Coalition Politics: Turning the Century*

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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 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 unreached. 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 they everybody looked the same, did things the same, and believed figure out the same things, and if they didn’t, you could just kill them and nobody would even ask you about it.

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 awhile 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 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