

Bernice Johnson Reagon and the Necessity of Coalition Work

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ABOUT A DECADE AGO...“The scene...was a civics text come to life,” Andrew Rudalevige (2003b, p. 63) contends. Surrounded by jubilant members of U. S. Congress—including Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy, Democratic Representative George Miller, Republican Senator Judd Gregg and Republican Representative John Boehner—and standing in front of a cheering crowd, President George W. Bush declared the start of a “new era” in American public education with the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The law represented the most sweeping reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act since it was originally enacted in 1965.

The development and passage of this legislation had been a long time in the making. NCLB was the cumulative result of a standards-based reform movement that began with the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* by the Reagan administration in 1983. This report declared war on public education, especially teachers, and despite being grounded on two unexamined and misleading assumptions—that testing is an accurate measure of education quality and school is responsible for the nation’s economy—it was successful in convincing citizens that American schools had truly gone wrong and something needed to be done. The movement progressively gained momentum over a twenty-year period with key events and legislative efforts. By the mid-1990s, the main themes of NCLB were already on the table and steadily gaining support from politicians, the business community, and the general public.

This is not to suggest that when NCLB emerged when Congress opened its doors in January 2001 it had wide support. NCLB was under fire from all sides: from local officials who rejected national norms; from teacher unions that rejected mandatory testing; and from conservatives who were angry over vouchers no longer being on the table. It took a year of negotiating the disputes among the different groups and many issues were left unresolved. In fact, the bill ended up satisfying no one. There were multiple factors that led to the passage of NCLB but one of the most important was when a group of four politicians—Kennedy, Miller, Gregg and Boehner—who previously “wouldn’t even have sat down together” (Rudalevige, 2003a, p. 42) formed a coalition. Known as the “big four” they were key figures in not only leading the charge for

NCLB but also molding the legislation. There was little agreement found among them. But one common belief became the driving force behind their coalition work: dramatic changes were needed in American schooling. Their coalition was formed to advance this shared principle.

Just a few months ago... a powerful coalition—television celebrity Oprah Winfrey, Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, Republican Governor Chris Christie, and Democrat Mayor Cory Booker—formed to impose a business model of educational reform on the public schools in Newark, New Jersey. They formed this coalition with a shared goal (and \$100 million from Zuckerberg) to take over the Newark public schools. They have provided little specific information about what this takeover would actually mean other than taking control of public schools away from, what they describe as, greedy and ineffective teachers and their unions. As a result of this coalition, they are being successful in moving toward this takeover.

It is important to note that, by conventional measures, New Jersey's public schools are among the most successful in the United States with the highest graduation rate and one of the top five states in every grade and subject tested by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). It is also one of the few states where test score gaps among student subgroups have decreased in recent years (Karp, 2010). But these facts are apparently irrelevant. The newly formed coalition of unlikely associates has further established the dominant narrative that declares public schooling a failed system and therefore in crisis. Without equally influential coalitions offering alternative narratives, this group of mostly politicians and businesspeople is setting the agenda for public education while educators are being further marginalized.

Over the years, coalitions have been formed on a number of occasions to advance particular principles. Unfortunately, these principles have created and continue to do so a nightmarish situation (Pinar, 2004) for schools, the larger field of education, and curriculum studies. In fact, these coalitions have consistently stood in the way of opening up theoretical spaces to further redefine, challenge, and resist limited and uncomplicated conceptions of schooling, education, and curriculum. The anti-intellectualism most often reflected in these principles runs counter to the “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004) that is central to curriculum studies. Recently, I have turned to the life and work of Bernice Johnson Reagon in exploring some possibilities—in the plural (Badiou, 1998)—for building coalitions that advance alternative principles. For well over four decades, Reagon has been a major cultural voice for freedom and justice; spending her life as a scholar, artist, singer, and teacher to speak out against racism and organized inequities. I have focused previously (Howard, in press) on a speech Reagon (1983) delivered at the West Coast Women's Festival in 1981 on the importance of building coalitions to work creatively and productively within/through a crisis. She placed this importance of coalition work throughout her career and life. And nowhere is this seen more clearly than through her music.

The Transformative Power of Song

An understanding of Bernice Johnson Reagon's life and work is nearly impossible without an understanding of the origin of her music that was so deeply connected to the Black Baptist Church. The daughter of a Baptist Minister, Reagon was raised in rural Georgia surrounded by the music of her father's church. From the day she was born, her parents immersed her in the life of the church, and music, particularly gospel music, was an integral part of that life. Although her family church had no piano or other musical instruments, she learned to capture the uplifting spirit of gospel music by singing, clapping her hands and stomping her feet. She credited the

church environment with shaping her identity as a singer and even her voice. Reagon (1993) wrote, “I was five years old [when]...I had experienced allowing the energy and support from the congregation to come into my voice and it changed my voice” (p. 135). She further explains that the power of singing in church during these formative years “made tracks in my soul—I am who I am because I was raised in the shadows between the lines of my people living their lives out in a song” (p. 141).

Along with her church and community, schooling through high school played a fundamental role in the development of her music. After completing her years at Blue Springs Elementary School, Reagon was one of the first African American children in her region to be bused to the county junior and senior high schools. For most African American children in her community at that time, they did not continue formal schooling beyond elementary grades. As Reagon (1993) explained, “If you were a student who finished the seventh grade in our county, the only way you could get to junior and senior high school was if your parents drove you or if you could board in town. Most students could not make it to school until we got that bus” (p. 143). With the necessary transportation provided, Reagon began high school in 1955 and soon after became the contralto soloist in the school chorus. It was during her high school years when she had her first glimpse of the two paths that would converge in her life for the next decade: College and the civil rights movement. She joined the Youth Chapter of the local NAACP and by her senior year she held a leadership role in the group. Meanwhile, her musical talent landed her an audition with the head of music department at Albany State College.

After high school, she continued her education by studying music at Albany State University. She soon discovered, however, that the music studies offered in the academic setting were not what she had imagined. As Reagon (1993) explains, “I started out as a music major, but had real trouble feeling music in the theory and harmony classes, so I thought I could not be a real musician” (p. 150). Discouraged with her academic setting, she found herself increasingly drawn to the civil rights movement, which had a more significant value to her life. Reagon quickly became involved in political activity, lending her talents as a community organizer, as a marcher, and whatever the situation demanded. In the fall of her second year of college, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to Albany and Reagon threw herself into the group’s work, which mainly focused on anti-segregation demonstrations and voter registration drives. During that semester, she spent time in jail, and, as Reagon describes, “found a new voice” (p. 153). Sharing a cell with nearly forty other women, Reagon came to a deeper understanding of music as a political act that could defuse conflict and consolidate purpose. Her time in jail also prompted her growth as a leader. She recalls, “When things would rub between people of different persuasions, someone would say, ‘Sing a song, Bernice,’ and I would. People were not necessarily changed, but singing collectively created more space to be together in a cell with no space...the singing seemed to connect people, and I was perceived as one of the leaders” (p. 156).

Although she was one of the highest-ranking students in her class, she was kicked out of college that semester for her involvement in political activities. The college administration did not condone activist participation in marches and demonstrations and suspended her. The music department at Spelman College was quick to court her and she attended Spelman briefly before returning to her work with the SNCC. As Reagon (1993) explains, “Leaving school was wrenching. I was on full scholarship at one of the best schools in the country and I needed to not be there. I needed to be in the Movement...” (p. 159). While still attending Spelman, Cordell Reagon, her future husband, and Jim Forman organized the Freedom Singers. The Freedom

Singers were originally formed to raise money for the SNCC and to inform audiences about various grassroots efforts expanding in communities of the South. She became a vital member of the Freedom Singers for only a year but set the template for the rest of her life as a singing fighter.

Singing to combat bigotry and to bolster the spirit of those engaged in struggle all across the country, the Freedom Singers played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement. Aside from fund-raising for voter registration drives, the group used songs to galvanize civil rights activists. Their singing was much more than just entertainment and more than just pleasing to the ear. Most of their songs were common hymns familiar to the southern African American community with lyrics modified to reflect the political aims of the Civil Rights Movement more so than the spiritual aims of a congregation. The Freedom Singers' songs reflected the views and values behind the Movement. As Reagon (1993) describes, "We told stories in song (sometimes we called ourselves a singing newspaper) that let our audiences know firsthand about racism in the United States and that helped them find ways for themselves to witness for freedom" (p. 161).

The transformative power of song was very apparent in the performances of the Freedom Singers. After witnessing the galvanizing effect of the Freedom Singers during a visit to Albany in 1962, folk singer Pete Seeger urged the group to begin a national tour. Over the next nine months after that suggestion, the group traveled over fifty thousand miles through forty states in a Buick station wagon, playing at colleges, elementary and high schools, concert halls, living rooms, jails, political rallies, and the March on Washington in August 1963. Reagon summarizes her early experiences in Freedom Singers by saying, "I sang and stood in the sound of the congregational singing of the freedom songs charging the air we breathed...I understood how the singing not only pulled us together, but became our articulate collective testimony to all who stood within the sound."¹

Coalition Work

Reagon has spent most of her life engaging in coalition work to combat injustices and urging others to join her in those efforts. From Reagon's understanding, coalition building is fundamentally about people working with others different from themselves. Differences among the groups in a coalition are neither ignored nor particularly celebrated. Differences are not addressed to form some kind of loving relationship between the groups but rather out necessity for the purpose of advancing shared principles. Difference, within coalitions, remains threatening, but can be, as Audre Lorde (1981) insists, a source of creativity and strength: "Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged" (p. 99).

Over the years, there have been scholars engaged in coalition work to advance particular principles in the curriculum studies field. In the United States, one of the most important coalitions established was in the mid-1970s with the reconceptualization of the field (Pinar, 1975, 1978). A diverse group of scholars came together to redirect the field toward critical politics with a focus on issues of power and equality. These efforts to shift the focus of analysis in curriculum scholarship did not happen without challenge even at the beginning of the reconceptualization (e.g., Jackson, 1980) that has continued over the years (e.g., Hlebowitsh, 1993, 2005; Wraga, 1999; Wraga & Hlebowitsh, 2003). Even with these challenges from "traditionalists," the coalition of scholars that advanced the reconceptualization was successful in situating curriculum

studies as an “extraordinarily complicated conversation” (Henderson, 2001, p. 18). As Wright (2000) argues, the “reconceptualization is firmly established and thriving despite ongoing critiques” (pp. 5–6).

More recently, a coalition of scholars from countries and regions throughout the world established the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies to advance efforts toward the internationalization of curriculum studies. This coalition was not interested in working toward neither a uniformity nor standardization of curriculum studies throughout the world. Believing that curriculum study is nationally distinctive, this coalition instead worked toward providing support for scholarly conversations about curriculum across national and regional borders (Pinar, 2004). For approximately the past ten years, they have been successful in maintaining a strong coalition of different groups of scholars from multiple countries to advance this shared principle of internationalizing the curriculum studies field.

Although some coalitions have been formed at different moments, the curriculum studies field has remained, as many scholars have pointed out, largely balkanized and fractured (e.g., Kafala & Cary, 2006). In fact, what Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) argued over fifteen years ago remains true: “The sense of collective enterprise, of all of us working together, despite serious differences in outlook and methods of working, is conspicuously absent at the present time” (p. 5). The fragmentations within the field make it difficult, to the say the least, to address the challenges we face of opening up theoretical spaces. The present conditions demand a commitment to coalition work. By working together, we can move toward possibilities that are unforeseeable in the current divided landscape of the curriculum studies field.

NOTES

1. Quoted from Reagon’s personal website: <http://www.bernicejohnsonreagon.com/bio.shtml>

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