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Author(s): Anna Carastathis

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Identity Categories as Potential Coalitions

In this essay, I revive a conception of intersectionality that seems to have been largely forgotten as intersectionality has become an “institutionalized intellectual project” (Nash 2008, 13). I argue that identity remains a useful basis for political organizing, as long as identity categories are conceptualized as coalitions (Crenshaw 1991). Identity politics is often contrasted with coalitional politics in that the former is viewed as a kind of separatism based on sameness while the latter depends on alliances built across differences. Yet this distinction between identity and coalition focuses exclusively on differences between groups, failing to consider differences within groups, which an intersectional critique of identity categories illuminates. In her germinal work on intersectionality, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw concludes that intersectional analysis of identity-based groups reveals them to be “in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed” (1991, 1299). For instance, intersectionality “provides a basis for reconceptualizing race as a coalition between men and women of color” or as a “coalition of straight and gay people of color” (1299).

Despite the fact that intersectionality has achieved a kind of “buzzword” status, the implications of this claim have rarely been explored (Davis 2008). In fact, the predominant critique of intersectionality doubts the efficacy of identity as a ground for political practice, contending that an intersectional

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conception of identity is divisive and could even constitute a form of individualism. Critics argue that because intersectionality reveals intragroup difference, it inevitably leads to divisions, rifts, and particularisms (Ehrenreich 2002; Ludvig 2006). They view the political implications of intersectionality as splitting, receding, or narrow identity-based organizing—not unity across lines of difference. Yet as Elizabeth R. Cole (2008) argues, while detractors worry about “vanishingly small constituencies,” conceiving of identities intersectionally, as coalitions, illuminates “new avenues of cooperation” (447). Furthermore, intersectionality—as a critical project—reveals politicized identity categories to be held together variously by tacit, unspoken, deliberate, and explicit acts of alignment, solidarity, and exclusion, about which we must become more reflective and critical if mass organizing for social justice is to be effectively pursued.

While many interpretations and deployments of intersectionality construe identity categories in essentialist terms, against this trend, I draw on social movement history to argue that conceptualizing identities as coalitions—as internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences and dissonances and by internal as well as external relations of power—enables us to form effective political alliances that cross existing identity categories and to pursue a liberatory politics of interconnection (Keating 2009). Conceptualizing identity coalitionally allows us to overcome some of the pitfalls of political alliances organized on the premise of homogeneous or essential identities. For one, the integration of all aspects of our individual identities is crucial to achieving the internal balance missing in one-dimensional political movements. Too often we are asked to subordinate one or more aspects of our identities to that which a monocular analysis privileges as significant. But in so doing, we are foreclosing a potential coalition with all those who share the repressed or excluded identities—not to mention betraying the possibility of a coalition among all parts of ourselves. Crenshaw’s conceptualization of identities as “in fact coalitions” challenges us to “summon the courage” to contest exclusionary practices that marginalize some people while constructing other people as representative or prototypical of an entire group, community, or movement (1991, 1299). Despite the power of Crenshaw’s argument, “internal exclusions and marginalizations” continue to structure US social movements, and even intersectional theorists tend to reify essentialized “group” identities “centered on the intersectional identities of a few” members (1299). Those who experience (what have been theorized as) multiple forms of oppression continue to face political intersectionality—the experience of being situated between two (or more) political movements claiming to represent them but pursuing mutually exclusive and often conflicting agendas that conspire to mar-

ginalize and fragment experiences of interlocking oppressions (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).¹

But have there been cases in which liberation is imagined in multiple registers, in which identities are conceptualized as plural, not singular, and movements are premised on finding the interconnections of struggles by forming relationships of accountability and compassion across lines of difference and dominance internal as well as external to “group” identities? And what political effects can centering the experiences and analyses of people who face multiple marginalizations have on the ways in which struggles and solidarities are envisioned? In this essay I examine the role a coalitional conception of identity played in the solidarity activism of one US-based organization. *Somos Hermanas* (We Are Sisters)—the solidarity project of the Alliance Against Women’s Oppression (AAWO), housed at the San Francisco Women’s Building—began as a multiracial delegation of lesbian and straight women to Sandinista Nicaragua in 1984 at the invitation of the Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinosa (the Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinosa; AMNLAE).² Over the six years of its duration, *Somos Hermanas* grew into a national organization, with chapters in multiple US cities, expanding its focus to El Salvador, Guatemala, and other Central American and Caribbean nations subject to US imperialism (then, as now).³ *Somos Hermanas* dissolved in 1990, yet I extend my exploration of its legacy into the present by focusing closely on the experiences of a key organizer of *Somos Hermanas*, Carmen Vázquez.⁴ A member

¹ I use the term “multiply oppressed” tentatively, following Crenshaw’s “provisional” usage of “intersectionality” to reference the fragmentation of identity as a consequence of political intersectionality (1991, 1244–45 n. 9).

² AMNLAE originated in the wartime organization Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional (Association of Women Confronting the Nation’s Problems), initiated in 1970 by the first woman to join the rural guerillas, Gladys Baez. In 1979, it was renamed to honor Luisa Amanda Espinosa, the first woman combatant in the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front; FSLN) to die in the revolutionary war (Randall 1992, 44–45). By September 1985, forty thousand women organized in six hundred grassroots groups were involved in AMNLAE (47).

³ *Somos Hermanas*, *Who We Are*, organizational pamphlet, c. 1985 (hereafter organizational pamphlet), *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/6. For more information on the *Somos Hermanas* archive, see n. 5.

⁴ The archival materials reveal that the organization faltered as members experienced “the need to split [their] political energies” between multiple movements and organizing efforts to which they were committed—which Crenshaw characterizes as a form of “intersectional disempowerment” (letter to CarEth Foundation, 1989, *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/14; Crenshaw 1991, 1252). In this sense, while I argue for the integrative effects of their organizing, it is worth noting the disintegrative influence of the broader social movement context.

of the first ten-day delegation (1984) and a national cochair of *Somos Hermanas* (1984–90), Vázquez was also the founding director of the Women’s Building (1980–84; Vázquez 2005). Vázquez’s writing and oral history reveal the impact of *Somos Hermanas* on her life trajectory, suggesting that this organizing experience was a crucial factor in the integration of her multiple identities and political commitments (Vázquez 1991; 2005, 49). What Vázquez’s analysis of her experience offers to my project is evidence that conceptualizing identities in coalitional terms enables us to cross lines of difference in building alliances, which is crucial to any effective liberation movement. Conceiving of our identities as coalitions intimates an integrated practice of struggle. Yet no less significant a lesson to draw from Vázquez’s activism and political thought is that political coalitions that attend to multiple forms of oppression help their members to integrate their identities as people—identities that through systemic oppression and monocular resistance movements have been fragmented, distorted, repressed, or negated. My analysis of *Somos Hermanas* draws on three main sources: Carmen Vázquez’s oral history, produced through the *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project*; published works by Vázquez (1991, 1993, 1997, 2010); and archival research that I conducted in March and October 2011 at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society Archive in San Francisco.⁵

Intersectionality and coalitions

At the outset, it is important to emphasize that Crenshaw’s reconceptualization of identities as coalitions troubles a commonplace distinction between coalitional and identity-based groups. Coalitions are usually contrasted with identity-based groups in the following way: identity-based groups are spaces of similarity, seclusion, and safety, whereas coalitions are spaces of difference, confrontation, and risk (Reagon 1983). Coalitions are born of necessity, not in order to fulfill needs of recognition, belonging, solidarity, or inclusion (Matsuda 1991, 1190). You seek those things from identity groups where others “like you” invite you in, share and affirm your

⁵ Archived materials pertaining to *Somos Hermanas* span boxes 50/6 to 50/15 and 35/1 and 2 of the San Francisco Women’s Building Records, 1972–2001, housed in the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society Archive in San Francisco; hereafter *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90 (Online Archive of California, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org>). I also consulted box 34/9 (Carmen Vázquez’s speeches) and boxes 34/12 and 34/16 (AAWO). I was interested in internal organizing documents (meeting minutes, letters, etc.) as well as public documents (pamphlets, posters, speeches, publications, etc.) that revealed how the organizers in *Somos Hermanas* conceptualized and mobilized their identities.

experience, and offer their analyses, insights, coping strategies, and support. Yet Bernice Johnson Reagon's argument that feminists should pursue coalitional rather than separatist politics rests on the astute and painful observation that separatism on the basis of identity almost always excludes some people who nevertheless identify, say, as women or as lesbians (1983, 349). And so, for many of us, identity-based groups are not experienced as "homes" but as "barred rooms," another metaphor Reagon uses to describe identity groups (346–47). Crenshaw, too, deliberately disrupts the distinction between home and coalition when she invites us to think about how we might form coalitions "in the name of [those] parts of us that are not at home" (1991, 1299).

There are at least two interpretations of the claim that intersectionality should lead us to think of identity categories as "in fact coalitions" or as "potential coalitions." The first interpretation is that this is an ontological claim about the nature of identity—about what identities are. The second interpretation is that this is a political claim about the possibilities of organizing across differences, even across identity categories. The two interpretations bring to mind the analytic distinction Leslie McCall (2005) makes between "intracategorical" and "intercategorical" intersectional approaches (1773, 1787). Conceptualizing identity categories as in fact coalitions, I want to suggest, enables us to focus simultaneously on intragroup and intergroup differences. The second interpretation—that an intersectional analysis should lead us to form coalitions with other groups—assumes that intercategorical distinctions constitute coalitions. But if identity categories *are* coalitions—constituted by internal differences as much as by commonalities—then this changes how we think about the political task of coalitional organizing. The emphasis shifts from forming coalitions across group differences to recognizing that groups are already internally heterogeneous. The experiences of their members—including those people exiled, unrecognized, tokenized, or denied visibility within a group—are discontinuous, differentiated, sometimes even in conflict with one another. That is not to say that members of a social group have nothing in common. Nor is it to say that groups dissolve under the intersectional lens into individuals whose experiences are entirely idiosyncratic. As Patricia Hill Collins (2003) has put it, every group occupies a location of "heterogeneous commonality" (221). I want to advance the view that identity groups are coalitions by virtue of their internal heterogeneity and the tacit or explicit creative acts through which they are organized and represented as unified. Models of coalitions that presuppose the fixity of coalescing groups—and the homogeneity of collective identities—elide intragroup differences, a danger to which intersectionality as a critique of categories alerts us.

Yet identities are also potential coalitions, in the sense that when viewed intersectionally they illuminate interconnections and interrelations, as well as grounds for solidarity, that reach across and reveal differences within categories of identity. But our common experiences are a “bond, not a political roadmap,” as Vázquez has written (1993, 222). Reflecting on the US LGBT movement, Vázquez observes that “our ability to work effectively in political coalition with those who share with us the assaults by the right wing has been hampered both by the single lens focus on oppression based on sexual orientation and by the misguided notion that we can address racism and sexism within our own movement through consciousness raising without a political agenda that specifically addresses racism, sexism and economic injustice” (223). Our ability to align and coalesce with people “outside” our movement who do not identify with its superordinate sexual and gender identities—yet to whom “the majority of us are connected . . . by blood, by class, and by spirit”—is contingent on recognizing, celebrating, and organizing meaningfully on the basis of the intersections within (Vázquez 1997, 133). For this to happen, “the dialogue we must engage in” has to be “about the truth of who we are, the whole truth” (133).

Yet perhaps because the dominant understanding of intersectionality is relatively uncritical regarding the use of essentialist categories, with some important exceptions, not many theorists who invoke intersectionality have interpreted identities as coalitions, nor have many pursued coalition as a challenge to single-axis conceptions of identity.⁶ Indeed, the contrast generally drawn between identity and coalition renders less visible the differences within: that is, the intersections that internally constitute any social group. Moreover, Cole (2008) argues that the categorical approach to intersectionality in empirical research “assumes the definition and operationalization of social/structural categories as independent variables,” without

⁶ While Crenshaw initially proposes intersectionality as a “provisional concept” (1991, 1244 n. 9), most interpretations do not see the model as requiring us to substantially revise and eventually abandon monistic categories of identity (Bowleg 2008). Hence, intersectionality is often elided with a “race, class, gender” approach that assumes the relative conceptual stability of these categories (Cuádriz and Uttal 1999; Belkhir and Barnett 2001; Ludvig 2006). In my view, even those intersectional approaches that claim to go beyond unitary or additive constructions of identity and oppression reify the categories they are conjoining (Meyers 2000; Ehrenreich 2002); elsewhere I have argued that their mutual exclusivity is the condition of possibility of their intersection (Carastathis 2008, 26–54). Crenshaw concedes that “in mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable” (1991, 1244 n. 9). Yet intersectionality in most deployments is conflated with just such a methodology; it is viewed not as a point of departure but as a sign of arrival.

“address[ing] the processes that create and maintain . . . the categories” (445). In this sense, some deployments of intersectionality reproduce what AnaLouise Keating (2009) calls “status quo stories about identity,” which prevent us from honing our perception to produce analyses and politics of “interconnection.”⁷ María Lugones (2003) argues that “the fragmentation of perception disempowers our resistance by making deep coalitions logically impossible as it undermines the very possibility of fashioning larger and complex resistant collective subjectivities” (160). A “lack of fluency in resistant logics” results in closed boundaries, in communities modeled on nations, in authenticity and legitimacy tests for membership (159–62). If some people have the “marks of solid identity” and they become arbiters of inclusion in “homeplaces,” in communities constructed as nations, others do not and are “exiled,” rendered invisible, turned into “imaginary beings” (151–52). Furthermore, categorical approaches to intersectionality tend to assume that “forming political alliances . . . within populations deemed socially similar is a straightforward matter” (Cole 2008, 446). Cole argues that conceptualizing identities as coalitions allows us to “trouble the ideal of ‘natural’ affinity groups” (446). As Angela Harris (1990) maintains, the construction of identity categories is always a creative (as opposed to a merely descriptive) act. What is crucial about Crenshaw’s coalitional conceptualization of identity is that it brings to our attention the fact that “any attempt to mobilize identity is a negotiation [of the] various political interests, conflicting though they may be, that exist within an identity category” (Crenshaw 1995, 12).

Somos Hermanas

On July 19, 1979, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front) formed a revolutionary government in Managua, Nicaragua, ending the forty-three-year US-supported Somoza military dictatorship.⁸ By contrast, in 1981, in the United States, after a decade of “economic restructuring . . . spurred by conservative renewal,” the eligible electorate voted in Ronald Reagan, who, “within weeks of assuming the

⁷ Status quo stories about racial identity “reinforce the belief in permanent, separate racial categories,” while status quo stories about gender identity naturalize heteronormative constructions of binary gender categories (Keating 1995, 902).

⁸ The FSLN overthrew Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who had inherited the dictatorship from his father, Anastasio Somoza García, who ruled Nicaragua from 1936 to 1956. The Sandinistas cited Augusto Cesar Sandino, who led an anti-imperialist uprising against the US Marines who had occupied Nicaragua since 1912; Sandino was executed by the US National Guard in Nicaragua in 1934 (Dunbar-Ortiz 2005; Weber 2006).

presidency,” began his concerted attack on progressive and revolutionary nationalist movements and emerging states, and on internal colonies, racialized communities, poor people, women, and LGBT people within the territorial borders of the United States (Elbaum 2002, 40, 253–55). Within the United States, liberation movements had been subjected to infiltration and intense repression by the COINTELPRO counterintelligence program for decades (James 1999; Dunbar-Ortiz 2005).⁹ In 1981, Reagan authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to spend \$19.5 million to covertly organize, train, lead, and finance a counterrevolutionary army to remove the Sandinistas from power (Dunbar-Ortiz 2005, 117).¹⁰ On December 21, 1981, the CIA launched the Contra War on Nicaragua and began a domestic propaganda campaign that, mirroring the military strategy, exploited divisions between indigenous peoples (Miskitu, Sumu, and Rama, some of whom aligned themselves with the Somocista Contras) and Sandinista supporters (117–19). On December 19, 1983, the CIA staged an “exodus” of Miskitu people to Honduras. The CIA, the Contras, and Christian missionaries had turned members of the Miskitu against the Sandinistas, who had made a major political and strategic error when their nationalism biased them against indigenous peoples’ claims to self-determination. The US government exploited indigenous insurgency by instigating what Dunbar-Ortiz describes as a “CIA-created Miskitu rebellion” and by running a publicly funded propaganda campaign within the United States alleging that the Sandinistas were guilty of atrocities against the Miskitu (129–31).¹¹ In this climate of intense repression and propaganda, the Sandinistas and AMNLAE were encouraging North Americans to travel to Nicaragua to make up their own minds about the revolution, while the United States was imposing an economic blockade and travel restrictions. According to Héctor Perla (2009), “the FSLN leadership hoped that allowing U.S. citizens to witness firsthand the effects of U.S. policy on the average Nicaraguan would move them to return home to denounce its negative impact” (84). The FSLN believed that “U.S. working people can stop intervention” in Nicaragua, as Sergio

⁹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains that the imprisonment and assassination of “consensus-building leaders” and the “discrediting and co-optation of activists” weakened these movements, as did their “failure to establish long-term, broad-based coalitions” (2005, 6).

¹⁰ Dunbar-Ortiz details her firsthand experience of the CIA’s “announcement” of “Operation Red Christmas” with an act of “state-sponsored terrorism”: the bombing of a Nicaraguan airplane at the Mexico City airport on December 13, 1981. The airplane was about to be boarded by international delegates traveling to Managua for a UN seminar on racism—Dunbar-Ortiz among them—and Nicaraguan students at Mexico’s National University “going home for Christmas vacation”; the bombing killed two people, and the blast injured many others (Dunbar-Ortiz 2005, 119–24).

¹¹ See “Nicaragua: Distortion/Reality,” c. 1986, Somos Hermanas archive, box 50/8.

Ramírez—elected vice president of the Sandinista government in 1984—argued in a speech with that title in 1982 (Ramírez 1985). By 1986, more than one hundred thousand US citizens had traveled to Nicaragua on solidarity delegations (Perla 2009, 84).

Reagan's reelection in 1984 coincided with the first *Somos Hermanas* delegation to Nicaragua, organized by AAWO at the invitation of AMNLAE.¹² The “national, multiracial” *Somos Hermanas* delegation consisted of eighteen “Afro-American, Puerto Rican, Chicana, Peruvian, Asian, Arab and white women” from New York, Boston, Washington, DC, and the Bay Area, of whom eight were lesbian—at least two of them butch—and ten were straight (Vázquez 2005, 49).¹³ Calling themselves “[a] veritable rainbow coalition,” *Somos Hermanas* reported that the “multiracial composition [of the delegation] sometimes caused confusion [among Nicaraguans] because it did not [jibe] with the image of the U.S. as a ‘white nation.’”¹⁴ As stated in the Fall 1984 newsletter, “In a working-class district in Managua, mothers whose children had been killed by Somoza and by U.S.-backed contras embraced and greeted us as ‘international mothers.’ When we interrupted to explain that we all came from the U.S. and represented those sectors of women most oppressed by racism, sexism, and Reagan’s budget cuts and war policies, one of the mothers broke into a smile, extended her arms and said, ‘Oh, how wonderful you have come!’”¹⁵

That gesture of embrace would become the representative image of *Somos Hermanas* and its very definition of sisterhood (see fig. 1): “*Somos Hermanas* means embracing our sisters in solidarity.”¹⁶ Emily Hobson (2009) argues that, significantly, who is embracing whom—Nicaragüense or Norte-americana—is left ambiguous in the image. Hobson interprets this ambigu-

¹² AAWO and *Somos Hermanas* newsletter, 1984, *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/11.

¹³ Delegates included members of various organizations, including the Black United Front, the International Council of African Women, Women for Women in Lebanon, the American Civil Liberties Union, KPFA Radio, and the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the Boston Rainbow Coalition (Vázquez 2005, 49–51; Hobson 2009, 233).

¹⁴ AAWO and *Somos Hermanas*, “Defending the Country, Proud to Be Women, Conquering the Future,” newsletter, Fall 1984, 1, *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/11.

¹⁵ The Nicaraguan mothers the delegates met may have been members of *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs*, an organization with which *Somos Hermanas* was in communication. Lorraine Bayard de Volo (2001) argues that in the Sandinista revolution, “women were organized primarily as mothers, often an empowering experience that also reshaped social views on women’s place in politics”; yet it was to “deferential and self-abnegating” political activity that women were recruited under the maternal mantle (4).

¹⁶ “Proposal for a West Coast Regional Network” (hereafter “Proposal”), c. 1985, *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/6.

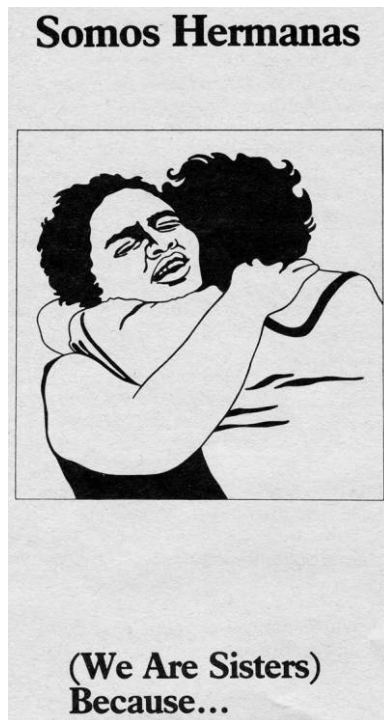


Figure 1 *Somos Hermanas*, *Somos Hermanas (We Are Sisters) Because . . .* (pamphlet), n.d. *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/6. Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

ity as “a strategy of representation” that “emphasized the shared context of transnational movement-building to foster egalitarian connections between women across the Americas” (87–88).

Yet the image could also be interpreted in another way, as referencing the historical trajectories of women of color living in North America by virtue of annexation, internal colonialism, diaspora, and coerced or enslaved migration. Could Vázquez, whose emigration at the age of five from Puerto Rico to New York City—“a place I thought was the moon [but turned out to be] the harshness and poverty of the Lower East Side, Harlem, Welfare and the Projects” (1993, 218)—have experienced the delegation to Nicaragua as a kind of diasporic return? Vázquez recounts that “it was just phenomenal to be in an environment like that and to be embraced by [Nicaraguan women]. And it was interesting to me because they embraced us as allies, you know, as American allies, as women” (2005, 49). She describes it as “truly a journey of magic”: “It was the first time in my life I’d been to a

socialist country, to a country in Latin America other than Puerto Rico. It was an opportunity to bring my passion for solidarity with other Latina women, my lesbian self, and my anti-racist self together” (54).

Specifically, Vázquez recounts how during the solidarity delegation, she had an “invaluable experience in how I could be Latina, lesbian and able to challenge the assumptions of heterosexism within the context of my own culture” (1991, 54). One night, the Somos Hermanas delegation was invited to an evening of dancing with another delegation, of Cuban musicians, “all men. . . . The men were asking the women to dance and a great time was had by all except that the lesbians were none too thrilled by this arrangement. In deference to our hosts, we said nothing, but in the midst of that silence my friend Lucrecia Bermudez strode across the patio and very formally asked ‘¿Bailemos?’—‘Shall we dance?’ We did. Not a minute into our dance, a Cuban gentleman took it upon himself to correct the situation.” But Lucrecia held Carmen “firmly” and “told the young man no, thank you”: “The silence had been broken,” Vázquez reflects, while “our dignity remained intact.” Their dance was a “small act of cultural militancy [that] shattered the heterosexual premise that a woman will always prefer a man”—“a simple act made possible by our respect for our culture and our political unity with the Nicaraguans.” Vázquez reflects that it was a “simultaneous embrace [of] the rituals of dance that we know in our blood” and an occasion to “learn from the rhythms, myths, traditions and values of my people about who I am [as a Puertorriqueña butch lesbian].” Lucrecia’s invitation—“¿Bailemos?”—occasioned another embrace, in which she held Carmen firmly, “as a whole human being, not fragments of one.”

Could the iconic embrace that became the symbol of Somos Hermanas represent the desire for wholeness of women of color belonging to diasporas and internal colonies structurally positioned at the margins of white/Anglo-dominated US society and—as lesbians—surviving at the margins of their own communities as well? “On a political level,” Vázquez states, “it was just a huge leap for me, that integration of all of those things” (2005, 49). Vázquez was inspired by the political and social revolution undertaken by Nicaraguans, by the role of women in that revolution, and by the support she found in Bermudez and others to “be visible and without apology.”¹⁷ As a proud Puertorriqueña lesbian in the solidarity delegation, she returned to the United States with “the humility to understand that my place in the

¹⁷ Women constituted 30 percent of the FSLN’s combatants and held important military, political, and social leadership positions. Yet the revolutionary discourse mobilized women in gendered and sexist ways (Figueroa 1996; Bayard de Volo 2012). Some commentators argue that progress occurred only when women’s and feminist concerns converged with the nationalist interests of the male FSLN leadership (Randall 1992; Bayard de Volo 2012).

struggle for liberation is one of many and that my struggles as a lesbian are no more and no less an institutional reality than are my struggles against racism and economic injustice” (1991, 54). Nkenge Touré, another member of the *Somos Hermanas* delegation, shared how inspired she felt: “I have wanted all my life to go to a place to actually see and be part of a people who are struggling to build a new society. My heart is very full” (quoted on p. 1 of the Fall 1984 newsletter).

When they returned from Nicaragua, *Somos Hermanas* delegates began planning a West Coast regional network to support the work of AMNLAE. The *Somos Hermanas* Network was launched at a conference on “Women in Central America” that was held around International Women’s Day (March 8, 9, and 10, 1985) at Mission High School in San Francisco and was attended by five hundred women. *Somos Hermanas* identified themselves as “a national, multiracial organization of women, lesbian and straight, who are committed to organizing ourselves and others to promote peace and stop U.S. intervention in Central America and the Caribbean” (organizational pamphlet). Many members were active in feminist movements; lesbian and gay rights movements; Black, Puerto Rican, and Chicano liberation movements; communities of faith; and trade unions. They had organized to defend affirmative action and to oppose Klan activity; they were peace movement activists, solidarity activists with Asian and African anticolonial struggles, members of Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, immigration and refugee rights organizers, and Socialist Party members (Vázquez 2005; organizational pamphlet). Emphasizing their “diverse experiences,” the group declared, “*Somos Hermanas* with the women of Central America because we share the burdens of militarism and war, of poverty, sexism and racism. . . . *Somos Hermanas* because we oppose racism and see it as a pillar of U.S. militarism” (“Proposal,” 1). Members of *Somos Hermanas* conceptualized their solidarity with Nicaraguan women as stemming from their analysis that “building the bonds of sisterhood . . . demands a clear understanding of how U.S. military and economic policies directly contribute to the impoverishment of women in Central America and women in the United States, particularly women of color” (1). In other words, they mobilized on the basis of what Cathy Cohen has termed a “shared marginal relationship to dominant power” (1997, 458). It is important to note that the activists who organized as *Somos Hermanas* were voicing their solidarity from the margins—or as Himani Bannerji (2000) puts it, “the colonial heart”—of the liberal democratic settler state (75). In this respect, placing *Somos Hermanas* in the context of lesbian, feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist movements reveals that while *Somos Hermanas* members acted as bridges between these disparate agendas and diverse communities—“taking the goals, objectives,

resources, and projects of the Somos Hermanas Network into the circles of people whose lives we already touch”—they remained at the margins of social movement histories. Yet from their marginal social location within the belly of the beast, Somos Hermanas extended their embrace across national borders that had cut across their own lives (“Proposal,” 1).

Solidarity and sisterhood

Situating Somos Hermanas in the political geography of San Francisco’s Mission District in the 1980s, prior to its gentrification, reveals the intersection of multiple social movements, diasporas, and communities (Dunbar-Ortiz 2005; Allison and Vázquez 2007; Hobson 2009).¹⁸ What is significant, for my purposes, is how Somos Hermanas bridged disparate movements by drawing on a coalitional conception of their identities. This bridging work consisted of integrated struggle against interlocking systems of oppression, which they conceptualized in transnational terms. Moreover, as the Somos Hermanas archive reveals, in their organizing, they “had to deal with the racism, homophobia, anti-communism and sexism of some of the other solidarity organizations.”¹⁹

US–Central American solidarity movement

Perla (2009) argues that the “roots of what came to be called the Nicaragua solidarity movement lie in the political activism of Central American activists in the United States,” specifically Nicaraguan immigrant organizers who had fled the repressive Somoza regime (83). Nicaraguan exiles began to mobilize in response to the December 1972 earthquake in Managua and organized to “protest against the corruption and brutality of the Somoza regime, and to oppose US support of the dictatorship” (83). The exiles’ movement, and the appeals for international solidarity on the part of the Sandinistas and Nicaraguan civilians, mobilized North Americans; by 1986, eighty thousand US citizens had signed a “Pledge of Resistance” to “protest legally or through civil disobedience in the event of a major US escalation in Central America” (92). In 1985–87, the organization Quest for Peace raised over \$127 million in humanitarian assistance from US residents, the same amount as approved by Congress in August 1985 and October 1986 to

¹⁸ By the 1970s, over fifty thousand Nicaraguan immigrants—some of whom were political exiles who had fled the Somoza dictatorship in the 1930s—and their descendants lived in San Francisco, many of them residing in the Mission District, which became an epicenter of the US–Nicaraguan solidarity movement and a recruitment ground for the FSLN (Dunbar-Ortiz 2005, 42–43).

¹⁹ “1987 Assessment,” c. 1988, 1, Somos Hermanas archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/8.

fund the Contras. Perla characterizes the Nicaragua solidarity movement as a “transnational grassroots movement for social justice [in which] activists in North and Latin America cooperat[ed] to achieve a shared objective” (94). This activism prevented the Reagan administration from “escalat[ing] its war on Nicaragua or [from using] the vastly more powerful weapons and resources at its disposal” (94). US-based activists pressured Congress to “cut off Contra aid,” after which Reagan continued to fund his administration’s interventionist policy illegally, “a move that nearly brought about Reagan’s impeachment” (94). Reagan failed in his goal of restoring the Somocistas to power, as the Contras were never successful in overthrowing the FSLN, which was voted out of power in 1990 through “the very same democratic process that it had inaugurated” (95).

Perla’s analysis controverts a common conception of US–Central American solidarity movements, which assumes that activists are privileged, white citizens moved by altruistic or moral reasons to support “a distant struggle that [does] not directly affect them” (2009, 95). This casting eclipses the agency of diasporic Latinoamericana/os in initiating the movement and of people of color within the United States who organized in multiracial coalitions against war and imperialist intervention. White-dominated US–Central American solidarity organizations predicated their conception of solidarity—as witnessing, international accompaniment, and citizen lobbying of the US government to change its foreign policy—on US citizen privilege (Weber 2006). In contrast, organizations whose bases were made up of diasporic communities and, more generally, people of color relied on different strategies, emphasized person-to-person connections, and—I would suggest—advanced a coalitional conception of identity.

Distinguishing itself from “other Central American Solidarity Groups,” Somos Hermanas overtly supported women’s revolutionary struggle in Central America and advanced an interlocking analysis “consciously making the connections between the U.S. military budget and role in Central America and poverty and deterioration of social services, housing, medical care, employment and education in the U.S.” in addition to the “concurrent increase in racism, sexism, and gay-bashing, all of which disproportionately affect poor people and women and especially women of color.”²⁰ While Somos Hermanas has been rendered invisible in social movement histories, the archive attests to the vibrancy of their organizing. Through delegations to Nicaragua and El Salvador, demonstrations, conference organizing, report writing, film screenings, popular education, material aid campaigns, dances,

²⁰ “Somos Hermanas Needs You,” c. 1989, Somos Hermanas archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/11.

and house meetings, Somos Hermanas contributed to a transnational social movement that engaged and transformed diasporic, sexual, and gender identities.

Unlike many other transnational solidarity movements, which construct a moral foundation for activism that privileges the agency of citizens from countries in the global North, Somos Hermanas envisioned solidarity with Nicaraguan women as having an objective basis in the domestic and international effects of the Reagan administration's policies and as benefiting women of color in the United States as much as Nicaraguan women. Somos Hermanas explicitly addressed women lacking social privilege within US territorial borders. They argued that as people of color and poor women in the United States, they had no choice but to oppose US intervention in Central America: "It is integral to our common struggles for liberation. . . . Just as the U.S. has a 'special interest' in maintaining the domination of Central America, we have a 'special interest' in supporting the self-determination of our Central American sisters. The bonds of our sisterhood compel us to cry out and actively join our sisters in opposing our common oppressor" ("Proposal," 2). Sharing an oppressor, for Somos Hermanas, meant sharing a struggle: "our sisters' struggle against U.S. intervention is one and the same as own struggle for social justice in the U.S." (2). This perception was not, it seems, one-sided, as claims of sisterhood have often been—delusions of privilege. The Secretary of International Relations of AMNLAE, Ivon Siu, told the Somos Hermanas delegation in 1984:

We see you as our sisters. You are aware of our difficulties and share similar experiences. You are fighting against racism and women's oppression. Our struggles have many points in common so that we may be straightforward in discussing our situation. Our problems are those of underdevelopment and a dependent economy. . . . We were subjected to population control, forced sterilization and high infant mortality, with many of our children dying from malnutrition and infections. Most of our population is between 14 and 25 years old. Under Somoza it was a crime to be young and many died as a result of political repression. (Fall 1984 newsletter, 2)

To say that our oppressor and our struggle are the same is not to say that we share the same experience as one another. The rhetoric of "global sisterhood" has rightly come under criticism for its tendency to elide "the diversity of women's agency in favor of a universalized Western model of women's liberation" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 17). Yet Somos Hermanas forged its conception of sisterhood and transnational solidarity in an anal-

ysis of what Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have called “scattered hegemonomies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, [and] local structures of domination” (1994, 17). In this respect, *Somos Hermanas* embodied Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s insight that “sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political praxis” (1988, 67).

The Women’s Building

Uncovering the work of *Somos Hermanas*—one of the long-standing sponsored projects of the San Francisco Women’s Building—is significant in terms of US feminist history as well. Vázquez, a leader in both organizations, reflects that the “Women’s Building was the reason for *Somos Hermanas*” (2005, 47). In the 1980s and 1990s, the San Francisco Women’s Building became “a critical site for the development of the women’s movement in San Francisco that had a strong foundation in a progressive race-class analysis” (48). That achievement resulted from a “major, major, major power struggle” by lesbians of color who made up the majority of the Women’s Building staff, while white women dominated the owning organization, the Women’s Centers, which had purchased the building in 1979 (48). The workers at the Women’s Building pushed for a merger with the Women’s Centers, which eliminated the hierarchy, diversified the leadership, and put women-of-color staff members onto the board of their own organization. After the merger, the leadership of the Women’s Building had a mandated representation (75 percent) of women of color (Vázquez 2005, 48; Hobson 2009, 90).

Lesbians of color who were active in projects housed at the Women’s Building countered the white dominance of gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements in San Francisco.²¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, the Women’s Building sponsored projects that included the Women’s Prison Coalition (1976–78), Rosie Jimenez Coalition (1982), Women of All Red Nations (1983–88), *Somos Hermanas* (1984–90), *Remember Our Sisters Inside* (1985–89), and *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* (1989–present).²²

As an organizing space for *Somos Hermanas*, the Women’s Building also differed from earlier women-of-color organizations in the Bay Area in the

²¹ “Recruitment Plan for *Somos Hermanas*,” n.d., *Somos Hermanas* archive, c. 1984–90, box 50/7. In her white-focused history of gay and lesbian organizing in San Francisco, Elizabeth Armstrong analyzes neither the Women’s Building nor *Somos Hermanas*, though she mentions lesbians of color forming multiracial coalitions to pursue multi-issue social justice agendas in the 1980s and 1990s (2002, 152).

²² *Remember Our Sisters Inside*: box 49/10; *Rosie Jimenez Coalition*: box 49/11; *Women of All Red Nations*: box 51/21; *Women’s Prison Coalition*: box 52/14; *Mujeres Unidas y Activas*: box 60/4, San Francisco Women’s Building/Women’s Centers.

predominance of out lesbians in its leadership and membership (Springer 2005, 130–38).²³ Vázquez explains that since “very few” straight women worked regularly at the Women’s Building in the 1980s, the main tensions and conflicts were about racism, not homophobia (2005, 48).²⁴ Yet racism and classism were often expressed through the regulation of gender identity. Vázquez states that class- and racially inflected tensions emerged at the Women’s Building from the hostility of middle-class white lesbian activists toward butches working in the building, who were women of color (42, 45). For working-class women of color, butch/femme was “just how lesbians were,” says Vázquez (2010, 6).²⁵ Yet Vázquez recounts that “to actually present as butch was not a happy thing in San Francisco”; white lesbian feminists frequently charged her with “emulating the patriarchy, being a man” (2005, 42). “In order to survive in that context, I changed,” she states, approaching in her gender presentation the “androgynous” norms of white lesbian feminism (42).

Engaging in solidarity activism with *Somos Hermanas* enabled Vázquez to integrate multiple identities, finding, perhaps, a home for all aspects of her self in this coalition. The embrace of others enables us to embrace parts of ourselves that have been derided, denied, and diminished. When asked by Kelly Anderson about the impact of the 1984 delegation on her life, Vázquez recounts that it “integrated all of [her identities] in a living, joyful, experience. And you know, and that was about being in a country that had had a successful revolution, where women were leaders. I mean, Comandante Dora Maria Tellez—oh, my God. She did not come out to us as a lesbian, but several of the women came out after the meeting wanting her baby, I’ll tell you that” (Vázquez 2005, 49).²⁶

²³ Ten years earlier, the West Coast chapter of the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA)—predecessor to AAWO, which initiated the *Somos Hermanas* delegation—had excluded, and may even have expelled, its lesbian members (Springer 2005, 131). While the West Coast branch of TWWA had been a multiracial coalition of women of color, the AAWO decided to allow white women to join but maintained a majority women-of-color membership until its dissolution in 1990. Both TWWA and AAWO were affiliated with the communist organization Line of March. AAWO members went on to form the Oakland-based nonprofit organization Women of Color Resource Center (Brown and Sánchez 1994; Elbaum 2002, 82, 274; Springer 2005, 131; Hobson 2009, 282–83).

²⁴ “I don’t really recall that there was a whole lot of tension between lesbians and straight women. The tensions were between white women and women of color” (Vázquez 2005, 48).

²⁵ Vázquez recalls that some women of color broke with this pattern; they were Argentine and Peruvian lesbian feminists who were middle class yet who “had their own unique styles [and] were not hostile towards a gender expression that was different” (2005, 45).

²⁶ Tellez, known as “Comandante Dos,” was a commander in the FSLN (Randall 1994, 230; 1995, 40–54). In 1979, Tellez led “her mostly female high command” in taking control over León from Somoza’s National Guard, a crucial battle in establishing the revolutionary

Vázquez remembers having “had long [and difficult] conversations” with some of the women from AMNLAE “about being a lesbian and what it meant. . . . We were having those discussions, but we were having them in a context of deep respect and you know, lots of rum and dancing, and so that made it easier, for sure” (2005, 49).²⁷ Margaret Randall (1992) notes the “reciprocal influence” of US-Nicaraguan lesbian and gay movements in the context of transnational solidarity (70). The organized LGBT movement in Nicaragua is said to have emerged in 1985 (Randall 1993, 911; see also Babb 2003). Rita Arauz, a Nicaraguan who was “an open lesbian feminist” living in San Francisco’s Mission District when she was recruited by the FSLN in 1976, recounts that “it was within the homosexual community that I began to organize a movement of solidarity with the Sandinistas in the war against Somoza” (1994, 268). Arauz’s organization, GALA—Gay Latino Alliance—marched in solidarity with the Nicaraguan Revolution at the first national lesbian and gay March on Washington in October 1979 (268).

The Somos Hermanas delegation, the dance with Lucrecia, the encounter with the masculine-of-center Comandante Téllez, and meeting women engaged in a successful social revolution gave Vázquez the means to integrate all aspects of her identity and to celebrate her culture and masculine gender presentation (Vázquez 2005, 2010).²⁸ She relates that embracing her butch identity “was made possible by the many women of color who claimed identity within a liberation framework” (2010, 6). Somos Hermanas—though not exclusively a lesbian of color organization—was at the forefront of the project of integrating struggles that were falsely separated in people’s minds by virtue of the scattered hegemonies of heteronormativity and nationalism and contributed not only to lesbian visibility but to articulating the connections among race, class, gender, and sexuality to enable alliances that can (and did) challenge imperialist power (2005, 90).

government. As minister of public health, she spearheaded Nicaragua’s HIV/AIDS strategy and worked to legitimize the lesbian, gay, and transgender struggle within both the FSLN and the broader society (Randall 1992, 178 n. 5). Despite the FSLN’s electoral defeat, she was reelected in 1990. Now a historian, Téllez was denied a visa by the US government in 2005 after being invited to take up a position at Harvard (Campbell 2005). See also Springer (2011).

²⁷ Nicaraguan lesbian feminists have critiqued AMNLAE’s lesbophobic and antifeminist tendencies (Randall 1992, 67, 77; 1995, 918; Arauz 1994, 276–77).

²⁸ It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the complex gender, racial, sexual, and colonial dynamics of the Sandinista Revolution. See AMNLAE (1983), Stoltz Chinchilla (1990), Randall (1992, 1993, 1994, 1995), Figueroa (1996), Bayard de Volo (2001, 2012), Isbester (2001), Babb (2003), Kampwirth (2004), and Dunbar-Ortiz (2005).

Building bridges, integrating struggles

I am
 a world
 alone
 and I build bridges
 —Carmen Vázquez (1993, 220)²⁹

The integration of aspects of her identity unleashed Vázquez’s potential as a coalitional activist who has been engaged for over thirty years in movement building and bridge building. In the early 1990s, Vázquez “made a decision” to prioritize the LGBT movement, “because I felt that it’s a movement that’s enormously in need of some more political sophistication. [Laughs.] And two, because it’s a movement that needs to unravel racism in a way it has not. . . . And I—I love queers. I mean, I love queers and wanted to spend the rest of my life trying to figure out how do we organize a movement that is more diverse, inclusive, progressive” (2005, 68).

In 1994, Vázquez became the director of public policy at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in New York, playing there “the role that [she had] played in many organizations, . . . to be the nudge around diversity and race issues and, you know, being more inclusive” (2005, 73). Through her interventions as an ally to bisexual and transgender communities and after an “enormous amount of education” in the course of which a great deal of transphobia was expressed, the center was renamed and began to focus substantively on integrating transgender and bisexual people (74). The LGBT Center championed a race-critical policy opposing the death penalty and formed a reproductive rights–LGBT liberation coalition, called Causes in Common (71–76). Vázquez describes Causes in Common as “a significant effort to make the case that these are movements that should naturally, politically be in alliance with each other and figuring out how to do that” (73). Vázquez is a coalitional organizer who describes herself as “a bridge and . . . a translator” who “can move between communities and try and facilitate a dialogue that hopefully moves us all forward” (68). She emphasizes that it is her relationships with others within coalitions that enable her to “hold on to the different threads I have woven into what I call my self” (1997, 127).

There are many lessons to be drawn from *Somos Hermanas* and from Carmen Vázquez by scholars of social movement history and by coalitionally minded activists. For my purposes, one central lesson is that understanding one’s identity as a coalition enables one to cross boundaries

²⁹ Vázquez wrote this poem in 1962, at thirteen years of age.

imposed by systems of oppression, for instance, national borders. This is crucial if we are to transcend what Vázquez calls “the silos of identity that our movements have become” (2010, 1). More generally, the *Hermanas* analyses and identifications enabled a form of transnational solidarity activism that departs in crucial ways from models that have rightly been critiqued by antiracist feminists for reproducing hegemonic power relations (Mahrouse 2008). Situating *Somos Hermanas* in its historical moment enables us to recast the dominant narratives of US-based feminist, LGBT, and solidarity movements, a narrative that obscures the political agency of women of color, “depicting them as the rank and file in coalitions rather than the impetus behind [them]” (James 1999, 168; see also Thompson 2002).

Ideally, integration occurs not only at the level of the political movement but at the very personal level of one’s own embodied identity. To the extent that our identities are constructed by oppression and by resistance, members of multiply oppressed groups face the existential challenge of constructing internal as well as external bridges. Bringing together the aspects of one’s identity that have been falsely separated (both in the institutions of dominant society and in single-issue political movements) amounts to forming a coalition of one, in which one is aligned with all parts of oneself, especially those we are taught to deny, repress, or even annihilate.

Coalitions of one are strategies of survival for those who are regarded by their “natural” communities as outsiders, traitors, and fakers. Yet they can function as a microscale version of political coalitions, which have also been theorized as emerging out of necessity. Vázquez “believe[s] in coalitions” because “my survival is dependent on my ability to close the gaps between the different worlds that converge in me, and on my ability to cross over from my queer world or my Puerto Rican world or my women’s world and build alliances. It is only on the strength of those alliances that I can be whole—Puerto Rican lesbian living in a straight, sexist, and racist world” (1993, 221).

Members of multiply oppressed groups positioned dilemmatically between movements that refuse to view identities as in fact coalitional, and struggles as optimally interconnected, are in a position to express and communicate these existing and potential interconnections. Differences within us can enable radical alliances among us (Barvosa-Carter 1999). The experience of conflicting commitments to political movements can illuminate a “practice of integrated struggle,” which Cheryl Clarke identifies as “a core principle of black feminism—what we now call intersectionality” (2010, 781).

Conclusion

At stake in this argument are two competing ways of thinking about intersectionality and categories of identity that, in my view, differ vastly in

their theoretical implications and political ramifications. On the one hand, there is what I see as the dominant interpretation and deployment of intersectionality by many feminist theorists and researchers, who perceive intersectionality as consisting of merging, compounding, adding, joining, or uniting discrete, mutually exclusive, and stable categories of identity (race and gender, paradigmatically) that (on these accounts) correspond to discrete—if intersecting—systems of power. On the other hand, exploring Crenshaw’s largely ignored claims about identity categories as coalitions allows us to envision a counterhegemonic interpretation of intersectionality, one that I believe is more consistent with the analyses of Black feminists who introduced and elaborated this concept, its antecedents, and its successors. Intersectionality, in Crenshaw’s account, reveals the inadequacy of categories of discrimination—as well as of struggle—constructed using an essentialist logic that abstracts the experiences of relatively privileged members of oppressed groups and, falsely universalizing them, renders them representative of all members of the groups in question (Crenshaw 1989). For women of color, queer people of color, and other multiply oppressed groups, conceptualizing identity groups as “in fact” coalitions shifts our attention to the “intersectionalities within”—the multiplicity and contradictions of our identities disregarded by social movements that have failed to grasp the social totality and lived experiences of multiple oppressions in a nonfragmented way.³⁰

Vázquez (2010) tells us that “the liberated body must live through many identities and in many movements.” Her own trajectory—in which I have suggested that *Somos Hermanas* played a crucial role—suggests that the integration of intersectional identities that are disparaged, denied visibility, and marginalized within identity-based politics is interconnected with the collective ability to integrate struggles against simultaneous oppression(s). We can be fully ourselves only in relation to others in movements that advance coalitional conceptions of identity and that articulate the connections between what have been theorized as discrete systems of oppression. The archive of *Somos Hermanas* and the coalitional praxis of Carmen Vázquez reveal that we can do politics in ways that allow the possibilities of coalition and solidarity to construct our identities as much as those relations of domination against which we struggle.

—*In memory of Claudia Baltazar*

*Department of Philosophy
California State University Los Angeles*

³⁰ Lisbeth Espinosa, personal communication with the author, Los Angeles, May 31, 2011.

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