Between the Lines

On Culture, Class, and Homophobia
I do not believe/our wants have made all our lies/holy.

–Audre Lorde*

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. Cultural 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 struggles 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 U.S. 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 U.S.

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 are not turning our backs on our people nor on ourselves. 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 U.S. 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.
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 strain 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 bleeded 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 to look but not alone and not at nite I lift my head I sniff I smell the danger and 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
everytime 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
mieda que gente fria y fea se creen gran cosa ai
escupe chica en su carifresca en su carifea meate ahi en el piso
feo y frio yo valgo mas que un piso limpio you valgo mas yo
valgo catage en l'alfombra chica arrancale el pelo yo quiero
salir de aqui yo quiero salir di ti yo quiero salir you see she's
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 sepanlo niñas m'hijas trigueñas bellas sepalo June Jor-
dan 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
don't forget ruby doris smith robinson tammi terrell sara gomez and
sisterwoman cuz 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 malcolm x
and stephen biko probably be round 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. thats 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 themselves 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 the 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 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 didnt 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 a 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 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 cafe society downtown in greenwhich 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 cafe 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? niggh 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 ennunciating. 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 them 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 sophiscated now and we have learned some more sophiscated 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 that's 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 feminists in the Women's Movement. The following is a transcript of their responses.

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 age 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 savvyness, I don't know what word 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 woman, 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 privilege 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 comparisons between different types of oppressions. 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 woman 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, the division that is totally en-
forced in this society to keep people unaware of each other's situa-
tions, commonalities, etc.

**The White-Wash 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, work-
ing class). It just depends on what you decide to spend it on. There is a
difference between class in that narrow sense and 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 of 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 better 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 a 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 things 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 realize, 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 even 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 the 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 have 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? 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 the 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 toward 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 separatists 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 see-
ing 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.*

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

*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.
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 more 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 subject 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 as 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 belong to white people.

Bar: So often lesbianism and male homosexuality is 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, "Toward 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 that 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 Cherrie 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 the 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 thing together. Let me explain what's going on here. Let my 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 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.
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, morally, 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" – 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 foresisters, 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.

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.*

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 predominately white dormitory and who fears leaving the door of her room open when she

*I would like to give particular acknowledgment 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.
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 then 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 extoll the boy-girl dyad as "natural" to keep us straight and compliant in the same way the European had to extoll 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 foresisters 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 disfranchisement 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.\(^3\)

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, eg. 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 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 neocolonized.

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 les-
bian, 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 by 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 racialist 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.4

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 harassment, terrorism, and the hostility of white communities?5

*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 Commission 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.
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.

ENDNOTES

5Rich, op. cit., p. 298.
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 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 wornout 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

Dear Ma,

January, 1980

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 U.S. 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 readings 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."

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.

2 AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian American Writers, editors Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong (Howard University Press, 1974).
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 at 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 a denial of you, your worth. I have always
supported you, and as the years pass, I think I begin to understand you more and more.

In the last few years, I have realized the value of Homework: I have studied the history of our people in this country. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be a Chinese/Korean American Woman. We have such a proud heritage, such a courageous tradition. I want to tell everyone about that, all the particulars that are left out in the schools. And the full awareness of being a woman makes me want to sing. And I do sing with other Asian Americans and women, Ma, anyone who will sing with me.

I feel now that I can begin to put our lives in a larger framework. Ma, a larger framework! The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle. In loving ourselves for who we are – American women of color – we can make a vision for the future where we are free to fulfill our human potential. This new framework will not support repression, hatred, exploitation and isolation, but will be a human and beautiful framework, created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit.

Ma, today, you are as beautiful and pure to me as the picture I have of you, as a little girl, under my dresser-glass.

I love you,
Merle
I Come with No Illusions

*Mirtha Quintanales*

Querida Chabela (Isabel Yrigoyen),

Columbus, Ohio

December 27, 1979

... Woman love. Never knew it would be so hard to leave anyone. Even though it means everything to me to move on, to finally embark on this self-healing journey. Torn by guilt. My lover. Working-class “white” woman from a small town. She has no more privileges than I do. As alone as I am. She is not my enemy. World upside down.

... What lies ahead? A mystery. Do not dare even consider the possibility of a love relationship with a Latina, a Cuban woman, even to dream that I could find such partnership... family. Work. It is my life. It is all I have. It is what now ultimately propels me to make this move. You, my friends, will sweeten my life. I know that. But I come to you with no illusions. I join you because I must. Give of myself to those who can give to me of themselves. Sisters. Sharing. I look for, expect nothing more. Is there really something more?

Setting myself up? Closing up, putting up barriers? Perhaps. Perhaps just trying to be “my own woman.” Perhaps just trying to be one, not one-half. Can I find happiness “alone”? Americans tell me that I should strive for this blessed state of self-contentment as “one” if I intend to survive. Yet often I have doubts. Is this the kind of world I want to live in? A world where ultimately only the “I” matters? Millions of people living in self-constructed little boxes, Incommunicado.

I ponder over the meaning and possible repercussions of the choices I am about to make. What does it mean to say to myself that only other Latina, bicultural lesbian women can satisfy my needs? What are the implications of separating myself from American women and creating a separate community with women I identify as my counterparts?

It means, for one thing, that I am admitting failure. Failure to adjust, adapt, change, transcend cultural differences. Yet this is not only a personal failure. It is one which I share with millions. The reality of ethnic minority enclaves throughout the world tells me a great deal about the process I am going through. It is neither unique nor new. And ultimately it may have a lot more to do with “success” than with failure. It is after all, a survival strategy – particularly in the context of a power imbalance between “natives” and “foreigners” – where the
latter are in a better bargaining position as a group than as scattered individuals fighting their own personal battles.

For myself – as a Latina lesbian/feminist, it also means a real narrowing of options and privileges. I have extremely limited resources. No money, no access to power, no legitimacy. If there are many like me I do not know. Nor is it going to be easy for me to connect with them if I should learn that there are. Their resources are likely to be as limited as mine. This is a socio-economic, political reality that acts as a barrier to the formation of a strong and visible community. Not only the "social goodies" (money, power, fame and other minor privileges) but life's necessities (a job, a roof over my head . . . ) depend on my ties, my interactions with American men and women. To say "I do not like the nature of this tie with the powerful" is dangerous; for the implications are that I may strive to break free from it and in doing so reduce my chances of making it in this society.

But what of human feeling? It is after all, great personal need, not political analysis that drives me to take this stand, to turn away from my American sisters and put all my energies into creating a community with my Latina sisters. What is the nature and significance of this need? Is it true that love knows no boundaries? Or that being "human" somehow means being ultimately undifferentiated – "all alike"? Perhaps one of the greatest lessons I have learned is that in fact "human nature", bound as it is to "culture", implies variability and difference. Yes, we all need to eat and sleep, keep ourselves warm, protect ourselves from harm, be nurtured into maturity; touch and be touched, etc. But, how we choose to meet these needs varies and changes from time to time, place to place and is dependent both on history and the particular set of environmental circumstances contextual to our lives. What both puzzles me and distresses me is the degree to which we seem to be "culture bound." As if "setting the cultural mold" implied never quite being able to break free from it. At least not completely. This seems to be particularly true in the most private activities of our lives – how we express and share feeling in the context of our intimate inter-personal relationships. The wonder of it! And the pain . . .

Con mucho carino, tu amiga
Mirtha
I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance

Mirtha Quintanales

Dear Barbara [Smith],

Thanks for your letter. I can appreciate your taking the time to write. It can get so difficult for busy people to keep up with correspondence...I only hope that you have taken some time to rest, gather your energies. I'm just beginning to emerge from a several-week period of semi-hermitdom myself. I, too, was exhausted. Too much work too many responsibilities – often the worry of not moving fast enough, or too fast to have any kind of an impact. After a brief peaceful interlude, the pressures are beginning to build again, Oh well...

I wanted to tell you about my visit to San Francisco, about coming together with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters. The joy and the pain of finding each other, of realizing how long we've "done without", of how difficult it's going to be to heal ourselves, to find our voices... But how perfectly wonderful to finally have a family, a community. Yet I find that there is too much to tell. Cannot easily compress it all in a letter. How I wish that we could meet and talk! So much of the Black lesbian/feminist experience speaks to our own... I passed around all the literature you'd handed out at conferences – including Conditions 5. And the Latina sisters were amazed. Lorraine Bethel's "What Chou Mean We White Girl?" was especially telling... Many of our feelings given form, meaning. Please let her know that her work has been very helpful to us – particularly in sorting out what we want and don't want in our relationships with white, mainstream American feminists. Yes, there is a lot we can learn from each other.

But Barbara, I am worried. At the moment I am in the process of organizing a roundtable for the NWSA* conference, on the topic of racial and ethnic minority lesbians in the U.S. There are two other women involved – a Greek friend of mine from Berkeley, and a Black woman from San Francisco. And I feel the tension building. The Greek woman's many attempts to "connect" with Third World lesbians and "Women of Color" (most poignantly at last year's conference) have been met with outright rejection. Unfortunately, being loud, aggressive and very Greek-identified, she has found a great deal of

*National Women's Studies Association
rejection in white, mainstream lesbian/feminist circles as well. Clearly she does not fit there either.

The Black woman's commitments, from what I can gather, are understandably with Third World women, women of color. And I am quite uncomfortably in the middle. As a Third World, Caribbean woman I understand what it means to have grown up "colonized" in a society built on slavery and the oppression of imperialist forces. As an immigrant and a cultural minority woman who happens to be white-skinned, I empathize with the pain of ethnic invisibility and the perils of passing (always a very tenuous situation – since acknowledgement of ethnic ties is inevitably accompanied by stereotyping, prejudice and various kinds of discrimination – the problem is not just personal, but "systemic", "political" – one more reality of American "life.") How to reconcile these different kinds of "primary emergencies": race and culture? Of course this kind of conflict tends to obscure the issue of class and its relationship to race and ethnicity so important for the understanding of the dilemma.

Not all Third World women are "women of color" – if by this concept we mean exclusively "non-white". I am only one example. And not all women of color are really Third World – if this term is only used in reference to underdeveloped or developing societies (especially those not allied with any superpower). Clearly then it would be difficult to justify referring to Japanese women, who are women of color, as Third World women. Yet, if we extend the concept of Third World to include internally "colonized" racial and ethnic minority groups in this country, so many different kinds of groups could be conceivably included, that the crucial issue of social and institutional racism and its historic tie to slavery in the U.S. could get diluted, lost in the shuffle. The same thing would likely happen if we extended the meaning of "women of color" to include all those women in this country who are victims of prejudice and discrimination (in many respects), but who nevertheless hold racial privileges and may even be racists.

I don't know what to think anymore. Things begin to get even more complicated when I begin to consider that many of us who identify as "Third World" or "Women of Color", have grown up as or are fast becoming "middle-class" and highly educated, and therefore more privileged than many of our white, poor and working-class sisters. Sometimes I get angry at my lover because she does not seem to relate to my being a "Cuban" lesbian. And yet, can I really relate to the fact that she grew up in a very small town, in a working-class family – with little money, few other resources, little encouragement to get an education, etc.? Yes...and no. There have been times in my life when my family
had little money or food. There have been times in my life when I lived from day to day not knowing if I would be alive “tomorrow” – not knowing really how it felt to plan for “next month”, or “next year.”

Yet, even though I grew up having to heat my bathwater and sleep in a very lumpy bed, even though I grew up often being ashamed of bringing my friends home because our furniture was old and dilapidated, I went to private schools, spent summers at the beach, traveled, had plenty of toys and books to read; took music and dancing lessons, went horsebackriding – my parents being very conscious of, and being very able to give us the best (if not always in terms of material comforts) that their middle-class resources gave them access to – including the services of a long string of nurse-maids (my mother worked, and in Cuba often the maids had maids – even if it meant putting little girls to work as servants and baby-tenders – economic exploitation galore!).

Yes, I have suffered in this country. I have been the victim of blatant prejudice and institutional discrimination. As an ethnic minority woman and a lesbian I have lived in the margins, in fear, isolated, disconnected, silent and in pain. Nevertheless, those early years of relatively “blissful” middle-class childhood (although I have to say that after age 7 it was hell – political violence and death always lurking) in my own country where I was simply part of the “mainstream” if not a little better off because of my father’s professional status, have served me as a “cushion” throughout my life. Even in the United States, as an essentially middle-class (and white-skinned woman), I have had “opportunities” (or have known how to make them for myself), that my very white, working-class American lover has never had. Having managed to graduate from college (one out of three in her graduating high school class who managed to make it to college) against tremendous odds, she is still struggling with the fact that she may never really learn the ropes of surviving well in mainstream, middle-class American society. And need I add that mainstream white, middle-class American feminism is as insensitive to her needs as it is to mine?

I realize that I cannot fight everybody’s battles. But need I create false enemies in order to wage my own? I am a bit concerned when a Latina lesbian sister generalizes about/puts down the “white woman” – especially if she herself has white skin. In the midst of this labeling, might she not dismiss the fact of her own white privileges – regardless of her identification with Black, Native American, and other Third World women of color? Might she not dismiss the fact that she may often be far better off than many white women? I cannot presume to know what it is really like to be a Black woman in America, to be racially oppressed. I cannot presume to know what it is really like to grow up American “White Trash” and destitute.
But I am also a bit concerned when a Black sister generalizes about/dismisses all non-black women, or all women who are not strict "women of color" or strictly "Third World." If you are not WASP in this country, if you or your family have known the immigrant experience or ghetto life, you are likely to be very much acquainted with the social, economic, political reality of internal colonization. Yes, racism is a BIG MONSTER we all need to contend with – regardless of our skin color and ethnic affiliation. But I think we need to keep in mind that in this country, in this world, racism is used both to create false differences among us and to mask very very significant ones – cultural, economic, political... And yes, those who have been racially oppressed must create separatist spaces to explore the meaning of their experiences – to heal themselves, to gather their energies, their strength, to develop their own voices, to build their armies. And yes, those of us who have not been victims of racial oppression must come to terms with our own racism, our own complicity with this system that discriminates and oppresses on the basis of skin color and body features. And of course it would be irresponsible liberal folly to propose that social and institutional racism could be eliminated by simply "becoming" personally non-racist, by becoming "integrated" in our private lives... How ridiculous for white folk to think that a long history of slavery and every other kind of oppression, that an ongoing and insidious reality of social, economic, political exploitation could be magically transcended through a few individual choices... And even if everybody's skin should suddenly turn black, it would be quite impossible to truly know what it means to have grown up – generation after generation – Black and female in America. Of course our skin is not likely to "turn", and so regardless of how "conscious" we claim to be of the "Black experience" in America, we shall always be limited by our own history and the reality of our white skin and the privileges it automatically confers on us.

Ironically, when a Black American sister (or anyone for that matter) puts me, or other ethnic women of this society in the same category with the socially dominant White American Woman on the basis of lighter-than-black skin color, she is in fact denying my history, my culture, my identity, my very being, my pain and my struggle. She too is being personally racist. When she fails to recognize that the "social privileges" of lighter-than-black ethnic-minority lesbians in this society are almost totally dependent on our denial of who we are, on our ethnic death, she also falls prey to the racist mythology that color differences are the end-all indications of social inequality. That those who happen to have the "right" skin color are not only all alike but all hold the same social privileges. Yes, lighter-than-black skin color may
confer on some ethnic minority women the option of becoming "assimilated", "integrated" in mainstream American society. But is this really a privilege when it always means having to become invisible, ghost-like, identity-less, community-less, totally alienated? The perils of "passing" as white American are perils indeed. It should be easy enough at least for lesbians to understand the meaning of being and yet not being, of "merging" and yet remaining utterly alone and in the margins of our society.

And while it is true that a lesbian/feminist community and culture have emerged, while it is true that Black, Latina and other Third World/lesbians "of color" have begun to speak up, it is not true that we have yet engaged in a truly un-biased, un-prejudiced dialogue. We are still measuring each other by the yardstick of the White, Capitalist, Imperialist, Racist American Patriarch. We are still seeing radical differences when they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical. And most disastrously, we are failing to recognize much of what we share. Is it not possible for us to recognize, respect and settle our differences; to validate our various groups' struggles and need for separate spaces, and yet to open our eyes to the fact that divided we are only likely to succeed at defeat?

It is pure folly to think that a small group of Latina or Black or Chinese American lesbians can, on its own, create a feminist revolution. It is pure folly to think that middle-class wasp feminists can do so...

Barbara, I ache to live with and love with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters – to speak "Spanglish", to eat arroz con frijoles, to dance to the salsa, to openly talk sex and flirt with one another; to secretly pray to Yemayá, Chango, Oshun, and the Virgen de Guadalupe. I run to them for refuge, for dear life!

But when I meet you and other Black lesbian sisters – and am moved by what we seem to share, I ache for you also. I spend time with Stacy (Anastasia) and other Southern European/North African/Mediterranean lesbian sisters – and am stirred by what we seem to have in common, I feel deep yearning for them... I read the words of other ethnic American lesbian sisters and I find that I understand them and want to share in these women's lives. And I live, love and work with working-class sisters. Have lived, loved and worked in the poor urban ghettos of Chicago and Boston. Have spent some time in the poor, rural, isolated mountains of New Mexico. Have traveled to Latin American countries, to India, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong-Kong, Japan – feeling the pain of my poor and hard-working sisters – struggling against all odds to stay alive, to live with dignity. I cannot sleep sometimes – haunted by the memories of such all-encompassing poverty – the kind of poverty that even poor Americans could not begin to con-
ceive. India. India was the unraveling. How insignificant our troubles seem in the United States... How ridiculously small my own struggles... I don't feel guilt or shame, but this nausea... To find us squabbling over who may or may not be called a feminist, who may or may not join or take part in this or that particular political group, etc, etc. The privilege of having feminist "groups"—most women in the world just eat shit. And lesbians—who really knows the fate of most lesbians in the world, especially the Third World?

Is it not possible for all of us here in America to turn right now to all the sisters of the world—to form a common, human-woman-lesbian bond?

I have lost some sleep lately pondering over this race/culture/class problem... We've got to do something! Many of us Latinas are non-white—as a matter of fact, most of us are racially mixed to various degrees. Ask a Black or "mulatto" Puerto Rican woman what her identity is though, and most likely she will tell you "Puerto Rican." All Chinese American women are non-white. But ask any of them what her identity is. She will not tell you "yellow", she will tell you Chinese, or Chinese American. Many African peoples are "Black", but ask a Nigerian, an Ethiopian, etc. what her identity is, and she will tell you "Nigerian", or "Ethiopian", or whatever... Obviously "Black Culture" is an American phenomenon. Many of us don't really understand this. I know I didn't for a long time. When I first came to this country I just assumed that Black people were simply American (for that matter I just assumed all Americans shared the same "American Culture"). I grew up with people of all kinds of skin-color—but we were all Cuban and understood each other, even though we could recognize the most minute "color differences," even though we could recognize class differences. How was I supposed to know—given the propaganda—that there was no such thing as a "melting pot"? How was I supposed to know that racism was so widespread and so deeply ingrained in American society? I was shocked in my sophomore year in college when several Black women implied that I was a racist when I said I could not figure out what was different about being Black or Yellow, or White, or Red in the United States. I could understand not knowing about a "culture", but not knowing about a "race"? Was "race" per se so important? Was it really linked to a "culture"? This was a weird notion to me indeed!

Well I paid very hard for my immigrant ignorance. I'm still paying—even though I have learned a great deal since then about American sub-cultures and about American racism. Many of my Latina sisters have had similar experiences, and the big question is always there—Will we ever really be accepted by our Black American
sisters? I cannot really convey the pain – especially in those of us who *are* Afro-Hispanic-American but light skinned – of seeing so much of ourselves in, of being so drawn to African-American women, and yet feeling that we are very likely to be denied a connection, to be rejected. The fucking irony of it! Racism. It has so thoroughly poisoned Americans of all colors that many of us can simply not see beyond it. I'm sorry about this long letter Barbara – especially this last part. But I have not been able to get over this pain. I used to have this recurrent dream (for years) that I would alternately become black and white and black and white over and over and over again... It felt really good. But I've never quite figured out all of what it meant... Well, take care Barbara.

In sisterhood,
Mirtha
Earth-Lover, Survivor, Musician
Naomi Littlebear

The following is an excerpt from a letter in response to Cherrie's request that Naomi write an essay on "language & oppression" as a Chicana:

Cherríe, January, 1980

I have a clear image in my mind about the things we talked about, your anger about language, identification – given the brief acquaintance, I personally could relate to a lot of what you were saying – i realize that those feelings had a lot to do with why i wrote the book i’m sending you* – that was a very important time in my life. However I realize now that it wasn’t for me exactly the most balanced part of my life. It was only a time in which i hurt so bad i had to shake off the dust of one too many insults in order to carry on. Nonetheless, my criticism, analysis, etc. did not come from a natural place in me. It was not the “voice of my mothers” nor did it completely reflect the way i was brought up to be. I wrote that book as a brown woman's retort to white people, white middle class leftists who were trying to redirect my spirit. I was supposed to be the angry chicana speaking her vengeance against whites, against the capitalist system.

I am a sad chicana lesbian woman who is woman-identified earth lover, survivor, musician – music and beauty are my tools against my aches and pains – striving to bring peace into an otherwise tumultuous past.

I am not the scholar analyst you are – which I totally respect. I'm clear about why i am and how i am – i cannot extricate the lesbian from my soul no more than i could the chicana – i have always been both.

The woman I am right now is not struggling with language – this time – i am closest and clearest right now about violence – i am haunted by dreams from my childhood and not-too-distant past. I could not adequately write about language unless i was right there with the problem, as you seem to be – you are fairly bursting with reasons and important thoughts, insights into our mutual experience with the degradation and denial that came with our language loss (abduction?).

*The Dark Side of the Moon. (Olive Press, Portland Ore.). Book of essays & poetry on life in the barrio, and the topics of the Church, Family, Education & the Left.
Imagine the process you would have to go thru if I asked you to write me a paper on violence in the barrios and how that affected your personal life? *I need to feel control of my own life – violence has on some deep level rendered me helpless and given me a deep fear of being powerless –* our language being stripped from us creates similar fears. I need to figure out what is closest to me. I have done some work in exorcising the demons of communication – my current observation is that i feel comfortable with words again, except when i try to make scientific discoveries – that is me reacting to male energy that says women are stupid & emotional.

My emotions & intuitions are there for a purpose. They are honest perceptions. I don't have to try to be grassroots. I do have to try to relate my straight feminist politics.

Wanting to be loving and have a family is my connection with my culture. I am doing that. Going to meetings is not part of my ethnic background.

I got real turned around when i got involved with leftist politics. I am now trying to piece my life together, discard the violence & humiliations, accept that i am a complete person with nothing lacking. My mind & heart are capable of deciding what's best for me.

For once in my life i have to let my self deserve a home, food on the table, and a handful of loving friends – this is a time of healing and taking the blame of the rapes and attempted rapes, the child beatings i received, taking all that pain off my shoulders and giving it back to who it belongs.

I want you to accept me as i accept you. Be an amiga, not a comrade to me. I will send you more words if you like but right now the hurt's all around me and i feel like flying away. I will fight back with music, but don't ask me to fight with words. Trust my instincts, my knowledge – i am not a sheltered little wetback – i've been through so much pain that i've popped out the other side. We have been thru so much pain that now we have no place to put that pain but to leave it out of our lives – because the pain was given to do its worst damage by festering in our soul, by growing comfortable in our flesh that we more often hurt each other 'tho infested by the same disease.

I have no solution but to go on. I will not carry the stigma that so many have tried to burden me with. These words are mine because this now is *my* language – 13 years of English, 13 years of Spanish – that's when I flipped out – the day of my two "children's" anniversary. I was prompted by devils – clinical radicals who instructed me in self-autopsy. Please applaud my victory over those fuckers – it is *your* victory as well – remember they think we're all related. We're
not at all where they expected us to be—we just slipped through—because we knew damn well it was a lie.

I refuse to be separated from your life by these words. I read you loud & clear: the story-telling, my crazy aunts, the laughter, deep-hearted joy, celebrating anything with a six-pack of beer.*

I remember. And as long as I know you too were once there—it is something that can warm us both this winter.

Because I haven't seen my cousins in years.

That is what I miss, that is what I'm looking for.

March 23, 1980

Now that the ice has melted and the flowers begin to bloom I welcome the season of growing. Thank you for sharing with me. I do believe we have in common—the cultural rip off, the anger, the wisdom, the fullness of life.

...I have started this letter many times, wanting to send you these stories. I appreciated your letter very much. It's still on my desk reminding me how hard we are working to be visible.

We are touring again, maybe we'll meet.

*Here Naomi is referring to experiences Cherrie describes in her essay, "La Gilera."