

**the collective aspect of the oppression and take on too much personal responsibility. They are crushed, unable to move. They feel powerless, and sometimes react angrily against the person or situation they think disempowered them by making them aware of the problem [...] Privilege is often invisible to the 'guilty' group, too, or if they see it, it adds to their immobilising guilt"** (insights from an anti-racist workshop, Anne Bishop, 1994, p. 94).

**"Personal guilt is usually immobilising, particularly if one sits with it for long [...] Sometimes feminists have become so personally hurt by criticism or feel so left out when a group is creating its own space that they withdraw from political engagement"** (Charlotte Bunch, 1990, p. 53-54).

Guilt is never productive. In fact, it often leads to a recreation of patterns of domination as oppressors seek forgiveness or reassurance from members of the oppressed group. This puts the members of the oppressed group in a uncomfortable contradictory situation, one in which they feel bad for having "hurt their ally's feelings" and therefore provide the sought after reassurance, but at the same time resent the fact that they were forced into that role. bell hooks (1995d) coins the term "mammification" to describe this process of traditional

**Anger, isolation and defiance on the part of the oppressed and guilt, dullness and confusion on the part of the oppressor often interfere with alliance building.**

dependence of white women on black women in times of slavery, and of the concomitant reflex of black women, who as slaves were at the mercy of their masters, to care for white women's every need. Audre Lorde writes that this process is "an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns" (1984e, p. 113). Gloria Anzaldúa relates her personal experience:

**"There is always some, no matter how minimal, unease or discomfort between most women-of-colour and most white-women. Because they can't ignore our ethnicity, getting our approval and acceptance is their way to try to make themselves more comfortable and lessen their unease. It is a great temptation for us to make white-women comfortable [...] some of us get seduced into making a white-woman an honorary woman-of-colour – she wants it so badly. But it makes us fidget"** (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 222).

**C**losely related is people's inability to acknowledge their role in maintaining and perpetuating different kinds of oppression. bell hooks (1995b) highlights that:

**"Just as many white Americans deny both the prevalence of racism in the**

**US and the role they play in perpetuating and maintaining white supremacy, non-white, non-black groups, Native, Asian, Hispanic Americans, all deny their investment in anti-black sentiment even as they consistently seek to distance themselves from blackness so that they will not be seen as residing at the bottom of this society's totem pole, in the category reserved for the most despised group"** (p. 199).

This complicity is not necessarily evidenced by overt racist comments or by explicit denial of privilege. In fact, silence or inaction is the more common form of complicity. bell hooks' reaction to a white man who took a seat in a plane that was already occupied by a black woman exemplifies this reality: "It was not a question of your giving up the seat, it was an occasion for you to intervene in the harassment of a black woman and you chose your own comfort and tried to deflect away from your complicity in that choice by offering an insincere, face-saving apology" (1995a, p. 9).

**A**nother obstacle to building alliances across difference has been the inability of people to hear the voices of the oppressed. Often people pay lip-service to the notion of "people speaking for themselves" but when it comes right down to it, the oppressed speak, heads nod,

and the group moves on with the original agenda. Paulo Freire (1970) relates our tendency to not really believe that the oppressed are able to reason for themselves, and therefore fall into the trap of reasoning for, instead of with the oppressed. Audre Lorde also speaks to this issue:

**"The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging [...] this dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us. This block makes it far easier to turn away from you completely than to attempt to understand the thinking behind your choices. Should the next step be war between us, or separation? [...] The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference"** (1984d, p. 66, 69).

In another publication, Audre Lorde writes that "it is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important

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— Audre Lorde**

source of empowerment" (1984g, p. 130). bell hooks (1995a) agrees, questioning: "whether black folks and white folks can ever be subjects together if white people remain unable to hear black rage, if it is the sound of that rage which must always remain repressed, contained, trapped in the realm of the unspeakable" (p. 12). Taking this argument further, hooks (1995a) claims that: "by demanding that black people repress and annihilate our rage to assimilate, to reap the benefits of material privilege in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, white folks urge us to remain complicit with their efforts to colonise, oppress and exploit" (p. 16). This refusal to listen to the voices of others has often resulted in alienation and separation: "When I brought these issues up, people were not even willing to talk about them and I had to be closeted about that part of myself. As in other groups, I felt a lot of isolation and ended up leaving" (Tatiana Arruda, 1987).

**R**elated to this almost unconscious refusal to acknowledge the voices of others is the need we have to reject difference, to homogenise, to universalise. Audre Lorde (1984f) argues that:

**"Institutionalised rejection of difference is an absolute**

**necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion. Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognise those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation"** (p. 115).

Many feminists of colour have argued forcefully against the generic notion of "sisterhood" as reflecting white middle-class feminism. Gloria Anzaldúa argues forcefully that "sisterhood in the singular was a utopian fantasy invented by white-women, one in which we women-of-colour were represented by white-women, one in which they continued to marginalise us, strip us of our individuality" (1990, p. 225). These attempts to

summarise all women's experiences in one definition of *woman*, defined based on white, middle-class women's experiences, ignores the built in privileges of whiteness (Lorde, 1984f). Lorde (1984f) writes, very revealingly:

**"Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying"** (p. 119).

This blindness towards difference and individuality is also apparent in the oppressors tendency to treat members of oppressed groups generically. For instance, Gloria Anzaldúa has been held accountable, in the past, for comments made by Chicano-Mexicano men. She points out that "were [one] to hold a white woman responsible for Ronald Reagan's acts, she would be shocked because to herself she is an individual (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 220).

**T**hese obstacles, anger, guilt, denial of responsibility, unwillingness to really listen and hear, and the tendency to reject difference, are all related, I believe, to our internalisation of the dominant ideology of domination/subordination. They are related to our

**Institutionalised rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people.**  
— Audre Lorde



tendency, within our social movements, to look to leaders, academics, theorists, to design our political plans, plans that we put into action. But these political plans are more often than not designed “according to their own personal view of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions) the *men-in-a-situation* [sic] to whom their program [is] ostensibly directed”, and to “win the people over” (Freire, 1970, p. 75-76). However, any theory of revolution that aims to transform the oppressive society into one based on solidarity and collective experience must have, built into it, *reflection* as well as action. “Reflection”, refers to dialogue, “an encounter between men and women who name their world [...] it is an act of creation” (Freire, 1970, p. 70). “A true revolution must initiate a courageous dialogue with its people. Its very legitimacy lies in that dialogue” (Freire, 1970, p. 109). It is only through dialogue, I believe, that true alliances can be developed and sustained, and that a complete theory of revolution will emerge.

bell hooks proposes that the space to engage in this dialogue is the small group setting, with a diversity of members. She has coined the term “beloved community” to refer to the space that can be created for this critical exchange to occur:

**“It would be useful to promote anew the small group setting as an arena for education for critical consciousness, so that women and men might come together in neighbourhoods and communities to discuss feminist concerns [...] All efforts at self-transformation challenge us to engage in ongoing critical self-examination and reflection about feminist practice, about how we live in the world. This individual commitment, when coupled with engagement in collective discussion, provides a space for critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves new. It is this commitment to feminist principles in our words and deeds that the hope of feminist revolution lies [...] Working collectively to confront difference, to expand our awareness of sex, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination, of the ways we reinforce and perpetuate these structures, is the context in which we learn the true meaning of solidarity” (hooks, 1990b, p. 188-190).**

Paulo Freire in defining dialogue, claims that “dialogue cannot exist [...] in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue

itself” (1970, p. 70). Many other writers and revolutionaries, men and women alike, have written about love as crucial to revolutionary struggle. Here are a number of examples:

**“It is not surprising that one way feminists have come to understand about differences has been through the love of a person from another culture or race. It takes persistence and motivation – which love often engenders – to get beyond one’s ethnocentric assumptions and really learn about other perspectives. In this process and while seeing to eliminate oppression, we also discover new possibilities and insights that come from the experience and survival of other peoples” (Bunch, 1987).**

**“Love can be and is an important source of empowerment when we struggle to confront issues of sex, race and class. Working together to identify and face our differences – to face the ways we dominate and are dominated – to change our actions, we need a mediating force that can sustain us so that we are not broken in this process, so that we do not despair” (hooks, 1990b, p. 192).**

**“This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighbourly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men**

**La gente hablando  
se entiende  
(People understand  
each other by  
talking)  
— Mexican proverb**

[sic]. This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept – so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force – has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man [sic]. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. If we love one another God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us” (Martin Luther King, cited in hooks, 1993, p. 166).

However, in speaking about love, and dialogue, we must not ignore history, and remember that, as Marx argued, “men (sic.) make history, but not under the conditions of their own choosing”. This is the dialectic of consciousness and the world – people make history/society, and are made by history/society. In other words, we must always work with the fact that the relations between people are both the

result and the cause of that history. The following quote, from Gloria Anzaldúa, points out this fact:

“All parties involved in coalitions need to recognise the necessity that women-of-colour and lesbians define the terms of engagement: that we be listened to, that we articulate who we are, where we have come from (racial past), how we understand oppression to work, how we think we can get our from under, and what strategies we can use in accomplishing the particular tasks we have chosen to perform. When we don’t collectively define ourselves and locations, the group will automatically operate under white assumptions, white definitions, white strategies” (1990, p. 225).

I have seen and heard similar narratives from many other women and men involved in various social movements. My own experience, within different political organisations, has also led me to conclude that women still need a space to gather and exchange without the presence of men. Therefore I am not convinced that we are ready, at this point in time, to completely abolish the notion of separate spaces for people with different identities. However, given the mounting criticism of the new social movements, and given the urgency to learn to work together, in solidarity, I am

led to the conclusion (albeit reluctantly!), that we need to re-think the model of identity politics as it is widely practised today. I suggest that we build “beloved communities”, composed of women and men of different colours, classes and sexualities, but that there always be, built into the structure of these dialogical groups, the notion of “caucuses” based on identity or rights. The space would ensure that oppressed groups continue to “have separate spaces in which to gain their self-respect, name themselves, and discover their own history” (Alperin, 1990, p. 31). This recognition of the need for separate spaces would also ensure that we never fall into the trap of erasing difference and of forgetting that “our common struggle for social change [must be] propelled forward by the recognition of unity in diversity”, that “this interconnectedness is the core element in emancipatory struggles” (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990, p. 19)

A genuine effort at listening and hearing the voices of other people around us is one of the foundations of dialogue: “how can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?” (Freire, 1970, p. 710). Therefore, built into the functioning of these beloved communities must be mechanisms to ensure that every person’s individual

We could stick together like Velcro whose two different sides together form a bond, the teeth of one half fasten onto the fabric of the other half and hold with a strength greater than either half alone.  
— Gloria Anzaldúa

and collective voice is heard, and really listened to.

**“Meeting across difference always requires mutual stretching and until you can hear me as a Black lesbian feminist, our strengths will not be truly available to each other as Black women” (1985, p. 3).**

**“It is [...] difficult to listen. We are usually so full of our own thoughts and responses that we seldom really listen close enough to one another to grasp the real flavour of what the other person is attempting to convey. Creative communication in depth is what allows us to experience a sense of belonging to others” (Mwalimu Imara, Dying as the Last Stage of Growth, cited in hooks, 1993, p. 16).**

Based on my personal experience, “creative communication” is difficult to achieve, because we are, as described throughout, subjects (or objects) of this world of domination and subordination. I believe, however, that we can develop mechanisms in our group functioning that help foster hearing and listening. I recently participated in a very rewarding series of group discussions, in which we attempted to engage in dialogical exchange. One of our main tasks was to experiment with “process” or “structures” or “mechanisms” that would enable us to *really* hear each other’s voices. We found it

very difficult at first, and came up with models that were common in Western society and in organisations we were active with, such as taking a speaking list or doing a “round-table”. We found, as a group, that these mechanisms did not work for us, and in the end reproduced the dominant ideology.

As the group became more cohesive, however, we started coming up with creative alternative mechanisms. For instance, during one discussion we established that before taking a turn to speak, we had to paraphrase what the last person had said. Although this did encourage us to really hear what people were saying, we found that those who were more articulate and who had more experience in group discussions had more facility paraphrasing than did those participants with less experience. Next time we decided that when finished speaking, the speaker would turn to someone of their choosing to ask them to contribute. The advantage of this method was that it ensured that no one person dominated the conversation, but in the end, it produced a similar effect to the “round-table” method, which is a certain lack of spontaneity. Our most successful mechanism, was borrowed from certain Aboriginal cultures, the “talking stick”; we used a melon, the only object we had with us for this meeting! The melon was placed on the

floor in the middle of the circle; when a person wanted to speak, they would reach down to take the melon. This process worked well in that it reminded us constantly not to interrupt, and therefore gave participants the necessary time to work out their thoughts and share them. All this is to say that it *is* possible to work on hearing each other. If the will is there. If we are to succeed in our efforts to build alliances, we *must* take the time (and it does take time) and put in the effort to talk about process in our groups. The following insight was shared by a member of our discussion group, and was a turning point in our functioning:

**“One cannot assume that because we do not discuss or consciously implement structure that none exists. After all, isn't there always an underlying power dynamic in groups of any size that results from people's privilege or lack of privilege in larger society? Chances are, if group functioning is not discussed, the microcosm will reproduce the hierarchical and undemocratic relations that exist in the larger society. Unless an alternative structure is discussed and applied, people who are “voiceless” or who are allowed limited visibility are forced to adjust themselves to the oppressive structures”.**

Thus the building of groups, to engage in dialogue,

**Only dialogue,  
which requires  
critical thinking,  
is capable of  
generating critical  
thinking  
— Paulo Freire**

based on notions of love and real listening and hearing, composed of people of different and mixed identities, is an integral part of alliance work and of any theory of revolution (the development of it, as well as of the theory itself). The main work of the group, of course, is *dialogue*, continuous self-reflection and critical thinking. Peter Leonard (1997), contemplating on this very issue, writes that the process of self-reflection:

**"refers not only to the individual subject attempting to struggle against the internalisation of dominant ideology, but is also seen as a collective enterprise. Just as the individual might draw upon psychoanalytical insights in order to understand the formation of her or his own subjectivity, so a class or other social grouping can develop reflexive knowledge of the dominant ideologies which constrain them and limit their freedom. The point of developing a self-reflective knowledge is that, given the massive legitimating power of dominant ideology in late capitalism, the project of emancipation might be seen as securing freedom from self-imposed constraints" (p. 142).**

Individual and collective self-reflection therefore is a process within which people come to understand themselves and each other in order to deal with the internalisation of the dominant

ideology.

**I**nternalisation of dominant ideology leads to self-hatred and fatalism or hopelessness, which in turn interfere with alliance building and social change efforts. The following quote, from bell hooks' renowned book, *Ain't I a Woman*, written almost 20 years ago, is still relevant today:

**"Widespread efforts to continue devaluation of black womanhood make it extremely difficult and oftentimes impossible for the black female to develop a positive self-concept. For we are daily bombarded by negative images. Indeed, one strong oppressive force has been this negative stereotype and our acceptance of it as a viable role model upon which we can pattern our lives".**

Similarly, Audre Lorde speaks of "the despair that oppression plants within each of us – that thin persistent voice that says our efforts are useless, it will never change, so why bother, accept it" (1984h, p. 142). Paulo Freire, talks of "peasant fatalism" in his pioneering work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; he cites the words of a peasant during an interview with himself as an example:

**"The peasant begins to get courage to overcome his dependence when he realises that he is dependent. Until then, he goes along**

**with the boss and says 'What can I do? I'm only a peasant'" (1970, p. 43).**

**"So often [the oppressed] hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness" (Freire, 1970, p. 45).**

Freire clarifies however that this fatalism, this hopelessness, is not an inherent trait of the peasant, or of the oppressed. Instead, he claims that "fatalism in the guise of docility is the fruit of an historical and sociological situation [...] it is almost always related to the power of destiny or fate or fortune" (1970, p. 43). It is important to remember, as well, that in referring to this fatalism as an obstacle to emancipation, I am not negating that people, in every relation they have, engage in resistance in the Foucauldian sense. What I'm talking about here, is an attempt to name that resistance through dialogue and to build on it.

Thus, collective self-recovery is an important step in the process of self-reflection. The need to expunge ourselves from internalised oppression and domination in our struggle to build alliances is a theme that reappears assiduously in the work of community workers and writers on social change.

**As long as I fight, I am moved by hope. And if I fight with hope, then I can wait.**  
— Paulo Freire

"Knowing I am oppressed, I must also know that I participate in this oppression. I must realise that I and all my darker sisters, take the instruments of oppression and use them on ourselves. Our tools come in many forms. We take from the oppressor the instrument of hatred and sharpen it on our bodies and souls. The internalisation of "spic" and "nigger" begins at birth. Only consciousness must follow – or death [...] my hatred was consuming me. For all the talk of hatred against the oppressor, true liberation must begin with the liberation of one's self from oneself [...] I've come to realise my greatest task is to unlock the prison doors which are of my own making. No matter who has given me the pattern to paint it [...] I know my second greatest task is to communicate my way of escape to all others who also wish to be free" (Aleticia Tijerina, 1987, p. 252-258).

"If I look at my most vulnerable places and acknowledge the pain I have felt, I can remove the source of that pain from my enemies' arsenals. My history cannot be used to feather my enemies' arrows then, and that lessens their power over me. Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in my-

self" (Lorde, 1984i, p. 147).

"reconciliation is one of my favourite words. Evoking our capacity to restore to harmony that which has been broken, severed and disrupted. The very word serves as a constant reminder in my life that we can come together with those who have hurt us, with those whom we have caused pain, and experience sweet communion. To be at peace, black women, especially those among us who have been deeply wounded and hurt, must release the bitterness we hold within us" (hooks, 1993, p. 164).

Self-reflection, especially in the group context, leads one to identify the oppressor in ourselves. This identification is a crucial part of the process of social change:

"we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as well alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. As Paulo Freire shows so well in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the op-

pressors' tactics, the oppressors relationships" (Lorde, 1984f, p. 123).

Engaging in collective dialogue and self-reflection, is not, as some would argue, "armchair activism". Nor does it mean "think now, act later". There is no question that revolution requires people to "act, as well as reflect, upon the reality to be transformed" (Freire, 1970, p. 111). To think critically is to act. And, critical consciousness is a characteristic of what Freire coins "a Subject in expectancy", an expectancy that leads them to consolidate their new status. Reflection – true reflection – always leads to action. Moreover, by engaging in collective dialogue, we are doing more than building alliances, we are actually doing pre-figurative work. That is, engaging in group dialogue based on notions of love, hearing and self-reflection, is in itself a revolutionary act, because we are trying to pre-figure, in our actions, the kind of society we aim for. This part of the revolution is what Freire refers to as "cultural action" which will inevitably lead to "cultural revolution": "I interpret the revolutionary process as dialogical cultural action which is prolonged in 'cultural revolution' once power is taken. In both stages a serious and profound effort at *conscientização* – by means of which the people, through a true praxis, leave behind the status of *objects* to assume

"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house [...] the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors relationships"  
— Audre Lorde

the status of historical *Subjects* -- is necessary" (Freire, 1970, p. 141). However, to focus solely on the act, without engaging with people in dialogue to reflect, can only lead to a reproduction of the ethos of domination/subordination within our organisations and within the new society we create.

**I**f we engage in loving dialogue through self-reflection and real hearing and understanding of our own and each others realities, we should be able to forge links between our struggles. We will recognise our privilege and our role in maintaining and perpetuating the dominant ideology without getting paralysed by our guilt or our anger. We will learn that the oppressor can never see the oppression as clearly as the oppressed. We will learn to support without taking leadership. We will learn that we should make every effort to educate ourselves about our own and others oppressions, and not depend on others to teach us. We will realise that anger and conflict are a necessary, and positive part of the process, and will not attempt to quell it. We will realise that to not act, to not speak is to be complicit with the dominant order, and will therefore make every effort to speak out, act out against injustice. We will stop lumping all members of the oppressor group together, thinking them as all "white", or "straight" or "male". We will focus our energies on

fighting for justice, and not on fighting each other. We will come to forgiveness and reconciliation.

bell hooks (1995d) gives us a concrete example of a small group of black and white woman attempting to build solidarity:

**"Individual black and white females who forged bonds found that we did so by first educating ourselves for critical consciousness and by studying the specific history of social relations between the two groups in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. That history showed time and time again the role betrayal placed as a recurring motif in black and white female interactions [...] Studying this powerful history within feminist circles, it was clear to individual black and white women that sisterhood could not emerge between us if we did not assume accountability for our roles in either sustaining racist thinking and action or nurturing conflict by holding onto mistrust and contempt. We had to take our understanding of the history of our social relations and relate it to our contemporary lives. As black women we had to look at the nature of the legacy of contempt and disrespect for white women and be willing to see them no longer through the lens of the past but recognise them as nondependent and capable. White women seemed to find it much**

**harder to surrender their longing to engage in 'mammification', to have us take care of them, to serve them. Yet it was only as individual white women could respect our thoughts and our capacity for leadership that we could work together as comrades and/or friends. Simultaneously, individual black women had to divest of internalised racist thinking that often led them to assume the role of caretaker, 'mammy' and then feel resentful. Most importantly, bonds were made only by those individual women who were willing to interrogate themselves honestly"** (hooks, 1995d, p. 219-222).

In conclusion, I'd like to call out to the readers of this compilation to go out and create, as I plan to do, a loving community and to experiment with the ideas I've shared in this paper. I see this paper as a "work-in-progress", one which will be modified many times over by loving communities that meet, dialogue, think critically, and add to it in an effort to develop a full theory of revolution. On a final note, I'd like to share a few last words and ideas that I found to be very pertinent to our struggle, in attempting to bring some perspective, and optimism to it:

**"you may have to accept that there may be no solutions, resolutions or even agreement ever. The terms *solution, resolution* and *pro-***

**We must be  
revolutionary, that  
is to say dialogical,  
from the outset  
— Paulo Freire**

*gressing and moving forward* are Western dominant cultural concepts. Irresolution and disagreement may be more common in life than resolutions and agreements [...] Instead, coalition work succeeds through collective efforts and individual voices being heard" (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 227).

"Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle, together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival" (Lorde, 1984f, p. 123).

We have chosen each other  
and the edge of each others battles  
the war is the same  
if we lose  
someday women's blood will congeal  
upon a dead planet  
if we win  
there is no telling  
we seek beyond history  
for a new and more possible meeting.  
— Audre Lorde

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Research, writing and layout done by Anna Kruzynski for the

**Quebec Public Interest Research Group**

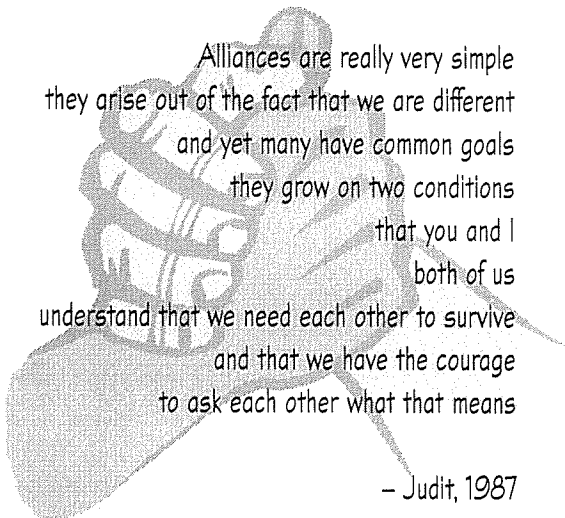
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Alliances are really very simple  
they arise out of the fact that we are different  
and yet many have common goals  
they grow on two conditions  
that you and I  
both of us  
understand that we need each other to survive  
and that we have the courage  
to ask each other what that means

– Judit, 1987

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## Author's comment

The final format of this paper is a compilation and synthesis of ideas that I have taken mostly from the work of Black, Chicana, Aboriginal, and lesbian academics and activists, people whose voices have traditionally been marginalised and ignored. I have chosen this format in order to remain consistent with my conclusions; that in order to build alliances, we must learn to respect differences and to hear the voices of others in our engagement in individual and collective self-education for critical consciousness.

As a white, middle-class, heterosexual (I think), university-educated woman, I am oppressor more often than not. As a woman, however, I am oppressed. Thus, my personal battle is one for a society without patriarchy. As a feminist however, my battle is “against domination in all its forms” (Charlotte Bunch, 1990). Therefore, I

struggle against racism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, against class exploitation.

This compilation is part of my personal process of self-reflection and of building of critical consciousness. I have made a real effort to hear the voices of my sisters and brothers who are different from me. I hope that I have made some progress in this area. I also hope that the compilation will help us in our collective self-reflection as people read, learn and attempt to understand our collective struggle to build alliances for change.

This paper was written for the Concordia Quebec Public Interest Research Group, and was supervised by Peter Leonard, professor at the School of Social Work at McGill University.

