

automatic solidarity and empathy. The Indian group sat in my motel room discussing and exchanging our experiences within the third world context. We didn't spend much time in workshops conducted by other third world people because of feeling unwelcomed at the conference and demoralized by having an invisible presence. What's worse than being invisible among your own kind?

It is of particular importance to us as third world gay people to begin a serious interchange of sharing and educating ourselves about each other. We not only must struggle with the racism and homophobia of straight white america, but must often struggle with the homophobia that exists within our third world communities. Being third world doesn't always connote a political awareness or activism. I've met a number of third world and Native American lesbians who've said they're just into "being themselves," and that politics has no meaning in their lives. I agree that everyone is entitled to "be themselves" but in a society that denies respect and basic rights to people because of their ethnic background, I feel that individuals cannot idly sit by and allow themselves to be co-opted by the dominant society. I don't know what moves a person to be politically active or to attempt to raise the quality of life in our world. I only know what motivates my political responsibility...the death of Anna Mae Aquash - Native American freedom fighter - "mysteriously" murdered by a bullet in the head; Raymond Yellow Thunder - forced to dance naked in front of a white VFW club in Nebraska - murdered; Rita Silk-Nauni - imprisoned for life for defending her child; my dear friend Mani Lucas-Papago - shot in the back of the head outside of a gay bar in Phoenix. The list could go on and on. My Native American History, recent and past, moves me to continue as a political activist.

And in the white gay community there is rampant racism which is never adequately addressed or acknowledged. My friend Chrystos from the Menominee Nation gave a poetry reading in May 1980, at a Bay Area feminist bookstore. Her reading consisted of poems and journal entries in which she wrote honestly from her heart about the many "isms" and contradictions in most of our lives. Chrystos' bluntly revealing observations on her experiences with the white-lesbian-feminist-

community are similar to mine and are probably echoed by other lesbians of color.

Her honesty was courageous and should be representative of the kind of forum our community needs to openly discuss mutual racism. A few days following Chrystos' reading, a friend who was in the same bookstore overheard a white lesbian denounce Chrystos' reading as anti-lesbian and racist.

A few years ago, a white lesbian telephoned me requesting an interview, explaining that she was taking Native American courses at a local university, and that she needed data for her paper on gay Native Americans. I agreed to the interview with the idea that I would be helping a "sister" and would also be able to educate her about Native American struggles. After we completed the interview, she began a diatribe on how sexist Native Americans are, followed by a questioning session in which I was to enlighten her mind about why Native Americans are so sexist. I attempted to rationally answer her inanely racist and insulting questions, although my inner response was to tell her to remove herself from my house. Later it became very clear how I had been manipulated as a sounding board for her ugly and distorted views about Native Americans. Her arrogance and disrespect were characteristic of the racist white people in South Dakota. If I tried to point it out, I'm sure she would have vehemently denied her racism.

During the Brigg's Initiative scare, I was invited to speak at a rally to represent Native American solidarity against the initiative. The person who spoke prior to me expressed a pro-Bakke sentiment which the audience booed and hissed. His comments left the predominantly white audience angry and in disruption. A white lesbian stood up demanding that a third world person address the racist comments he had made. The MC, rather than taking responsibility for restoring order at the rally, realized that I was the next speaker and I was also T-H-I-R-D-W-O-R-L-D!! I refused to address the remarks of the previous speaker because of the attitudes of the MC and the white lesbian that only third world people are responsible for speaking out against racism. *It is inappropriate for progressive or liberal white people to expect warriors in brown armor to eradicate racism.* There must be co-responsibility from people of color and white people

to equally work on this issue. It is not just MY responsibility to point out and educate about racist activities and beliefs.

Redman, redskin, savage, heathen, injun, american indian, first americans, indigenous peoples, natives, amerindian, native american, nigger, negro, black, wet back, greaser, mexican, spanish, latin, hispanic, chicano, chink, oriental, asian, disadvantaged, special interest group, minority, third world, fourth world, people of color, illegal aliens – oh yes about them, will the US government recognize that the Founding Fathers (you know George Washington and all those guys) are this country's first illegal aliens.

We are named by others and we are named by ourselves.

Epilogue...

Following writing most of this, I went to visit my home in South Dakota. It was my first visit in eight years. I kept putting off my visit year after year because I could not tolerate the white people there and the ruralness and poverty of the reservation. And because in the eight years since I left home, I came out as a lesbian. My visit home was overwhelming. Floods and floods of locked memories broke. I rediscovered myself there in the hills, on the prairies, in the sky, on the road, in the quiet nights, among the stars, listening to the distant yelps of coyotes, walking on Lakota earth, seeing Bear Butte, looking at my grandparents' cragged faces, standing under wakiyan, smelling the Paha Sapa (Black Hills), and being with my precious circle of relatives.

My sense of time changed, my manner of speaking changed, and a certain freedom with myself returned.

I was sad to leave but recognized that a significant part of myself has never left and never will. And that part is what gives me strength – the strength of my people's enduring history and continuing belief in the sovereignty of our lives.

Notes

1. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“... And Even Fidel Can't Change That!”

Aurora Levins Morales

1

Cherríe, you asked me to write about internationalism, and at first it made sense...I'm a Latin woman in the United States, closely involved with Latin American movements in the rest of the continent. I *should* write about the connection. But when I tried, all I could think was: No, write about the separation.

2

For me the point of terror, the point of denial is the New York Puerto Rican. My mother was born in New York in 1930, raised in Spanish Harlem and the Bronx. I represent the generation of return. I was born deep in the countryside of Puerto Rico and except for four years when I was very young, lived there until I was 13. For my mother, the Barrio is safety, warmth. For me, it's the fear of racist violence that clipped her tongue of all its open vowels, into crisp, imitation British. She once told me her idea of hell was to be a single mother of two children under five in the South Bronx. I'm afraid of ever knowing what she meant.

Where I grew up, I fought battles to prove I was Puerto Rican with the kids who called me “Americanita,” but I stayed on the safe side of that line: Caribbean island, not Portah Ricah; exotic tropical blossom, not spic – living halfway in the skin and separating myself from the dark, bad city kids in Nueva York.

3

The point of terror, of denial, the point of hatred is the tight dress stretched across my grandmother's big breasts, the coquettish, well made-up smile: grandmother, aunt and greataunts all decked out in sex, talking about how I'm pretty, talking about how men are only good for one thing, hating sex and gloating over the hidden filthiness in everything, looking me over, in a hurry to find me a boyfriend, and in the same breath: “you can't travel alone! You don't know what men are like...*they only want one thing...*” Women teaching women our bodies are disgusting and dirty, our desires are obscene, men are all sick

and want only one sickening thing from us. Saying, you've got to learn how to hold out on 'em just enough to get what you want. It's the only item you can put on the market, so better make it go far, and when you have to deliver, lie down and grit your teeth and bear it, because there's no escape.

4

And yet, I tell you, I love those women for facing up to the ugliness there. No romance, no roses and moonlight and pure love. You say pure love to one of these women and they snort and ask you what the man has between his legs and is it pure? I love these women for the bitch sessions that pool common knowledge and tell the young wife: "Oh, yes, the first time he cheated on me I tried that, too, but he just beat me. Listen, don't give him the satisfaction. The next time..." These women don't believe in the sanctity of the marriage bond, the inviolable privacy of the husband-wife unit. The cattiness is mixed with the information, tips. The misery is communal.

5

Claustrophobia. A reality I can't make a dent in...because it's the misery that's communal. The resistance is individual and frowned upon. It rocks the boat. How many times has a Latin woman stood up for me in private, then stabbed me in the back when the moment comes for the support that counts. How many times has a Latin woman used me to bitch to and then gone running to men for approval, leaving me in the lurch. The anger is real and deep: You have forced me to turn out of my own culture to find allies worthy of the name; you have forced me into a room full of Anglo women who nod sympathetically and say: "Latin men are soooo much worse than Anglo men..." Why the last time I was in Mexico, you couldn't walk down the streets without some guy...It must be so hard for you to be a Latin feminist..." And not to betray you in the face of their racism, I betray myself, and in the end, you, by not saying: It's not the men who exile me...it's the women. I don't trust the women.

6

Points of terror. Points of denial. Repeat the story that it was my grandmother who went to look at apartments. Light skinned, fine, black hair: I'm Italian, she would tell them, keeping the dark-skinned husband, keeping the daughters out of sight. I have pretended that pain, that shame, that anger never touched me, does not stain my skin. She could pass for Italian. She kept her family behind her. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother working at the bra and girdle factory, speaking with an accent, lying to get an apartment in Puertoricanness neighborhoods.

7

Piri Thomas' book *Down These Mean Streets* followed me around for years, in the corner of my eye on bus terminal bookracks. Finally, in a gritted teeth desperation I faced the damn thing and said "OK, tell me." I sweated my way through it in two nights: Gang fights, knifings, robberies, smack, prison. It's the standard Puerto Rican street story, except *he* lived. The junkies could be my younger brothers. The prisoners could be them. I could be the prostitute, the welfare mother, the sister and lover of junkies, the child of alcoholics. There is nothing but circumstance and good English, nothing but my mother marrying into the middle class, between me and that life.

8

The image stays with me of my mother's family fleeing their puertoricanness, the first spics on the block, behind them, the neighborhoods collapsing into slums. There was a war, she told me. The enemy was only a step behind. I borrow the pictures from my other family, the nightmares of my Jewish ancestry, and imagine them fleeing through the streets. My mother never went back to look. This year she saw on television the ruins of the Tiffany Street of her childhood, unrecognizable, bombarded by poverty and urban renewal into an image of some European city: 1945. Like the Jews, like many people, the place she could have returned to has been destroyed.

9

I saw a baby once, the same age as my fat, crowing baby brother, then six months old. I was twelve, and under the

influence of our Seventh Day Adventist teacher some of the girls in the seventh grade took up a collection for two poor families in the neighborhood. We bought them each one bag of groceries. This baby was just a little bit of skin stretched over a tiny skeleton. It hardly moved. It didn't even cry. It just lay there. The woman's husband had left her. The oldest boy, he was 13 or 14, worked picking coffee to help out. When we came the younger kids hid in the mother's skirts and she just stood there, crying and crying.

I ran straight home when we left and the first thing I did was to find my brother and hug him very tightly. Then I spent the rest of the afternoon feeding him.

If something had happened to my father, the ghost over my mother's shoulder would have caught up with us. Papi was our middle class passport. I grew up a professor's daughter, on the road to college, speaking good English. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother. Behind me lie the mean streets. Behind me my little brother is nothing but skin and skeleton.

10

Writing this I am browner than I have ever been. Spanish ripples on my tongue and I *want* the accent. I walk through the Mission drinking in the sounds. I go into La Borinqueña and buy *yautia* and *plátano* for dinner. Facing up to the terror, ending the denial, refusing to obey the rule "Don't talk bad about your own people in front of anyone else." I have never learned to dance salsa. My body goes rigid when the music plays. Oh yes, I tap my feet, and now and then I do a few steps, swing around the room with someone who doesn't know more than I do...but if I'm in a Latin scene I freeze. I can't make my hips fluid or keep my feet from tripping. It's the perversion of sexuality that frightens me. It's the way the women around me exude a sexiness that has nothing to do with the heart. Of course Latin Women love as well as any other women...but while the chilliest Anglo-Saxon repression of sex pretends it simply doesn't exist, Latin repression says it's a filthy fact of life, use it for what it's worth...shake it in his face, wear it as a decoy. It's all over the

floor and it's cold and savage. It's the hatred of the powerless, turned crooked.

11

Sitting in the kitchen in oh-so-white New Hampshire with old friends, mother and daughter, Ceci says, "It takes three generations. If you resolve your relationship with your mother you'll both change, and your daughter will have it easier, but *her* daughter will be raised differently. In the third generation the daughters are free." I'm not thinking then of this essay, but days later when I sit down again to work, the phrase keeps ringing: *In the third generation the daughters are free.*

12

"Don't you think I've swallowed my mouthful of blood? It's different for a man. You're too stubborn...you've always wanted your own way. It was this way for my grandmother, it was this way for my mother, it was this way for me...because this is the way it is. God made men and women different and even Fidel can't change that! Anything is better than being alone."

Older woman in *Portrait of Teresa*
Cuban film, 1979

13

The relationship between mother and daughter stands in the center of what I fear most in our culture. Heal that wound and we change the world.

A revolution capable of healing our wounds. If we're the ones who can imagine it, if we're the ones who dream about it, if we're the ones who need it most, then no one else can do it.

We're the ones.

I Walk in the History of My People

Chrystos

There are women locked in my joints
for refusing to speak to the police
My red blood full of those
arrested, in flight, shot
My tendons stretched brittle with anger
do not look like white roots of peace
In my marrow are hungry faces who live on land the whites
don't want

In my marrow women who walk 5 miles every day for water
In my marrow the swollen faces of my people who are not
allowed
to hunt
to move
to be

In the scars on my knee you can see children torn from
their families
bludgeoned into government schools
You can see through the pins in my bones that we are prisoners
of a long war

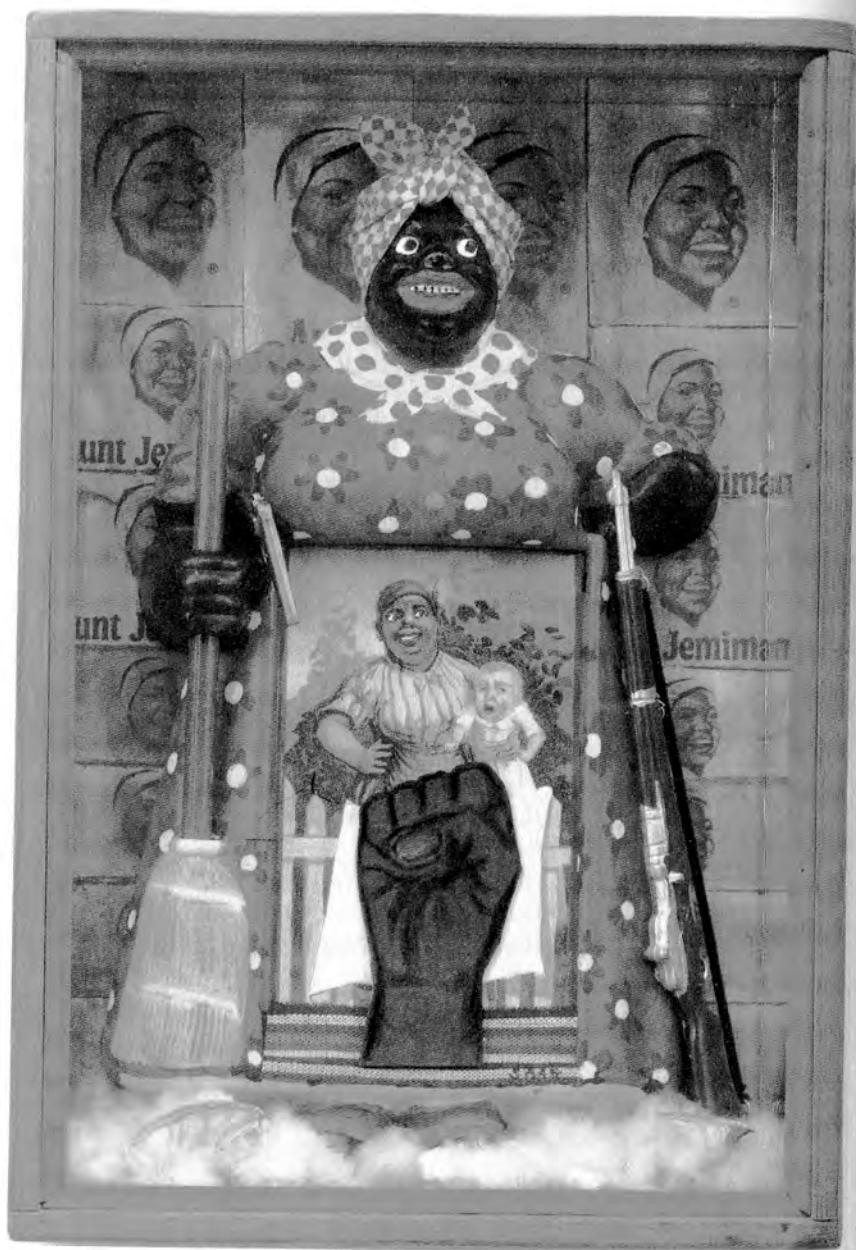
My knee is so badly wounded no one will look at it
The pus of the past oozes from every pore
The infection has gone on for at least 300 years
My sacred beliefs have been made pencils, names of cities,
gas stations

My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly
Anger is my crutch
I hold myself upright with it
My knee is wounded
see

How I Am Still Walking

And When You Leave,
Take Your Pictures
With You

Racism in the Women's
Movement



Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972
Mixed media, 11.75" x 8" x 2.75"
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum
Photo by Benjamin Blackwell

And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You

Racism in the Women's Movement

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.¹

– Barbara Smith

We women of color are the veterans of a class and color war that is still escalating in the feminist movement. This section attempts to describe in tangible ways how, under the name of feminism, white women of economic and educational privilege have used that privilege at the expense of Third World women. Although the original intent of including a section in this anthology specifically about racism in the movement was to make a *connection* with white women, it *feels* now more like a separation.

Things have gotten worse. In academic and cultural circles, Third World women have become the subject matter of many literary and artistic endeavors by white women, and yet we are refused access to the pen, the publishing house, the galleries, and the classroom. "Only for the sake of art/Millicent, do you rise/tall from the ink" (Daniels). Our traditional native cultures are ripped off from us and are displayed as the artifacts of "primitive" peoples by white Bohemian liberated women headed for the West Coast. In leftist feminist circles we are dealt with as a political issue, rather than as flesh and blood human beings. We represent the party line, but the truth is, "We're not as happy as we look/on their/wall" (Carrillo). We have had it with the word "*outreach*" referring to our joining racist white women's organizations. The question keeps coming up – where exactly then, is *in*? It smells like white to us. We have had it.

Repeatedly acknowledged throughout this section and infusing the entire contents of this anthology is our understanding that theory alone cannot wipe out racism. We do

not experience racism, whether directed at ourselves or others, theoretically. Neither do white women.

How does one then emotionally come to terms with racism? None of us in this book can challenge others to confront questions that we ourselves have not confronted. How do we deal with the ways in which this diseased society has infused our very blood systems? How do we take personal responsibility for our own racist actions and assumptions?

As Third World women we clearly have a different relationship to racism than white women, but all of us are born into an environment where racism exists. Racism affects all of our lives, but it is only white women who can "afford" to remain oblivious to these effects. The rest of us have had it breathing or bleeding down our necks.

But you work with what you have, whatever your skin color. Racism is societal and institutional. It implies the power to implement racist ideology. Women of color do not have such power, but white women are born with it and the greater their economic privilege, the greater their power. This is how white middle-class women emerge among feminist ranks as the greatest propagators of racism in the movement. Rather than using the privilege they have to crumble the institutions that house the source of their own oppression – sexism, along with racism – they oftentimes deny their privilege in the form of "downward mobility," or keep it intact in the form of guilt. Fear is a feeling – fear of losing one's power, fear of being accused, fear of a loss of status, control, knowledge. Guilt is *not* a feeling. It is an intellectual mask to a feeling. Fear is real. Possibly this is the emotional, non-theoretical place from which serious anti-racist work among white feminists can begin.

The women writing here are committed feminists. We are challenging white feminists to be accountable for their racism because at the base we still *want* to believe that they really *want* freedom for *all* of us. The letter from Audre Lorde to Mary Daly appearing in this section is an example to all of us of how we as feminists can criticize each other. It is an act of love to take someone at her word, to expect the most out of a woman who calls herself a feminist – to challenge her as you yourself wish to be challenged.

As women, on some level we all know oppression. We must use this knowledge, as Rosario Morales suggests, to "identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt."

...For "We are all in the same boat."
And it is sinking fast.

Notes

1. From a talk given at the closing session at the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) Conference, May 1979; appeared in *Frontiers*, vol. v, no. 1 (1980).

And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You

Jo Carrillo

Our white sisters
radical friends
love to own pictures of us
sitting at a factory machine
wielding a machete
in our bright bandanas
holding brown yellow black red children
reading books from literacy campaigns
holding machine guns bayonets bombs knives
Our white sisters
radical friends
should think
again.

Our white sisters
radical friends
love to own pictures of us
walking to the fields in hot sun
with straw hat on head if brown
bandana if black
in bright embroidered shirts
holding brown yellow black red children
reading books from literacy campaigns
smiling.

Our white sisters radical friends
should think again.

No one smiles
at the beginning of a day spent
digging for souvenir chunks of uranium
of cleaning up after
our white sisters
radical friends

And when our white sisters
radical friends see us
in the flesh

not as a picture they own,
they are not quite as sure
if
they like us as much.
We're not as happy as we look
on
their
wall.

Beyond the Cliffs of Abiquiu¹

Jo Carrillo

She calls you a rock.
He calls you a rock.
They both agree that you
are unworthy
of anything
but a slow death.

Her skin is white;
more parched than
the land she hates.
Silver fades into her arm
turquoise matches
nothing
more than her
eyes
but she wears it.

two cliffs little trees lots of rocks
is this land nothing but a rock? She asks
while gracefully walking back to her
MG

OH, yes I know, I live here
in this desert
and let me tell you...!
The whole place is
parched.
Just one great big rock.

Let me see,
do I have time to put on my
my
my
squash blossom.

It's Authentic Navajo Indian Laguna Pueblo
design from
Buen Muir Indian Trading Post

completely
 staffed
 by
 whites
 except of course
 for the janitor.

How can it be
 that the mines
 the uranium cancer causing dangerous radon gas emitting
 mines
 are worked by Navajos and other assorted
 types
 and the trading posts
 are all
 all
 worked over
 by whites?

The mines belong to them
 too;
 don't enjoy the work as much?
 Rather sell Authentic Navajo Hopi Zuni Indian made
 real
 live
 Laguna Santa Ana Santo Domingos?

It's
 less
 of a mess.

Oh, those Indians.
 They are
 all
 just
 drunks.
 Can't even go through Gallup
 without seeing at least
 at least
 at least

ten of them.

Oh, let's step into this Navajo rug shop
while we're here.

But you don't have *that*
in San Francisco Los Angeles New York
Albuquerque.

They are really lovely rugs
my whole house is done
in

Navajo rugs
it's adobe

in Corrales
by the river

lots of
rich

whites

with Authentic Navajo Hopi Zuni Indian made real live
Laguna Santa Ana Santo Domingo
artifacts.

There is a village
over
that
hill.

Notes

1. My poem to the land that, along with South Dakota, is a "proposed National Sacrifice" area for energy (uranium, coal, coal gasification, etc.).

I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me

Chrystos

5:23 am – May 1980

I am afraid of white people Never admitted that before
deep secret

I think about all the white women I knew in San Francisco
Women with Master's degrees from Stanford University & cars
that daddy bought, women with straight white teeth & clear skins
from thousands of years of proper nutrition They chose to be
poor They were quite convincing in the role of oppressed
victim I want to tell them to go down to Fillmore & Haight &
tell somebody about it Tell Jim my old landlord who picked
cotton since he was 6 moved here for a better life lost his hearing
& his teeth & his hair from working in the shipyards for 35 years
The constant vibration of his drill on the metal literally shook his
teeth out He went bald from always wearing a safety helmet
He can't hear after years of that racket He worked so hard for
35 years & he is still poor They live on Webster street, across
from the projects The house is an old Victorian which will not
be paid off unless he lives to be 89 which is unlikely.

I read the funniest line in a health book yesterday It said,
that for some "unknown" reason, more black people had
hypertension than white people Not funny No mystery
Most Indian people don't usually live long enough to even GET
hypertension All the deaths I carry so heavily Faces I knew
Mani murdered in Phoenix by whites outside a bar whites
who still have not gone to trial Ron dying of pneumonia I
still mourn him death None of my relatives has a degree
from Stanford Neither did Jim So those poor white girls are
still suffering mightily in my old home town of San Francisco

It did not help that it occurred to me that no amount of
education was going to improve my lot in life if I didn't also
change my attitude about the society I still think that 98% of
what happens – liberal, conservative or radical lesbian separatist
is: bullshit My attitude is all I own so I quit school

All the schools & crazy houses I was in were simply
brainwashing & most of the feminist movement that I worked so

hard to be a part of was propaganda. This is heresy but it held no solution for me. Surely Jane suffers oppression on her job because she is a woman. All the problems and issues which feminism raises are valid & important. It simply does not give me any answers for correct behavior in my own life. Certainly I won't obey that lesbian mafia nonsense that one must dress in a certain way or cut off one's hair to be real. Those are all the most superficial rules. Silly. I no longer believe that feminism is a tool which can eliminate racism – or even promote better understanding between different races & kinds of women. I have felt less understanding between different races & from many lesbian women than I do from some straight people. At least their heterosexual indifference allows me more freedom to be myself. I felt so much stricture & censorship from lesbians. I was supposed to be a carpenter to prove I was a real dyke. My differences were sloughed over. None of them came to a pow wow or an AIM¹ fundraiser to see about *me*. Above all I could not enjoy & love being a woman. Jane commented when I first met her that she didn't care for most lesbians because they didn't like women. They didn't like themselves. Of course it is extremely difficult to like oneself in a culture which thinks you are a disease.

Many of the lesbians I knew seemed to throw off the outer trappings of their culture & were very vocal in criticizing it. Yet, they had no joy, no new roads. Night after night in endless picky meetings discussing everyone's inadequacies & faults & the harm which men do or night after night in dreary body shop bars drinking themselves into a stupor I worked so hard as part of a local women's coffeeshop & bookstore, harder than I've ever worked. I ordered for the kitchen, & the art shows, did shifts, brought flowers, cleaned, met the pest man & phone man, did entertainment, washed a million coffee cups. Recently someone told me that a young lesbian whose parents have given her a law practice, commented that she remembered me. I didn't work she said. All I did was talk to people. I remember her too. She was one of the thousands of women whose names & faces I memorized & tried to understand only to have them disappear after 3 months or whenever they found a lover. After 3-1/2 years I had so little left of myself. So many bitter memories of women who disrespected me & others. A woman

who called herself a communist but supported capitalist enterprises of women, rather than our brave collective worker-owned effort
 The lies, pretensions, the snobbery & cliquishness
 The racism which bled through every moment at every level
 The terrifying & useless struggle to be accepted
 The awful gossip, bitchiness, backbiting & jealousy
 The gross lack of love

I left the women's movement utterly drained
 I have no interest in returning
 My dreams of crossing barriers to true understanding were false
 Most of the white women I thought I was close to want nothing to do with me now
 Perhaps white women are so rarely loyal because they do not have to be
 There are thousands of them to pick up & discard
 No responsibility to others
 The bathing beauties
 They want the status of reality & respect without labor
 Respect us simply because we exist
 Give us what we want now
 My bitterness distorts my words

I don't understand those who turned away from me

Notes

1. American Indian Movement

Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism

Mitsuye Yamada

Most of the Asian Pacific American women I know agree that we need to make ourselves more visible by speaking out on the condition of our sex and race on certain political issues which concern us. Some of us feel that visibility through the feminist perspective is the only logical step for us. However, this path is fraught with problems which we are unable to solve among us, because in order to do so, we need the help and cooperation of the white feminist leaders, the women who coordinate programs, direct women's buildings, and edit women's publications throughout the county. Women's organizations tell us they would like to have us "join" them and give them "input." These are the better ones; at least they know we exist and feel we might possibly have something to say of interest to them, but every time I read or speak to a group of people about the condition of my life as an Asian Pacific woman, it is as if I had never spoken before, as if I were speaking to a brand new audience of people who had never known an Asian Pacific woman who is other than the passive, sweet etc. stereotype of the "Oriental" woman.

When Third World women are asked to speak representing our racial or ethnic group, we are expected to move, charm or entertain, but not to educate in ways that are threatening to our audiences. We speak to audiences that sift out those parts of our speech (if what we say does not fit the image they have of us), come up to shake our hands with "That was lovely my dear, just lovely," and go home with the same mind set they come in with. No matter what we say or do, the stereotype still hangs on. I am weary of starting from scratch each time I speak or write, as if there were no history behind us, of hearing that among the women of color, Asian women are the least political, or the least oppressed, or the most polite. It is too bad not many people remember that one of the two persons in Seattle who stood up to contest the constitutionality of the Evacuation Order in 1942 was a young Japanese American woman. As individuals and in groups, we Asian Pacific women have been (more intensively than ever in the past few years) active in community affairs and

speaking and writing about our activities. From the highly political writings published in *Asian Women* in 1971 (incisive and trenchant articles, poems and articles), to more recent voices from the Basement Workshop in New York City to Unbound Feet in San Francisco, as well as those Asian Pacific women showcased at the Asian Pacific Women's Conferences in New York, Hawaii and California this year, these all tell us we *have* been active and vocal. And yet, we continue to hear, "Asian women are of course traditionally not attuned to being political," as if most other women are; or that Asian women are too happily bound to their traditional roles as mothers and wives, as if the same cannot be said of a great number of white American women among us.

When I read in *Plexus* recently that at a Workshop for Third World women in San Francisco, Cherríe Moraga exploded with "What each of us needs to do about what we don't know is to go look for it," I felt like standing up and cheering her. She was speaking at the Women's Building to a group of white sisters who were saying, in essence, "It is *your* responsibility as Third World women to teach *us*." If the majority culture knows so little about us, it must be *our* problem, they seem to be telling us; the burden of teaching is on us. I do not want to be unfair; I know individual women and some women's groups that have taken on the responsibility of teaching themselves through reaching out to women of color, but such gestures by the majority of women's groups are still tentatively made because of the sometimes touchy reaction of women who are always being asked to be "tokens" at readings and workshops.

Earlier this year, when a group of Asian Pacific American women gathered together in San Francisco poet Nellie Wong's home to talk about feminism, I was struck by our general agreement on the subject of feminism *as an ideal*. We all believed in equality for women. We agreed that it is important for each of us to know what it means to be a woman in our society, to know the historical and psychological forces that have shaped and are shaping our thoughts which in turn determine the directions of our lives. We agreed that feminism means a commitment to making changes in our own lives and a conviction that as women we have the equipment to do so. One by one, as we sat around the table and talked (we women of all

ages ranging from our early twenties to the mid-fifties, single and married, mothers and lovers, straight women and lesbians), we knew what it was we wanted out of feminism, and what it was supposed to mean to us. For women to achieve equality in our society, we agreed, we must continue to work for a common goal.

But there was a feeling of disappointment in that living room toward the women's movement as it stands today. One young woman said she had made an effort to join some women's groups with high expectations but came away disillusioned because these groups were not receptive to the issues that were important to her as an Asian woman. Women in these groups, were, she said "into pushing their own issues" and were no different from the other organizations that imposed opinions and goals on their members rather than having them shaped by the needs of the members in the organizations. Some of the other women present said that they felt the women's organizations with feminist goals are still "a middle-class women's thing." This pervasive feeling of mistrust toward the women in the movement is fairly representative of a large group of women who live in the psychological place we now call Asian Pacific America. A movement that fights sexism in the social structure must deal with racism, and we had hoped the leaders in the women's movement would be able to see the parallels in the lives of the women of color and themselves, and would "join" *us* in our struggle and give *us* "input."

It should not be difficult to see that Asian Pacific women need to affirm our own culture while working within it to change it. Many of the leaders in the women's organizations today had moved naturally from civil rights politics of the 60's to sexual politics, while very few of the Asian Pacific women who were involved in radical politics during the same period have emerged as leaders in these same women's organizations. Instead they have become active in groups promoting ethnic identity, most notably ethnic studies in universities, ethnic theater groups or ethnic community agencies. This doesn't mean that we have placed our loyalties on the side of ethnicity over womanhood. The two are not at war with one another; we shouldn't have to sign a "loyalty oath" favoring one over the other. However, women of color are often made to feel that we must make a choice between the two.

If I have more recently put my energies into the Pacific Asian American Center (a job center for Asians established in 1975, the only one of its kind in Orange County, California) and the Asian Pacific Women's Conferences (this first of its kind in our history), it is because the needs in these areas are so great. I have thought of myself as a feminist first, but my ethnicity cannot be separated from my feminism.

Through the women's movement, I have come to truly appreciate the meaning of my mother's life and the lives of immigrant women like her. My mother, at nineteen years of age, uprooted from her large extended family, was brought to this country to bear and raise four children alone. Once here, she found that her new husband who had been here as a student for several years prior to their marriage was a bachelor-at-heart and had no intention of changing his lifestyle. Stripped of the protection and support of her family, she found the responsibilities of raising us alone in a strange country almost intolerable during those early years. I thought for many years that my mother did not love us because she often spoke of suicide as an easy way out of her miseries. I know now that for her to have survived "just for the sake" of her children took great strength and determination.

If I digress it is because I, a second generation Asian American woman who grew up believing in the American Dream, have come to know who I am through understanding the nature of my mother's experience; I have come to see connections in our lives as well as the lives of many women like us, and through her I have become more sensitive to the needs of Third World women throughout the world. We need not repeat our past histories; my daughters and I need not merely survive with strength and determination. We can, through collective struggle, live fuller and richer lives. My politics as a woman are deeply rooted in my immigrant parent's and my own past.

Not long ago at one of my readings a woman in the audience said she was deeply moved by my "beautifully tragic but not bitter camp poems which were apparently written long ago,"¹ but she was distressed hear my poem "To A Lady." "Why are you, at this late date, so angry, and why are you taking it so personally?" she said. "We need to look to the future and stop wallowing in

the past so much." I responded that this poem *is not* all about the past. I am talking about what is happening to us right now, about our nonsupport of each other, about our noncaring about each other, about not seeing connections between racism and sexism in our lives. As a child of immigrant parents, as a woman of color in a white society and as a woman in a patriarchal society, what is personal to me *is* political.

These are the connections we expected our white sisters to see. It should not be too difficult, we feel, for them to see why being a feminist activist is more dangerous for women of color. They should be able to see that political views held by women of color are often misconstrued as being personal rather than ideological. Views critical of the system held by a person in an "out group" are often seen as expressions of personal angers against the dominant society. (If they hate it so much here, why don't they go back?) Many lesbians I know have felt the same kind of frustration when they supported unpopular causes regarded by their critics as vindictive expressions to "get back" at the patriarchal system. They, too, know the disappointments of having their intentions misinterpreted.

In the 1960s when my family and I belonged to a neighborhood church, I became active in promoting the Fair Housing Bill, and one of my church friends said to me, "Why are you doing this to us? Haven't you and your family been happy with us in our church? Haven't we treated you well?" I knew then that I was not really part of the church at all in the eyes of this person, but only a guest who was being told I should have the good manners to behave like one.

Remembering the blatant acts of selective racism in the past three decades in our country, our white sisters should be able to see how tenuous our position in this country is. Many of us are now third and fourth generation Americans, but this makes no difference; periodic conflicts involving Third World peoples can abruptly change white Americans' attitudes towards us. This was clearly demonstrated in 1941 to the Japanese Americans who were in hot pursuit of the great American Dream, who went around saying, "Of course I don't eat Japanese food, I'm an American." We found our status as true-blooded Americans was only an illusion in 1942 when we were singled out to be imprisoned for the duration of the war by our own government.

The recent outcry against the Iranians because of the holding of American hostages tells me that the situation has not changed since 1941. When I hear my students say "We're not against the Iranians here who are minding their own business. We're just against those ungrateful ones who overstep our hospitality by demonstrating and badmouthing our government," I know they speak about me.

Asian Pacific American women will not speak out to say what we have on our minds until we feel secure within ourselves that this is our home too; and until our white sisters indicate by their actions that they want to join us in our struggle because it is theirs also. This means a commitment to a truly communal education where we learn from each other because we want to learn from each other, the kind of commitment to a truly communal education where we learn from each other because we want to learn from each other, the kind of commitment we do not seem to have at the present time. I am still hopeful that the women of color in our country will be the link to Third World women throughout the world, and that we can help each other broaden our visions.

Notes

1. Mitsuye Yamada. *Camp Notes and Other Poems*. San Francisco: Shameless Hussy Press, 1976.

Millicent Fredericks

Gabrielle Daniels

Millicent Fredericks is part of my anthology of forgotten Third World women celebrated in poetry, *A Woman Left Behind*. She was Anais Nin's housemaid, and the quotes about her and on black people in general are the original ones from Anais' Diary.

Millicent has been on my mind since I first read the Diaries while getting my B.A. (I am going for my Master's now). One day it just poured out. I haven't been able to find a publisher for her, because some people will not touch it. Too much for them to take, I guess. Too damn bad. All our saints have a few taints of sin...

Millicent Fredericks was a black woman from Antigua, who married an American black man and had four children. He had a trade as a tailor that he refused to implement after a while. Millicent was an alien, therefore she could not teach school as she had in Antigua. The only way out was housework. As far as I know she remained the sole support of her family. As noted in the Diaries of Anais Nin, one son was shot up in a gang war.

Here were two women, one black and one white, both educated and silenced in their own ways, yet could not help each other because of race and class differences.

Anais could not get beyond the fact of Millicent's blackness and poverty and suffering. The stench of the patrona just reeks about her:

"I would like to write the life of Millicent. But saint's lives are difficult to do A Negro is a concept Millicent perhaps . . . becomes a symbol of what they have to endure . . . the very first day she came to me sent by my mother and she sat sewing, the thread rolled to the floor and I picked it up for her . . . This gesture established the quality of our relationship . . . I would like to devote my life to the recognition of the Negro's equality, but I always feel ineffectual in political battles . . . one can only win by force or trickery . . . she has fine features, which a Gauguin would have enjoyed painting . . ."

— from the Diary of Anais Nin

Only for the sake of art
 Millicent, do you rise
 tall from the ink
 in the pupils you sought
 dark and wide
 taking you in like the letters
 you would have performed
 scratched indelibly on slated memories, chalk dust
 gold on your fingers. A teacher.

From A to B
 from Antigua to Harlem
 is no giant step. Brown syrup
 from the cane stills of home
 stick like skin
 adheres to the sharpened ribs of shanty girls
 running careless like your husband from responsibility
 catches white heat rubbing shoulders
 on the New York trolley, the floors and windows
 sucking the strength from your maid's fingers
 your teats dribbling the same tar sweetness on
 to your smacking children the same curse.

Beyond introductions
 the thread of your lives intersected,
 ran from the tangled nest in the sewing basket.
 The spools dared equality. Two aliens
 two mothers well met, living on little thanks.
 The pin money feebly spread out
 for Dad and his drink, Patchen
 a pair of shoes for the youngest, the press
 Pressure. Glimpses in the lilt of clipped English
 from both sides of the ocean:
 Harlem clubs, black street gangs cutting up
 a son, the broken families and the literati
 dining on themselves
 The mending to be done, the mending of words
 the hunger knit in the growling guts of the mind
 Publish, publish our cries.

You the ministrant
above the small white fact
which was but one seam
pinched in emergency in the creeping taxi
is your last conscious scene.

No curtain calls in the proceeding pages
in the wake of her saving move to California,
you continue
to rummage through days-old bread,
trickle down shops. The killing routine
she admired of you, and because of you
escaped to write, to cable Henry
ever the last sum. "The writer", she said,
"must be served and taken care of,"
lessening the time
you could afford for breath
to clean your own home for Sunday meetin'

Perhaps to dust off your teacher's diploma
with more care.

No islander, despite her praise
Gauguin could not have traced
the furrows in your face,
the buried seeds waiting in vain
for spotlight to flower
a smile, Madonna, smile please...

In your uniform
you were like everyone of them
at war to survive
and then like no other. I have learned
from such self-denial,
martyrs and saints are made
or forgotten.

“– But I Know You, American Woman”

Judit Moschkovich

I am Latina, Jewish and an immigrant (all at once). When I tell people who I am, I usually see a puzzled look on their face. I am likely to tell them, “I realize that you are a little confused by me – how I can be both Jewish and Latin American at the same time – but just take my word for it. It is possible!”

The following letter was originally written in response to a letter which appeared in a women’s newspaper with national distribution. This letter reflected the blatant ignorance most Anglo-American women have of Latin cultures. My response is directed to all women of the dominant American culture.¹ The Anglo woman’s letter represents spoken and unspoken views and feelings that I have repeatedly encountered in many Anglo-American women.

My immediate reaction to reading the letter was: don’t speak about someone/something unless you can admit your ignorance on the subject. Or, “you don’t know me, but I know you, American women.” I believe that lack of knowledge about other cultures is one of the basis for cultural oppression. I do not hold any individual American woman responsible for the roots of this ignorance about other cultures; it is encouraged and supported by the American educational and political system, and by the American media. I do hold every woman responsible for the *transformation* of this ignorance.

In her letter, the Anglo woman seems to ask for information about Latin culture.² She wants to know what we want as Latin people, what we are struggling for, etc. First of all, it is hard for me to respond to even a simple request for more information about Latin cultures without experiencing strong and conflicting feelings. We’ve all heard it before: *it is not the duty of the oppressed to educate the oppressor*. And yet, I often do feel pressured to become an instructor, not merely a “resource person.” I don’t usually hear “Hey, what do you think of the work of such and such Latin American feminist author,” but rather, “Teach me everything you know.” Latin America women write books,

music, etc. A great deal of information about Latin American is readily available in most libraries and bookstores. I say: read and listen. We may, then, have something to share.

Second, it is very hard to respond to a request for information when it follows paragraph after paragraph that belittles and insults Latin culture. Anyone that was raised and educated in this country has a very good chance of being ignorant about other cultures, whether they be minority cultures in this country or those of other countries. It's a sort of cultural isolationism, a way of life enforced on the people in this country so as to let them have a free conscience with respect to how they deal with the rest of the world or with subcultures in America. Notice the lack of emphasis on learning other languages, and the lack of knowledge even about where other countries are located. Often, I am asked questions like, "Is Argentina in Europe or Africa?" or "Don't you speak Portuguese down there?" How can one feel guilt about screwing over someone/some country she knows nothing about?

Think of it in terms of men's and women's cultures: women live in male systems, know male rules, speak male language when around men, etc. But what do men really know about women? Only screwed up myths concocted to perpetuate the power imbalance. It is the same situation when it comes to dominant and non-dominant or colonizing and colonized cultures/countries/people. As a bilingual/bicultural woman whose native culture is not American, I live in an American system, abide by American rules of conduct, speak English when around English speakers, etc., only to be confronted with utter ignorance or concocted myths and stereotypes about my own culture.

My Latin culture means many things to me: the food I like to eat, the music I love, the books I read, the language I speak, the land and trees I remember in another country, the jokes I tell, how I am used to kissing and hugging people when I greet them, etc., etc., etc...I could go on forever. It also means the things I'd like to change in Latin culture and I'm not speaking of changing men, but of changing *systems* of oppression. As a result of these changes, I do not foresee a culture-less vacuum because "all cultures are bad so I don't want any of them." That culture-less vacuum proposed would actually be the American culture of

French Fries and Hamburgers (or soyburgers), American music on the radio (even if it's American women's music on a feminist radio show), not kissing and hugging every time you greet someone, etc. And it would ultimately still be the culture of exploitation of other countries/cultures combined with ignorance about them.

I want to illustrate more specifically some of the un-informed statements made in the Anglo woman's letter. The fascist government of Spain which she refers to (and suggests as Latin people's sole nation of heritage) was made possible by ample economic and political support from the US, as are multiple other fascist governments in the world right now, particularly in the Third World. When people are not democratically represented by their government, there is a real difference between the policies of that government and the country's people/culture. If one knows about the bitter struggle of the Spanish people against fascism during the Spanish Civil War, and during Franco's regime, one would never equate Spanish with fascist. I do not equate "American" with imperialist/racist, but I *do* equate American people who do *not* transform their ignorance about "non-dominant" cultures and their relationship to these cultures, with imperialism and racism.

As to the "historical" accident that both North and South America are not dominated by Latin (i.e. non-Anglo) culture, I don't call the appropriation of Mexican land an accident, but an imperialist/expansionist move by the United States. Latin America is a mixture of Native, Black, Spanish and sometimes other European cultures, but it is *dominated* by American *mass* culture as Latin American economic systems are dominated by American interests (this applies to most Latin American countries, not all). In Latin America, in addition to our own cultural expressions, we watch American T.V. shows, listen to American music on the radio, wear American jeans (if we can afford them); in other words, we do anything that is economically profitable to America. In comparison, how often do you hear songs in Spanish on the radio in the US or see a Spanish show on T.V.? I'm not talking about radio or T.V. shows by and for the Latin community; I'm talking about *mainstream American* media.

No one will deny that the Spanish conquistadores did in fact conquer the native people of Latin America, and that the latter are still being oppressed there. It is important, however, to know that the Latin American people residing in the US are not some vague "Spanish" conqueror race, but are a multi-racial/cultural people of Native, Black and European background. Latin American culture is quite different from Anglo culture in that each country has retained and integrated the indigenous cultures in food, music, literature, etc. For example the folk music of Argentina is largely Native Indian folk music, played on traditional and European instruments, speaking about traditional themes, using lyrics in Spanish and/or indigenous languages. In the US, you don't often think of Native American music as "American folk music."

I'm sick and tired of continually hearing about the destructive aspects of Latin American culture, especially from women who don't know the culture and can only repeat well-known and worn-out myths. Let Latina women tell you what's going on, the good and the bad. I've lived there and I damn well know what it's like. Listen to what I have to say about my culture, rather than believe hearsay, myths or racist stereotypes. No one ever talks about "terminally depressed Scandinavians," or the cut-throat competition instilled by American culture, or the lack of warmth and physical contact in Anglo culture. These are all destructive aspects of Anglo culture, and they cannot be ignored.

The unspoken question always seems to be: "Aren't Latin (or Black, etc.) men *more* macho and women *more* oppressed in that culture?" My answers to that are: 1) It is absurd to compare sexist oppression. Oppression is oppression in whatever form or intensity. 2) Sexist and heterosexist oppression is more or less visible depending on how communicative people in a culture are. That Anglo culture is more Puritan and less visibly expressive does not mean it is less sexist. 3) Most of Latin America is a land economically colonized by the US, and as such can't be compared with a colonizing culture (US). Women's condition in Latin America would be much better were they not living in colonized countries. 4) Most importantly, are we as feminists concerned with men or with women? There is always a women's culture within every culture. Why is everyone so willing to accept the very male view of Latin American culture as

consisting simply of macho males and Catholic priests? There are scores of strong women living in Latin America today and our history is full of famous and lesser known strong women. Are they to be ignored as women have always been ignored?

Culture is not really something I have a choice in keeping or discarding. It is in me and of me. Without it I would be an empty shell and so would anyone else. There was a psychology experiment carried out once in which someone was hypnotized and first told they had no future; the subject became happy and as carefree as a child. When they were told they had no past they became catatonic.

Anglo people should realize when you say we should discard all cultures and start anew that you are speaking English with all its emotional and conceptual advantages and disadvantages.³ You're not really about to change your taste in food, your basic style of relating to people, nor the way you talk.

I've heard many people say “Immigrants to this country should learn English, act American, and stop trying to keep their own culture. That's what I would do if I went to another country!” I say Bullshit! Being an immigrant or a bicultural/bilingual person is something which can sometimes be understood only when experienced.⁴ Would an American woman move to another country and not hold dear her memories of childhood places and people? Would she not remember with longing some special song or food that she has no access to in her new country? And would she not feel her communication limited, no matter how well she learned her second language, because some very deep, emotional things can only be expressed in one's native tongue? Or would she speak to her parents in her newly adopted language? From my personal experience I can say the American woman would experience all these things. It is very hard to deny who you are, where you come from, and how you feel and express yourself (in the deepest possible sense) without ending up hating yourself.

In conclusion, I hope this letter expresses my frustration. When Anglo-American women speak of developing a new feminist or women's culture, they are still working and thinking within an Anglo-American cultural framework. This new culture would still be just as racist and ethnocentric as patriarchal American culture. I have often confronted the attitude that

anything that is "different" is male. Therefore if I hold on to my Latin culture I am holding on to hateful patriarchal [constructs]. Meanwhile, the Anglo woman who deals with the world in her Anglo way, with her Anglo culture, is being "perfectly feminist."

I would like us some day to get past the point of having to explain and defend our different cultures (as I am doing in this letter). For that to happen the process of learning about other cultures must be a sharing experience. An experience where American women learn on their own without wanting to be spoon-fed by Latinas, but don't become experts after one book, one conversation, or one stereotype. It is a delicate balance which can only be achieved with caring and respect for each other.

Everything I have written about here has been from my personal experience as an immigrant to this country as a teenager. I'm by no means an expert, but these are issues I constantly deal with in myself and with others. I do not speak for all Latinas, or for all non-Anglo-American women. I would like to acknowledge the support and feedback I received from my friends throughout the writing of the original letter. They were all Anglo-American women (at the time there were no Latinas around me); and they cared enough to get beyond their guilt and/or ignorance.

Notes

1. When I say "American culture" I obviously do not include Afro-American, Native American, Asian American, Chicana, etc. I am speaking of the Anglo culture which dominates American society.
2. When I say "Latin culture" I mean Latin American cultures, which have a history of expression different from the European Latin cultures (French, Italian, etc.)
3. Let me illustrate some differences in language. English expository writing goes in a straight line (sound familiar?) from introductory paragraph, to thesis sentence, to conclusion. Spanish composition follows a form more like a zig-zag, sometimes deviating from straight, linear thinking. I am fighting against this when I write in English so I can be understood by English readers.
4. As a Latina and an immigrant, I cannot ignore the fact that many Hispanics have been in this country for more generations than Anglos. The Hispanic cultures in the West and Southwest were

established long before their land was colonized by Anglos. The Hispanic people have as much right to their cultural heritage as any Anglo (if not more so, since they were here first).

The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin

doris davenport

A few years ago in New Haven, I tried to relate to feminism through a local [womon's] center (located in a Yale basement). I was politely informed that I should "organize" with Black wimmin. In other words, get out. I wanted to start several projects that would include more third world wimmin, but I was told to talk to black wimmin about that. In short, white only. Then, the socialist study group I was interested in was suddenly closed just at the time I wanted to join. And once, in a wimmin's group when a discussion of men came up, it was revealed that half the white wimmin there feared black men, which included me (from the way they glared at me). In other words: *nigger, go home*.

Last year in Los Angeles, after volunteering to work for a local white feminist magazine, repeatedly offering my services and having my ideas and poems rejected, I was finally called to be one of the few token black wimmin at a reception for Ntozake Shange. And the beat, like the song says, goes on. From coast to coast, the feminist movement is racist, but that news is old and stale by now. It is increasingly apparent that the problem is white wimmin.

We, third world wimmin, always discuss this fact. (Frankly, I'm a little tired of it). However, we usually discuss the varied, yet similar manifestations of racism, without going into *why* white wimmin are racist.

In this article, which I conceive of as a conversation with third world wimmin, I want to explore the whys. I don't see the point of further cataloguing my personal grievances against white racist feminists. You know. Whatever you have experienced, I have too. Extrapolate a little. I think that one of our limitations in dealing with this issue is that we stay on the surface. We challenge symptoms of the disease while neglecting the causes. I intend to examine the causes.

If I were a white feminist and somebody called me a racist, I'd probably feel insulted (especially if I knew it was at least partially true). It's like saying someone has a slimey and incurable

disease. Naturally, I would be reactionary and take out my health department/liberal credentials, to prove I was clean. But the fact is, the word "racism" is too simplistic, too general, and too easy. You can use the word and not say that much, unless the term is explained or clarified. Once that happens, racism looks more like a psychological problem (or pathological aberration) than an issue of skin color.

By way of brief clarification, we experience white feminists and their organizations as elitist, crudely insensitive, and condescending. Most of the feminist groups in this country are examples of this elitism. (This anthology came to be as a result of that.) It is also apparent that white feminists still perceive us as the "Other," based on a menial or sexual image: as more sensual, but less cerebral, more interesting, perhaps, but less intellectual; and more oppressed, but less political than they are. (If you need specific examples of this, think about your *own* experiences with them.)

When we attend a meeting or gathering of theirs, we're seen in only one of two limited or oppressive ways: as being white-washed and therefore sharing all their values, priorities, and goals, etc.; or, if we (even accidentally) mention something particular to the experience of black wimmin, we are seen as threatening, hostile, and subversive to their interests. So when I say racist, these are some of the things I mean. I know this, and so do many white feminists. Because of their one-dimensional and bigoted ideas, we are not respected as feminists or wimmin. Their perverse perceptions of black wimmin mean that they continue to see us as "inferior" to them, and therefore, treat us accordingly. Instead of alleviating the problems of black wimmin, they add to them.

Although black and white feminists can sometimes work together for a common goal with warmth and support, and even love and respect each other occasionally, underneath there is still another message. That is that white feminists, like white boys and black boys, are threatened by us. Moreover, white feminists have a serious problem with truth and "accountability" about how/why they perceive black wimmin as they do.

For example, in a long, and long-winded article, "Disloyal to Civilization, Feminism, Racism, and Gynephobia"¹ Adrienne Rich attempted to address an issue similar to this one. Instead

she did what she accused other feminists of doing, she "intellectualized the issues." She evaded it, after apologetically (or proudly, it's hard to tell) saying that "the most unconditional, tender...intelligent love I received was given me by a black woman." (Translated, she had a black mammy as a child.) Then, she hid behind a quasi-historical approach that defused the subject. After about fifteen pages, she got close, but apparently also got scared, and backed off. It seems she found it hard, after all, to tell the truth and be "accountable."

On the other hand, and as a brief but necessary digression, black wimmin don't always tell the whole truth about and to white wimmin. We know, for example, that we have at least three distinct areas of aversion to white wimmin which affect how we perceive and deal with them: aesthetic, cultural, and social/political. Aesthetically (& physically) we frequently find white wimmin repulsive. That is, their skin colors are unaesthetic (ugly, to some people). Their hair, stringy and straight, is unattractive. Their bodies: rather like misshapen lumps of whitish clay or dough, that somebody forgot to mold in-certain-areas. Furthermore, they have a strange body odor.

Culturally, we see them as limited and bigoted. They can't dance. Their music is essentially undanceable too, and unpleasant. Plus, they are totally saturated in western or white American culture with little knowledge or respect for the cultures of third world people. (That is, unless they intend to exploit it.) The bland food of white folks is legendary. What they call partying is too low keyed to even be a wake. (A wake is when you sit up all night around the casket of a dead person.) And it goes on and on.

Socially, white people seem rather juvenile and tasteless. Politically, they are, especially the feminists, naïve and myopic. Then too, it has always been hard for us (black folk) to believe that whites will transcend color to make political alliances with us, for any reason. (The women's movement illustrates this point.)

We have these aversions for one thing, because we saw through the "myth" of the white woman. The myth was that white wimmin were the most envied, most desired (and beautiful), most powerful (controlling white boys) wimmin in existence. The truth is that black people saw white wimmin as

some of the least enviable, ugliest, most despised and least respected people, period. From our "close encounters" (i.e., slavery, "domestic" workers, etc.) with them, white people increasingly did seem like beasts or subnormal people. In short, I grew up with a certain kind of knowledge that all black folk, especially wimmim, had access to.

This knowledge led to a mixture of contempt and repulsion. I honestly think that most black feminists have some of these feelings. Yet, we constantly keep them hidden (at least from white wimmim), try to transcend them, and work towards a common goal. A few of us even see beyond the so-called privilege of being white, and perceive white wimmim as very oppressed, and ironically, invisible. This perception has sometimes been enough for us to relate to white feminists as sisters.

If *some* of us can do this, it would seem that some white feminists could too. Instead, they cling to their myth of being privileged, powerful, and less oppressed (or equally oppressed, which ever it is fashionable or convenient to be at the time) than black wimmim. Why? Because that is all they have. That is, they have defined, or re-defined themselves and they don't intend to let anything or anybody interfere. Somewhere deep down (denied and almost killed) in the psyche of racist white feminists there is some perception of their real position: powerless, spineless, and invisible. Rather than examine it, they run from it. Rather than seek solidarity with wimmim of color, they pull rank within themselves. Rather than attempt to understand our cultural and spiritual differences, they insist on their own limited and narrow views. In other words, they act out as both "white supremacists" and as a reactionary oppressed group.

As white supremacists, they still try to maintain the belief that white is right, and "godly" (sic). Not matter how desperately they try to overcome it, sooner or later it comes out. They really have a hard time admitting that white skin does not insure a monopoly on the best in life, period.

Such a "superiority complex" is obviously a result of compensation. I mean, if whites really knew themselves to be superior, racism could not exist. They couldn't be threatened, concerned, or bothered. I am saying that the "white

supremacist" syndrome, especially in white feminists, is the result of a real inferiority complex, or lack of self-identity. Just as a macho male uses wimmin to define himself or to be sure he exists, white feminists use wimmin of color to prove their (dubious) existence in the world.

Anyone familiar with the literature and psychology of an oppressed or *colonized* group knows that as they initially attempt to redefine themselves, they react. Their immediate mental, spiritual, and physical environment is chaotic and confused. The fact is, white wimmin are oppressed; they have been "colonized" by white boys, just as third world people have. Even when white wimmin "belonged" to white boys they had no reality. They belonged as objects, and were treated as such. (As someone else has noted, the original model for colonization was the treatment of white wimmin.) Nobody has yet sufficiently researched or documented the collective psychology of oppressed white wimmin. So consider this as a thesis: they know. And so do I. The reality of their situation is the real pits. Lately, having worked free of the nominal and/or personal control of white boys, white wimmin are desperately reactionary. As a result, they identify with and encourage certain short-sighted goals and beliefs. Their infatuation with the word "power" in the abstract is an example of this: power to them mainly means external established power or control. They have minimal, if any, knowledge of personal power. But most importantly, as a reactionary oppressed group, they exhibit a strange kind of political bonding or elitism, where white wimmin are the only safe or valid people to be with; all others are threatening. Clearly, this state of mind is a political dead-end, and the reasons for it stem from their great confusion.

So this is my contribution to the conversation. The cause of racism in white feminists is their bizarre oppression (and suppression). This, I contend, is what lies beneath the surface. This pathological condition is what *they* have to admit and deal with, and what we should start to consider and act on. Too often, we discuss their economic freedom while ignoring other aspects of life. We sometimes dwell at length on their color, forgetting that they are still wimmin in a misogynist culture. They have been seriously mutated as a result.

In other words, their elitism and narrow-minded rigidity are defense mechanisms and that, in part, is why they create "alternatives" for themselves and put up psychological signs saying **white women only**. Part of the reason is fear, as a result of centuries of living with dogs and having no identities. Now, they are threatened by anyone different from them in race, politics, mannerisms, or clothing. It's partly a means of self-protection but that does not excuse it. Feminism either addresses itself to all wimmin, or it becomes even more so just another elitist, prurient white organization, defeating its own purposes.

As a partial solution to some of the above, and to begin to end some of the colossal ignorance that white feminists have about us, we (black and white feminists) could engage in "c.r." conversations about and with each other. If done with a sense of honesty, and a sense of *humor*, we might accomplish something. If overcoming our differences were made a priority, instead of the back-burner issues that it usually is, we might resolve some of our problems.

On the other hand, my experiences with white feminists prevent me from seeing dialogue as anything but a naïve beginning. I honestly see our trying to "break into" the white feminist movement as almost equivalent to the old, outdated philosophy of integration and assimilation. It is time we stopped this approach. We **know** we have no desire to be white. One the other hand, we know we have some valid concerns and goals that white feminists overlook. By now, in fact, a few of their organizations are as rigid and stagnant as any other "established" institution, with racism included in the by-laws.

So, sisters, we might as well give up on them, except in rare and individual cases where the person or group is deliberately and obviously more evolved mentally and spiritually. This is, un-racist. We should stop wasting our time and energy, until these wimmin evolve. Meanwhile, we can re-channel our energies toward ourselves.

We can start to develop a feminist movement based on the realities and priorities of third world wimmin. Racism would have to be a priority. Misogyny is another major problem of third world wimmin. Not only that, many of our communities are more homophobic (or "lesbophobic") than white ones. Also,

a lot of our sisters are straight, and have no intention of changing. We cannot afford to ignore them and their needs, nor the needs of many third world wimmin who are both feminists and nationalists; that is, concerned with our sex and also our race. Finally, a lot of third world wimmin are ignorant about each other. We have yet to make our own realities known to ourselves, or anyone else. So we really do have a lot more to concentrate on beside the pathology of white wimmin. What we need to do is deal with us, first, then maybe we can develop a wimmin's movement that is more international in scope and universal in application.

It is time we stopped letting the rest of this oppressive society dictate our behavior, devour our energies, and control us, body and soul. It is time we dealt with our own energies, and our own revolutionary potential, like the constructive and powerful forces that they are. When we *do* act on our power and potential, there will be a *real* feminist movement in this country, one that will finally include all wimmin.

Notes

1. Adrienne Rich. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 9.

We're All in the Same Boat

Rosario Morales

November 1979

I am not white. I am not middle class.

I am white skinned and puertorican. I was born into the working class and married into the middle class. I object to the label white and middle class both because they don't include my working class life and my puertoricanness, but also because "white & middle class" stands for a kind of politics. *Color and class don't define people or politics.* I get angry with those in the women's movement and out of it who deal with class & color as if they defined politics and people.

My experience in the Puerto Rican communist & independence movements has made me suspicious of and angry at Puerto Rican (& other Latin American) activist women. They have been sexist and supported the macho line that we *needed to fight against imperialism first – only later could we think about women as women.* I desperately want Latina women in the feminist movement while I fear the entry of hispanic & often black women because I fear they will play an anti-feminist role.

Racism is an ideology. Everyone is capable of being racist whatever their color and condition. Only some of us are liable to racist attack. Understanding the racist ideology – where and how it penetrates – is what is important for the feminist movement, not "including" women of color or talking about "including" men. *Guilt* is a fact for us all, white & colored: an identification with the oppressor and oppressive ideology. Let us, instead, identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt.

I want to be whole. I want to claim my self to be puertorican, and US american, working class & middle class, housewife and intellectual, feminist, Marxist, and anti-imperialist. I want to claim my racism, especially that directed at myself, so I can struggle with it, so I can use my energy to be a woman, creative and revolutionary.

April, 1980

This society this incredible way of living divides us by class
by color It says we are individual and alone and don't
you forget it It says the only way out of our doom of our
sex our class our race is some individual gift and character and
hard work and then all we get all we ever get is to change
class or color or sex to rise to bleach to masculinize
an enormous game of musical chairs and that's only at its fairy
tale Horatio Alger best that's only at its best

From all directions we get all the beliefs to go with these
divisions we believe all kinds of things about: what real men
really are what women must want what black people feel
and smell like what white people do and deserve how
rich people earn their comforts and cadillacs how poor
people get what's coming to them

O we are all racist we are all sexist some of us only
some of us are the targets of racism of sexism of homophobia of
class denigration but we all all breathe in racism with
the dust in the streets with the words we read and we struggle
those of us who struggle we struggle endlessly endlessly to think
and be and act differently from all that

Listen you and listen hard I carry within me a vicious anti-
semitic voice that says jew him down that says dirty jew
that says things that stop me dead in the street and make the
blood leave my face I have fought that voice for 45 years
all the years that I lived with and among jews who are almost me
whose rhythms of speech and ways of laughing are close beside
me are dear to me whose sorrows reach deep inside me
that voice that has tried to tell me that that love and
identification are unreal fake cannot be and I refuse
it I refuse its message

I carry a shell a white and crisp voiced shell to hide my
brown golden soft Spanish voiced inner self to pass to
hide my puertoricanness

I carry a pole 18 inches long to hold me at the correct
distance from black-skinned people

I carry hard metal armor with spikes with shooting
weapons in every joint with fire breathing from every hole
to protect me to prepare me to assault any man from 13 to 89

I am a whole circus by myself a whole dance company
 with stance and posture for being in middle class homes in
 upper class buildings for talking to men for speaking with
 blacks for carefully angling and directing for
 choreographing my way thru the maze of classes of people and
 places thru the little boxes of sex race class nationality
 sexual orientation intellectual standing political
 preference the automatic contortions the exhausting
 camouflage with which I go thru this social space called

CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY

a daunting but oh so nicely covering name this is no way to
 live Listen listen with care class and color and sex
 do not define people do not define politics a class society
 defines people by class a racist society defines people by
 color We feminists socialists radicals define
 people by their struggles against the racism sexism
 classism that they harbor that surrounds them

So stop saying that she acts that way because she's middle
 class that that's all you can expect from that group because
 it's white that they're just men, quit it!

We know different things some very much more
 unpleasant things if we've been women poor black or lesbian or
 all of those we know different things depending on what sex
 what color what lives we live where we grew up What
 schooling what beatings with or without shoes steak
 or beans but what politics each of us is going to be and do
 is anybody's guess

Being female doesn't stop us from being sexist we've had
 to choose early or late at 7 14 27 56 to think different dress
 different act different to struggle to organize to
 picket to argue to change other women's minds to
 change our own minds to change our feelings ours
 yours and mine constantly to change and change and change
 to fight the onslaught on our minds and bodies and feelings

I'm saying that the basis of our unity is that in the most
 important way we are all in the same boat all subjected to
 the violent pernicious ideas we have learned to hate that we

must all struggle against them and exchange ways and means
hints and how tos that only some of us are victims of sexism
only some of us are victims of racism of the directed arrows
of oppression but all of us are sexist racist all of us.

An Open Letter to Mary Daly

Audre Lorde

Dear Mary,

Thank you for having *Gyn/Ecology* sent to me. So much of it is full of import, useful, generative, and provoking. As in *Beyond God The Father*, many of your analyses are strengthening and helpful to me. Therefore, it is because of what you have given to me in the past work that I write this letter to you now, hoping to share with you the benefits of my insights as you have shared the benefits of yours with me.

This letter has been delayed because of my grave reluctance to reach out to you, for what I want us to chew upon here is neither easy nor simple. The history of white women who are unable to hear black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering, I hope.

I believe in your good faith toward all women, in your vision of a future within which we can all flourish, and in your commitment to the hard and often painful work necessary to effect change. In this spirit I invite you to a joint clarification of some of the differences which lie between us as a black and a white woman.

When I started reading *Gyn/Ecology*, I was truly excited by the vision behind your words, and nodded my head as you spoke in your first passage of myth and mystification. Your words on the nature and function of the Goddess, as well as the ways in which her face has been obscured, agreed with what I myself have discovered in my searches through African myth/legend/religion for the true nature of old female power.

So I wondered, why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess-images only white, western-european, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo and Mawulisa? Where are the warrior-goddesses of the Vodun, the Dohemeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan? Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her

scope and to deal only with the ecology of western-european women.

Then I came to the first three chapters of your second passage, and it was obvious that you were dealing with non-european women, but only as victims and preyers-upon each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power. Your inclusion of African genital mutilation was an important and necessary piece in any consideration of female ecology, and too little has been written about it. But to imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.

To dismiss our black foremothers may well be to dismiss where european women learned to love. As an African-American woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized but it is terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge so much matches my own. As women-identified women, we cannot afford to repeat these same old destructive, wasteful errors of recognition.

When I speak of knowledge, as you know, I am speaking of that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others. It is this depth within each of us that nurtures vision.

What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us.

It is obvious that you have done a tremendous amount of work for this book. But simply because little material on non-white female power and symbol exists in white women's words from a radical feminist perspective, to exclude this aspect of connection from even comment in your work is to deny the fountain of non-european female strength and power that nurtures each of our visions. It is to make a point by choice.

Then to realize that the only quotations from black women's words were the ones you used to introduce your chapter on African genital mutilation, made me question why you needed to

use them at all. For my part, I felt that you had in fact misused my words, utilized them only to testify against myself as a woman of color. For my words which you used were no more, nor less, illustrative of this chapter, than *Poetry Is Not A Luxury* or any number of my other poems might have been of many other parts of *Gyn/Ecology*.

So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already-conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? This is not a rhetorical question. To me this feels like another instance of the knowledge, crone-logy and work of women of color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western-european frame of reference. Even your words on page 49 of *Gyn/Ecology*: "The strength which Self-centering women find, in finding our Background, is our *own* strength, which we give back to our Selves" has a different ring as we remember the old traditions of power and strength and nurturance found in the female bonding of African women. It is there to be tapped by all women who do not fear the revelation of connection to themselves.

Have you read my work, and the work of other black women, for what it could give you? Or did you hunt through only to find words that would legitimize your chapter on African genital mutilation in the eyes of other black women? And if so, then why not use our words to legitimize or illustrate the other places where we connect in our being and becoming? If, on the other hand, it was not black women you were attempting to reach, in what way did our words illustrate your point for white women?

Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women – the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that non-white women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of black women, and how it devalues your own words. This dismissal does not essentially differ from the specialized devaluations that make black women

prey, for instance, to the murders even now happening in your own city.¹ When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise.

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? Assimilation within a solely western-european herstory is not acceptable.

Mary, I ask that you re-member what is dark and ancient and divine with your self that aids your speaking. As outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders. But in order to come together we must recognize each other. Yet I feel that since you have so completely un-recognized me, perhaps I have been in error concerning you and no longer recognize you.

I feel you do celebrate differences between white women as a creative force towards change, rather than a reason for misunderstanding and separation. But you fail to recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share, and some of which we do not. For instance, surely you know that for non-white women in this country, there is an 80% fatality rate from breast cancer; three times the number of unnecessary eventurations, hysterectomies and sterilizations as for white women; three times as many chances of being raped, murdered, or assaulted as exist for white women. These are statistical facts, not coincidences nor paranoid fantasies. I had hoped the lesbian consciousness of having been "other" would make it easier to recognize the differences that exist in the history and struggle of black women and white women.

Within the community of women, racism is a reality force within my life as it is not within yours. The white women with hoods on in Ohio handing out KKK literature on the street may not like what you have to say, but they will shoot me on sight. (If you and I were to walk into a classroom of women in Dismal Gulch, Alabama, where the only thing they knew about each of us was that we were both Lesbian/Radical/Feminist, you would see exactly what I mean.)

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries, either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.

For then beyond sisterhood, is still racism.

We first met at the MLA² panel, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action." Shortly before that date, I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy, because of their destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another, at far less emotional cost to the speaker, and probably with a better hearing. This letter attempts to break this silence.

I would like not to have to destroy you in my consciousness. So as a sister Hag, I ask you to speak to my perceptions.

Whether or not you do, I thank you for what I have learned from you. This letter is in repayment.

In the hands of Afrekete,
Audre Lorde
May 6, 1979

Notes

1. In the Spring of 1979, twelve black women were murdered in the Boston areas.
2. Modern Language Association.

The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House

*Comments at "The Personal and the Political" Panel
(Second Sex Conference October 29, 1979)*

Audre Lorde

I agreed to take part in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference a year ago, with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of American women; difference of race, sexuality, class, and age. For the absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory in this time and in this place without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, black and third-world women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and black women have nothing to say of existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.

The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of third world women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within the papers presented here. For example, in a paper on material relationships between women, I was conscious of an either/or model of nurturing which totally dismissed my knowledge as a black lesbian. In this paper there was no examination of mutuality between women, no systems of shared support, no interdependence as exists

between lesbians and women-identified-women. Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women "who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results," as this paper states.

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection, which is so feared by a patriarchal world. For it is only under a patriarchal structure that maternity is the only social power open to women.

Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom which allows the "I" to "be," not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive "be" and the active "being."

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively "be" in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been

forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Poor and third world women know there is a difference between the daily manifestations and dehumanizations of marital slavery and prostitution, because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. The Black panelists' observation about the effects of relative powerlessness and the differences of relationship between black women and men from white women and men illustrate some of our unique problems as black feminists. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in aspects of our oppressions, then what do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor and third world women? What is the theory behind racist feminism?

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower.

Why weren't other black women and third world women found to participate in this conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of black feminists? And although the black panelist's paper ends on an important and powerful connection of love between women, what about inter-racial co-operation between feminists who don't love each other?

In academic feminist circles, the answer to these questions is often "We did not know who to ask." But that is the same

evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps black women's art out of women's exhibitions, black women's work out of most feminists publications except for the occasional "Special Third World Women's Issue,"¹ and black women's texts off of your reading lists. But as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about Black women and the differences between us – white and black – when it is key to our survival as a movement?

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

Simone DeBeauvoir once said:

"It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw strength to live and our reasons for acting."

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and this time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

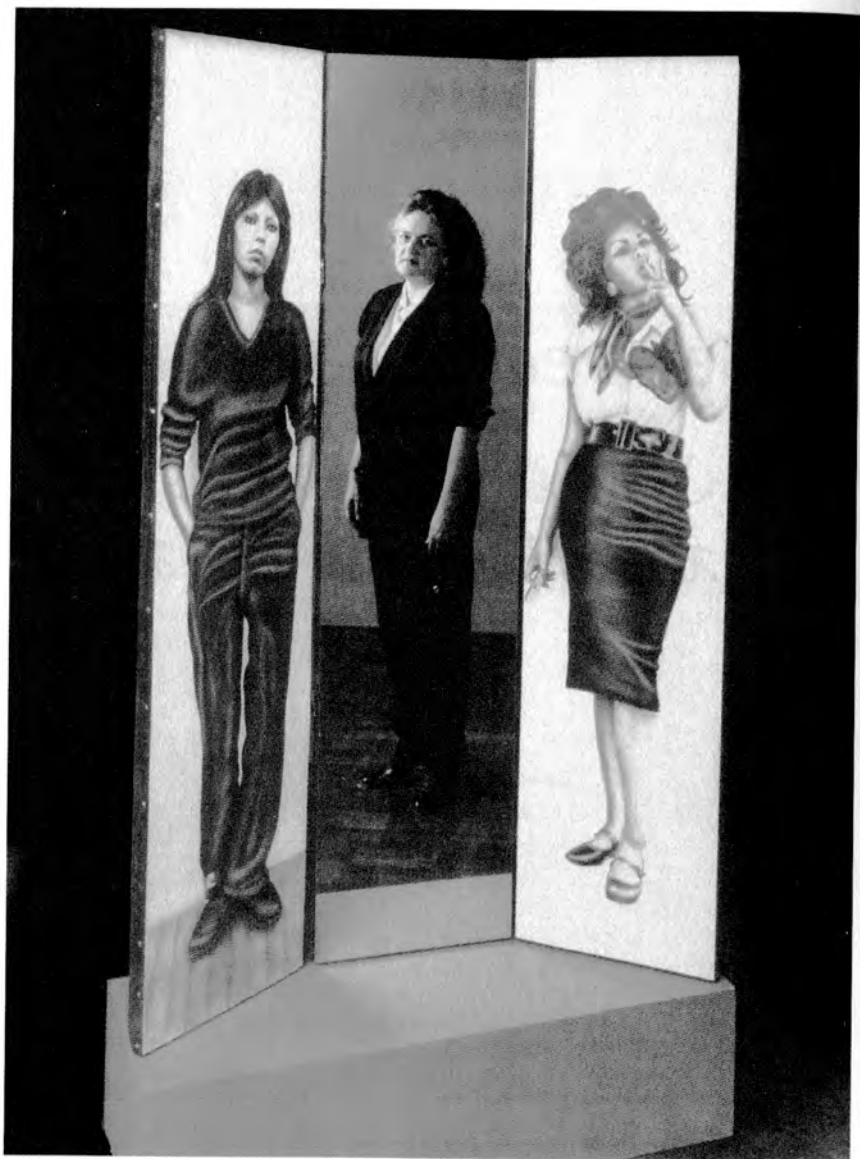
Notes

1. *Conditions* of Brooklyn, NY is a major exception. It has fairly consistently published the work of women of color before it was "fashionable" to do so. (Editors' footnote)



Between the Lines

On Culture, Class,
and Homophobia



Judith Francisca Baca, *Las Tres Marias*, 1976 (Photographed with the artist, 1990)
Mixed media, three panels, 68" x 16" x 2.5" each
Collection of the Artist

Between the Lines

On Culture, Class, and Homophobia

I do not believe/our wants have made all our lies/holy.

— Audre Lorde¹

What lies between the lines are the things that women of color do not tell each other. There are reasons for our silences: the change in generation between mother and daughter, the language barriers between us, our sexual identity, the educational opportunities we had or missed, the specific cultural history of our race, the physical conditions of our bodies and our labor.

As Audre Lorde states in the closing piece of the preceding section, "Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged." It is critical now that Third World feminists begin to speak directly to the specific issues that separate us. We cannot afford to throw ourselves haphazardly under the rubric of "Third World Feminism" only to discover later that there are serious differences between us which could collapse our dreams, rather than fuse alliances.

As Third World women, we understand the importance, yet limitations of race ideology to describe our total experience. Culture differences get subsumed when we speak of "race" as an isolated issue: where does the Black Puerto Rican sister stake out her alliance in this country, with the Black community or the Latin? And color alone cannot define her status in society. How do we compare the struggle of the middle class Black woman with those of the light-skinned Latina welfare mother? Further, how each of us perceives our ability to be radical against this oppressive state is largely affected by our economic privilege and our specific history of colonization in the US. Some of us were brought here centuries ago as slaves, others had our land of birthright taken away from us, some of us are the daughters and granddaughters of immigrants, others of us are still newly immigrated to the US.

Repeated throughout this section is each woman's desire to have all her sisters of color actively identified and involved as feminists. One of the biggest sources of separation among women of color in terms of feminism has been homophobia. This fear that we (whatever our sexuality) breathe in every day in

our communities never fully allows us to feel invulnerable to attack on our own streets, and sometimes even in the homes we grew up in (let alone in the white man's world). So often it is the fear of lesbianism which causes many of us to feel our politics and passion are being ignored or discounted by other Third World people. "There's nothing to be compared with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own..." (Barbara Smith). But we refuse to make a choice between our cultural identity and sexual identity, between our race and our femaleness. We even claim lesbianism as an "act of resistance" (Clarke) against the same forces that silence us as people of color.

We write letters home to Ma.

Surfacing from these pages again and again is the genuine sense of loss and pain we feel when we are denied our home because of our desire to free ourselves as specifically female persons. So, we turn to each other for strength and sustenance. We write letters to each other incessantly. Across a kitchen table, Third World feminist strategy is plotted. We talk long hours into the night. It is when this midnight oil is burning that we secretly reclaim our goddesses and our female-identified cultural tradition. Here we put Billie Holiday back into the hands and hearts of the women who understand her.

The difference that we have feared to mention because of our urgent need for solidarity with each other begins to be spoken to on these pages, but also the similarities that so often go unrecognized – that a light-skinned Latin woman could feel "at home" and "safe" (Morales) among her Afro-American sisters – that among many of us there is a deep-rooted identification and affinity which we were not, logically, supposed to feel toward each other living in segregated white-america.

We turn to each other to make family and even there, after the exhilaration of our first discovery of each other subsides, we are forced to confront our own lack of resources as Third World women living in the US. Without money, without institutions, without one community center to call our own we so often never get as far as dreamed while plotting in our kitchens. We disappoint each other. Sometimes we even die on each other. How to reconcile with the death of a friend, the death of a spirit?

We begin by speaking directly to the deaths and disappointments. Here we begin to fill in the spaces of silence between us. For it is between these seemingly irreconcilable lines – the class lines, the politically correct lines, the daily lines we run down to each other to keep difference and desire at a distance – that the truth of our connection lies.

Notes

1. "Between Ourselves," *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), 112.

The Other Heritage

Rosario Morales

(for June Jordan and Teish and all other Black women at the San Francisco Poetry Workshop; January 1980)

I forgot I forgot the other heritage the other stain refrain
the silver thread thru my sound the ebony sheen to my life to
the look of things to the sound of how I grew up which was in
Harlem right down in Spanish Harlem El Barrio and bounded I
always say to foreigners from Minnesota Ohio and Illinois
bounded on the North by Italians and on the South by Black
Harlem A library in each of these almost forbidden places so no
wonder I didn't take off with books till I hit the South Bronx
What I didn't forget was the look of Ithaca Rochester
Minneapolis and Salt Lake bleached bled and bleached
the street full of white ghosts like Chinese visions And the first
time Dick and I drove back thru New York past Amsterdam
Avenue right thru the heart of Harlem I breathed again safe
brown and black walking the streets safe My mami taught
me my teacher taught me everybody taught me watch out
black smelly savage keep out of the way I did too
so how come I come to feel safe! when I hit Harlem when
I hit a city with enough color when a city gets moved in on
when Main Street Vermont looks mottled agouti black and
brown and white when the sounds of the english Black folk
speak and the sounds of Spanish wiggle thru the clean lit air I
still shy and start from black men from about thirteen on but
then I shy and start from all men starting from when they think
to be men and so do the things men do my mami taught me
that and that stuck but then I learnt that on my own too I got
myself a clean clear sense of danger that's what smells not
black skin but danger stalking the streets for me I can smell
it a mile away wafting to me in the breeze I keep downwind
raise my head to sniff the air I only muse and rest my neck
when in the herd and in the day and loping thru people traffic
on the streets surrounded by the sounds of wheeled traffic in the
streets I think and plan and forget and forget to look but not
alone and not at nite I lift my head I sniff I smell the danger
and the wheel and run long before he thinks maybe she

looks about right a morsel for my appetite I bound away and
 pant safe for this time safe but all I feel when I sit down
 with you black woman the only danger in my air is from some
 whirring voice inside that always says you don't belong and
 if you don't utter just just right they will know you don't belong
 and toss you out and I feel that every time with every group
 of any color no matter what they speak but what I feel inside
 nowhere near that grating prating voice is well OK! this
 sounds just right this here music is music to my ears here I
 hear something that feels like oh like Carlos Gardel
 moaning his tangoes like the special beat caribbean drums do
 I forgot this heritage african Black up here in this cold place
 the sound of african in english of drums in these musics I
 forgot I breathed you with my air and declared fine and
 when you're not there I look and ask for where you've gone
 but I know I know why I forgot I'm not supposed to
 remember what I do remember is to walk in straight and white
 into the store and say good morning in my see how white how
 upper class how refined and kind voice all crisp with consonants
 bristling with syllables protective coloring in racist fields looks
 white and crisp like cabbage looks tidy like laid out gardens
 like white aprons on black dresses like please and thank you
 and you're welcome like neat and clean and see I swept and
 scrubbed and polished ain't I nice que hay de criticar will
 I do will I pass will you let me thru will they let me be
 not see me here beneath my skin behind my voice crouched
 and quiet and so so still not see not hear me there where I
 crouch hiding my eyes my indian bones my spanish sounds
 muttering mierda que gente fría y fea se creen gran cosa
 aí escupe chica en su carifresca en su carifea meate ahí
 en el piso feo y frío yo valgo más que un piso limpio yo
 valgo más yo valgo cagate en l'alfombra chica
 arrancale el pelo yo quiero salir de aquí yo quiero salir de
 ti yo quiero salir you see she's me she's the me says
 safe sarita safe when I see you many and black around the
 table behind me in the big room and up in front June
 Jordan how you belt it out and how I take it in right to where
 she sits brown and golden and when she and I laughed big
 last nite I was not "too loud" I was not "too much" I was just
 right just me just brown and pink and full of drums inside

beating rhythm for my feet my tongue my eyes my hands
my arms swinging and smacking I was just right just right
just right sépanlo niñas m'hijas trigueñas bellas sépalo
June Jordan mujer feroz aquí me quedo y aquí estoy right!

billie lives! billie lives

hattie gossett

yeah billie holiday lives.

shes probably got a little house somewhere with yemanya jezabel the queen of sheba and maria stewart. plus sojourner truth ma rainey ida cox lil hardin and sapphire & her mama are there. and what would they do without sister rosetta thorpe big maybelle dinah washington long tall sally & her aunt mary and fannie lou hamer? and please dont forget ruby doris smith robinson tammie terrell sara gomez and sister woman cruz they are probably all there too helping with the free community music and life school that billie started. and you know that anaci the original spiderman david walker chaka denmark vesey baby brother lester prez young john coltrane beanhead ray malcom x and stephen biko probably be around the house all the time too. plus the amistad crew and shango. but its billies house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

of course we know that charlie bird parker lives cuz folks be saying and writing bird lives! all the time. they even got buttons. and this year 1980 has been declared the year of the bird. but when i woke up this morning i woke up thinking billie lives! so after i got through talking on the phone to this sister who called me up right in the middle of when i was thinking billie lives! i got up and put on a tape of an old record by billie and listened to it again for the first time in a long time while i made a pitcher of orange & lemonade and drank some. then i took the tape and went outside to sit in the sun and listen to the tape some more and write this poem down in a hurry.

cuz billie lives and i wanna call her up and make an appointment and go by and visit her one afternoon and take her some violets and orchids and some peaches (and if you dont like my peaches dont shake my tree) one afternoon when shes got a few hours when shes not too busy and shes relaxed and dont mind being bothered with somebody asking her a whole lotta questions about all kinds of stuff but the main thing i wanna ask her about is how did she do it and what did she do when she

made this record that i am listening to now on this tape that had those bigtime bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves that time.

oh you never heard of that record.

well to tell you the truth i hadnt either til this other sister told me about it. or rather i had heard of the record and i had even listened to it. but i hadnt heard of the effect that the record had on the bigtime daddies. that's what i hadnt heard about. you know the effect that this record had is somehow strangely not mentioned in the movie or in any of the books articles etc. that are supposed to be telling the billie holiday story. thats why i wanna ask billie about it and listen to her run it down about how it was that she had all them bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves behind this record.

now you know this record had to be bad cuz it had to be taken off the radio. thats how bad this record was. as a public service it was taken off the radio cuz everytime the record played on the radio the bigdaddies would be knocking each other outta the way to get to the window and take concrete nosedives. in droves.

plus they dont play it on the radio that much even now. when they do play something by billie once every other blue moon they dont hardly ever play this. and when me and this other sister who first told me about the effect the record had when we wanted to listen to it we couldnt find nobody that we knew that had it. oh they had heard of it. but they didnt have it. so when we wanted to listen to the record we had to git on a train and ride way downtown then switch over to the path train and ride a while then switch again to the underground streetcar for a few blocks then walk a few more blocks to this special library in newark new jersey just to hear it. cuz we couldnt find it in the nyc public library though later we found out that if we had some money and had had known what to ask for we could have bought this album called the billie holiday story volume 2 which contains this song i am talking about but we didn't have no money nor did we know what to ask for.

and i cant even repeat what we had to go through to get this tape of the original 78 that i am listening to now. if you get my meaning.

anyway. this record was made august 6 1941 just 4 months to the day before the japanese took everybody by surprise with that early morning bombing raid on pearl harbor in the early summer days of billies career and it was 78 on the okeh label called gloomy sunday subtitled hungarian suicide song with the teddy wilson orchestra. it was one of those my man is dead so now i am gonna throw myself in the grave too funeral dirge numbers (tragic mulatress division) that they used to mash on billie when she went into the studio.

it wasnt even no bad blues.

it was some of their shit and billie said okay watch this and she took the tune and she turned it around on them.

yeah. i am telling you she had them bigdaddy blip d blips leaping outta the windows in droves honey.

in droves do you hear me.

i wonder what it was like when billie sang this song in person. i guess i better ask her that too when i go for my appointment. can you imagine what that was like. cuz you know billie used to sing at the café society downtown in greenwich village at one time which was one of them slick bigdaddies main hangout joints at that time and after billie got off work down in the village she would catch a cab and go uptown to harlem to the afterhours spot and jam and hangout and have a good time talking to people and it could possibly be that if she had sung that song during the last set at one of those café society gigs that while she was uptown cuttin up and stuff you know who was downtown plunging downward off the roofs of their penthouses.

and then when she woke up later that day the papers would have big headlines about who had taken the plunge during the early dawn hours. do you think billie had a good laugh to herself when she read those headlines? or are you one of those people who would say billie wasnt aware of what was going on? that she was only a po lil gal from baltimore who was just trying to sing and entertain people or that if she was aware then she was confused and heartbroken that her music was being taken in the wrong way? nigguh pullease! well but if you think like that then you dont belong in this poem so i am gonna cancel you right out. go somewhere and write yo own poem.

well anyway when i go for my appointment i am gonna ask billie about it cuz i wanna hear what she says. plus i wanna see if she will explain how she did it. did the juju women give her some kind of special herbal potions to purify her throat and vocal chords and lungs and what not. did the wise women teach her an ancient way of breathing enunciating. did she have a certain type of dream the night before the recording session during which the goddesses appeared and gave her a sign and said go ahead on in that studio tomorrow sister and turn that shit around on then bigtime blank t blanks so we can get them off our backs and move forward to a brighter day.

i wanna ask billie about it. and i wanna see if she would teach some of us how to do it too. do you think she would? when i go see her i am gonna ask her if she could give some of us weekly lessons cuz i know some other sisters that want to learn how to use their voices the same way billie did on this record.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but things are different now. we are more sophisticated now and we have learned some more sophisticated methods. like subliminal seduction. you know those tapes with that weird nonmusic and those hidden voices playing in the supermarkets and other stores that numb our minds and then plant suggestions in our minds that trick us into spending all our money on a buncha stuff that we dont need? and those tapes they play in restaurants and elevators and on the phone when they put you on hold? yeah thats subliminal seduction. people could ride bicycles or delivery trucks with hidden high frequency killer diller tape cassettes through certain neighborhoods at certain hours.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but we have developed some other methods.

yeah billie lives.

shes probably got that house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

i wanna go see her and ask her if she will teach some of us how to use our voices like she used hers on that old 78 record i am listening to now on this tape so we can learn how to have these moderntime bigtime so & sos jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves in droves so we can raise up offa our knees and move on to a brighter day.

saturday august 23 1980.

Across the Kitchen Table

A Sister - to - Sister Dialogue

Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith

In June 1980, we sent Beverly and Barbara a number of questions regarding their experiences as Black feminist in the Women's Movement. The following is a transcript of their responses.

The Editors

Feminism: More than a "Click" and a Clique

The Editors: What do you see as the effects of the pervasiveness of white middle class women in the feminist movement? In your experience how do class and race issues intersect in the movement?

Beverly: ...on Saturday night, what happened is that she was flossing her teeth after the meal. I was just so impressed with the fact that she would take such good care of her teeth. And so she said that the reason was that when she was a child her mother had saved up money for her to go and visit her grandmother or something down South. And she had been looking forward to it all year. I think that she usually went. But what happened is that this particular year she went to the dentist right before, and she had 7 cavities. And that wiped out her vacation. Because it was a matter of either/or. But of course, that's not the poorest you can get either. "My God" I said "I bet there's hardly a white woman that we come into contact with that would have any perception of what that meant." And yet it sounded so familiar to me.

Barbara: Exactly. What we want to describe in this dialogue are the class differences we experience on this kind of basic level which "high-level" analysis and rhetoric don't get to.

An example I can think of and which drives me crazy is the arrogance some white women display about "choosing" not to finish school, you know, "downward mobility". But the thing is they don't have to worry about being asked "Do you have a degree," and then being completely cut out of a whole range of jobs and opportunity if they don't. Race is a concept of having

to be twice as qualified, twice as good to go half as far. And I feel like at this point, in these economic times, it's like being three times as good to go half as far. No way in Hell would I give up getting a degree or some piece of paper that would give me more economic leverage in this "boy's" system. That's not necessarily a perception that white women have. In fact, I know a lot of white women who never finished college, yet are functioning in ways that if they had been Black women would be completely unavailable to them.

This ties in with another thing we had talked about in the past, which is the difference between women's politics, who come to a realization that oppression exists say at 22, 25 or even 18, versus Black women's and other women of color's perspective which is that your oppression is a lifelong thing. There is a political savviness, I don't know what words to use, canniness – some difference in attitude I think between Black and white feminists. I think what it is, is like the surprise factor. There is virtually no Black person in this country who is surprised about oppression. Virtually not one. Because the thing is we have had it meted out to us from infancy on. And I think that when we are dealing with white women in coalitions, or whatever, that often we're at very different places about how you deal with a problem, how you think about a problem, how you react to a problem. Because they are coming from a perspective like, "Oh! I didn't know. I didn't know. I never knew until... I never knew until..." There is a difference when you come in to your politics because you're Black and oppressed on that level.

Bev: What I would really want to talk about is why the women's movement is basically a middle class movement. What does it mean? At least middle class in tone. I am not saying everyone in the women's movement is middle class but the thing is that I think that it is middle class women who dominate in terms of numbers and in terms of what actually gets done, and just how things get done. What gets made the priorities and what have you.

What really are the similarities and differences between women's oppression and class and racial oppression? My perception about racial oppression and class oppression is that it's something that starts from Day One.

Bar: You're born into it and it's grinding.

Bev: It's grinding. And it continues. My sense about the oppression of women is that it's something that people come to often times, but not always, in a more intellectual manner. It's something that's pointed out to them. It's something that they read about and say "Oh, yeah!" I mean even the concept of the "click", you know, that you can read about in *Ms.* magazine.

Bar: They still have "clicks!"

Bev: Right. They still talk about when you have an experience that makes you realize your oppression as a women, makes you realize other women's oppression, you know, some revealing incident in your life as a woman. That is a "click." Well I mean, I guess there are "clicks" among racial lines, but the thing is they're so far back in terms of class that they're almost imperceptible. It just feels to me like it's a different kind of thing.

Bar: Another thing when you talk about experiencing racial oppression and class oppression from the very beginning, if indeed you are a recipient of those oppressions what is happening to you is from moderately bad to horrible. In other words, being Black in this country there is very little about it that is mild. The oppression is extreme. Probably the only Black people where oppression is somewhat mitigated are those who have class privileges and that is certainly not the majority of Black people here. Likewise if you are a recipient of class oppression, that means that you are poor, you are working class and therefore day to day survival is almost the only thing you can focus on. The thing that's different about women's oppression is that you can be white and middle class and female and live a so-called "nice" life up until a certain point, then you begin to notice these "clicks," but I think the quality of life for the upper or middle class white woman is so far ahead of the quality of life for the Black person, the Black child, the working class child or the poor child.

Bev: I want to attempt to make comparison between different types of oppression. When I think of poverty, I think of constant physical and material oppression. You know, you aren't poor one day and well-to-do the next. If you're poor it's a constant thing, everyday, everyday. In some ways it's almost more constant than race because, say you're middle class and you're a Black person who is of course subject to racism, you don't necessarily experience it every single day in the same intensity,

or to the same degree. Whereas, poverty is just something you experience constantly. So what I was trying to come up with is — Is there any oppression that women experience that is that total, in other words literally affects their physical well-being on a day to day basis?

Bar: Can I make a joke, Bev?

Bev: What?

Bar: Heterosexuality. Well, moving right along...

Bev: Yes, they *are* suffering... Well, battering is maybe something, but not necessarily, only in some extreme incidences.

Bar: Well, I think in a way we're almost comparing apples and pears. We don't have a language yet or a framework as to what is the true nature of women's oppression, given where it takes place and who it comes from and how. Maybe the battered woman is not beaten every day, but she has to wait on her husband every day and her children. She's either bored out of her mind or worrying and scraping, trying to make ends meet, both in the context of the nuclear family. Women's oppression is so organic or circular or something. One place on the circle is battering, one place is cat calls, another is rape, another place is the fact that no one takes you seriously even while you worked to put your husband through college. There's a whole range of stuff, that's why it's so hard to pin something down.

Bev: I think for purposes of analysis what we try to do is to break things down and try to separate and compare but in reality, the way women live their lives, those separations just don't work. Women don't live their lives like, "Well this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women's identities," so it's confusing.

Bar: And Black women and women of color in particular don't do that. I think maybe what we have defined as an important component of Black feminism is that maybe, for the short run at least, that's all right. We don't have to rank or separate out. What we have to do is define the nature of the whole, of all the systems impinging on us.

Bev: Given these differences between us, that women are of different races and classes, how can a white middle class movement actually deal with *all* women's oppression, as it purports to do, particularly if most women are not present to

represent their own interests? I think this is one of the most essential questions the movement has to face.

Bar: What we've got to look at is what is the nature of those issues that get multi-oppressed women involved in movement work. What are those issues and how might those issues be incorporated into the women's movements? I am thinking here of all the Black women who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Fannie Lou Hamer is a name we know, but there were countless thousands of other women whose names we don't know whose material conditions would not indicate that they would have the wherewithal to struggle politically but then they did. Even more recently, poor women have been involved in issues like tenants rights or welfare organizing, etc.

Bev: Sometimes I think maybe twenty-five to fifty years from now we might really understand what the origins of the women's movement were, much more so even than we know today. We may lose some of the proximity, but we'll gain some of the hindsight and the perspective. One of the things we might discover is that the origins of the feminist movement were basically middle class, but there are reasons for that. Already there is analysis about that from people who are somewhat anti-feminist, Marxists and leftists that have the perception that the women's movement is just an indication that we're in an advanced stage of capitalism. They say that the fact that the women's movement developed in this country at the time it did had to do with how capitalism had developed, in other words, a high enough rate of profit or surplus. I don't know what the terminology is, exactly, but this material surplus made it possible for women to have the "leisure" to demand certain rights.

As I see it, the welfare rights movement comes out of the needs expressed and experienced by the women receiving welfare. In the same way, there is a path the women's movement has followed that originated out of the needs of middle class women.

Bar: Yes, I think that is quite verifiable... There is just so much class conflict in this society that it is hard for people who are economically and/or racially oppressed to believe that there are some people who may experience their oppression differently. I think that this is where the laughability of the women's movement comes in. The women I teach a class with told me

how she has a friend who was teaching John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, to a class who had a decent number of Black students in it and the Black students refused to believe that it was about white people. *Refused* to believe, you know? John Steinbeck, Great White Novelist! That's just incredible! What it shows is the class conflict, the class division, that is totally enforced in this society to keep people unaware of each other's situations, commonalities, etc.

The Whitewash of Cultural Identity

Eds: *By virtue of your education, what class assumptions are made about you by white feminists? How do you experience white women trying to "whitewash" you?*

Bar: This is very complicated. There is a sociologist, a Black woman who's here in Boston, she said something very astute about this whole issue of class. She was talking about how sociologists often confuse class with lifestyle. They will throw out all their knowledge about income level, and assume people are of a different class. So they'll see a Black family who makes \$6000 a year, but the thing is they have books and they are stable and blah blah blah and all this crap, you know, they're trying to send their kids to college and they do and the sociologists say, "Well, then, they must be middle class." As she said so succinctly, "\$6000 dollars worth of money buys \$6000 worth of goods." (That would make them poor today. Twenty years ago, working class). It just depends on what you decide to spend it on. There is a difference between class in that narrow sense of values, you know? Because I think we come from that kind of home...

Bev: Sure. Sure.

Bar: Where there were priorities put on things that poor working class Black people weren't supposed to be thinking about.

Bev: Yeah, it's very confusing. The fact that education was something that was always valued in our family, not just in our generation, but for generations back. I think that's where a lot of white feminists get confused about us. Because of the fact of the education we had and the emphasis on cultural development and on intellectual development that has been in our family at least for three generations, makes people think, well, we must have come from a middle class background.

Bar: Oh yeah! Sure!

Bev: It's true, we never starved. But I just get so frustrated because I feel people don't understand where we came from. When I look at the photographs in our scrapbook I just think if they looked at the house, would they understand what our class background actually was? Because of where we were living, the size of the rooms...

Bar: The fact that there was no automatic washing machine.

Bev: The fact that when you got a chest of drawers, a dresser, and a bed in one of the bedrooms, literally there was no floor space. I think that a lot of where we came from had to do with, as you said, values and managing. One of the values is that you handled money in such a way that you made it stretch as far as you possibly could.

Bar: Don't I remember! (laughing) It was a real value that you live as decently as possible on the money you do make.

Bev: Exactly.

Bar: There was a lot of emphasis on trying.

Bev: Sometimes I do wish people could just see us in the context we grew up in, who our people are.

Bar: In order for people to understand what our background was, in order to place us, they need to have a lot of comprehension about what Black life is all about in this country, period. There is a cookbook, called *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* by these two Darden sisters. The reason why I mention it is because they have family history in there. This was a successful Black family, and yet these people worked like hell! They were people who were ex-slaves. Almost anybody in their family who wanted to go to a Black college could have, but that's not nearly the same thing as a family who sent all of their sons to Harvard, all of their daughters to Smith, or whatever. There's just a different social context. Even though this is a successful Black family, there is poverty, struggle, oppression, violence in the history of that family that is totally unrecognizable to outsiders...

Bev: Just like within ours. You know one of the thing that I've felt for a long time being involved in the women's movement, is that there is so much about Black identity that doesn't get called into practice.

Bar: Indeed! Indeed!

Bev: And that's very upsetting to me. It really makes me think about the choices I have made, either implicitly and less consciously or very consciously. It makes me think about how I live my life because there are so many parts of our Black identity that we no longer get a chance to exercise. And that's just something that is very appalling to me.

Bar: It's just too true. It's too true.

Too appalling! I would just like to mention July 4th which happened a few days ago and watching the Black family who lives in the house behind mine as I have for the last four years and just having this feeling of longing like, you know, I'll never be in that situation. A few days later, I was talking to this white woman I know about that and she said, "Well do you really want to be sitting out there with those men?" and I said, No. But the thing is that it's the whole thing. The whole damn thing! I realized, too, it was my regret for the past, for those July 4ths that were essentially just like the one I was watching right outside my window and for the fact that it will never be that way again. Well...

I don't think we can ever give it to each other as peers because there is a kind of family bonding across generations that is very Black that doesn't happen.

Bev: One of the things I was getting at is that there are ways we act when Black people are together that white women will never see in a largely white context. So I think that's one of the reasons that again, to use to phrase that was asked to us, they are able to "whitewash" us. Now, I don't think this is about acting white in a white context. It's about one, a lack of inspiration. Because the way you act with Black people is because they inspire the behavior. And I *do* mean inspire. And the other thing is that when you are in a white context, you think, "Well why bother? Why waste your time?" If what you're trying to do is get things across and communicate and what-have-you, *you talk in your second language*.

Bar: This is so different from being in a Black context. For example, it just occurred to me this experience I had visiting an old friend of mine that I have known for a number of years. She was staying in this house with this regular old Black nuclear

family. And the woman of the house was clearly the person who kept the whole thing together. They had food layed back! (laughing) and the thing is it was really a lot of fun for me to see that, "pervert" that I am – that's in quotes – dyke that I am, I could sit down at a table with these middle-aged Black women who were playing pokeeno and be able to hang, you know? And it was very nice. I had a good time.

Bev: Only one question, Barbara, did you play? (laughing)

Bar: Yeah, I played for a little while. Throughout the day, there must been twenty people in and out of the house. And it was no particular occasion, just twenty people in and out of the house. At one point, we were talking about television and the woman said, "Oh Barbara doesn't watch T.V. She's an intellectual." It was a joke and I felt good enough in that context with people I hardly knew to understand that they said that with a great deal of affection. I realized they were complimenting me and being supportive for something I had accomplished. I'm sure they felt proud of the fact that Alice, the doctor, and Barbara, who teaches at U. Mass, were sitting around on a Sunday evening. And the thing is that it was not the kind of hostility that I have sometimes experienced from my so called peers of Black women about those very same struggles and accomplishments. And it certainly is not the misunderstanding that I have gotten from white women about the meaning of that. Because of course, these people are trying to send their children to school too.

Bev: I wonder is this the trade-off, is this what everyone who has our identity has to sacrifice? One of my constant questions is how do other lesbians of color live their lives? The other question I have is – "Is this 'fly in the buttermilk' existence a function of our feminism more than our lesbianism?" To ask the question more explicitly – Do black lesbians, who do not identify as feminists and base their lives in the Black community, feel this struggle? I think the answer is that they don't all the time. It's hard to figure out.

Bar: I think the isolation is probably a result much more of being a feminist. I think this has some class factors in it. This almost takes us back to where we began because in order to be involved in this women's movement, as it stands today, you have to be able to deal with "middle-classness." And the Black

women who can take it are often the ones with educational privilege.

Lesbian Separatism

Eds: *Is a lesbian separatist position inherently racist? Is this position a viable political position to take?*

Bar: As we said in our collective statement (Combahee) I think we have real questions because separatism seems like such a narrow kind of politics and also because it seems to be only viably practiced by women who have certain kinds of privilege: white-skinned privilege, class privilege. Women who don't have those kinds of privilege have to deal with this society and with the institutions of this society. They can't go to a harbor of many acres of land, and farm, and invite the goddess. Women of color are very aware that racism is not gender specific and that it affects all people of color. We have experiences that have nothing to do with being female, but are nonetheless experiences of deep oppression...and even violence.

Bev: Maybe the reason that white women got into lesbian separatism was because in being separatist they were separating themselves from white men, given how there is so much oppression in this world currently that white men have visited on people. In some ways they felt that they had to separate themselves from white men to even have a fighting chance.

Bar: So seldom is separatism involved in making real political change, affecting the institutions in the society in any direct way. If you define certain movement issues as straight women's issues, for example reproductive rights and sterilization abuse, then these identifiable sexual/political issues are ones you are not going to bother with.

We have noticed how separatists in our area, instead of doing political organizing often do zap acts. For example they might come to a meeting or series of meetings then move on their way. It is not clear what they're actually trying to change. We sometimes think of separatism as politics without a practice.

Bev: One of the problems of separatism is that I can't see it as a philosophy that explains and analyzes the roots of all oppression and is going to go towards solving it. I think it has some validity

in a more limited sphere. To begin to talk about being separate from men is viable. It has some worthwhile aspects.

Bar: Many lesbians are separatist in that sense. You are very aware of the choice – that in being a lesbian you understand that you really don't need men to define your identity, your sexuality, to make your life meaningful or simply to have a good time. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have no comprehension of the oppressions that you share with men. And you see white women with class privilege don't share oppression with white men. They're in a critical and antagonistic position whereas Black women and other women of color definitely share oppressed situations with men of their race.

What white lesbians have against lesbians of color is that they accuse us of being "male identified" because we are concerned with issues that affect our whole race. They express anger at us for not seeing the light. That is another aspect of how they carry on their racism. They are so narrow and adamant about that that they dismiss lesbians of color and women of color who aren't lesbians because we have some concern about what happens to the men of our race. And it's not like we like their sexism or even want to sleep with them. You can certainly be concerned as we are living here this summer in Boston when one Black man after another ends up dead.¹

Bev: It's not only being concerned, it is observing what happens – who does racist acts and who are the targets for racism. It would be incredibly dishonest to say that racism is a thing just experienced by Black women.

Bar: And also politically inexpedient. I think that people who define themselves as Black feminists certainly have decided that the bulk of their political work is in concert with other Black women. That doesn't mean that you're totally oblivious to the reality of racism. I feel that the one thing about racism is that it doesn't play favorites. Look at the history of lynching in this country. And also look at how Black women have experienced violence that is definitely racial. When you read about Black women being lynched, they aren't thinking of us as females. The horrors that we have experienced have absolutely everything to do with them *not even viewing us as women*.

Because if we are women some false chivalry would enter in and maybe certain things wouldn't happen. I've never read an account of a lynching of a white woman, or one who was pregnant. I think there's a difference between the old usual rape-murder that happens to all women and the lynching that happens specifically to Black women. A contemporary example of that is how Black women who are battered and who physically defend themselves are treated differently than white women by the courts. It's seen differently by the courts when a white middle class woman murders her husband. Then it's so-called self defense. I was just reading a case involving a Black woman in Michigan where the Black woman was sold down the river obviously because she was Black. A negative image of Black men and women got her fate delivered.

Bev: One of the most dangerous & erroneous concepts that separatists have put forward is that other oppressions, in addition to sexism, are attributed to men only. Some separatists believe that although women are racist, when men disappear and no longer rule, racism will not be a problem. It's very analogous to people who are Marxists who say, "Well, when class oppression and racism end, definitely the oppression of women and lesbians will end." What lesbian separatists are saying is that when we get rid of men, sexism and racism will end, too. I think that this is one of the most racist aspects of it because it does not recognize the racism that women, including lesbians, have.

There is also a dishonesty that I have come across in some lesbians who although they do not regard themselves as separatists, they also do not acknowledge the separatism in their own lifestyles. Many lesbians who don't consider themselves separatists would never live with a man and would not go very far to befriend a man (although they may have a few token men in their lives), but they don't go any further than to disavow their separatism.

Bar: I disagree with that. The so-called disavowal is, from my perspective, the lack of need to deify or glorify those very kinds of choices. Separatists get angry at the fact that I don't make much of the fact that I don't see a man socially from one end of the week to the other. I feel they are trying to collapse political positions that I do not consider in any way trivial. Who you have

parties with, as far as I am concerned, is not the bottom line of defining your political commitment.

I also want to say that I don't think that white lesbian separatists are more racist than any other white women in the women's movement that we deal with. I just think it takes different forms. White lesbian separatism has almost a studied obliviousness to instances of oppression whereas another group of feminists, for example socialists, are even sectarian. The way their racism would manifest itself – they would know that racism was an important issue but they wouldn't be dealing with it in any way except as a theoretical radical issue. Their discomfort in dealing around women of color would be just as palpable; that attitude would be just as apparent. All white people in this country are victims of the disease of racism.

There is no such thing as a non-racist. Sometimes it's as simple as who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose face you can touch. There are bunches of white women for whom these things that I've mentioned are unknown experiences with women of color.

Bar: Beverly is fixing this little teddybear. She's been doing surgery on it for the last couple of hours. The bear shows remarkable stamina, like no human being. You could say that we are having a series of operations in our lives.

Bev: If it weren't for Barbara and her relationship with this person who is not myself, I wouldn't be dealing with it.

Bar: I don't see that as being relevant to this conversation.

Bev: It is relevant. I'm talking about how I got involved in this surgery.

Homophobia in the Black Community

Eds: *Describe your experience in dealing with homophobic Black sisters.*

Bar: There's nothing to compare with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own... I think the reason that Black women are so homophobic is that attraction-repulsion thing. They have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women. They make great cases for how fucked up it all is, and therefore cover their asses admirably. *Is homophobia more entrenched in the Black community than in the white community?*

Bev: You can argue about that until Jesus comes, really.

Bar: I really must say historically, politically there are more reasons for the Black community to be homophobic, one of them being that the women's movement has made fewer inroads into the Black community, as well as gay rights. We can assume that a community that has been subjected to the ideas of the movement is going to have more consciousness. And given how up until the last couple of years the feminist movement has not touched Third World communities, we can expect their attitudes to be much as they have been in the past.

One of the reasons that I have thought for homophobic attitudes among Black women is the whole sexual stereotyping used against all Black people anyway, but especially women in relation to homosexuality – you know, the “Black bulldagger” image. Lesbianism is definitely about something sexual, a so-called deviant sexuality. So the way most Black women deal with it is to be just rigid and closed about it as possible. White people don't have a sexual image that another oppressor community has put on them.

Bev: This country is so racist that it is possible to take many, many things and concepts that have nothing to do with race and talk about them in racial terms. Because people are so dichotomized into either black or white, it defines a continuum. This is so strict and so overwhelming in this country, you can take things that have nothing to do with race and refer to them racially.

Therefore, Black people have the option of taking things – sexuality behavior, conflicts, whatever they don't like – and saying, “That's white.” Lesbianism is not the only thing seen as a white thing. A real good example is suicide. Black people say, “Yeah, suicide is a white thing.”

Bar: Oh yeah, we used to believe that. And of course one felt all the worse for having considered it. I'm thinking of Ntozake Shange's play “for colored girls who have considered suicide.” It's very brave. I mean, she's dealing with a lot of myths, by saying that we have even considered it, if it's supposed to be a white thing.

Bev: Any behavior Black people say is despicable, they can disregard by saying this doesn't belong to the Black community.

There's hardly a thing in this world in our experience that is not referred to being either Black or white, from animals on – people talking about white dogs. They weren't talking about dogs that were white in color, they were talking about dogs that belonged to white people.

Bar: So often lesbianism and male homosexuality are talked about as a white disease within the Black community. It is just so negating of our lives. Very upsetting.

Eds: *Are Black women more vulnerable to homophobic attack?*

Bar: Yes, Black women are more vulnerable to homophobic attack because we don't have white skin privilege, or class privilege to fall back on if somebody wants to start a smear campaign against us. As I said in my essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," it's (heterosexual privilege) always the last to go. We don't have any of the other privileges. It really is jumping off the edge in a very fundamental way. Somebody who is already dealing with multiple oppression is more vulnerable to another kind of attack upon her identity.

Bev: I also feel that Black women are more vulnerable to physical attack as lesbians because they're Black. The stories you hear over the years of Black lesbians being attacked for being lesbian, usually by white men!

Eds: *What is the relationship between Black women's resistance to identifying as feminists, and lesbianism?*

Bar: It's real connected. Feminists have been portrayed as nothing but "lesbians" to the Black community as well. There was a considerable effort in the early seventies to turn the Black community off to feminism. You can look at publications, particularly Black publications making pronouncements about what the feminist movement was and who it reached that would trivialize it, that would say no Black women were involved, that did everything possible to prevent those coalitions between Black and white women from happening because there was a great deal of fear. Black men did not want to lose Black women as allies. And the white power structure did not want to see all women bond across racial lines because they knew that would be an unbeatable unstoppable combination. They did a very good job. You can just document those happenings during that period.

So, yes, most Black women think that to be a feminist you have to be a lesbian. And if not that, then at least you have to deal with being around lesbians. And you see, that is true. It's very hard to be in the women's movement and not be around lesbians. And if you're so homophobic that you can't deal with the thought of lesbianism then you probably won't be involved. I think these things are changing. More and more Black women are becoming sensitive or sympathetic to the women's movement.

Third World Women: Tokenism or Leadership

Eds: *How, as women of color, can we prevent ourselves from being tokenized by white feminists? How do you see Third World women forming the leadership in the feminist movement?*

Bev: One looks at the question about tokenism and just throws up her hands. There are so many possibilities of tokenization. One of the most tokenized situations that Barbara and I find ourselves in is when we are asked to speak at a certain place. You can be certain to be the only Black person there. You're going to be put in the position of speaking for the race, for all Black feminists. One of the things that helps is to get paid and to put it on that level so you don't feel so exploited.

Bar: I think that the service Gloria thought of having and calling it "Dial a Token" – I mean that's a good thing. For one thing it puts it out there. It's saying, "Hey, I know what you're doing and I want to get paid for it."

Another thing, try not to be the only Third World person there. I was thinking of the meeting that Cherríe went to when she was here with us. And even though there were several Third World women we were still tokenized (laughing). I guess that I am really talking about support as opposed to defusing tokenization.

Bev: Given the state of things between Black and white women, we're going to be tokenized quite a bit. It's so hard to get around that.

Bar: A solution to tokenism is *not* racial separatism. There are definitely separatist aspects emerging among Black and Third World feminist community and that is fine. But, ultimately, any kind of separatism is a dead end. It's good for forging identity

and gathering strength, but I do feel that the strongest politics are coalition politics that cover a broad base of issues. There is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don't necessarily have to like or love the people you're in coalition with.

This brings me back to the issue of lesbian separatism. I read in a women's newspaper an article by a woman speaking on behalf of lesbian separatists. She claimed that separatists are more radical than other feminists. What *I* really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think *that* is really radical because it has never been done before. And it really pisses me off that they think of themselves as radical. *I think there is a difference between being extreme and being radical.*

This is why Third World women are forming the leadership in the feminist movement because we are not one-dimensional, one-issued in our political understanding. Just by virtue of our identities we certainly define race and usually define class as being fundamental issues that we have to address. The more wide-ranged your politics, the more potentially profound and transformative they are.

Bev: The way I see it, the function that Third World women play in the movement is that we're the people who throw the ball a certain distance and then the white women run to that point to pick it up. I feel we are constantly challenging white women, usually on the issues of racism but not always. We are always challenging women to go further, to be more realistic. I so often think of the speech that Sojourner Truth made not because of the contents so much but more because of the function. She says, "Now children, let's get this together. Let me explain what's going on here. Let me lay it out for you." I must admit that the reason I think of it so often is that I have thought of myself in that situation. "Let me explain this to you one more time, let me take you by the hand, etc." I find myself playing that role. But there's a way though that I feel that Third World women are not in actual leadership *positions* in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But position in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But we certainly have the vision.

We are in the position to challenge the feminist movement as it stands to date and, not out of any theoretical commitment. Our analysis of race and class oppression and our commitment to really dealing with those issues, including homophobia, is something we know we have to struggle with to insure our survival. It is organic to our very existence.

Bar: Thank you, sweetheart. Teddybear just gave me a kiss.

Bye Girls.

Notes

1. An even more striking example of the connection between a Lesbian separatist stance and the disavowal of racism as a central feminist concern can be seen in the incredibly negative responses to Elly Bulkin's fine article "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics" coming primarily from separatists.

Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance

Cheryl Clarke

For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance. (A resistance that should be championed throughout the world by all the forces struggling for liberation from the same slave master.) No matter how a woman lives out her lesbianism – in the closet, in the state legislature, in the bedroom – she has rebelled against becoming the slave master's concubine, viz. the male-dependent female, the female heterosexual. This rebellion is dangerous business in patriarchy. Men at all levels of privilege, of all classes and colors have the potential to act out legalistically, moralistically, and violently when they cannot colonize women, when they cannot circumscribe our sexual, productive, reproductive, creative prerogatives and energies. And the lesbian – that woman who, as Judy Grahn says, "has taken a woman lover"¹ – has succeeded in resisting the slave master's imperialism in that one sphere of her life. The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship – roles notwithstanding.

Historically, this culture has come to identify lesbians as women, who over time, engage in a range and variety of sexual-emotional relationships with women. I, for one, identify a woman as a lesbian who says she is. Lesbianism is a recognition, an awakening, a reawakening of our passion for each (woman) other (woman) and for same (woman). This passion will ultimately reverse the heterosexual imperialism of male culture. Women, through the ages, have fought and died rather than deny that passion. In her essay, "The Meaning of Our Love for Women Is What We Have Constantly to Expand" Adrienne Rich states:

...Before any kind of feminist movement existed, or could exist, lesbians existed: women who loved women, who refused to comply with behavior demanded of women, who refused to define themselves in relation to men. Those women, our fore Sisters, millions whose names we do not know, were tortured and burned as witches, slandered in religious and later in

"scientific" tracts, portrayed in art and literature as bizarre, amoral, destructive, decadent women. For a long time, the lesbian has been a personification of feminine evil.

...Lesbians have been forced to live between two cultures, both male-dominated, each of which has denied and endangered our existence... Heterosexual, patriarchal culture has driven lesbians into secrecy and guilt, often to self-hatred and suicide.²

The evolving synthesis of lesbianism and feminism – two women-centered and powered ideologies – is breaking that silence and secrecy. The following analysis is offered as one small cut against that stone of silence and secrecy. It is not intended to be original or all-inclusive. I dedicate this work to all the women hidden from history whose suffering and triumph have made it possible for me to call my name out loud.³

The woman who embraces lesbianism as an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny must also identify with the world-wide struggle of all women to end male-supremacist tyranny at all levels. As far as I am concerned, any woman who calls herself a feminist must commit herself to the liberation of *all* women from *coerced* heterosexuality as it manifests itself in the family, the state, and on Madison Avenue. The lesbian-feminist struggles for the liberation of all people from patriarchal domination through heterosexism and for the transformation of all socio-political structures, systems, and relationships that have been degraded and corrupted under centuries of male domination.

However, there is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship. Also there is no one kind of response to the pressures that lesbians labor under to survive as lesbians. Not all women who are involved in sexual-emotional relationships with women call themselves lesbians or identify with any particular lesbian community. Many women are only lesbians to a particular community and *pass* as heterosexuals as they traffic among enemies. (This is analogous to being black and passing for white with only one's immediate family knowing one's true origins.) Yet, those who hide in the closet of heterosexual presumption are sooner or later discovered. The "nigger-in-the-woodpile" story retells itself. Many women are politically active as lesbians,

but may fear holding hands with their lovers as they traverse heterosexual turf. (This response to heterosexual predominance can be likened to the reaction of the black student who integrates a predominantly white dormitory and who fears leaving the door of her room open when she plays gospel music.) There is the woman who engages in sexual-emotional relationships with women and labels herself *bisexual*. (This is comparable to the Afro-American whose skin-color indicates her mixed ancestry yet who calls herself "mulatto" rather than black.) Bisexual is a safer label than lesbian, for it posits the possibility of a relationship with a man, regardless of how infrequent or non-existent the female bisexual's relationships with men might be. And there is the lesbian who is a lesbian anywhere and everywhere and who is in direct and constant confrontation with heterosexual presumption, privilege, and oppression. (Her struggle can be compared to that of the Civil Rights activist of the 1960's who was out there on the streets for freedom, while so many of us viewed the action on the television.)

Wherever we, as lesbians, fall along this very generalized political continuum, we must know that the institution of heterosexuality is a die-hard custom through which male-supremacist institutions insure their own perpetuity and control over us. Women are kept, maintained, and contained through terror, violence, and spray of semen. It is profitable for our colonizers to confine our bodies and alienate us from our own life processes as it was profitable for the European to enslave the African and destroy all memory of a prior freedom and self-determination - Alex Haley notwithstanding. And just as the foundation of Western capitalism depended upon the North Atlantic slave trade, the system of patriarchal domination is buttressed by the subjugation of women through heterosexuality. So, patriarchs must extol the boy-girl dyad as "natural" to keep us straight and compliant in the same way the European had to extol Caucasian superiority to justify the African slave trade. Against that historic backdrop, *the woman who chooses to be a lesbian lives dangerously.*

As a member of the largest and second most oppressed group of people of color, as a woman whose slave and ex-slave forefathers suffered some of the most brutal racist, male-supremacist imperialism in Western history, the black lesbian has

had to survive also the psychic mutilation of heterosexual superiority. The black lesbian is coerced into the experience of institutional racism – like every other nigger in America – and must suffer as well the homophobic sexism of the black political community, some of whom seem to have forgotten so soon the pain of rejection, denial, and repression sanctioned by racist America. While most political black lesbians do not give a damn if white America is negrophobic, it becomes deeply problematic when the contemporary black political community (another male-dominated and male-identified institution) rejects us because of our commitment to women and women's liberation. Many black male members of that community seem still not to understand the historic connection between the oppression of African peoples in North America and the universal oppression of women. As the women's rights activist and abolitionist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, pointed out during the 1850's, racism and sexism have been produced by the same animal, viz. "the white Saxon man."

Gender oppression (i.e. the male exploitation and control of women's productive and reproductive energies on the specious basis of a biological difference) originated from the first division of labor, viz. that between women and men, and resulted in the accumulation of private property, patriarchal usurpation of "mother right" or matrilineage, and the duplicitous, male-supremacist institution of heterosexual monogamy (for women only). Sexual politics, therefore, mirror the exploitative, class-bound relationship between the white slave master and the African slave – and the impact of both relationships (between black and white and woman and man) has been residual beyond emancipation and suffrage. The ruling class white man had a centuries-old model for his day-to-day treatment of the African slave. Before he learned to justify the African's continued enslavement and the ex-slave's continued disenfranchisement with arguments of the African's divinely ordained mental and moral inferiority to himself (a smokescreen for his capitalist greed) the white man learned, within the structure of heterosexual monogamy and under the system of patriarchy, to relate to black people – slave or free – as a man *relates* to a woman, viz. as property, as a sexual commodity, as a servant, as a source of free or cheap labor, and as an innately inferior being.

Although counter-revolutionary, Western heterosexuality, which advances male-supremacy, continues to be upheld by many black people, especially black men, as the most desired state of affairs between men and women. This observation is borne out on the pages of our most scholarly black publications to our most commercial black publications, which view the issue of black male and female relationships through the lens of heterosexual bias. But this is to be expected, as historically heterosexuality was one of our only means of power over our condition as slaves and one of two means we had at our disposal to appease the white man.

Now, as ex-slaves, black men have more latitude to oppress black women, because the brothers no longer have to compete directly with the white man for control of black women's bodies. Now, the black man can assume the "master" role, and he can attempt to tyrannize black women. The black man may view the lesbian - who cannot be manipulated or seduced sexually by him - in much the same way the white slave master once viewed the black male slave, viz. as some perverse caricature of manhood threatening his position of dominance over the female body. This view, of course, is a "neurotic illusion" imposed on black men by the dictates of male supremacy, which the black man can never fulfill because he lacks the capital means and racial privilege.

Historically, the myth in the Black world is that there are only two free people in the United States, the white man and the black woman. The myth was established by the Black man in the long period of his frustration when he longed to be free to have the material and social advantages of his oppressor, the white man. On examination of the myth, this so-called freedom was based on the sexual prerogatives taken by the white man on the Black female. It was fantasied by the Black man that she enjoyed it.⁴

While lesbian-feminism does threaten the black man's predatory control of black women, its goal as a political ideology and philosophy is not to take the black man's or any man's position on top.

Black lesbians who do work within "by-for-about-black-people" groups or organizations either pass as "straight" or relegate our lesbianism to the so-called "private" sphere. The more male-dominated or black nationalist bourgeois the

organization or group, the more resistant to change, and thus, the more homophobic and anti-feminist. In these sectors, we learn to keep a low profile.

In 1979, at the annual conference of a regional chapter of the National Black Social Workers, the national director of that body was given a standing ovation for the following remarks:

Homosexuals are even accorded minority status now... And white women, too. And some of you black women who call yourselves feminists will be sitting up in meetings with the same white women who will be stealing your men on the sly.

This type of indictment of women's revolution and implicitly of lesbian liberation is voiced throughout the bourgeois black (male) movement. But this is the insidious nature of male supremacy. While the black man may consider racism his primary oppression, he is hard-put to recognize that sexism is inextricably bound up with the racism the black woman must suffer, nor can he see that no women (or men for that matter) will be liberated from the original "master-slave" relationship, viz. that between men and women, until we are all liberated from the false premise of heterosexual superiority. This corrupted, predatory relationship between men and women is the foundation of the master-slave relationship between white and black people in the United States.

The tactic many black men use to intimidate black women from embracing feminism is to reduce the conflicts between white women and black women to a "tug-o'-war" for the black penis. And since the black lesbian, as stated previously, is not interested in his penis, she undermines the black man's only source of power over her, viz. his heterosexuality. Black lesbians and all black women involved in the struggle for liberation must resist this manipulation and seduction.

The black dyke, like every dyke in America, is everywhere – in the home, in the street, on the welfare, unemployment and social security rolls, raising children, working in factories, in the armed forces, on television, in the public school system, in all the professions, going to college or graduate school, in middle-management, et. al. The black dyke, like every other non-white and working class and poor woman in America, has not suffered the luxury, privilege or oppression of being dependent on men, even though our male counterparts have been present, have

shared our lives, work and struggle, and, in addition have undermined our "human dignity" along the way like most men in patriarchy, the imperialist family of man. But we could never depend on them "to take care of us" on their resources alone – and, of course, it is another "neurotic illusion" imposed on our fathers, brothers, lovers, husbands that they are supposed to "take care of us" because we are women. Translate: "to take care of us" equals "to control us." Our brothers', fathers', lovers', husbands' only power is their manhood. And unless manhood is somehow embellished by white skin and generations of private wealth, it has little currency in racist, capitalist patriarchy. The black man, for example, is accorded native elite or colonial guard or vigilante status over black women in imperialist patriarchy. He is an overseer for the slave master. Because of his maleness he is given access to certain privileges, e.g. employment, education, a car, life insurance, a house, some nice vines. He is usually a rabid heterosexual. He is, since emancipation, allowed to raise a "legitimate" family, allowed to have his piece of turf, viz. his wife and children. That is as far as his dictatorship extends for, if his wife decides that she wants to leave that home for whatever reason, he does not have the power or resources to seduce her otherwise if she is determined to throw off the benign or malicious yoke of dependency. The ruling class white man on the other hand, has always had the power to count women among his pool of low-wage labor, his means of production. Most recently, he has "allowed" women the right to sue for divorce, to apply for AFDC, and to be neocolonialized.

Traditionally, poor black men and women who banded together and stayed together and raised children together did not have the luxury to cultivate dependence among the members of their families. So, the black dyke, like most black women, has been conditioned to be self-sufficient, i.e. not dependent on men. For me personally, the conditioning to be self-sufficient and the predominance of female role models in my life are the roots of my lesbianism. Before I became a lesbian, I often wondered why I was expected to give up, avoid, and trivialize the recognition and encouragement I felt from women in order to pursue the tenuous business of heterosexuality. And I am not unique.

As political lesbians, i.e. lesbians who are resisting the prevailing culture's attempts to keep us invisible and powerless,

we must become more visible (particularly black and other lesbians of color) to our sisters hidden in their various closets, locked in prisons of self-hate and ambiguity, afraid to take the ancient act of woman-bonding beyond the sexual, the private, the personal. I am not trying to reify lesbianism or feminism. I am trying to point out that lesbian-feminism has the potential of reversing and transforming a major component in the system of women's oppression, viz. predatory heterosexuality. If radical lesbian-feminism purports an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-woman-hating vision of bonding as mutual, reciprocal, as infinitely negotiable, as freedom from antiquated gender prescriptions and proscriptions, *then all people struggling to transform the character of relationships in this culture have something to learn from lesbians.*

The woman who takes a woman lover lives dangerously in patriarchy. And woe betide her even more if she chooses as her lover a woman who is not of her race. The silence among lesbian-feminists regarding the issue of lesbian relationships between black and white women in America is caused by none other than the centuries-old taboo and laws in the United States against relationships between people of color and those of the Caucasian race. Speaking heterosexually, the laws and taboos were a reflection of the patriarchal slave master's attempts to control his property via controlling his lineage through the institution of monogamy (for women only) and justified the taboos and laws with the argument that purity of the Caucasian race must be preserved (as well as its supremacy). However, we know that his racist and racialist laws and taboos did not apply to him in terms of the black slave woman just as his classist laws and taboos regarding the relationship between the ruling class and the indentured servants did not apply to him in terms of the white woman servant he chose to rape. The offspring of any unions between the white ruling class slave master and the black slave woman or white woman indentured servant could not legally inherit their white or ruling class sire's property or name, just their mothers' condition of servitude.

The taboo against black and white people relating at any other level than master-slave, superior-inferior has been propounded in America to keep black women and men and white women and men, who share a common oppression at the

hands of the ruling class white man, from organizing against that common oppression. We, as black lesbians, must vehemently resist being bound by the white man's racist, sexist laws, which have endangered potential intimacy of any kind between whites and blacks.

It cannot be presumed that black lesbians involved in love, work, and social relationships with white lesbians do so out of self-hate and denial of our racial-cultural heritage, identities, and oppression. Why should a woman's commitment to the struggle be questioned or accepted on the basis of her lover's or comrade's skin color? White lesbians engaged likewise with black lesbians or any lesbians of color cannot be assumed to be acting out of some perverse, guilt-ridden racist desire.

I personally am tired of going to events, conferences, workshops, planning sessions that involve a coming together of black and other lesbians of color for political or even social reasons and listening to black lesbians relegate feminism to white women, castigate black women who propose forming coalitions with predominantly white feminist groups, minimize the white woman's oppression and exaggerate her power, and then finally judge that a black lesbian's commitment to the liberation of black women is dubious because she does not sleep with a black woman. All of us have to accept or reject allies on the basis of politics not on the specious basis of skin color. *Have not black people suffered betrayal from our own people?*

Yes, black women's experiences of misogyny are different from white women's. However, they all add up to how the patriarchal slave master decided to oppress us. We both fought each other for his favor, approval, and protection. Such is the effect of imperialist, heterosexist patriarchy. Shulamith Firestone, in the essay, "Racism: the Sexism of the Family of Man," purports this analysis of the relationship between white and black women:

How do the women of this racial Triangle feel about each other? Divide and conquer: Both women have grown hostile to each other, white women feeling contempt for the "sluts" with no morals, black women feeling envy for the pampered "powder puffs." The black woman is jealous of the white woman's legitimacy, privilege, and comfort, but she also feels deep contempt... Similarly the white woman's contempt for the black woman is mixed with envy: for the black woman's greater sexual

license, for her gutsiness, for her freedom from the marriage bind. For after all, the black woman is not under the thumb of a man, but is pretty much her own boss to come and go, to leave the house, to work (much as it is degrading work) or to be "shiftless." What the white woman doesn't know is that the black woman, not under the thumb of one man, can now be squashed by all. There is no alternative for either of them than the choice between being public or private property, but because each still believes that the other is getting away with something both can be fooled into mis-channeling their frustration onto each other rather than onto the real enemy, "The Man."⁵

Though her statement of the choices black and white women have under patriarchy in America has merit, Firestone analyzes only a specific relationship i.e. between the ruling class white woman and slave or ex-slave black woman.

Because of her whiteness, the white woman of all classes has been accorded, as the black man has because of his maleness, certain privileges in racist patriarchy, e.g. indentured servitude as opposed to enslavement, exclusive right to public assistance until the 1960's, "legitimate" offspring and (if married into the middle/upper class) the luxury to live on her husband's income, etc.

The black woman, having neither maleness nor whiteness, has always had her heterosexuality, which white men and black men have manipulated by force and at will. Further, she, like all poor people, has had her labor, which the white capitalist man has also taken and exploited at will. These capabilities have allowed black women minimal access to the crumbs thrown at black men and white women. So, when the black woman and the white woman become lovers, we bring that history and all those questions to the relationship as well as other people's problems with the relationships. The taboo against intimacy between white and black people has been internalized by us and simultaneously defied by us. If we, as lesbian-feminists, defy the taboo, then we begin to transform the history of relationships between black women and white women.

In her essay, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," Rich calls for feminists to attend to the complexities of the relationship between black and white women in the United States. Rich queries:

What caricatures of bloodless fragility and broiling sensuality still imprint our psyches, and where did we receive these imprintings? What happened between the several thousand northern white women and southern black women who together taught in the schools founded under Reconstruction by the Freedmen's Bureau, side by side braving the Ku Klux Klan harrassment, terrorism, and the hostility of white communities?⁶

So, all of us would do well to stop fighting each other for our space at the bottom, because there ain't no more room. We have spent so much time hating ourselves. Time to love ourselves. And that, for all lesbians, as lovers, as comrades, as freedom fighters, is the final resistance.

Notes

1. Grahn, Judy. "The Common Woman," *The Work of a Common Woman* (Oakland: Diana Press, 1978), 67.
2. Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: WW Norton, 1979), 225.
3. I would like to give particular acknowledgement to the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement." Because this document espouses "struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," it has become a manifesto of radical feminist thought, action and practice.
4. Robinson, Pat and group. "Poor Black Women's Study Papers by Poor Black Women of Mount Vernon, New York." In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade (New York: New American Library, 1970), 194.
5. Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 113.
6. Rich, op. cit., 298.
7. One such example is the Port Royal Experiment (1862), the precursor of the Freedmen's Bureau. Port Royal was a program of relief for "freed men and women" in the South Carolina Sea Islands, organized under the auspices of the Boston Education Commision and the Freedmen's Relief Assoc. in New York and the Port Royal Relief Assoc. in Philadelphia, and sanctioned by the Union Army and the Federal Government. See *The Journal of Charlotte Forten on the "Port Royal Experiment"* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1969). Through her Northern bourgeois myopia, Forten recounts her experiences as a black teacher among the black freed men and women and her Northern white women peers.

Lowriding Through the Women's Movement

Barbara Noda

One road winds down the mountains, past apple orchards, and into the half-awake town of Watsonville, California. Not quite disturbed by the university students of Santa Cruz or the tourists of Monterey, an eye-distance from the blue roar of the Pacific, Watsonville is still a sleepy town where lowriders drag Main in search of non-existent action. The lowriders are left to their own destiny, to cruise against a backdrop of fog-shrouded artichokes when the sun has gone down. Thorny spears thrust into a star-studded night, and the lowriders bail out at deserted beaches, drink six-packs of beer and stare at the foam.

Sharon's kitchen in Watsonville was the center of a different kind of activity. We assembled in the evening: Sharon; Sharon's zealous sister who would soon be led to Christianity; a black lesbian who lived in a cottage behind Sharon's house who was an unforgivable romantic and who probably led a past life as an opera singer; a Chicana, self-named after a revolutionary, struggling to earn a doctorate in the University of California's ethereal mountaintop program called "History of Consciousness;" and myself.

We were probably among the first of our kind back in the early seventies: a third world women's group. There, in the quiet of residential Watsonville, we discussed the "colonized" and the "colonizer". Sharon distributed green tea, Chinese pastries, and Aime Cesaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. As the evening wound down we stormed out together – third world sisters – and dragged Main with the masses, drank beer and howled at the empty, innocent face of the sky who oppressed us.

Whether *Race* was our answer or our question, certainly it held us together if even for a few brief months in our lives during a time when *nothing else* in the world that we saw around us had any solid identity or meaning. It was a vaporous season, like a lost summer, and desperately we needed to hold onto each other and croon a few songs from the underworld.

Now, so many years later, it is still difficult to believe that Sharon is dead. I keep thinking that one day I'll see her in the

midst of a demonstration, shouting through a megaphone and glaring into the pale eye who dares to tell her to "go back to where you came from." She is *not* from China. But perhaps shouting into a megaphone was not her way. I remember the last time I saw her in newly established living quarters in the Outer Mission. We shared a sweet piece of watermelon that floated like a bright red iceberg in the middle of our plate, unmistakably a bite of paradise. Old differences over "correct" politics slithered harmlessly from our mouths with the black seeds we spit out. We talked about Asian American poetry and Tule Lake, co-existed for a moment then parted ways.

For one who was so sincerely dedicated to the "cause" for her to be broadsided while driving past the pine and sand that border Highway One and killed instantly is a mystery beyond all comprehension. There is no understanding of such things. Maybe we knew something then that we needed to forget in order to live more meaningful lives, when we joined the lowriders in the flagrant pursuit of their destiny.



I rode the elevator down from the 21st floor, marched to the bakery where Sharon used to buy pastries on her visits to the city, and ate my lunch in Portsmouth Square. I had been plugged into a dictaphone all morning and Chinatown squirmed with life.

Pigeons softly gurgling. Game tables obscured and surrounded by the beating hearts of groups of men. Women carrying bags of groceries nearly flying above sedate heads, like kites trailed by small children. Old people deciphering the ancient language of their worn out books. The red benches. My red sweater. The color RED sang out at me, and I was a glorious part of it.

Across the street was the leveled site of the I-Hotel. A fortress barricaded with the strategy of ardent organizers, it was now a parking lot. The damp cold of the building, the loneliness of the tenants and of us (I was not sure whether we had been the youthful guardians of the building or stray cats who had

wandered in) had been demolished into a flattened expanse of less than nothing. Even nothing speaks. This was merely city grime, fumes, noise, pollution. The humanity that had kept us warm and huddled together through makeshift Christmas dinners, internal crises and external warfare had been strained from the air. Not even a mirage existed, only the city life around me.

Letter to Ma

Merle Woo

January, 1980

Dear Ma,

I was depressed over Christmas, and when New Year's rolled around, do you know what one of my resolves was? Not to come by and see you as much anymore. I had to ask myself why I get so down when I'm with you, my mother, who has focused so much of her life on me, who has endured so much; one who I am proud of and respect so deeply for simply surviving.

I suppose that one of the main reasons is that when I leave your house, your pretty little round white table in the dinette where we sit while you drink tea (with only three specks of Jasmine) and I smoke and drink coffee, I am down because I believe there are chasms between us. When you say, "I support you, honey, in everything you do except...except..." I know you mean except my speaking out and writing of my anger at all those things that have caused those chasms. When you say I shouldn't be so ashamed of Daddy, former gambler, retired clerk of a "gook suey" store, because of the time when I was six and saw him humiliated on Grant Avenue by two white cops, I know you haven't even been listening to me when I have repeatedly said that I am not ashamed of him, not you, not who we are. When you ask, "Are you so angry because you are unhappy?" I know that we are not talking to each other. Not with understanding, although many words have passed between us, many hours, many afternoons at that round table with Daddy out in the front room watching television, and drifting out every once in a while to say "Still talking?" and getting more peanuts that are so bad for his health.

We talk and we talk and I feel frustrated by your censorship. I know it is unintentional and unconscious. But whatever I have told you about the classes I was teaching, or the stories I was working on, you've always forgotten within a month. Maybe you can't listen - because maybe when you look in my eyes, you will, as you've always done, sense more than what we're actually saying, and that makes you fearful. Do you see your repressed anger manifested in me? What doors would groan wide open if

you heard my words with complete understanding? Are you afraid that your daughter is breaking out of our shackles, and into total anarchy? That your daughter has turned into a crazy woman who advocates not only equality for Third World people, for women, but for gays as well? Please don't shudder, Ma, when I speak of homosexuality. Until we can all present ourselves to the world in our completeness, as fully and beautifully as we see ourselves naked in our bedrooms, we are not free.

After what seems like hours of talking, I realize it is not talking at all, but the filling up of time with sounds that say, "I am your daughter, you are my mother, and we are keeping each other company, and that is enough." But it is not enough because my life has been formed by your life. Together we have lived one hundred and eleven years in this country as yellow women, and it is not enough to enunciate words and words and words and then to have them only mean that we have been keeping each other company. I desperately want you to understand me and my work, Ma, to know what I am doing! When you distort what I say, like thinking I am against all "caucasians" or that I am ashamed of Dad, then I feel anger and more frustration and want to slash out, not at you, but at those external forces which keep us apart. What deepens the chasms between us are our different reactions to those forces. Yours has been one of silence, self-denial, self-effacement; you believing it is your fault that you never fully experienced self-pride and freedom of choice. But listen, Ma, only with a deliberate consciousness is my reaction different from yours.

When I look at you, there are images: images of you as a little ten-year-old Korean girl, being sent alone from Shanghai to the United States, in steerage with only one skimpy little dress, being sick and lonely on Angel Island for three months; then growing up in a "Home" run by white missionary women. Scrubbing floors on your hands and knees, hauling coal in heavy metal buckets up three flights of stairs, tending to the younger children, putting hot bricks on your cheeks to deaden the pain from the terrible toothaches you always had. Working all your life as maid, waitress, salesclerk, office worker, mother. But throughout there is an image of you as strong and courageous, and persevering: climbing out of windows to escape from the Home, then later, from an abusive first husband. There is so much

more to these images than I can say, but I think you know what I mean. Escaping out of windows offered only temporary respites; surviving is an everyday chore. You gave me, physically, what you never had, but there was a spiritual, emotional legacy you passed down which was reinforced by society: self-contempt because of our race, our sex, our sexuality. For deeply ingrained in me, Ma, there has been that strong, compulsive force to sink into self-contempt, passivity, and despair. I am sure that my fifteen years of alcohol abuse have not been forgotten by either of us, nor my suicidal depressions.

Now, I know you are going to think that I hate and despise you for your self-hatred, for your isolation. But I don't. Because in spite of your withdrawal, in spite of your loneliness, you have not only survived, but been beside me in the worst of times when your company meant everything in the world to me. I just need more than that now, Ma. I have taken and taken from you in terms of needing you to mother me, to be by my side, and I need, now, to take from you two more things: understanding and support for who I am now and my work.

We are Asian American women and the reaction to our identity is what causes the chasms instead of connections. But do you realize, Ma, that I could never have reacted the way I have if you had not provided for me the opportunity to be free of the binds that have held you down, and to be in the process of self-affirmation? Because of your life, because of the physical security you have given me: my education, my full stomach, my clothed and starched back, my piano and dancing lessons – all those gifts you never received – I saw myself as having worth; now I begin to love myself more, see our potential, and fight for just that kind of social change that will affirm me, my race, my sex, my heritage. And while I affirm myself, Ma, I affirm you.

Today, I am satisfied to call myself either an Asian American Feminist or Yellow Feminist. The two terms are inseparable because race and sex are an integral part of me. This means that I am working with others to realize pride in culture and women and heritage (the heritage that is the exploited yellow immigrant: Daddy and you). Being a Yellow Feminist means being a community activist and a humanist. It does not mean "separatism," either by cutting myself off from non-Asians or men. It does not mean retaining the same power structure and

substituting women in positions of control held by men. It does mean fighting the whites and the men who abuse us, straight-jacket us and tape our mouths; it means changing the economic class system and psychological forces (sexism, racism, and homophobia) that really hurt all of us. And I do this, not in isolation, but in the community.

We no longer can afford to stand back and watch while an insatiable elite ravages and devours resources which are enough for all of us. The obstacles are so huge and overwhelming that often I do become cynical and want to give up. And if I were struggling alone, I know I would never even attempt to put into action what I believe in my heart, that (and this is primarily because of you, Ma) Yellow Women are strong and have the potential to be powerful and effective leaders.

I can hear you asking now, "Well, what do you mean by 'social change and leadership'?" And how are you going to go about it?" To begin with, we must wipe out the circumstances that keep us down in silence and self-effacement. Right now, my techniques are education and writing. Yellow Feminist means being a core for change, and that core means having the belief in our potential as human beings. I will work with anyone, support anyone, who shares my sensibility, my objectives. But there are barriers to unity: white women who are racist, and Asian American men who are sexist. My very being declares that those two groups do not share my complete sensibility. I would be fragmented, mutilated, if I did not fight against racism and sexism together.

And this is when the pain of the struggle hits home. How many white women have taken on the responsibility to educate themselves about Third World people, their history, their culture? How many white women really think about the stereotypes they retain as truth about women of color? But the perpetuation of dehumanizing stereotypes is really very helpful for whites; they use them to justify their giving us the lowest wages and all the work they don't want to perform. Ma, how can we believe things are changing when as a nurse's aide during World War II, you were given only the tasks of changing the bed linen, removing bed pans, taking urine samples, and then only three years ago as a retired volunteer worker in a local hospital, white women gave themselves desk jobs and gave you, at sixty-nine, the same work you did in 1943? Today you speak more fondly of being a nurse's

aide during World War II and how proud you are of the fact that the Red Cross showed its appreciation for your service by giving you a diploma. Still in 1980, the injustices continue. I can give you so many examples of groups which are "feminist" in which women of color were given the usual least important tasks, the shitwork, and given no say in how that group is to be run. Needless to say, those Third World women, like you, dropped out, quit.

Working in writing and teaching, I have seen how white women condescend to Third World women because they reason that because of our oppression, which they know nothing about, we are behind them and their "progressive ideas" in the struggle for freedom. They don't even look at history! At the facts! How we as Asian American women have always been fighting for more than mere survival, but were never acknowledged because we were in our communities, invisible, but not inaccessible.

And I get so tired of being the instant resource for information on Asian American women. Being the token representative, going from class to class, group to group, bleeding for white women so they can have an easy answer - and then, and this is what really gets to me - they usually leave to never continue their education about us on their own.

To the racist white female professor who says, "If I have to watch everything I say I wouldn't say anything," I want to say, "Then get out of teaching."

To the white female poet who says, "Well, frankly, I believe that politics and poetry don't necessarily have to go together," I say, "Your little taste of white privilege has deluded you into thinking that you don't have to fight against sexism in this society. You are talking to me from your own isolation and your own racism. If you feel that you don't have to fight for me, that you don't have to speak out against capitalism, the exploitation of human and natural resources, then you in your silence, your inability to make connections, are siding with a system that will eventually get you, after it has gotten me. And if you think that's not a political stance, you're more than simply deluded, you're crazy!"

This is the same white voice that says, "I am writing about and looking for themes that are 'universal.'" Well, most of the time

when "universal" is used, it is just a euphemism for "white:" white themes, white significance, white culture. And denying minority groups their rightful place and time in US history is simply racist.

Yes, Ma, I am mad. I carry the anger from my own experience and the anger you couldn't afford to express, and even that is often misinterpreted no matter how hard I try to be clear about my position. A white woman in my class said to me a couple of months ago, "I feel that Third World women hate me and that *they* are being racist; I'm being stereotyped, and I've never been part of the ruling class." I replied, "Please try to understand. Know our history. Know the racism of whites, how deep it goes. Know that we are becoming ever more intolerant of those people who let their ignorance be their excuse for their complacency, their liberalism, when this country (this world!) is going to hell in a handbasket. Try to understand that our distrust is from experience, and that our distrust is *powerless*. Racism is an essential part of the status quo, *powerful*, and continues to keep us down. It is a rule taught to all of us from birth. Is it no wonder that we fear there are no exceptions?"

And as if the grief we go through working with white women weren't enough; so close to home, in our community, and so very painful, is the lack of support we get from some of our Asian American brothers. Here is a quote from a rather prominent male writer ranting on about a Yellow "sister:" "...I can only believe that such blatant sucking off of the identity is the work of a Chinese American woman, another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow. Pussywhipped again. Oh, damn, pussywhipped again."

Chinese American woman: "another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow." According to him, Chinese American women sold out - are contemptuous of their culture, pathetically strain all their lives to be white, hate Asian American men, and so marry white men (the John Smiths) - or just like Pochahontas: we rescue white men while betraying our fathers; then marry white men, get baptized, and go to dear old England to become curiosities of the civilized world. Whew! Now, that's an indictment! (Of all women of color.) Some of the male writers in the Asian American community seem never to support us. They always expect us to support them, and you know what? We almost always do. Anti-Yellow men? Are they kidding? We go

to their readings, buy and read and comment on their books, and try to keep up a dialogue. And they accuse us of betrayal, are resentful because we do reading together as Women, and so often do not come to our performances. And all the while we hurt because we are rejected by our brothers. The Pochahontas image used by a Chinese American man points out a tragic truth: the white man and his ideology are still over us and between us. These men of color, with clear vision, fight the racism in white society, but have bought the white male definition of "masculinity:" men only should take on the leadership in the community because the qualities of "originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" are "traditionally masculine."¹

Some Asian men don't seem to understand that by supporting Third World women and fighting sexism, they are helping themselves as well. I understand all too clearly how dehumanized Dad was in this country. To be a Chinese man in America is to be a victim of both racism and sexism. He was made to feel he was without strength, identity, and purpose. He was made to feel soft and weak, whose only job was to serve whites. Yes, Ma, at one time I was ashamed of him because I thought he was "womanly." When those two white cops said, "Hey, fat boy, where's our meat?" he left me standing there on Grant Avenue while he hurried over to his store to get it; they kept complaining, never satisfied, "That piece isn't good enough. What's the matter with you, fat boy? Don't you have respect? Don't wrap that meat in newspapers either; use the good stuff over there." I didn't know that he spent a year and a half on Angel Island; that we could never have our right names; that he lived in constant fear of being deported; that, like you, he worked two full-time jobs most of his life; that he was mocked and ridiculed because he speaks "broken English." And Ma, I was so ashamed after that experience when I was only six years old that I never held his hand again.

Today, as I write to you of all these memories, I feel even more deeply hurt when I realize how many people, how so many people, because of racism and sexism, fail to see what power we sacrifice by not joining hands.

But not all white women are racist, and not all Asian American men are sexist. And we choose to trust them, love and

work with them. And there are visible changes. Real tangible, positive changes. The changes I love to see are those changes within ourselves.

Your grandchildren, my children, Emily and Paul. That makes three generations. Emily loves herself. Always has. There are shades of self-doubt but much less than in you or me. She says exactly what she thinks, most of the time, either in praise or in criticism of herself or others. And at sixteen she goes after whatever she wants, usually center stage. She trusts and loves people, regardless of race or sex (but, of course, she's cautious), loves her community and works in it, speaks up against racism and sexism in school. Did you know that she got Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker on her reading list for a Southern Writers class when there were only white authors? That she insisted on changing a script done by an Asian American man when she saw that the depiction of the character she was playing was sexist? That she went to a California State House Conference to speak out for Third World students' needs?

And what about her little brother, Paul? Twelve years old. And remember, Ma? At one of our Saturday Night Family Dinners, how he lectured Ronnie (his uncle, yet!) about how he was a male chauvinist? Paul told me once how he knew he had to fight to be Asian American, and later he added that if it weren't for Emily and me, he wouldn't have to think about feminist stuff, too. He says he can hardly enjoy a movie or TV program anymore because of the sexism. Or comic books. And he is very much aware of the different treatment he gets from adults: "You have to do everything right," he said to Emily, "and I can get away with almost anything."

Emily and Paul give us hope, Ma. Because they are proud of who they are, and they care so much about our culture and history. Emily was the first to write your biography because she knows how crucial it is to get our stories in writing.

Ma, I wish I knew the histories of the women in our family before you. I bet that would be quite a story. But that may be just as well, because I can say that *you* started something. Maybe you feel ambivalent or doubtful about it, but you did. Actually, you should be proud of what you've begun. I am. If my reaction to being a Yellow Woman is different than yours was, please know that that is not a judgment on you, a criticism or