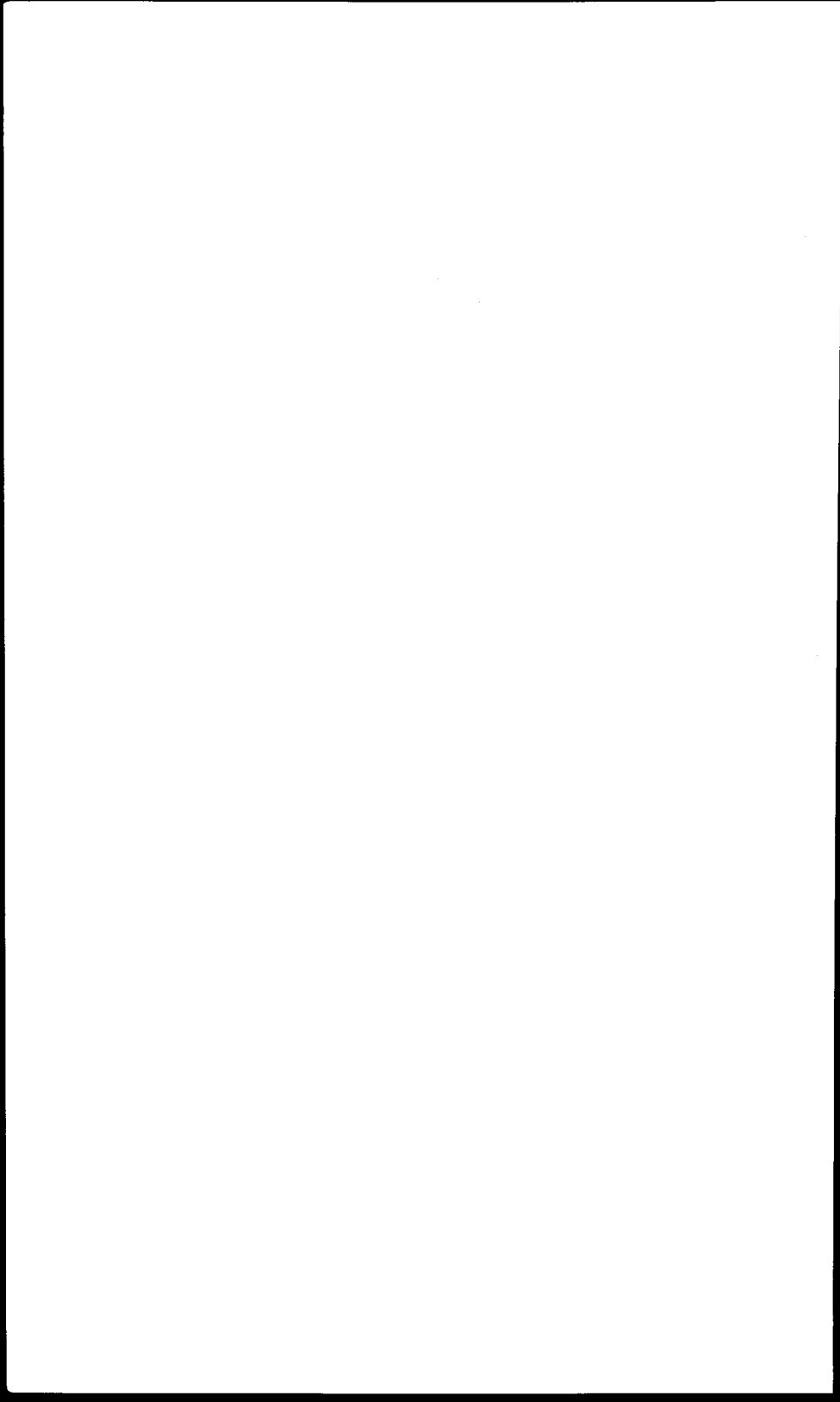


**And When You Leave,
Take Your Pictures With You**
Racism in the Women's Movement



"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."*

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

*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.

alone can not 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. Guilt is *not* a feeling. It is an intellectual mask to a feeling. Fear is a feeling – fear of losing one's power, fear of being accused, fear of a loss of status, control, knowledge. 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.

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 Abiquiu*

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.

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

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.

Bet 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.

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 AIM* 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 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 3½ 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

*American Indian Movement.

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

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 and 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 country. 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 know 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 the 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 (the 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,"* but she was distressed to 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* at 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 1960's 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

**Camp Notes and Other Poems* by Mitsuye Yamada (San Francisco: Shameless Hussy Press) 1976.

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 American's 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 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.

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 *padrona* just reeks about her.

"I would like to write the life of Millicent. But saints' 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.* 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 bases 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.** 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,

*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.

**When I say "Latin culture" I mean Latin American cultures, which have a history of oppression different from the European Latin cultures (French, Italian, etc.)

"Teach me everything you know". Latin American 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 U.S., 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 *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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S., and as such can't be compared with a colonizing culture (the U.S.). 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 careless 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.* You're not really

*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.

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 and immigrant or a bicultural/bilingual person is something which can sometimes be understood only when experienced. * 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.

*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).

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.

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 women'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 rake 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 hap-

pens, 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 are 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 Gynophobia"* Adrienne Rich attempted to address an issue similar to this one. Instead she did what she accused other feminists of doing, she "intellectualized the issue." 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."

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

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 un-pleasant. 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, naive 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 womon. 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 wimmin, 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 wimmin), 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 wimmin 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, power-

ful, and less oppressed (or equally oppressed, whichever it is fashionable or convenient to be at the time) than black wimmin. 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 wimmin 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). No 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 narrowminded 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 issue 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 naive 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. On 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. That 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.

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 & 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 U.S. 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 Dohomeian 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 prayers-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 so 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." have 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.* 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 within 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.

*In the spring of 1979, twelve black women were murdered in the Boston area.

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 eventururations, 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 MLA* 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

*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 a important and powerful connection of love between women, what about interracial 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 feminist publications except for the occasional "Special Third World Women's Issue,"* 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.

**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. (editor's footnote)

Simone DeBeauvoir once said:

"It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our 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.

