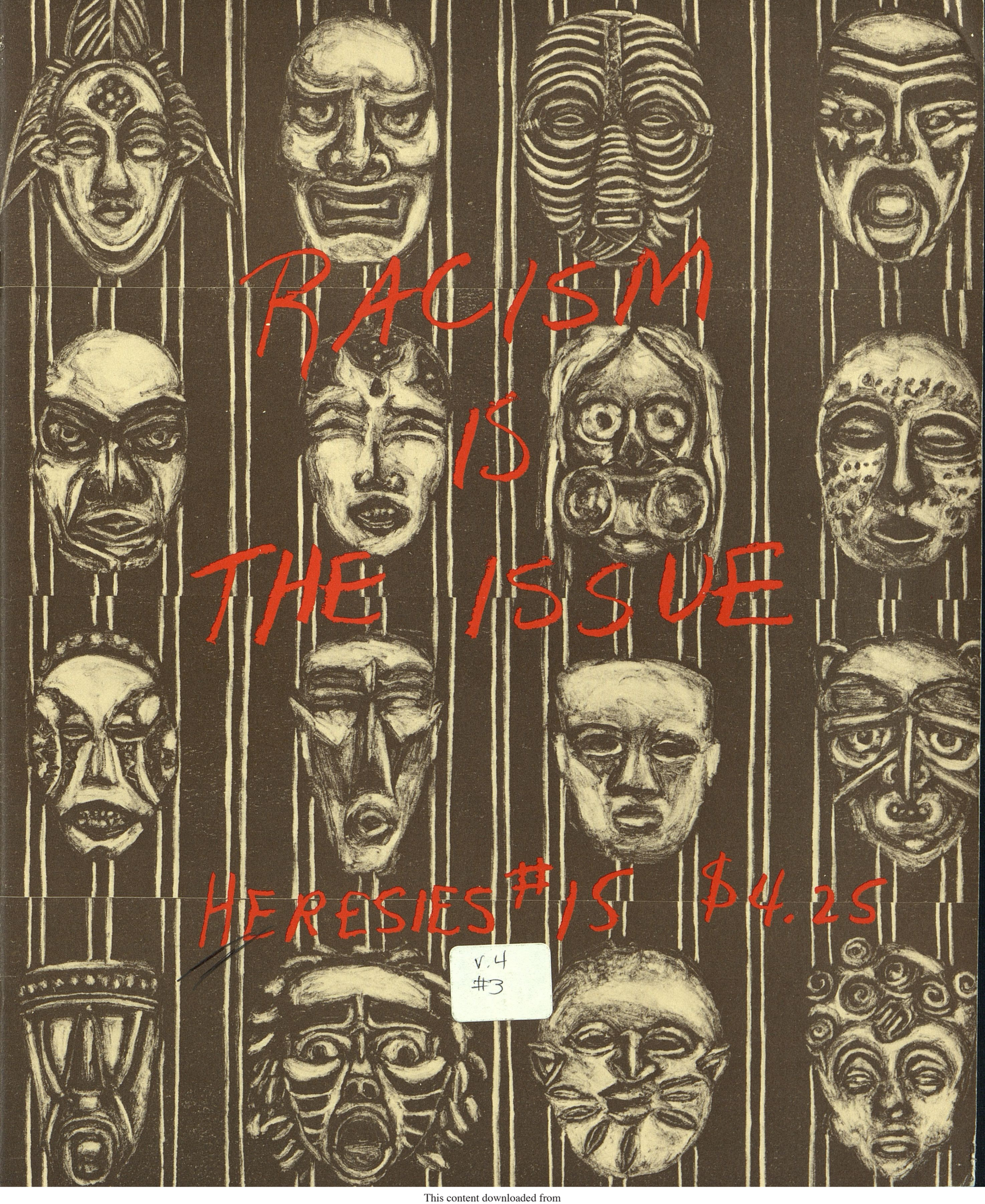


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**Issue 15 Editorial Collective:** Vivian E. Browne, Cynthia Carr, Michele Godwin, Hattie Gossett, Carole Gregory, Sue Heinemann, Lucy R. Lippard, May Stevens, Cecilia Vicuña, Sylvia Witts Vitale.

# ISSUE 15 EDITORIAL STATEMENT (From Taped Conversation, October 21, 1982)

So what's the point of a collective statement? What do we want it to say? (S.H.)

Well, it's *not* an individual statement. What I could do with another Black woman is totally different from what I can say in a collective statement. (S.W.V.)

The point of this is what we say to each other. Let's talk about what were our expectations when we joined the group. (M.S.)

When I arrived from Boston the Heresies Collective was working on the Third World Women's issue. That was apparently a very difficult issue and the word that got back to me from Black feminists was the Heresies Collective is a group of racist white women. . . . Then I read some of the issues and articles and I really liked the material. I had an article in the next issue, and decided to come to a meeting for this one. I was really happy to see so many different women. I know a lot of people from different countries, but this was a chance to focus on *women*. This was so different. We put in so much hard work. We tried to be so fair and listened to each other's experiences. Yet I am still shocked at the way white American women discuss racism. So many of the manuscripts we got talked about white women and sex with Black men. Sexual contact was always the starting point, which is not how *I* see racism at all. If we're talking about feminism, we're talking about women, so they're only interacting with me, a Black woman, through their sexual image of Black men. Perhaps this is one major barrier. I don't think about white men at all when I think about white women. Fortunately nobody here in the collective did that; it was just in the manuscripts. (C.G.)

Part of the experience is the way the women in this collective looked at that material and reacted to it. (S.H.)

Yeah, we were OK. (C.G.)

It wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be, based on the stories I had heard from other women of color about working with "those racist white girls at Heresies." Not that both white girls and colored girls don't have a lot of learning and growing to do. (H.G.)

Being on the racism issue—it was an experience. Hearing these people argue about something that's so important when you usually don't hear about it. You may read about it, but you usually don't hear other people talking about it, unless you bring it up. (M.G.)

Carole, you say now you can talk to white women? (V.B.)

Not in general, only the women in this collective. (C.G.)

So you felt some need to make some kind of contact? Was it satisfied? (V.B.)

I don't really like to make contact with white people. (C.G.)

But you came here. (V.B.)

I didn't see the racism issue as just white people, but many women coming from many backgrounds to discuss the subject. Like at work you can *not* discuss racism with white people. (C.G.)

Has this experience changed your approach to white people? Affected your attitudes in any way? (V.B.)

That's hard to answer. I don't want to dismiss our work. . . . We needed to form a study group to define racism. Then, we would have had a common language. I felt that one of the stories we published is a racist piece. To refer to the West Indies as "bush" and to quote a Harlemite expressing hatred of whites are negative symbols about Black people. The Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, has asked white authors to refrain from creating more works like Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" in which Africans are degraded. However, no one agreed with my interpretation of the piece. Had I not solicited manuscripts from Alice Walker and other women, I would have resigned from this collective on racism. Unconscious and conscious racist imagery hurts. (C.G.)

This short-term process might not produce anything. I see that in the classrooms when I talk about racism. . . . You might see a little bit of opening up. (S.W.V.)

A little bit of opening up is a miracle. (M.S.)

Here you had the Civil Rights Movement, you are always aware of the years of struggle between Black and white. But in Latin America, particularly in Chile where I come from, racism is simply not discussed. So I had never had the opportunity to think about racism in relation to my own experience. It was a fantastic thing to think in those terms with Black and white women. My experience in this capital of the world is that whatever art my Latin friends do, it's ignored by the mainstream. It does not exist, *or* it's "ethnic." Which is why I got out the issue of ethnocentrism. And I realized nobody in this collective shared this thing with me. I was disappointed that everybody said this issue is about racism and nobody was willing to go to a more general, a more cultural and ideological issue. Nobody was willing to go from the emotional level of personal experiences about racism to the more philosophical level. . . . So I adapted! (C.V.)

I remember those early meetings being very exciting, when there were Asian and other Latin women in the group too. A new experience for me too. Before that I had worked on racism in a group of all-white feminists. I think I was afraid, at first, of working with women of color on this issue but I decided I wanted to do it anyway. Afraid, I guess, that I'd unpeel new horrible layers of my own racism. Instead this was a really wonderful experience. I think I've become much more aware of racism. . . . There are shortcomings in the issue, like the lack of input from Native American women, but in general I'm proud of it. If racism is going to change, white people will have to do something to make it change. I think what we did here will be a tool for that change. What I discovered was just that simple step—that you don't just say, "Oh it's all so horrible," but that *you can do something about it.* (C.C.)

Me too. Another thing I got out of the whole process was a deepened sense of the *complexity* of racism in the U.S., how it's affected by elements of class, education, degree of color, all that. And the intense ambivalence even the most positive women of color have toward the kind of work we've been doing, and the psychological and historical roots of that ambivalence. (L.R.L.)

Working together you see how people feel and see. A lot of times white people aren't aware that we're being racist. We don't really understand how it's understood. A lot of the racism that goes on is unintentional, unconscious. It's really important to work together to undo that. . . . Misunderstanding only gets corrected when there's a chance to understand. (S.H.)

I've had white women—friends—try to talk to me about racism and tell me they just don't know what to say about racism because *they're not involved.* I just couldn't believe that. The problem doesn't exist. (V.B.)

That's what I meant about Latin America. People are very ready to discuss class struggle because class struggle is a term that comes from European culture that everybody shares, so this is OK. But to go beyond that conception or even discuss the implications—like racism—it's awkward. The subject of the Indians in Chile was usually treated as a problem of class struggle, not a cultural or religious difference. We have to question to what extent we've been conditioned by all this miseducation we've received. I worried about the narrowness of the experiences that were submitted. Most of the articles in this issue are individualized, separated experiences—"I felt this, you felt that." But we also have to put together our own experiences of racism with what's going on in the world, to reach a more general concept of global racism. It's the American situation. If this collective were in Latin America, we would have arrived at a totally different conclusion because we are marginal. We're always aware of the global situation because we have to be. (C.V.)

This issue of *Heresies* is on the situation of racism in the U.S. today. It represents who we are and what we're concerned with, and how far we could go. (M.S.)

We do need to put discussion on an intellectual plane at some point, but I do not necessarily agree that the word "ethnocentrism" for this country is on an intellectual plane. I still insist that for us here that's a cop-out. When you say how you are not chosen by the art world because it centers on here, that puts another meaning on ethnocentrism which has nothing to do with racism. It *does* have to do with peripheral vision. I insist on calling racism racism, a spade a spade (laughter). That's what it is and you cannot take it and water it down. I'm not saying that your relation to the word is a watering down for you, but this country has gone through so much shit, and to come up with another name on top of the shit is to say it did not happen to us. All these personal little things make up this country. (V.B.)

(continued on inside back cover)

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Heresies

# THE ORIGINS OF RACISM

A story

about who
and when
and where

A story in passionate prose
and poetry
and pictures

to be read aloud
on cold snow nights when the blood is thin
on warm summer nights when the pulse is warm
to be read to music
to be said to music
to be said as music

BY ROSARIO MORALES

## In the beginning...

capitalism spread slowly like an angry red infection up the arteries of Europe. Feudal Europe was strong- and vigorous-seeming but it was in no condition to resist the infection. In its tissues lay classes of people bloated off the tillers of the soil, off the toil of women. They leeched enough from others' work to trade for the scarce goodies from Asia, like silk, like spice, to buy more and more war horses and armor and weapons to fight needless smaller and bigger wars in order to use them. No, feudal Europe was not healthy.

Capitalism spread like an angry red infection up the arteries, up the body of feudal Europe. Anybody who could escape the ladder of feudal hierarchies, who could wiggle out of the boxes on feudal classes and the constant, ever-present obligations to serve and serve and serve, ran away and vagabonded thru and around the heavy social structure and sang for their supper, or stole and/or bought cheap and sold dear. Sons of serfs (no, dears, not the daughters) became ratty peddlers, became richer peddlers armed to the teeth, traveling in caravans (to ward off other wanderers who wanted their merchandise or their gold), became substantial citizens, merchants living in towns and storing their goods in warehouses, became merchants in large groups, setting up rules for merchandising, setting up law and lawyers—the better to buy and sell, my dears—to make money, to arrange more of the city, of the society for the benefit of buying and selling, to push here and shove there and nose out, sniff out, smell more sources of profit, to set themselves up like the biggies of feudalism, like lords in big houses with lots of servants and an almost-idle wife to push around and show off, to set up in a home apart to provide a respite from it all, from all the buying and selling and constant calculating. Calculating a respite from calculating.

Capitalism spread thru Europe and in the body of feudal Europe, idling restlessly were numberless knights-in-arms who had ridden to the east, and held off and defeated the invading Magyars, and ridden to the north and pushed back the raiding Norse, and bashed and battered and beaten and raped and slashed and torn and scattered human bodies and been slashed and beaten and bloodied—

and oh!, how they missed it all!

the jolly good fun of it and the lovely profit of looting and the honor and estates they were always promised and sometimes paid.

Capitalism spread and the merchants were many and there were more and more markets for them daily from more and more wearing of silks and perfumes, more buying of spice and sugar, but how to get more to sell when it all came from Asia and between them and Asia were Muslim cities and towns and fields, Muslim armies and ships and traders, Muslim traders, many Muslim traders—too many Muslim traders.

And...

so...
Pope Urban II declared a crusade,
declared a oly war
to free the oly land
with its oly relics
from the un oly eathens who
eld it in t rall.
and the knights yelled:
Hot dog!
What a ball!

I Am Sor
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Across Europe and down it they walked and ran and galloped, down to the Mediterranean and across it and along it to fight and loot once more and oh! but it was good for their souls.

And their pockets.
But not *their* pockets only.
And not *their* pockets for long.

Because capitalists spread through the Mediterranean into Africa and the Near East. They lodged themselves firmly in the conquered cities and wrested rights to trade, to land, to buildings, to marketplaces. They bought and sold to Christians and Muslims, to the conquerors and conquered, to both sides of every battle, and the gold rolled in.

And those that settled there learned Arabic,
learned about Asia, about Africa
learned to take baths, to survive bathing
learned to wear muslins and silks and perfumes
learned to make maps
learned to navigate with compass and astrolobe
learned to make more and tighter commercial laws
learned to make better ships
to sail better ships better
learned to profit better,
and more of them craved more,
more of them elbowed each other,
kneed and tripped each other to get more.

Great gobs of them clumped in the city-states in the northern Mediterranean lands, prospered there, spread south from there and north from there and

Pisa coveted Genoa's advantage
Venice craved Pisa's good fortune
Genoa cursed Venice's power and profit.

so many merchants in the Mediterranean,
so many eager money-makers,
so few ports to trade at, to get Asian goods at,
so many cities,
so many traders jostling each other at these ports for those goods.
so few, so many
so... what
so now what?

Discover! a way to take away from him
the privileges I want for me.

Discover! a way to get around the guys that
have the markets in their hands.

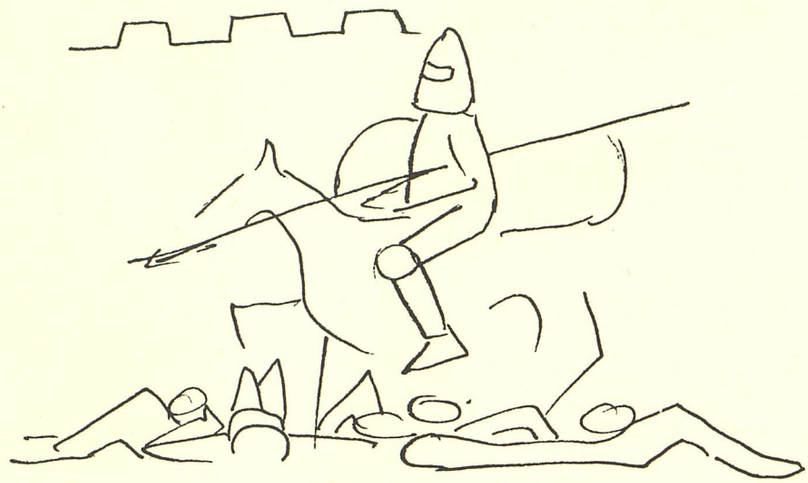
Discover! a way to get to Asia that
no one else controls.

Discover! a way to get
a way to get, to get, to get!

Therefore:
Then:
Thus:

BOLD men
BRAVED high seas
to stare at unknown horizons
BRAVE men
FOUGHT choking jungles to
carve new paths to faraway places.
BOLD
BRAVE
DARING
ADVENTUROUS men
discovered NEW
totally NEW
totally EMPTY worlds
for us all
for us all
for us all

while chanting upfront
and backstage
outloud
and under their breath
the competition chorus which goes thus:
I'm gonna cheat them
gonna go West to get East
gonna cheat them
gonna go West to get East
gonna go round A — Fri — Ca
gonna go round A — Fri — Ca
gonna go North
gonna go South
gonna go West
gonna go East
gonna get there fast
gonna get there FIRST!
Oh! Ooooh! Then capitalism flared up, became infectious
and spread
and spread
and spread.
Ravenous hordes of the get-rich-quick armed with swords and horses and corporations and Christian religions and royal grants in someone else's



land and royal prerogatives in the services of unsuspecting peoples, hordes of them descended upon the Americas, descended on Oceania, descended on Africa, descended on the East Indies, descended on the West Indies, descended on us,

on me.

The omens were bad, the omens had been bad for forty years. When they came, they came mounted on large hornless deer as high as the rooftops. Their bodies were covered all over with cotton armor and only their faces showed. They were white, white as if they were made of lime. They hungered and thirsted for gold, they fingered it like monkeys. Their bodies swelled with greed, their hunger was ravenous. They hungered like pigs for gold.

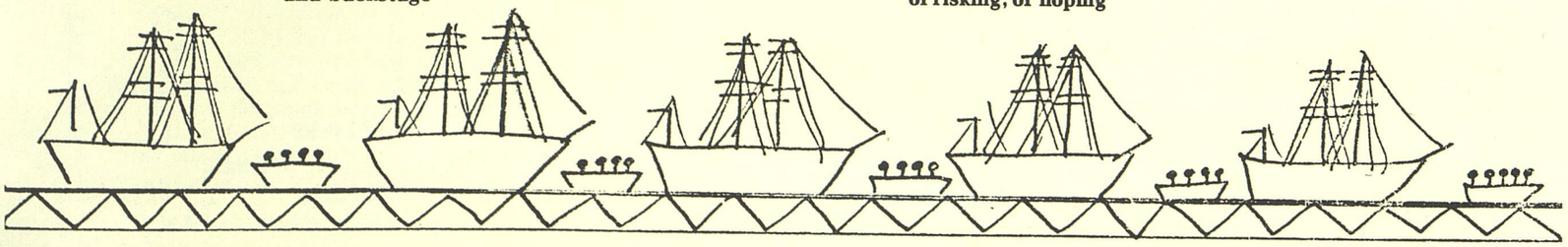
I was given as a gift to these strangers, these gods, these devils, these pigs. I was given as a gift of friendship.

But they set a price on us all, all of us women, on all the young men, on the priests, on the boys and girls. They took us to die in their mines, to work till we dropped in the fields they took from us.

They brought plagues with them and we broke out all over our bodies. We couldn't move with the pain. So many were sick that there was no one to feed the ill and some of us died of hunger in our beds.

It was a terrible time, it was the end of time, the end of our people, a time of weeping, of moaning, of mourning, of mourning without end.

and...
It was a time of feverish rejoicing
of risking, or hoping





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of hope against hoping
for moving out of poverty
for rising out of peasantry
out of second son's landlessness
and third son's penury.

a time of yearning
of dreaming
of scheming
of plotting for prosperity....

Don't you want to raise yourself above the mob?! God has seen fit to fill whole worlds with riches and savages for us to use as we will, whole worlds full of adventure and possibilities. Dare! Dare to reach for your dreams, for position, for power!

Dream!

You! Juan Rafael Fortunato! You can dry your sweat, abandon your plow. You can wear the robes of the lordly and dress your women in yards and yards of silk and when you snap your fingers seventy souls will jump to your command!

And you, John Paul Fairweather—you can shake the mud from your boots, from under your fingernails! You can wear the cloth of a man of substance and command a large prosperous household of women and children and servants and slaves! Master of all you survey!

Come! This is the shining moment. Fortune smiles and thru her lips between her ivory teeth beckons the gold of the Incas, the sweat of the Mayans calls! We! We are the new lords!

then:

more and more ships with more and more men landed on the shores of...no...not America...on the shores of Borinquen.

Siboney
Quisqueya
Ciguayo
Cusató
Chitimacha
Wampanaog
Narraganset
Pennacook!

and they went back to their patrons,
they wrote back to their partners,
they reported back to their financial backers:

They are gentle and trusting.
We can conquer them and make them do the work in our fields.

They are naked and savage,
we must conquer and christen them and make them do the work in our mines.

They are cowardly and easily pleased.
We can conquer them and make them do the work in our fields.

They are licentious and unnatural,
we must conquer and christen them and make them do the work in our mines.

no!
no!
no! no! NO! NO!

Stop them!
Fight them!
Stop all this! Save ourselves!
How?
Now!
No. Consider

The Spanish rise from the dead. On the third day, they say, they rise from the dead. How can we fight and win? How can we do them in?

Is it true? Is it real? Is it tales they tell? Is it lies? Do they rise? Do they die? Do they really die?

How shall we know?
What can we do?

This is what we did. We carried the Spaniard Salcedo across a stream on our shoulders and pretended to slip, pretended to slide. When we fell we pretended to drown and all the while we held him, held him down till he drowned,

and we apologized humbly.

And then we laid him down on the riverbank and lit a fire and kept a watch, by day, by night, we kept a watch and called on this spirit to return, to quicken, to animate him,

and we apologized humbly.

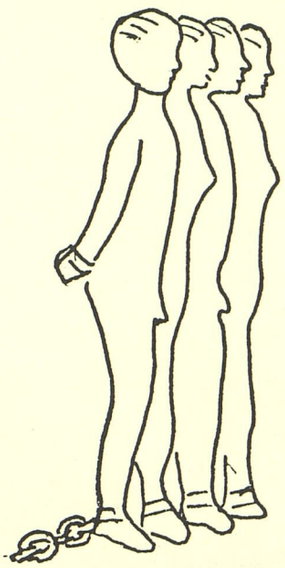
And when he lay there still and dead we tore our hair, we broke our bowls, we cried our regret. We offered our lives, offered up the lives of two clumsy Indians who had so offended,

and we apologized humbly.

We apologized humbly while we watched, three days we watched and three days more. We apologized humbly while the flies lit on his eyes and the sweet smell of the long dead filled the air.

And then we knew. And the women pounded the largest pestles in the largest mortars, and the men hit the ends of their spears on the ground, the sounds of gladness!

and we blew the conch to the four winds:
arm!
fight back!
kill these destructive devils!



We ought to kill all those treacherous bastards!! You can't turn your back on 'em. And lazy! Never seen such lazy flesh.

Lie around and smoke their pipes and fornicate, that's all they'd do if we didn't put the fear of God in 'em.

And liars! Lie as soon as breathe! Now they're saying they're dying off. Sick, they say. Fear of hard work, more likely. Bah! They're not dying, they're hiding out there in those endless bloody thickets.

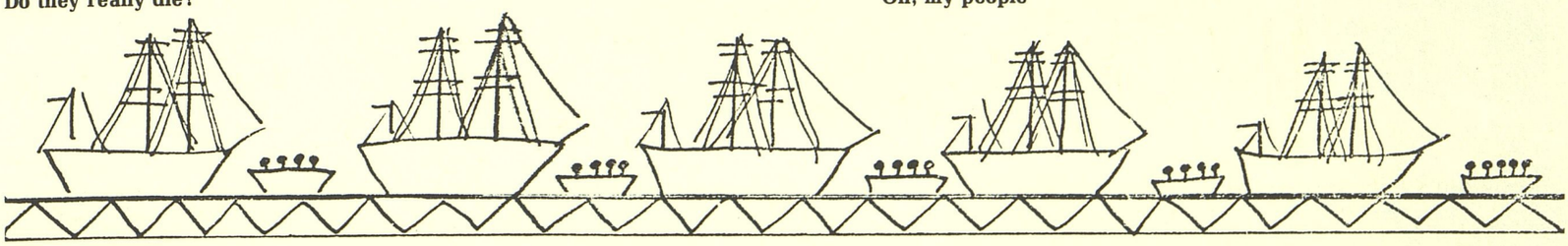
Got so you can't make a decent profit out here anymore. Why, thirty years ago you could go out and bring in 100 Indians as easy as I reach for this glass of gin. And any amount of honest English men and women ready to put their hands to anything and glad of a blanket and a crust. But now! I don't know what the world's coming to.

I've made up my mind! I'm going to Kingsport this week and buy me some of those Africans. Sure it'll cost me money. But I tell you, with the price of sugar the way it is I'm losing money letting that land lie idle. No, blacks it is. Hah! They'll have a time trying to find where to hide out here! Hah! And no pesky Englishmen's rights to this and rights to that, blast 'em! See a mile away, too. Ha ha ha! Yehss. Sugar's got a good price now, hmmmm; a good price.

And the merchants perched on the coast of Africa and cast into its depths and fished out, plucked out, pulled in, black skin after black skin after black skin, and chained and branded and caged and shipped and whipped, and raped, pulled them into shape to be slaves, to do the unfree labor a free society requires.

And first by the hundreds and next by the thousands and then faster and faster until millions were pushed and pulled out of Africa and those who weren't killed in capture or whipped dead or jumped overboard or died in transit, those that were left—were left—in a thousand places in a distant land, never to return, never to return,

return
return
Oh, my people!
to return
Oh, my Ibo people!
Oh, my people





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far—away people—

Ibo
Congo
Mandingo
Konkomba
Fulani
Yoruba
Ashanti
Ashanti

(recite like drumbeats,
like messages across the miles)
congo, congo
congo, congo!
congo, congo!
Lukumi, Yoruba. (repeat)

work and strain
sorrow and pain
caña, cane,
sugarcane
sugarcane

cotton cane coconut cacao
cotton cane coconut cacao

congo, congo, Lukumi, Yoruba
congo! congo! Lukumi, Yoruba,
Carabali!

No way, no right way, no one way, don't matter which you do you gonna get whipped anyway. That's the way they keep you doing and doing what you wouldn't do if you could choose. There's no way, don't you see, no one way to do it, to get thru it. Sometimes I just aim to please, appease, and do what's wanted before it's wanted, to keep the whip off, to have a bit of peace—"but that don't make it all right, that don't make it OK."

Sometimes I'm just sly as sly, and sneak, and steal myself a bit of life, a bit of food, a bit of joy, don't give a damn bout no one else but me, but that don't make it all right, that don't make it OK.

And sometime all I care about is to keep you safe a bit, quiet a bit, rested a bit, but that don't make it all right, that don't make it OK.

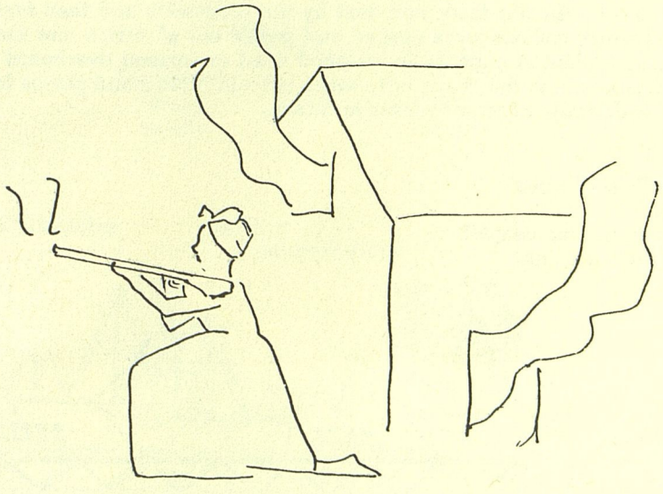
And sometime I don't care what happen to me. I just want to kill. I just want to give them back every lash, every bruise, every pain and every single humiliation I have got from them, every one, but that don't make it all right, that don't make it OK.

And sometime I sit with you and plot and plan and work to get folks free to move them north to plot and plan and work to free another and another, but that don't make it all right, that don't make it OK.

Because I just trying to be human and this ain't human, I just trying to live and this ain't life, I just want to be free and this ain't free. I wanna be free now, I want to live now before I die while I got some young left in me—now!

and they ran away:
slave woman poisoned their masters,
killed their mistresses,
and they struck back:
they burnt the tobacco houses, the sugar mills,
and they ran away:
in South Carolina slaves ran away and killed the guards

they ran to the south and killed the white people and
burnt the houses in their path



and they struck back:
in New York black slaves and Indians
set fire to buildings and killed the
white people who tried to stop them
and they fought back:
The Native Americans fought back,
harassed the settlements.
The black slaves fought back,
killed their masters and overseers.
The white indentured servants fought back,
rioted against the wealthy.

and often,
not real often,
but often,
white and black together fought back
red and black together fought back
together?
Oh no! Not together!

Because if there is anything more threatening, more scary, more hand-wringing, fist-clenching, lung-searing scary than black women and black men getting uppity and independent and angry and dangerous,

If there's anything more eye-wide, cold-sweat-, foot-twitch, heart-pounding scary than black folks getting dangerous,

It's black men, black women rising up and conspiring seditiously and perniciously with the poor and white, the mean, the vile, the lowly, the dregs from Europe, getting together to stop, to kill, to destroy, to murder, to murder us all in our beds, Oh, lord! to murder us all in our beds.

And the trapped snapped,
the door slammed,
the law rose up and bore down.

And it bore down first and hardest on the slaves.
It said:
whip them!
scar them!
kill them!
dismember them!
burn them!
burn them slow!
And the law bore down next and next hardest
on the whites who helped slaves
who cared for slaves
who married slaves
who were kind to slaves
who were not unkind to slaves
who were not vicious to slaves.
It said:
whip them!
scar them!
dismember them!
kill them!
It said:
you are white
you have a duty and a care,
Take Care!
you are the better and will
get the better share
Take Care!
and it said:
here's my carrot—
here's my stick—
ease and shillings,
or the whip's flick
and it said:
you can be one of us,
one of us,
one of us,
yes!
you can be one of us,
one of us,
one of us,
yes!
you gotta know it,
you better show it,
better not blow it,
yes!

The profit-making, body-breaking infection ripened and broke out in pimples, postules and pestilent sores. The sore oozed out privilege for some and unprivilege for others, it oozed out attitudes and postures and



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**positions, it oozed out hate and self-hate, it oozed out measure and weigh: my skin, dark skin, white skin, it oozed out weigh and measure: hair curl and nose breadth and mouth width, it oozed out high or base, know your place, be your race,**

**it oozed out the rotten green pus:**

**racism**

**a pus, an ooze, a crust, a sore,**
**a fever, a malaise, an unease, a disease.**

**It spread, penetrated, situated itself,**
**soaked deep into every fiber of every being.**

**It took hold, took form, took shape, took force,**
**took over.**

**Before Jefferson and Bolívar, the white, the males, the property owners took over, "liberated" their countries and all the people in it**

**racism was in place**

**Before the French traders and merchants and bankers and the German and the Italian forced out the feudal lords and kings and ruling classes and took over their countries and all the people in it**

**racism was in place**

**Before the land-owning, mill-owning, profit-making classes of the United States tore off and took over the northern half of the country of Mexico and all the people in it**

**racism was in place**

**Before the U.S. speculators and frontiersmen and cavalry took over what was left of the Native American lands and all the people in it**

**racism was in place**

**Before the British man-o-wars and American gunboats cruised up the large long Chinese rivers and sailed into the ports of India and China and imposed their rule on Asia and all the people in it**

**racism was in place**

**Before the English and French and Belgians and Germans and Portuguese cut up and parceled out the whole continent of Africa and what was left of the people in it**

**racism was in place**

**Racism was in place,**

**In place.**

**It was there.**

**It was there.**

**Out there.**

**In here,**

Right in here.

---

**Rosario Morales is a NY Puerto Rican writer and fabric artist joyfully approaching old age in Cambridge, Mass.**

A list of some of the books and records I used to tap the outlook, information, feelings, or sounds for this piece:

Blauner, Robert, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
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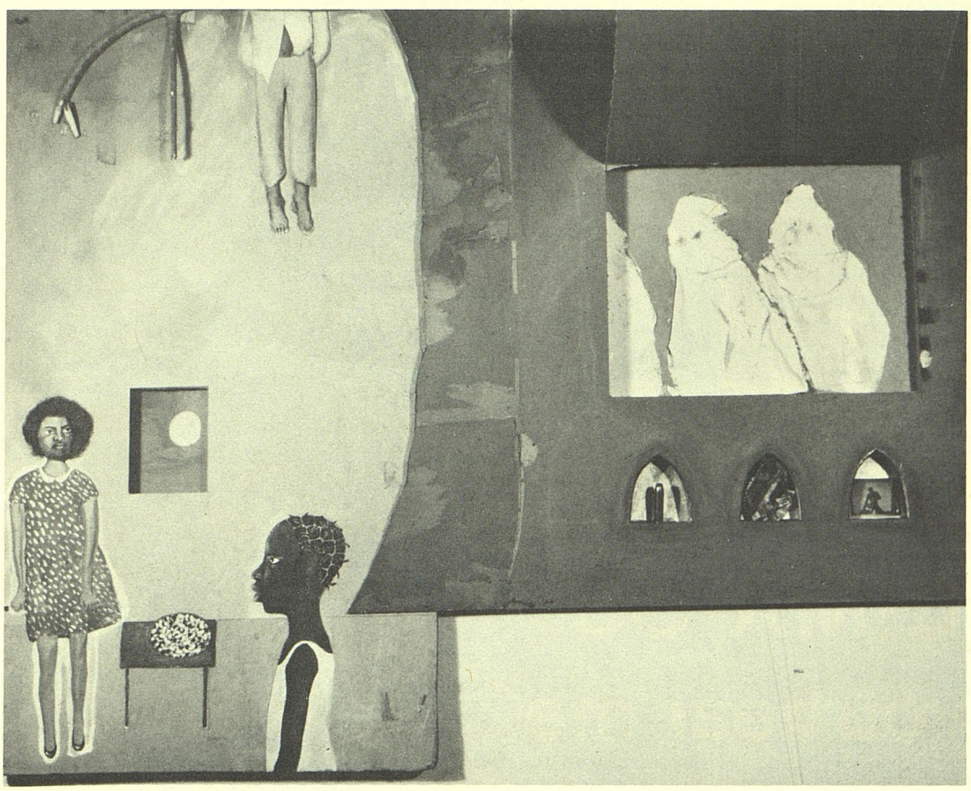
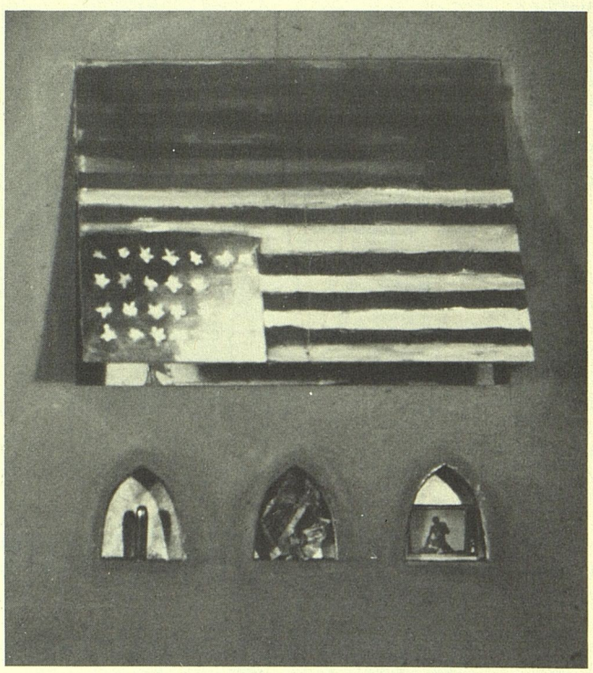
Guillen, Nicolas, *El Son Entero, La Voz de Nicolas Guillen* (Buenos Aires: Coleccion los Poetas).
Hooks, Bell, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
Leon-Portilla, Miguel, ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).
Rice, C. Duncan, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
Sweet Honey in the Rock, *Good News* (Chicago: Flying Fish Records).
Tiger, Michael E., & Levy, Madeleine R., *Law and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977).
Tuchman, Barbara, *A Distant Mirror* (New York: Knopf, 1978).
Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

The drawings are adapted from the art of Aztec, South Sea, and Eskimo peoples as seen in two books: Julius E. Lips, *The Savage Hits Back* (New York: University Books, 1966), and Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed., *The Broken Spears* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).





Marina Gutiérrez. *Untitled*. 1981. Mixed material construction and painting on cardboard. 30" x 40". *Above*: Detail. *Left*: Painting after string (tied to small plastic soldier) is pulled to raise flag and reveal low relief image. Marina Gutiérrez, born in NYC, draws most of her inspiration from non-Western art.

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My name is Linda Nishio. I am 28 years old. I am a third generation (sansei) Japanese/American. I grew up in L.A. in a household where very little Japanese was spoken,



except of course by my grandmother, who spoke very little English. During those early years I picked up some Japanese phrases, a few of which I still remember today. Then



I went to Art School on the East Coast. I attended classes in an environment where very little art was taught but where iconoclastic rhetoric (intellectualism) replaced



"normal" art education. Before long I realized I, too, was communicating more and more in this fashion. Ho hum. Upon returning to L.A. I found myself misunderstood by



family and friends. So this is the story: A young artist of Japanese descent from Los Angeles who doesn't talk normal.



Photographs by Mark Clair

# KI·KO·E·MA·SU KA
# (Can you hear me?)



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# THE AMBIGUOUS JOURNEY OF A WOMAN IN SEARCH OF CULTURE

BY LYNDA HILL



A special paradox occurs to me each time I contemplate race prejudice and culture. Plaguing me, the dilemma arises at times I can never predict, often when I interact with people. I want to know why, after growing up believing racism is destructive and irrational, many American people are unable to dissolve the color line with confidence.

As a black woman, I am on a perpetual quest to transcend negative stereotypes. I often grope in the dark, like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Sometimes I speak philosophically with friends about the transcendental versus the existential. "Where is the threshold between black and white and when does logic collapse into allies versus opponents?" I ask, although I know the question has no straightforward answer. Nevertheless, I decide to discuss it with a close friend who is white, imagining that we can sort it out together or not at all.

"How can we be friends and ignore the potent force of racism?" I ask her one night, following an intense prelude in which I explain this is not going to be one of our usual glib conversations. I will call her Sarah instead of Ann (as in Miss Ann) for the ethnic contrast. Sarah is Jewish, which is supposed to mean something special in understanding our friendship. The historical liaison between blacks and Jews in the U.S., however, may be one of the most debatable issues of the century—a subject stripped of pretense in Harold Cruse's book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. By coincidence, I have just finished reading Cruse before this conversation.

"We have similar backgrounds," says Sarah.

As a child I lived in an integrated neighborhood, where many of the people were Jewish. My NAACP youth group, however, was where I found true camaraderie among my black peers. I remember marching with my friends, singing freedom songs, attending rallies and sit-ins, our energy concentrated on crushing barriers as we sang our way into a frenzied insistence on being part of America. We forced others to see our color, acknowledge it, and accept it...or so we thought. Acceptance, we later learned, was not an automatic transition—and here I think I'm safe in speaking for others who, like me, have often felt cheated because we actually did believe our ideals would translate into reality. The Civil Rights Movement was a peculiar, misleading phenomenon, the outcome of an American interpretation of Pangloss' maxim: "Things cannot be otherwise; for, since everything is made for an end, everything is necessarily for the best end."

Our songs were as clear then as they are elusive now; our quest for integrated schools, restaurants, buses, a cold victory. We sang, "Black and white to—gether/ We shall not be moved," but later we had to question our meaning: How "together" did we want to be with *them*? It got to be a bore, defending our own humanity. What about *their* humanity? Hadn't *they* subjugated *us*? Did we really have time to wait for them to listen to our message, hear our song, see our black skin, weep or smile, show some feeling, act like brothers and sisters, jump to embrace fair treatment under the law?

Sarah and I have known each other for more than ten years, since Barnard. At that time I thought friendships were based on arbitrary alliances between people with similar interests, regardless of race, religion, or class. I dated an Anglo-Saxon boy from a broken family, who was poor and led a bohemian life. Together, we acted out our own countercultural rendition of the film *Rebel Without a Cause*, improvising a code of conduct as we defied our childhoods. I was in question by my family and friends, black and white. Sarah thought I was more intelligent than he. As far as my family was concerned, my whole future was in jeopardy. What would my father, who died when I was eight years old, have thought? An architect, engineer, and religious man devoted to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, he gave me, as he had given my older sisters, an appreciation for black culture. When the sixties came, he wasn't around. "We shall not be moved" was in our hearts as we approached El Dorado with Candide, and Pangloss gleamed down from what might have been heaven, insisting, "Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

I am an armchair psychoanalytic buff, with a penchant for free association and the subliminal. Authentic emotions are often buried beneath layers of breeding: Sarah and I shield ourselves from each other with good manners.

"Are we hypocrites?" I ask her.

"Listen," says Sarah, "our being friends isn't so surprising. I'm from a liberal family. Swastikas were burned on our door when I was a child. I've always identified with being part of an outside group. I went to an integrated high school. We have the same middle-class background."

The mention of class alarms me. I wonder if we are elitists. How clever to subvert the issue of race by replacing the color line with a class line.

Sarah crosses the street whenever she sees black teenaged males who don't look middle-class. Twice she was mugged and once she was forced to suck the penis of a boy who took her money. In all three episodes the aggressors were black.

"Do you think race had anything to do with it?" I ask of the incidents. The question is calculated, a test of her liberalism.

"No," she says, passing the liberalism test, with points subtracted for naiveté. I have my own answer, knowing she doesn't want to offend me. A friend of hers, who is black, she says, was raped by a black man. "It's probably a matter of class," she says.

There may be some truth to this. Another friend of mind, a black male, tells me of a black woman who was robbed and brutalized by a white man. She wants revenge. I am frightened of the blurry contrast between poverty and race and of the violence slashing across bogus categories defined by fate. Where is Pangloss now? I wonder. Voltaire might not have considered 1982 in New York.

I used to be an optimist, but now I am confused, as my paradox propels itself through psychic energy. Emily, a friend of mine from high school who is a successful corporate executive, a black woman, tells me one day she ran into another high school mate who is white. I am happy to receive this information, as I haven't been in touch with Clara, the white friend, in years. Emily tells me Clara is planning to move in with a man. When Clara calls me, it's a fine reunion, a long talk probing the events of our recent past. She tells me of her involvement in an unsuccessful political campaign and of her romance.

"I don't know if you would be surprised," she says. I am immediately reminded that because of our bourgeois manners two dialogues proceed at once—one spoken, the other suppressed.

"He's not Jewish," I say, although I know she is half Italian. Her mother was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for crossing the religion line. If penetrating culture is so easily punishable, I speculate, what will be the consequences of Clara's transgression? I know what she wants

Lynda Hill is a freelance writer working in NYC.
*Kikoemasu-Ka*, on the opposite page, is by Linda Nishio, a performance artist in Los Angeles.

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to say, and then the words spill out in staccato phrases, as we hesistate and interrupt each other in turn. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a flashback from the sixties, is revised with a new cast: he is black, with graduate degrees from two Ivy League schools.

"I'm not surprised," I say. After all, Clara dated a Hispanic boy when we were in high school. The muscles in my stomach are tense, however. Being a good friend and politically aware black intellectual novice feminist at this moment seems to require the same degree of diplomacy needed to negotiate an international border dispute. When everything is over, war may be imminent.

"What do your parents think?" I ask. "I know they weren't pleased with Carlos."

"They're not thrilled, of course, but with Carlos it was a class—they thought he wasn't good enough. I was young . . . it was different."

The discreet barriers are reconstructed. Strange, I think, how we evolve into people trapped by second-hand social philosophies. Thorstein Veblen and Vance Packard must have conditioned us for this scenario. Somehow Zionism slips into our conversation. The Middle East may start World War III, says Clara.

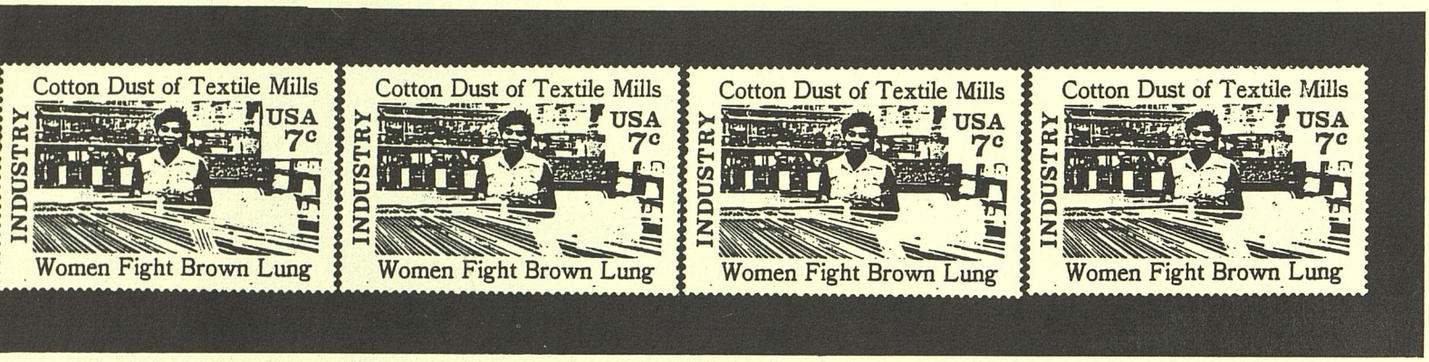
"I'm a Zionist," she says.

I think of her red hair. "Zionism is irrational," I say.

"Of course it's irrational."

Pangloss can't console me now. When speaking my mind has become the path of least resistance, there is no way out of this paradox, I'm sure. Clara and I haven't spoken to each other again, but I keep rethinking the conversation, especially the part where I compare the Middle East with South Africa. Clara says the U.S. will never bear arms against the black majority there, with so many black people here. In the Middle East, we are the undisputed allies of Israel. War against the Palestinians is not the answer, I say.

Finally, another line has been drawn, one that is murkier than the color line, one that coils like a serpent, hissing at us. I think if we must meet in battle, Clara and I, we must meet on home ground, where we can remember old times before we shoot.







"As advertisements for the state, postage stamps encourage patriotism and project an idealized national history in which social contradictions vanish and democracy triumphs. To question what is represented on postage stamps is to begin to imagine the history that has been left out." —Janet Koenig

*Above*: From *Commemorative Stamp Series* (1979-80), by Janet Koenig, a NY artist and graphic designer.
*Below*: Cynthia Carr is a member of the Heresies Collective.
*Facing page*: *"Moving Along"* (1982), by Judy Blum, a painter who lives in NYC.

# TESTIMONY OF A GIRL

BY CYNTHIA CARR

When I was eight maybe nine my parents sent me to an art class on Saturdays where I met some black children for the first time in my life—one boy and one girl. My parents had told me about black people (who I'm sure we called "Negro" or "colored"). That my old great-aunts were afraid of them when they walked to the German service on Sunday mornings. That if some moved into your neighborhood you shouldn't go near them. And when you went to *their* neighborhoods, you had to roll up the windows. So I looked at these children.

The boy was serious and spoke to no one and I realized after a session or two that he was the best artist there. The girl was lively and friendly and slightly overweight like me. I decided I wanted to make friends with her. I can't remember any of the other white kids who were there.

But I do remember sitting at a desk across from my new friend. I remember some of the horrible little artworks that I made there and how the teacher frowned at them. And I remember standing outside with my friend after the first or second class and talking while we both waited for our parents to come get us.

I was excited getting into the car that day. My parents had no Negro friends and obviously they'd been misinformed. Now I'd be able to tell them the real story and they'd be so pleased. "Mom, I'm making friends with this Negro girl in my class and she's real nice." Something like that was what I tried on her first, but she didn't reply. "They're not bad after all, Mom." She was driving and acting like she hadn't heard me. "Could I invite her to our house?" I realized that my mother, staring ahead like stone, was not going to answer. I remember the odd hollow ache in my chest as we drove home not speaking.

I remember my friend's face but not her name. We continued our talking and sitting together for maybe another month—till the class ended. Then she was lost to me.



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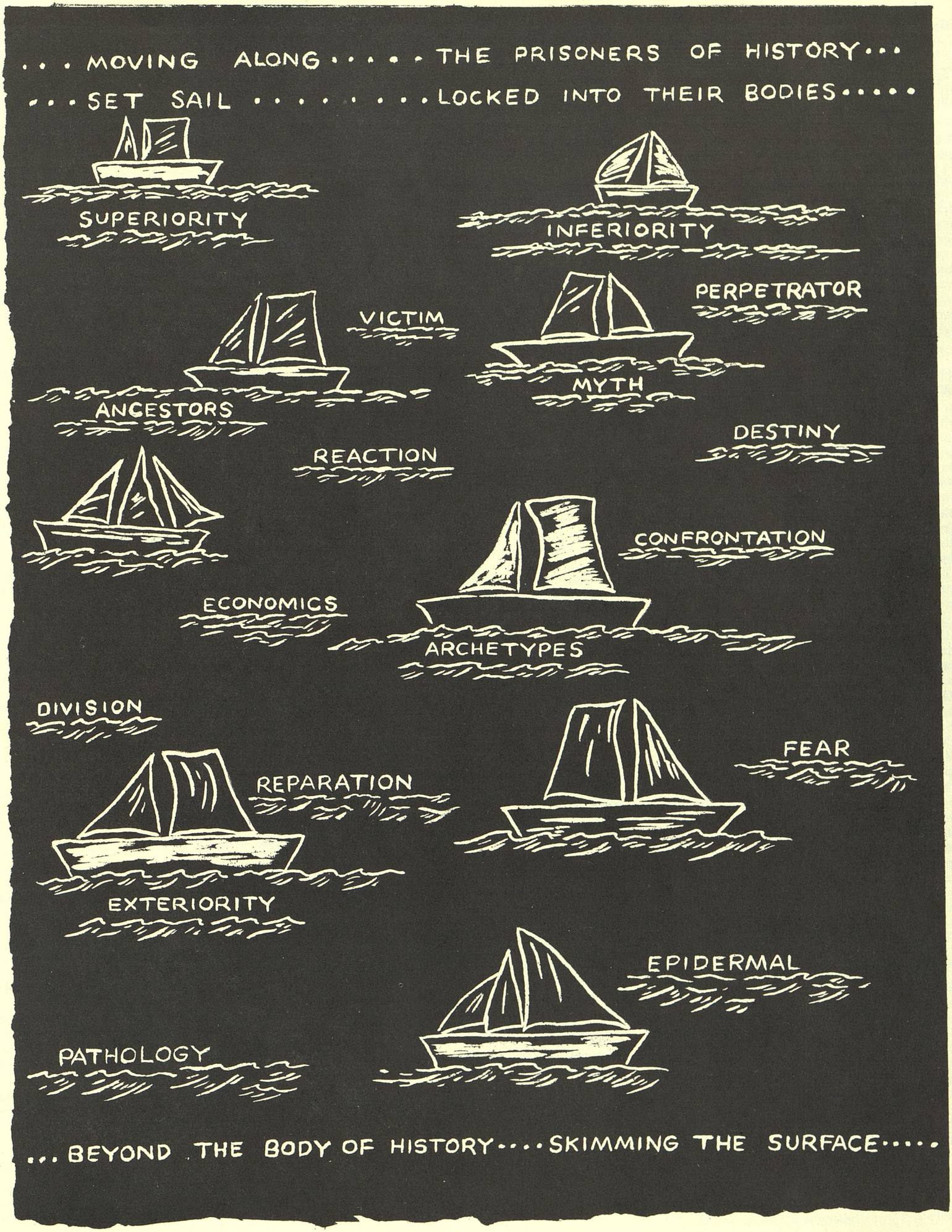


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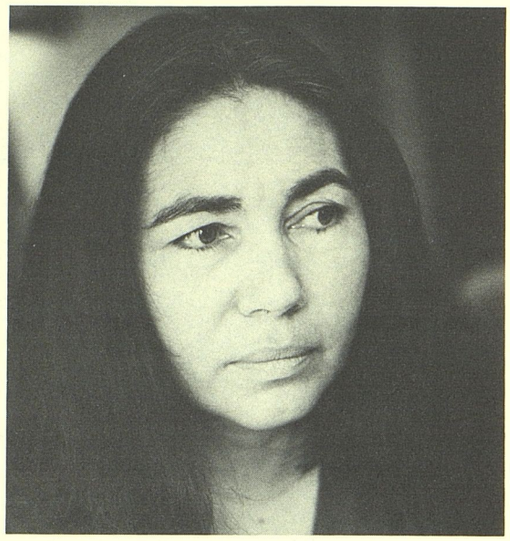
*The following is excerpted from an interview with Isabel Fraire (roman) by Cecilia Vicuña (bold) which took place in New York on May 1982. A transcript of Alaide Foppa's controversial radio program, mentioned in this interview, appears on page 12.*

# DEATH AND DEFENSE: C

## PART 1



Isabel Fraire. Photo by Layle Silbert.

**Would you tell us how your poem for Alaide Foppa came about?**

As you know, Alaide was a friend of mine, but she was not only a friend of mine, she was a friend of a great many people in Mexico. Alaide was a Guatemalan, an art critic, very active in the cultural life of Mexico. She taught Italian literature at the university; she was co-founder of the feminist magazine *FEM*; and she had a great radio program called "Foro de la Mujer" (Women's Forum), where she dealt with women's problems in general. She was a very loved person. She was one of the gentlest people I have known.

**When did you see her last?**

I saw her...I believe it was in November 1980. We both participated in a panel discussion and afterwards she drove me home and we spoke of the problems of Guatemala. She told me she was going to make a trip back to see her mother, who is very old, and when she came back she planned to set up a kind of solidarity group to work on a much more intense scale for Guatemala. After this, in December, I suddenly heard from a friend that she had disappeared! She had been going from her mother's house on a shopping trip, on the very last day of her stay in Guatemala, driven by her family's chauffeur, Leocadio Actún Chiroy. A number of unidentified black cars blocked the road. They dragged her and the chauffeur out of the car, and they disappeared.

**What was your reaction to this?**

Everybody was tremendously concerned. I immediately feared the worst, because I know that a disappearance means almost certain death. The term "disappearance" is a euphemism. What happens is that people are picked up or arrested. Sometimes it is a group of policemen; sometimes they are plainclothes police agents; sometimes it is the army. Quite frequently when they arrest a person they show their credentials and identify themselves as members of the police, or their uniforms identify them as soldiers. But afterwards when the relatives go to look for this person at the jail, to try to see what has happened, see if they can be of any use, they are told that this person is not in jail, has not been arrested. They can go all over the country, looking everywhere, going from authority to authority, and they are frequently told, "No, we don't have this person, he or she was probably taken by the Death Squads..."

**And what are these "Death Squads"?**

The Death Squads are a phantom organization, not at all independent from the government. It is obvious that they are in agreement with the government and act with its permission, since they can operate freely on the streets even during curfew hours. During the state of siege in one of the regimes, for instance, the number of Death Squad victims rose to unheard-of levels, in spite of the fact that anyone circulating in the streets after the curfew began was shot on sight by the army and police. Another detail is that when they first appeared, they distributed leaflets announcing their formation and making their threats from planes which took off from and landed on an army strip!

**Does the government acknowledge its link with the Death Squads?**

Of course not. The Squads are just a way for the police or the army to deny all responsibility, not to have to acknowledge that a person has in fact been arrested. This eliminates the recourse of habeas corpus; there is no trial; there is no sentence. There is execution, because with great frequency the bodies turn up in two or three days to a week. Quite often they have notes pinned on them saying, "This was an execution by such and such Death Squad." People turn up badly tortured. They obviously suffered terribly before they died. So when I heard that Alaide had disappeared in these circumstances in Guatemala, I was tremendously worried. I thought, my God, if she doesn't show up in a matter of days, that means she is dead.

**Why did they pick Alaide?**

Well, there are a number of possible reasons. Alaide was living in exile in Mexico. She had left Guatemala in 1954, when the famous coup overthrew the Arbenz government; it was engineered, as we all know, by the CIA. I mean the CIA says this quite frankly. They are not ashamed of it at all. They are happy and proud of it. The country was then taken over by forces which wanted to undo everything the Arbenz government had even begun to do, like a very timid land reform. They just rolled time back. There was a lot of repression and many people left the country. They did well to leave because a lot of people lost their lives in that period.

**She had been active in the Arbenz government?**

No, actually she wasn't, though I believe her husband had a position. But she had written about the situation in Guatemala. On her radio program she had interviewed three Guatemalan Indian women from the Quiché who were members of a peasant self-defense league—the CUC, or Committee for Peasant Unity. They were traveling through Mexico hoping to stir up public opinion about what was happening to their country.

**When did this interview take place?**

Two months before her disappearance, but Alaide hadn't put it on the air yet. She was holding it until she came back. She was not taking unnecessary risks, you know. And what else was she doing? Well, she directed *FEM*, a feminist magazine which was not this antiseptic feminism; it was a politically conscious magazine.

**I understand Alaide had a humanist position within the feminist movement. Very politically aware, but not what people call a "radical." Is this so?**

Alaide was somebody who would try to see what was going on. She was certainly a far cry from dogmatism of any type, feminist or political or anything.

**I remember reading articles in which she said that feminism was a cultural revolution, that feminism could not be a sect of sexists but had to change the consciousness of men and women in order to transform society as a whole.**

Oh yes. She was a writer and a thinker, and she would not easily fall for a shallow definition of feminism, or for a shallow definition of social change. She would want something much more ample, necessarily.

**How old was she when she disappeared?**

Sixty-five.

**Did the government of Guatemala ever acknowledge her disappearance?**

That kind of government simply tries to disguise the truth. They lie, and they believe this lie has a chance of being believed. The first thing they said was that she was kidnapped by the guerrillas! And the guerrillas obviously had nothing to do with it.

**How do you know?**

The guerrillas immediately declared they had absolutely nothing to do with it. They had no motive. No ransom was ever demanded. This makes it clear that it was not a kidnapping by a leftist group. So there is only one option...When you get three to ten to twenty people disappearing a day, and 99% of them have been taken by the Death Squads, you know, there is no question about it. And there is one more detail to corroborate the guilt of the government: Shortly before Alaide went to Guatemala, her brother-in-law, who was a Minister of Economics in the Guatemalan government at the time, telephoned her in Mexico, and warned her not to come. This means that somebody else in the government, knowing that he was Alaide's brother-in-law, was friendly enough to tell him to tell her not to come because she would be killed.

**Why did she go?**

Her mother is very, very old. Alaide probably thought, "When I return to Mexico, if I start a campaign to make the public aware of what is going on in Guatemala, I will not be able to re-

Isabel Fraire, born in Mexico City, is a poet and literary critic. Her *Poems in the Lap of Death* (Latin American Literary Review) recently appeared in a bilingual edition.



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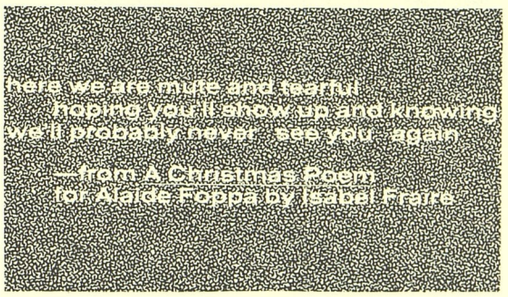
# GUATEMALAN WOMEN



Alaide Foppa.




turn." Maybe she just wanted to see her mother one last time.

**Did her body, or that of the Indian chauffeur, ever appear?**

No, that's another point. A year after her disappearance, shortly before the anniversary, a number of public protests were planned in Mexico to again demand that the government present Alaide Foppa. If you have her, where is she? We want to see her. What crime has she committed? We want a trial. And the government said she had died in an armed encounter with the guerrillas! That's what they said! To begin with, a woman 65 years old joining the guerrillas when she had plans to go back and fight to make the problem known...

**Were there protests in Guatemala as well?**

I doubt there have been because in that country there's no such thing. It is impossible. Anybody who tries to protest is murdered. That's it. The government respects nothing. They kill Christian Democrats.

**I wanted to ask you about Alaide's background. I understand she came from a very wealthy family, and in spite of this, she took the side of the Indian.**

Yes, her family had a coffee plantation, I believe. Alaide undoubtedly had Indian nannies taking care of her; she had little Indian playmates when she was a kid. She certainly would know what was happening on the plantation, and a child who is sensitive or perceptive is likely to learn more from what she sees around her than from what she is told. Quite frequently children will not share their parents' points of view, or their prejudices....Growing up as a student, she would know the situation. You can be an aloof intellectual or you can have a wider perception of reality, which is obviously what she had. She would certainly have been concerned with the social and economic problems of everyday people, and the Indians in Guatemala are among the most downtrodden human groups in the whole world.

**Have you been in Guatemala?**

Yes, when I went there for the first time, I think I hadn't seen anything like it, though things are bad in many places. For the first time in my life I saw men in the streets doing the work of horses, pulling carts with loads on them. The poverty is so great that in Guatemala City, which is probably the richer section of the country, you can buy cigarettes one by one, because so many people can't pay for the whole packet...Chiapas, in Mexico, is next door to Guatemala, and these are regions where the Indian population is assimilated and unbelievably exploited by the white population. This does not happen to the same degree in other parts of Mexico, but Guatemala is just like Chiapas.

**One of the most extraordinary things happening now in Guatemala is the participation of the Indians in the guerrilla struggle. Can you tell us more about it?**

I would say in 1980 and 1981 it started up again among the Indians, because they are losing their land, and they are being murdered to the point of genocide. Homes, villages are being wiped out. When the Indian (most peasants are Indians) sees his or her father, family members, friends being murdered in cold blood, he or she comes to the conclusion it would be better to pick up arms than to stand and wait to be murdered as well. And that is why you have such a strong renewal of the guerrilla movement and why you have men and women together. Because there is no salvation. There is no option. They either fight or they are probably going to die.

**Soledad Cano, in her book *La Noche del Colibrí, Arde Centroamerica*, says that the multinational corporations are very interested in grabbing the Indian land because nickel and petroleum have been discovered there. Can you tell us how they are doing it?**

Yes, they connive with the army to take all the Indians away from their ancestral land, and they do it by all kinds of legalistic tricks. The Indians don't have "titles of property" to the land they inherited from their ancestors! So they just take their livelihood away, leaving them no other resource. They opened up a new highway which connects this land with the outside world, and this makes the value of the land go up to stratospheric levels. There is also the fact that many officers in the army have taken advantage of their position in the government and they have bought up the land, and now they have a double interest in maintaining the status quo because now they are landowners, they are capitalists.

**Many people think the Indians are only a small group of people, but isn't it true that they are more than half of the population of Guatemala?**

Of course. I would say that the white or *ladino*, the *criollo* population is a minority. The very vast majority is Indian. The "owners" may be white, but everybody who works for them is definitely Indian.

**How do you see the prospects for the future in Guatemala?**

Well, frankly I think they will keep fighting. I think they cannot help but keep fighting. At present the government can carry on this warfare at tremendously repressive levels, wipe out entire populations. They have the arms; they have the airplanes and all kinds of technology; they have computerized communications systems all over the country, so that they are perfectly capable of fighting the barely armed, barely fed guerrilla groups. However, as we have seen in other cases, in countries like Vietnam, when the population is that desperate, that decided, they just have to kill them all, and they will have to kill them all in Guatemala. There comes a point when it is no longer possible, when the armed forces themselves are not willing to go on, when they turn. There could come a change within the army, but I don't believe they are flexible enough. I don't believe the upper classes in Guatemala are ready to give up anything at all.

**What about elections, can they change anything?**

Well, as in Salvador, the supposedly democratic elections are nothing but an incredible farce. You don't even have what they call "the center." You have nothing except the right and the far right. In the most recent elections what happened is that the far right claimed there had been a fraud; they marched in the streets and said the army's candidate, who had won, had been forced in by the army. I believe this is what is behind the recent coup. That the army saw these people marching in the streets, their photographs in the international press, and a society woman being hit on the face with a gun by a soldier was bad public relations internationally. It was a very funny coup, because it was part of the army against the government in power, which was the army as well. There was no fighting, no opposition, nothing. Now, I can understand a coup by generals against a civilian government not encountering opposition, but a coup by officials against the military government, and no resistance? I think there was perfect agreement before this coup happened. The same people are still in power.

**And has the situation in the country changed since the coup?**

Since the coup the Death Squad murders have continued and even increased. Not only has nothing changed, the situation has actually gotten worse, and even high functionaries of the last government who were considered to be relatively decent are leaving the country. Among them, by the way, Alaide's brother-in-law.

**I understand that the Carter government did cut military aid to Guatemala because of Human Rights violations, and Carter was accused by the Guatemalan right wing of being a communist!**

Yes, this is why a very important group of Guatemalan businessmen gave Reagan a lot of money for his campaign, and had an understanding with him. Reagan is obviously paying them back for this, saying yes, we are going to try to renew military aid, saying they have a different government now, and things are going to change, like in Salvador. They say we just had an election, there are now civilian men in the government, we must continue military aid....

**What do you think the people of the United States can do to help the people of Guatemala?**

Ah, very clearly what the American people can do is to write to their Congressmen and their Senators and tell them we do not want American military aid to Guatemala renewed.



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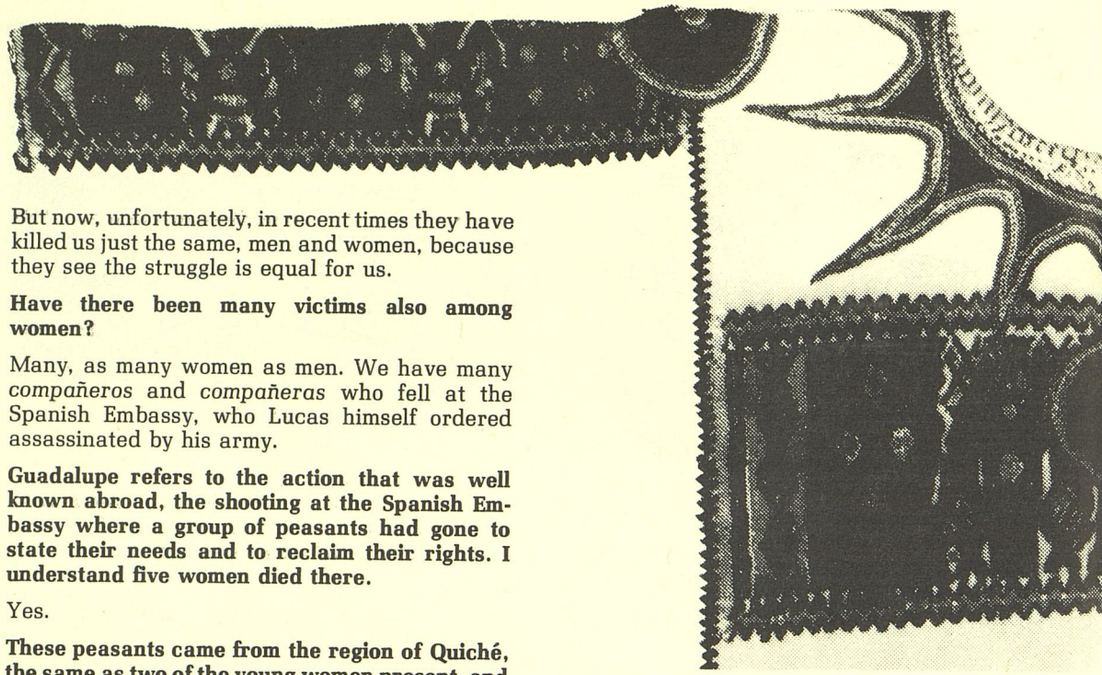

# DEATH AND DEFENSE:

## PART 2

*The following is excerpted from an interview with three Indian women from Guatemala (roman) by Alaide Foppa (bold) done in November 1980 for "Women's Forum," a program on Radio University in Mexico City. All reports on Guatemala in the U.S. press fail to present the point of view of the Indians themselves, even more so, of the Indian women. This interview is a rare opportunity to hear the voices of three women from the Committee for Peasant Unity (Comite de Unidad Compesina, or CUC).*

**What has brought you to this serious commitment to the CUC at such an early age?**

What has carried us to this point is the suffering, the pain in which we see our people. The CUC is mainly a committee of peasants in which the majority of participants are Indians, although there are also a few poor *ladinos* with us, so that all of us, the poor, participate in this organization.

**When did this organization begin?**

In 1978.

**Approximately how many members are there?**

The CUC has local committees in small settlements (*caserios*), hamlets, villages, and even in the city, where there are poor people who participate in the struggle and who want to improve the situation in which we live.

**The CUC is always present at all the protest demonstrations. How do women participate?**

We women participate equally with men because we saw the men fight and protest against the injustices in the country, but we saw that they didn't accept a man's word because they didn't even listen to it. Then we women thought to participate to reclaim our rights as well.

**And do you believe that they listen better to women's words?**

In the beginning, yes, when we began to speak; even though the assassin Lucas was not resolving our problems, it was still not so easy to kill us.

For information on Alaide Foppa, see page 10.



But now, unfortunately, in recent times they have killed us just the same, men and women, because they see the struggle is equal for us.

**Have there been many victims also among women?**

Many, as many women as men. We have many *compañeros* and *compañeras* who fell at the Spanish Embassy, who Lucas himself ordered assassinated by his army.

**Guadalupe refers to the action that was well known abroad, the shooting at the Spanish Embassy where a group of peasants had gone to state their needs and to reclaim their rights. I understand five women died there.**

Yes.

**These peasants came from the region of Quiché, the same as two of the young women present, and Guadalupe is from Quetzaltenango, isn't that right?**

Yes.

**And Maria, what can you say of your early participation, to be only 15 and already participating in the struggle? Maria speaks very little Spanish, but Guadalupe can translate for us.**

She says that she is proud to participate at this age, because the assassin Lucas has killed so many people, mainly in the Quiché province, so they feel the necessity to participate in the popular struggle even as young ones. They have a vision of growing up as a free people. She adds that she began to participate two years ago, and that her participation has been taken into account in the struggle.

**We're going to ask the same thing of Celia, the youngest, who is only 13. [Again Guadalupe translates.]**

She says that she began not very long ago, only one year. She says her participation is with the people, giving testimony, and that she is going to keep on giving testimony to all the suffering they have endured in the Quiché province.

**She could hardly have begun any earlier. Have there been victims in your families?**

Yes, we have had victims, yes, in the family, cousins, nephews, even brothers have fallen.

**Do your parents agree with your participation?**

They agree. We have learned primarily from them, because they grew up as good *catequistas* and that's where the repression began, against all Guatemalan Christians. Then we began to organize ourselves, to search for other solutions with which to defend ourselves.

**In the province of Quiché, the Catholic Church has been particularly repressed, so much so that the bishop was obliged to close the churches and leave, since, as Guadalupe just said, the** catequistas **were the best educated. They were also the most threatened and singled out by the repression. . . . When you speak of testimony, to what are you referring? Before whom are you giving testimony?**

Principally to the people of Mexico and to the President here. We need solidarity. We give testimony so that other people will aid us in resolving our problems. In our provinces we need many things; we need money, help, aid from abroad; we need medicine, everything. Recently, the assassin Lucas will not permit the peasants to buy medicine, not in Quiché or in other provinces, especially in the faraway communities up in the mountains. He wants the Indians to die, to die of disease or hunger, so in the face of this, we have to find aid, economic assistance, or other things which can help us.

**I think this request of Guadalupe's is heard by many, and whoever wishes to contribute assistance can contact Radio University. . . . What has the CUC done about the lack of food? What influence has the repression had, or the struggle, on the harvests in the fields?**

Now and since the struggle began, the most pressing problem is getting fair wages, as well as equality and good treatment on the job. Now the CUC has gained a wage of three quetzals and 20 cents.

**The quetzal is equivalent to a dollar, so this triumph represents a very low salary. I would like for you to speak for a moment about what you gained in the great strike in which the CUC participated.**

In April of this year [1980] on the Southern Coast of Guatemala, some 4,000 peasants participated with us in demanding this wage. Many of them were assassinated, kidnapped and threatened. But we succeeded in obtaining the minimum wage.

**How much did you earn before?**

We earned one quetzal.

**How long did the strike last?**

It lasted a month or more.

**How did women participate in this movement?**

We participated equally with men, as we do not have a division between men and women, between children and young people; men, women,

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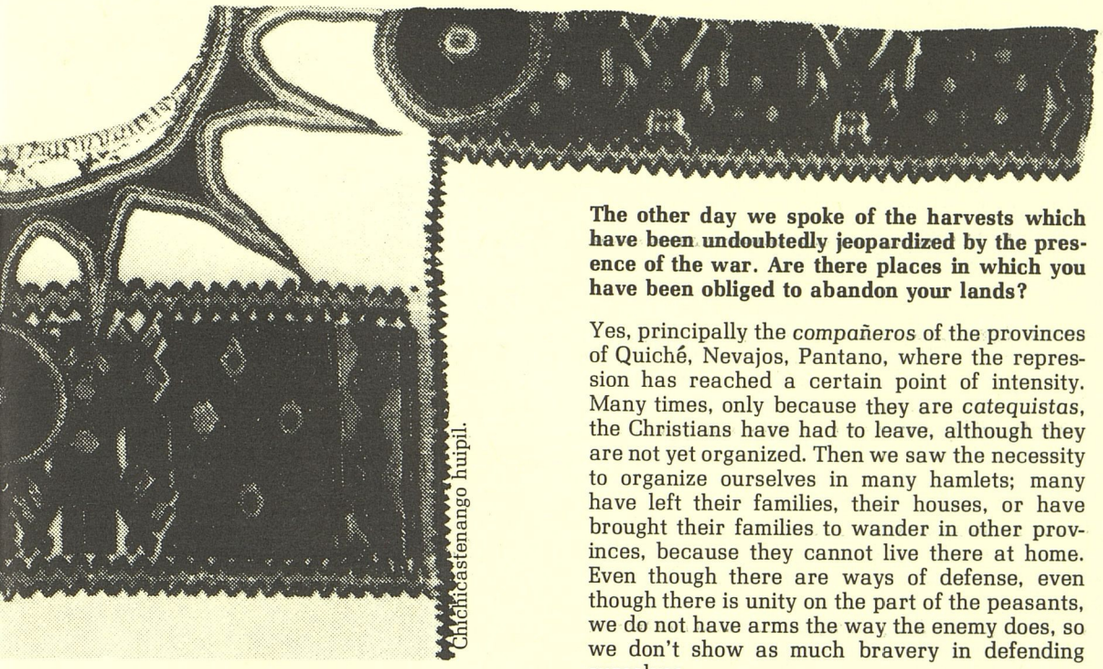


Chichicastenango huipil.

# GUATEMALAN WOMEN

TRANSLATED BY CATHERINE TINKER

and children all have the floor to speak. So then, in this strike we all participate, reclaiming our rights and our just wages by means of demonstrations, strikes, taking over the streets, and quite a bit of activity such as stopping buses.

**Did the number of participants grow during the course of the month?**

Yes, when we began, the number of participants was not so great, nor was the support, because it was the first concrete action we took.

**That is to say, the first action organized by the CUC, by the peasant people, by the masses of men, women, and children, a truly mass movement. Was the repression very great?**

Yes, the government sent troups of soldiers from the army to kill all these peasants. Thus the CUC is an organization that deals with means of defense and security, to defend ourselves against the enemy...

**You mean that there are not only verbally expressed demands, but also self-defense? In what form?**

Well, for example, we work mostly in sabotage, scattering small tacks in the road, making ditches or tunnels, or destroying bridges so that it is not so easy for the enemy to advance. We also defend ourselves with our machetes and everything we have at hand.

**How or in what way do peasant groups, or more concretely, the CUC, feel supported by the armed struggle, or in what way do you feel you are helping the guerrillas from your position?**

As an organization we feel it by means of the actions they have done. They have also done sabotage. When there are armed encounters, the enemy pays attention to them and leaves us in peace. Also, the distribution of pamphlets by the guerrillas helps us in that we can feel as brothers in the struggle. It is not only we who suffer and struggle. If the enemy does not sleep, we don't sleep either.

**The other day we spoke of the harvests which have been undoubtedly jeopardized by the presence of the war. Are there places in which you have been obliged to abandon your lands?**

Yes, principally the *compañeros* of the provinces of Quiché, Nevajos, Pantano, where the repression has reached a certain point of intensity. Many times, only because they are *catequistas*, the Christians have had to leave, although they are not yet organized. Then we saw the necessity to organize ourselves in many hamlets; many have left their families, their houses, or have brought their families to wander in other provinces, because they cannot live there at home. Even though there are ways of defense, even though there is unity on the part of the peasants, we do not have arms the way the enemy does, so we don't show as much bravery in defending ourselves.

**Bravery you do not lack.**

Yes, that we have, but we don't have the concrete means to defend ourselves or to attack the enemy.

**And in Quiché are there landowners? Are Indians the owners of their own land? As a group or as individuals?**

Well, now they say all the land belongs to Lucas, right? Yet we live not only in Quiché, but in the greater part of this country. We live on the land, yet we have to travel to Inta for Lucas to give us the land and for them to give us a piece of paper.

**You have gone to protest; have you had some success?**

Yes, we have, because there are many farmers who wanted to throw us out of our lands in the Quiché province; the young ones, principally Indians who cannot speak Spanish and who no one listens to, they take them away and then the land is the farmers'. But confronted by the unity of the peasants and through our tactics of self-defense and our sense of security, we have succeeded so that the farmers are no longer encouraged to enter our lands. Before, the army arrived and entered houses and carried off eggs and money and anything else they could find. But now if they still do these things, we are able to fight up to a certain point, until nothing more can be done. As long as we can defend ourselves, with everything that we have at hand, we will fight so that it won't be so easy for them.

**Is the resistance growing?**

Yes.

**This is very important and you are conscious of it, and it gives you courage to go ahead. I would like to ask Maria to what extent she has participated in self-defense?**

She says that she has participated in almost every means of self-defense; principally she has been on sentry duty, when they must watch for each other, in order that some may rest.

**A sentinel for observing the possible movements of the army?**

Yes, in the province of Quiché the army would from time to time come in companies of 75 or 90 men. She says that she was on watch but she had no arms. She had a machete, she had a stick, and she also had hot water as her means of self-defense.

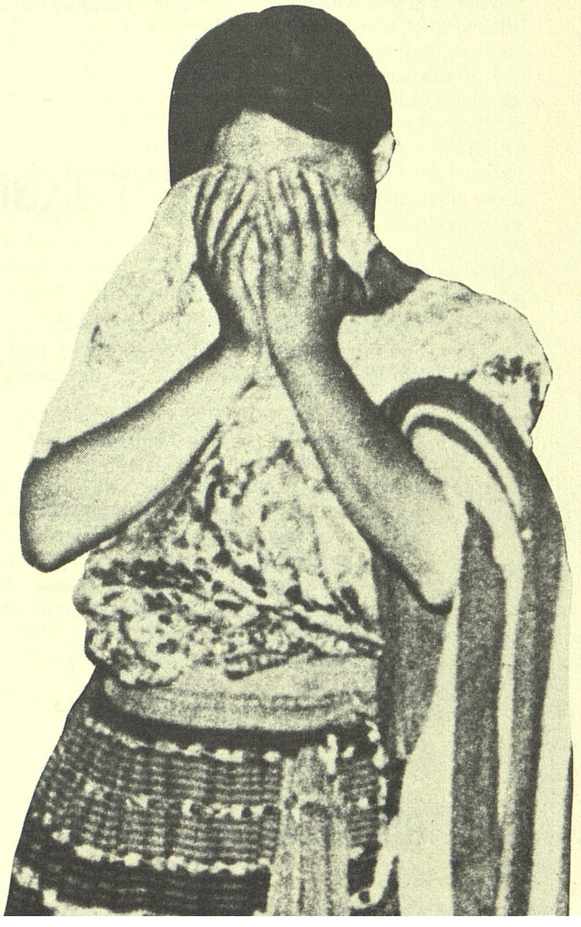
**You mean they use the medieval system—hot water that women can throw on the army? Did she have the occasion to use these methods?**

Yes, she was to occupy them for whatever time she could, so that the *compañeros* could retreat, or take up other means of defense.

**We have to realize that it is not Maria alone. When there is resistance of this kind, one can expect the success of the resistance, despite the terrible repression and the aggression of the army....Since the time has run out, I want to repeat what we said in the beginning: these three young peasant women are seeking solidarity...**

*Since the coup that overthrew the government of Lucas García in March 1982, General Efraín Ríos Montt, the new President, has escalated the war of extermination against the Indian population, especially in the Quiché province. It is estimated that the army has killed between 2,000 and 5,000 people since March. Entire villages have been wiped out, with no discrimination made in killing men, women, or children. According to Raymond Bonner, "The government's message to the Indians is clear: If you are with us, we'll feed you; if not, we'll kill you"* [New York Times, *July 18, 1982; see also John Dinges' report,* These Times, *July 28, 1982*). *And it is important to note that General Ríos Montt has been an active member of the U.S. Christian Church of the Word, a fundamentalist Protestant group.*

*In a recent article in* Plexus (*October 1982*), *Rigoberta Menchu Tum, another Quiché woman giving testimony, described a 1982 conference of women in Managua, Nicaragua, attended by 920 delegates from all over the world. Preventing U.S. intervention in Central America was a key topic. "It is extremely important for all women to understand the situation of people who are at war," Rigoberta said, "and that war is the only road left to us, it is the only option left."*



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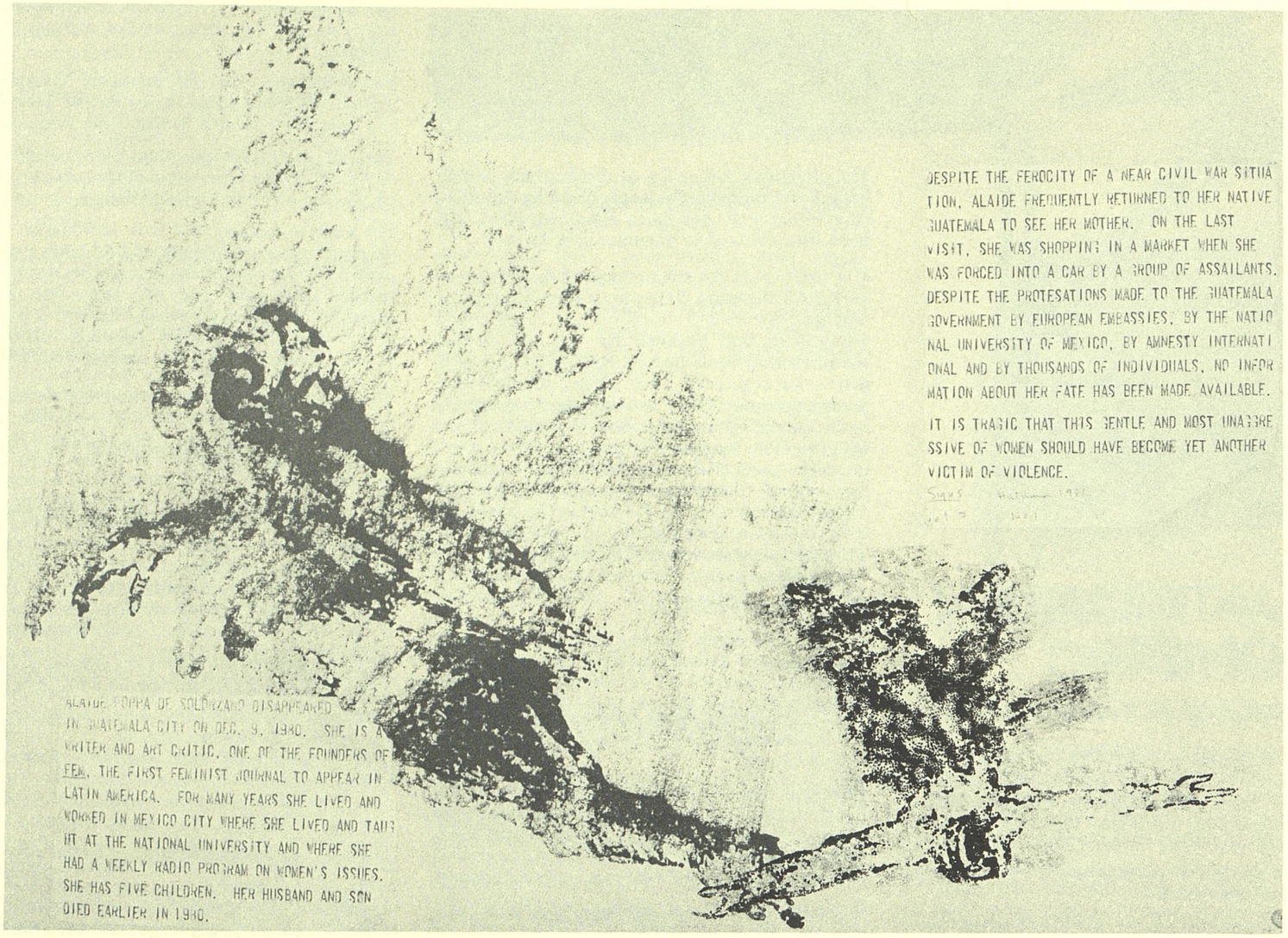


Nancy Spero. *Alaide Foppa de Solorzano Disappeared in Guatemala City on Dec. 9, 1980.* 1982. Hand-printing and type collage on paper. 20" x 28". Photo by David Reynolds. Nancy Spero is a NYC artist.

# mistaken identity

BY TESS RANDOLPH

her skin is white. her hair is thin, kinky, and lays down
straight. her voice is light, high, nearly a whisper.

in mexico they said she was cuban. in spain they said
she was spanish. in portugal they said she was angolan.
in england they said she was obviously an alien.

in black america they said
you are lucky to have such good hair or
you'll make it in this world baby or
which one of your folks is white? they never said
you are one of us. in black america they never said
look what the white man has done to our color or
you are a high yeller girl and i don't trust you or
you are a woman that can pass and i want you or
your momma musta been gettin' it from some white dude or
you think you're white don't you bitch.
they never said these things. not to her face.

in white america they said what are you anyway? or
which one of your parents is black or
you don't look like a negro. they studied her
like a mysterious stone and she watched their eyes
inspect her over and over and she hardened. they never said
you don't look like a black girl so you might as well
be a white girl. please be a white girl

so i can keep my prejudices intact, my guard down,
my slurs unrestrained. it would be better for everybody
all around if you were a white girl. that would explain
your intelligence, talent, and presence among us.
they never said these things. they didn't have to.

she became adept at mind reading and justifiably paranoid.
she often lifts her head and realizes
i am the only black at this concert, art gallery, office,
university, beach, movie, meeting, hotel,
airport, restaurant, party, lecture,
and feels alone and wrong. she was known to speak
of feeling alone and wrong to her white friends
who stared blankly and her black friends
who are distanced.

her father said you are my child.
her mother said you are god's child.
to everyone outside herself
she had the best of both worlds.
as if she had a choice.

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Tess Randolph is a poet and visual artist currently living in Los Angeles. Her poetry has appeared in small press magazines in Europe.



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# SISTER OUTSIDERS

**BY AUDRE LORDE**

I walked down those three little steps into the Bagatelle on a weekend night in 1956. There was an inner door, guarded by a male bouncer, ostensibly to keep out the straight male intruders come to gawk at the "lezzies," but in reality to keep out those women deemed "undesirable." All too frequently, undesirable meant Black.

Women stood three-deep around the bar and between the tables, and in the doorway to the postage-stamp-sized dance floor. By 9:00 p.m. the floor was packed solid with women's bodies moving slowly to the jukebox beat of Ruth Brown's "When your friends have left you all alone / and you have no one to call your own..." or Frank Sinatra's "Set 'em up, Joe / I got a little story..."

When I moved through the bunches of women cruising each other in the front room, or doing a slow fish on the dance floor in the back, with the smells of cigarette smoke and the music and the hair pomade whirling together like incense through charged air, it was hard for me to believe that my being an outsider had anything to do with being a lesbian.

But when I, a Black woman, saw no reflection in any of the faces there week after week, I knew perfectly well that being an outsider in the Bagatelle had everything to do with being Black.

The society within the confines of the Bagatelle reflected the ripples and eddies of the larger society that had spawned it, and which allowed the Bagatelle to survive as long as it did, selling watered-down drinks at inflated prices to lonely dykes who had no other social outlet or community gathering place.

Rather than the idyllic picture created by false nostalgia, the fifties were really straight white america's cooling-off period of "let's pretend we're happy and that this is the best of all possible worlds and we'll blow those nasty commies to hell if they dare to say otherwise."

The Rosenbergs had been executed, the transistor radio had been invented, and frontal lobotomy was the standard solution for persistent deviation. For some, Elvis Presley and his stolen Black rhythms became arch-symbols of the antichrist.

Young america's growing pains, within the Bagatelle, were represented by the fashion conflicts between the blue-jeans set and the Bermuda-shorts set. Then, of course, there were those who fell in between, both by virtue of our art or our craziness or our color.

The breakdown into the mommies and daddies was an important part of lesbian relationships in the Bagatelle. If you asked the wrong woman to dance, you could get your nose broken in the alley down the street by her butch, who had followed you out of the Bag for exactly that purpose. It was safer to keep to yourself. And you were never supposed to ask who was who, which is why there was such heavy emphasis on corrèct garb. The well-dressed gay-girl was supposed to give you enough clues for you to know.

For some of us, however, the role-playing reflected all the depreciating attitudes toward women which we loathed in straight society. It was a rejection of these roles that had drawn us to "the life" in the first place. Instinctively, without particular theory or political position or dialectic, we recognized oppression as oppression, no matter where it came from.

But those lesbians who had carved some niche in the pretend world of dominance/subordination rejected what they called our "confused" life style, and they were in the majority.

Felicia was so late one Sunday afternoon for our photography lesson that Muriel and I went off to Laurel's without her, because you had to be early on Sundays to get something to eat. The Swing Rendezvous had closed its table, but at Laurel's on Sunday afternoon there was free brunch with any drink, and that meant all you could eat. Many of the gay bars used this to get Sunday afternoon business at a traditionally slow time, but Laurel's had the best food. There was a Chinese cook there of no mean talent. He cooked back and kept it coming. After the word got around, every Sunday afternoon at four o'clock there would be a line of gay-girls in front of Laurel's, smoking and talking and trying to pretend we had all arrived there at that time by accident.

When the doors opened, there was a discreet but determined stampede, first to the bar and then to the food table, set up in the rear of the lounge. We tried to keep our cool, pretending that we couldn't care less for barbecued spare ribs with peach and apricot sweet sauce, or succulent pink shrimp swimming in thick golden lobster sauce, dotted with bits of green scallion and bright yellow egg drops, tiny pieces of pork and onion afloat on top. There were stacked piles of crispy brown egg rolls filled with shredded ham and chicken and celery, rolled together and fried with a touch of sesame paste. There were fried chicken bits, and every once in a great while, a special delicacy such as lobster or fresh crab. Only the first lucky few got to taste those special dishes, so it was worthwhile being first on line and pushing your cool image a little bit askew.

We were healthy young female animals mercifully more alive than most of our peers, robust and active women, and our blood was always high and our pockets empty and a free meal in convivial surroundings—meaning around other lesbians—was a big treat for most of us, even if purchased at the price of a bottle of beer, which was fifty cents, with many complaints.

Dancing wasn't allowed at Laurel's so it never got to be as popular as the Bag, except on Sunday afternoons. Muriel preferred it because it was always quieter. Trix ran the place, and always had a hand for "her girls." Tiny and tough, with a permanent Florida tan and a Bronx accent, she took a shine to Muriel and me, and sometimes she would buy us a beer, and sit down and talk with us if the place wasn't too crowded.

We all knew the situation with gay bars, how they came in and out of existence with such regularity and who really profited from them. But Trix was pretty and bright and hard and kind all at the same time, and her permanent tan particularly endeared her to me. She looked like one of the nicer of the hickory-skinned devils who used to people my dreams of that period.

Actually, the lifespan of most gay bars was under a year, with the notable exception of a few like the Bag. Laurel's went the way of all the other gay bars—like the Swing and Snooky's and the Grapevine, the Sea Colony and the Pony Stable Inn. Each closed after a year or so, while another opened and caught on somewhere else. But for that year, Laurel's served as an important place for those of us who met and made some brief space for ourselves there. It had a feeling of family.

On summer Sunday afternoons, Muriel and I would split from the gay beach at Coney Island or Riis Park early, take the subway back home in time to wash up and dress and saunter over to Laurel's in time for the food at 4:00. I had my first open color confrontation with a gay-girl one Sunday afternoon in Laurel's.

Muriel and I had come back that day from Riis Park, full of sun and sand. We loved with the salt still on our skins, then bathed, washed our hair, and got ready to go out. I put on my faded cord riding britches with the suede crotch, and a pale blue short-sleeved sweatshirt bought earlier that week at John's on Avenue C for sixty-nine cents. My skin was tanned from the sun and burnished ruddy with the heat and much loving. My hair was newly trimmed and freshly washed, with the particular crispiness that it always develops in sustained summer heat. I felt raunchy and restless.

We walked out of the hot August afternoon sun into the suddenly dark coolness of Laurel's downstairs. There was Muriel, in her black Bermuda shorts and shirt, ghost pale, her eternal cigarette in hand. And I was beside her, full of myself, knowing I was fat and Black and very fine. We were without peer or category, and on that day I was conscious of being very proud of it, no matter who looked down her nose at us.

After Muriel and I had gotten our food and beer and copped one of the tables, Dottie and Pauli came over. We saw them a lot at the Bag and in the supermarket over on Avenue D, but we'd never been to their house nor they to ours, except for New Year's food, when everyone came.

"Where you guys been?" Pauli had an ingenuous smile, her blonde hair and blue eyes incandescent against the turquoise mandarin shirt she wore.

"Riis. Gay Beach." Muriel's finger crooked over the bottle as she took a slug. All of us eschewed glasses as faggy, although I sometimes longed for one because the cold beer hurt my teeth.

Pauli turned to me. "Hey, that's a great tan you have there. I didn't know Negroes got tans." Her broad smile was intended to announce the remark as a joke.

My usual defense in such situations was to ignore the overtones, to let it go. But Dottie Daws, probably out of her own nervousness at Pauli's reference to the unmentionable, would not let the matter drop. Raved on and on about my great tan. Matched her arm to mine. Shook her pale blonde head, telling whomever would listen that she wished she could tan like that instead of burning, and did I know how lucky I was to be able to get such a tan like that? I grew tired and then shakingly furious, having enough of whatever it was.

"How come you never make so much over my natural tan most days, Dottie Daws; how come?"

There was a moment of silence at the table, punctuated only by Muriel's darkly appreciative chuckle, and then we moved on to something else,

This piece is excerpted from Audre Lorde's new work of fiction, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Persephone Press). Audre Lorde teaches poetry at Hunter College. Her other recent book is *Chosen Poems—Old and New* (Norton).

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mercifully. I was still shaking inside. I never forgot it.

In the gay bars, I longed for other Black women without the need ever taking shape on my lips. For four hundred years in this country, Black women have been taught to view each other with deep suspicion. It was no different in the gay world.

Most Black lesbians were closeted, correctly recognizing the Black community's lack of interest in our position, as well as the many more immediate threats to our survival as Black people in a racist society. It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay. To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal. And if you were fool enough to do it, you'd better come on so tough that nobody messed with you. I often felt put down by their sophistication, their clothes, their manners, their cars, and their femmes.

The Black women I usually saw around the Bag were into heavy roles, and it frightened me. This was partly the fear of my own Blackness mirrored, and partly the realities of the masquerade. These women felt to me like parts of my own sexual self I had not yet come to terms with. They seemed tough in a way I felt I could never be. Even if they were not, their self-protective instincts warned them to appear that way. By white america's racist distortions of beauty, Black women playing "femme" had very little chance in the Bag. There was constant competition among butches to have the most "gorgeous femme" on their arm. And "gorgeous" was defined by a white male world's standards.

For me, going into the Bag was like entering an anomalous no-woman's land. I wasn't cute or passive enough to be "femme," and I wasn't mean or tough enough to be "butch." I was given a wide berth. Nonconventional people can be dangerous, even in the gay community.

With the exception of Felicia and myself, the other Black women in the Bag came protected by a show of all the power symbols they could muster. Whatever else they did during the week, on Friday nights when Lion or Trip appeared, sometimes with expensively dressed women on their arms, sometimes alone, they commanded attention and admiration. They were well-heeled, superbly dressed, self-controlled high-steppers who drove convertibles, bought rounds of drinks for their friends, and generally took care of business.

But sometimes, even they couldn't get in unless they were recognized by the bouncer.

My friends and I were the hippies of the gay-girl circuit, before the word was coined. Many of us wound up dead or demented, and many of us were distorted by the many fronts we had to fight upon. But when we survived, we grew up strong.

Every Black woman I ever met in the Village in those years had some part in my survival, large or small, if only as a figure in the head-count at the Bag on a Friday night.

Black lesbians in the Bagatelle faced a world only slightly less hostile than the outer world which we had to deal with every day on the outside—that world which defined us as doubly nothing because we were Black and because we were Women—that world which raised our blood pressures and shaped our furies and our nightmares.

The temporary integration of war plants and the egalitarian myth of Rosie the Riveter had ended abruptly with the end of World War II and the wholesale return of the american woman to the role of little wifey. So far as I could see, gay-girls were the only Black and white women who were even talking to each other in this country in the 1950s, outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements.

Black or white, Ky-Ky, butch, or femme, the only thing we shared, often, and in varying proportions, was that we dared for connection in the name of woman, and saw that as our power, rather than our problem.

All of us who survived those common years had to be a little strange. We spent so much of our young womanhood trying to define ourselves as woman-identified women before we even knew the words existed, let alone that there were ears interested in trying to hear them beyond our immediate borders. All of us who survived those common years have to be a little proud. A lot proud. Keeping ourselves together and on our own tracks, however wobbly, was like trying to play the Dinizulu War Chant or a Beethoven sonata on a tin dog-whistle.

The important message seemed to be that you had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps.

In times of need and great instability, the place sometimes became more a definition than the substance of why you needed it to begin with. Sometimes the retreat became the reality. The writers who posed in cafes talking their work to death without writing two words; the lesbians, virile as men, hating women *and* their own womanhood with a vengeance. The bars and the coffee shops and the streets of the Village in the 1950s were full of nonconformists who were deathly afraid of going against their hard-won group, and so eventually they were broken between the group and their individual needs.

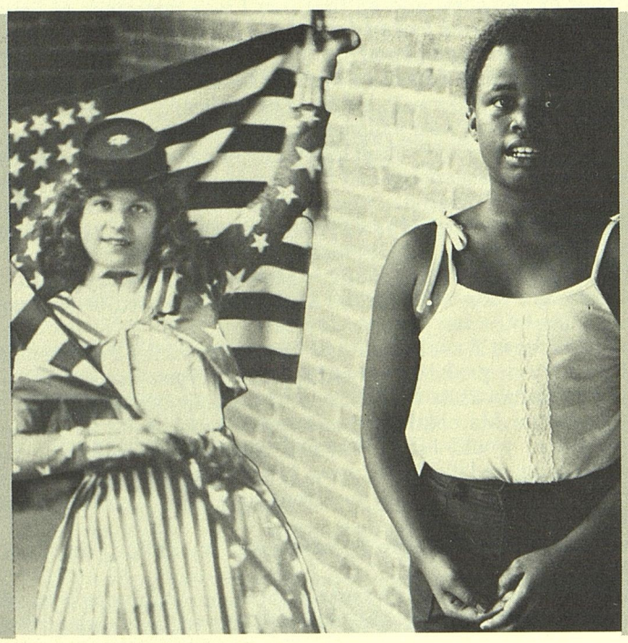
For some of us there was no one particular place, and we grabbed whatever we could from wherever we found space, comfort, quiet, a smile, nonjudgment.

*Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.*

Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self. At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing.

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference. (And often, we were cowards in our learning.) It was years before we learned to use the strength that daily surviving can bring, years before we learned that fear does not have to incapacitate, and that we could appreciate each other on terms not necessarily our own.

The Black gay-girls in the Village gay bars of the fifties knew each other's names, but we seldom looked into each other's Black eyes, lest we see our own aloneness and our own blunted power mirrored in the pursuit of darkness. Some of us died inside the gaps between the mirrors and those turned-away eyes.



**Instances of violence by the Ku Klux Klan have been on the upsurge throughout the country. In April 1980 four Black women were simply shot down, without provocation, by Klansmen in Chattanooga, Tennessee; a fifth woman was injured by flying glass. Only in February 1982 were these women awarded damages (the three Klansmen had been acquitted by an all-white jury in July 1980). According to the National Anti-Klan Network, "Since April 1980, scores of people have been targets of harassment, attempted bombings, stoning and shootings by the Nazis, Klansmen and their imitators. . . . Victims most often have been Black people or other people of color—but other targets include synagogues, union members and women's rights offices. During this same period, the U.S. Department of Justice consistently has refused to intervene against right-wing violence utilizing the existing civil rights and anti-Klan statues." For more on what you can do to fight the Klan, write: National Anti-Klan Network, P.O. Box 10500, Atlanta, Ga. 30310.**

Photograph on left by Helen Koba. *Girls in Patterson, N.J.* 1980. Helen Koba, who lives in Portland, Oregon, has been taking pictures of people for the last five years.



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# SOME DO'S AND DON'TS FOR BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS

## BY EMMA AMOS

DON'T admit to being over 28 unless you are over 58. It's handy to be either young and hot, or a doyenne, like Neel or Nevelson. In the middle, it's finding time and space, jobs, kids, lovers, husbands, and hard slogging, no glamour, no news.

DON'T take your art to Soho or 57th Street without Alex Katz's written introduction. Soho/57th Street doesn't dig blackass art. (They do still love "primitive" art, but don't be confused.) I think unsolicited slides are reviewed so the director can continually reinforce decisions about what he or she will NOT show.

DON'T complain about being a black woman artist in the '80s. Many people, both black and white, think you were fashioned to fit the slot in a turnstile—a mere token, baby. They may also think, deep down, that your minority face is a meal ticket entitling you to some special treatment they're not getting. All minorities have this problem; you've just got to tough it out.

DON'T fantasize about winning recognition without breaking your behind for it. There are no "instant winners" in today's art world, the MacDonald Awards not inclusive. (Hope springs eternal.)

DON'T fret about things over which you have little control:

- The landlord raises your rent when you put new wiring in the studio.
- Your work overflows every available space, and even your new $400 flat file is delivered already full.
- The show you're in next month is not insured.
- The show you're in gets reviewed, but the writer went to the John Simon school of criticism and your work gets singled out as too _____.

DO take good slides every 3 months or so. Business in the art world is transacted through transparencies. Art that doesn't look good reduced to 1 x 1⅓ probably shouldn't be reproduced. More people may look at your ektachromes than will ever see your work for real.

DO show as often as you can—new work if possible. Discourage curators from selecting work whose ideas you're no longer involved with. It's hard to do, but each show should reveal something more about you, a progression.

DO exhibit with people whose work you like and in which you find similarities to your own. There's nothing intrinsically good about being a loner; finding parallels won't make you a "groupie."

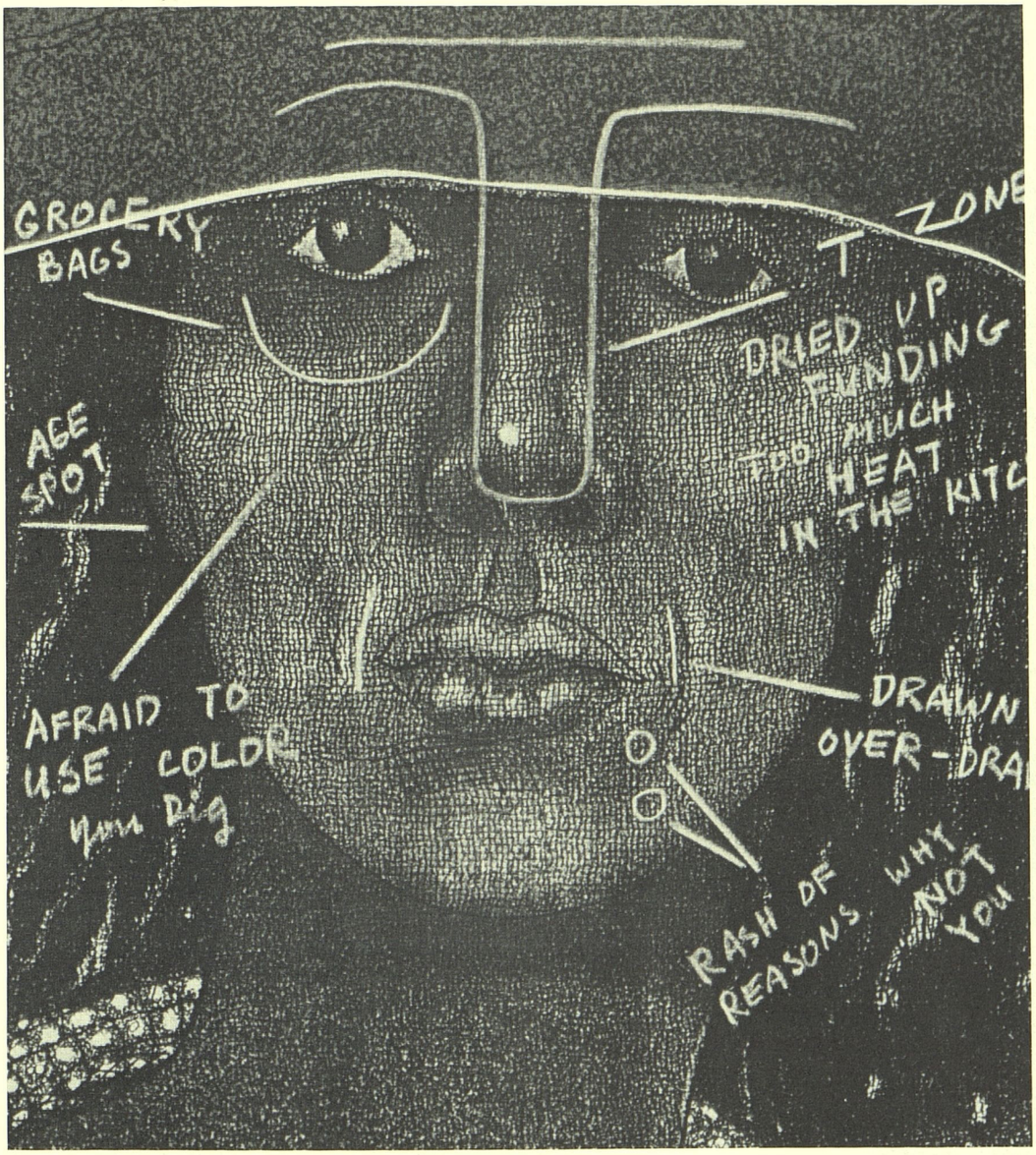
DO be supportive of all your artist friends. Your peers are the people who see your work as it's happening. They give you feedback and keep you going.

DO extend yourself:

- Let the Studio Museum know you're alive.
- Let the Met know you're contemporary.
- Let the Museum of Mod Art know you're permanent.
- It'll probably net you only a "thank you," but we need to let them know how many of us are out there.

DO be thankful and shout "Hallelujah!" for:

- Dealers, agents, and pals who work at JAM.
- Lovers, husbands, children, patrons, and friends.
- Norman Lewis—whose art, elegance and concern impressed so many of us.
- Alma Thomas—she hung on, and it was worth it.
- Nellie Mae Rowe—she keeps working, an incredible Atlanta "folk" artist.
- Norma Morgan—the engravings, the work! Where is she?
- Romare Bearden—bright, open and deserving of all the praise.
- Samella Lewis and Val Spaulding—whose *Black Art Quarterly* is so beautiful.
- Hatch-Billops—the collection you must see, to know what "black art" is.
- Bob Blackburn—the artist's printmaker and shoulder for 25 years plus.
- James Van Der Zee—who has always been an artist.
- Hale Woodruff—who would help any artist, black or white.
- Lena Horne—for her transformation and hard work.
- Tina Turner—who found herself and is free.
- Toni Morrison—who invents and forms worlds.
- Duke Ellington—whose music is our soul.
- Stevie Wonder—he deserves to be taken more seriously.
- Bill Cosby—kills us on Carson, and buys art, too.
- Ntozake Shange—who shows us how to use the system and how to survive success.
- Maya Angelou.
- Katherine Dunham.
- The "do praise" list goes on.




Emma Amos. *Self-Portrait*. 1982. Etching, drawing, and xerox. 8½ x 7½". Emma Amos, painter, printmaker, weaver, and papermaker, lives in NYC and teaches art in NJ.

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**"...speaking of oneself is allowed for reasons of necessity...The first is when one could not put a stop to great infamy or danger without discoursing of oneself....It was necessity which moved Boetius to speak of himself in order that...he could defend himself against the perpetual disgrace of exile. Demonstrating its injustice, since no other defender had risen up."**
**—Dante Alighieri, "The Banquet"**

# CHOOSING THE FEATHER


## BY CECILIA VICUÑA

TRANSLATED BY
LORRAINE O'GRADY




When I was a little girl I liked to put a feather in my hair and say to the other children in the neighborhood: "Can you imagine what we'd be doing if the Spaniards hadn't come here? Dressed or naked, we would be jumping from rock to rock, swift as arrows after a small bird, or quiet and absorbed in the perfume of fruit, we would be listening to the sound of waterfalls, ferns swaying in the mist...We wouldn't be subject to the silly idea of spending life sitting in a chair, listening to what the teacher says."

But in the neighborhood where I lived, the Sunday movies annulled my work of persuasion: the cowboy and Indian films imposed prestige of the opposite version. The Indians appeared defeated and impoverished, so who would want to be like them? Most of us came out of the theater imitating the fractured English of the Far West: "Wasa matta, yu stickemop."

In our war games, I became the leader of the girl's army, probably inspired by Wonder Woman and other ancient amazons. To conquer fear and demonstrate that we, too, could run with our eyes closed to the edge of the abyss, on a building top, was the main test. I liked the image of heroism in battle, until I began to read and discovered that I liked the image in pre-Columbian mythology, Shakespeare, and Homer better than fighting.

I became a writer and discovered that I had chosen a double symbol: the feather was both my race and my form of doing battle.

From the start I understood art and poetry as a form of transgression: I had no intention of accepting the role assigned to me. My family had a long European cultural tradition, but the advice of the women sculptors saved me time. Aunt Rosa had learned from the old Indian pottery-makers techniques she later applied in her ceramic sculpture.

My first works were an emblem or declaration. A joyful challenge nurtured them: the primal impulse to make an offering, and a conscious desire not to repeat what already existed.

As I wrote poetry, I instinctively followed my inner voice. I would notice a tension at the nape of my neck—proof of a clear, sustained listening. The density of the texts produced this way differentiated them from my other verbal constructions. I surely had at the back of my mind the images and metaphors of Guarani literature. The spiritual and concrete eroticism of their body-song:

*The divine soles of the feet,*
*their little round seats....*

*The divine palms of the hands*
*with their flowering branches.*

And the incorporation of this vision into their laws: "Whoever, out of lack of love for his neighbor's beautiful body, sets fire to their house shall suffer the same punishment. Only this way will there be justice." [1]

Poetry, as the essential life-transforming experience, led me to search for different ways to extend its effectiveness. And the silence in poetry, that which could not be expressed in words, drew me to art.

I began to paint, and painting led me to sculpture...a process that began in 1963 and culminated in 1966, when I found myself gathering debris on the beach. The stones, sticks, and feathers I found as I walked, and the sun above me, called out for a form. The sticks asked for a specific tieing, the stones for a specific placement. I had to listen and obey. The same tension, vibrating at the nape of my neck, would occur as I listened. The paths of the mind I explored, looking for the precise positioning, led me to an ancient silence, waiting to be heard.

These fragile constructions on the beach, which high tide would carry away, were the symbols of an inner rite.

In 1966 I called this work "arte precario," from its propensity to disappear. Years later I discovered that *precario* comes from the Latin *precis*, prayer, and from *precarius*, what is obtained through prayer.

I understood this work as a way of remembering, of recovering a language; the shaman is the one who remembers his other lives.

All along, the obverse of this silent work was my collective experience with TRIBU NO (the NO tribe), a group of artists and writers who gathered around my "NO manifesto" (1967) and remained active until 1971. Together we produced actions, manifestos, theatrical works, and readings in Santiago. Our poetry was published in Mexico City and other Latin American and European cities, but in Chile it was neither acknowledged by literary critics nor anthologized.

My *Autumn* installation, a room full of tree leaves piled three feet deep, and the pages of my "Autumn Journal" were presented at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago in 1971. The installation's spatial metaphor established a specific intersection between sculpture and poetry...the celebration of autumn and the text's call to attend to the here-and-now evoked the seasonal cults of primordial religions. This piece was dedicated to the construction of socialism...but it was not and has never been mentioned by


Cecilia Vicuña is a poet and artist from Santiago, Chile, living in NYC. She has shown her art in NYC, Europe, and Latin America.





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art critics or art historians in Chile.

In 1972 I signed a contract with the University Press of Valparaíso for my poetry book *Sabor a mi*.[2] It was never fulfilled.

It took me years to understand the silencing of these works. *Autumn* and the precarious sculpture had been pioneer events. (Experimental art forms began in Chile much later. In 1971 the scene was dominated by political art—"political" in content, but formally derivative.) And my poetry was not *like* anyone else's, so who could notice it?

I left Chile for London in 1972, to do post-graduate work, and was caught there by the military coup in 1973. There was no time for thinking about the supression of art when the anti-fascist movement demanded an active concern with the human and political problems of the day. . . Eventually reflection on the failure to secure the democratic process began and I questioned the effectiveness of my previous work. As a result I adopted the prevailing view that our struggle had room only for the most immediate calls to rebel. I forgot the double symbol I had chosen; the poetry of self-discovery I had produced until then.

I returned to Latin America in 1975—not to Chile, but to Colombia. Encountering the mountains of Bogotá, the smell of the land, the color and bones of the people, made me feel again my Indian ancestry. But the feeling did not become awareness until the Guambiano tribal cooperative invited me to Cauca to give an art workshop. Being with them taught me that the Latin Amerian struggle for independence cannot be fought exclusively with European ideologies, which are derived from the same ethnocentric world view that supressed the Indian cultures.

The search for liberating thought would have to include the spiritual vision of the American Indian, just as it has already begun to acknowledge the contribution of revolutionary Christianity.

One day, the leader of the cooperative asked me: "What tribe are you from?" A shiver ran down my spine. I don't think I ever felt so proud. Suddenly my mestizo blood took sides, as clearly as it had when I was a little girl: I *was* an Indian, even if I had lost my tribe generations ago.

For me, being an "Indian" means to listen, to let the slow, hidden presence within raise its voice above my European education. This is the business of poetry.

I remembered what Guarani literature had meant to me: poetry for them had the power to heal, to communicate with the divine.

> *In their dreams they obtain their most sacred songs, the most powerful, those that benefit their fellow men.*

Their poetic images were not simply beautiful arrangements of words, they were the complete and truthful image of their reality, and they had to be taken "literally," that is to say, *poetically*.[3]

But who knows now what it means to *think poetically*?

I had known from the beginning that Western civilization had done away with poetry as a necessity of life, that *poetic thinking* was a transgression, that the poet had to struggle to be heard, because poetry had been divorced from thinking centuries ago.[4]

But I had had to forget, in order to remember.

Finally I understood the supression of my art and poetry in the context of a much larger phenomenon. I concluded that its eroticism (I almost said heroticism, or heroism of the erotic), apparently so shocking to the machismo and Catholic squeamishness of the publishers, had obfuscated the deeper vein of my work; its link with our Ancient American poetic tradition.

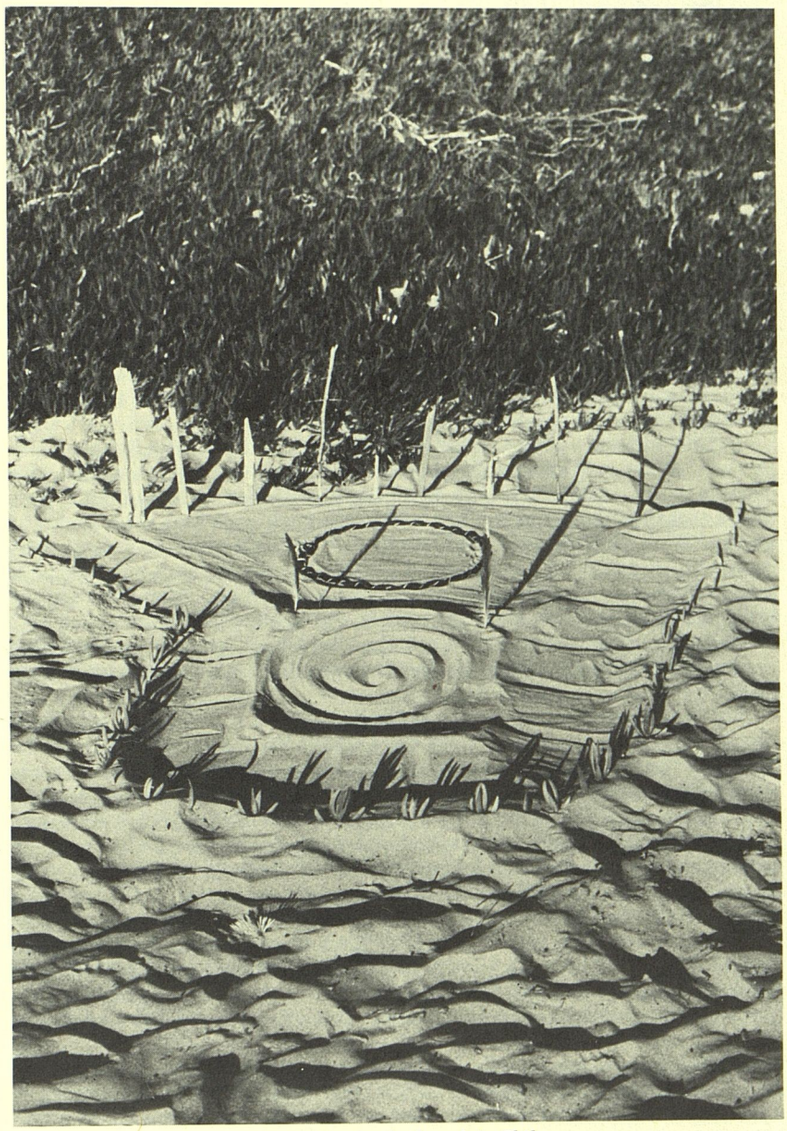
Latin American intellectuals, for the most part ignore this tradition, conceiving of pre-Columbian poetry as an aspect of anthropology.[5]

And this blatant ethnocentrism is enforced with all the more strength because our dependent, colonial societies are perpetually trying to demonstrate their Westernness.

The poet Humberto Diaz Casanueva has noted that no anthology of Chilean poetry includes either Mapuche ceremonial poetry, chants and prayers, or their battle harangue.

Only if we choose to understand who we are, and decide to pay heed to our ancestors, to the immense richness of their knowledge. . .
Only if we choose to respect the surviving Indian communities, will we respect ourselves.
Only then will we be able to allow a metamorphosed poetic thinking to arise from our mestizo America, and thus call ourselves an independent people.

1. *La literatura de los Guaraníes*, ed. & trans. León Cadogán (Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1965).
2. Published (with changes and additions) in England in a bilingual edition by Beau Geste Press (1973).
3. For a discussion of what "to read literally" means, see Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).
4. See Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
5. The great exception is César Vallejo, and there are other ones: José María Arguedas, Miguel Angel Asturias, Ernesto Cardenal, Jorge Zalamea, and Juan Rulfo.



Cecilia Vicuna. *Arte precario*. 1966. On the beach in Chile.



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# GROWING UP NEGRO, SOON TO BE BLACK

## BY SYLVIA WITTS VITALE

It happens all the time. For me as well as other Black people, some racist instances are every day, every week, no big deal, the norm, what the hell did you expect, so what, who cares. So what occurs is that I get used to it.

For the most part, I, as a Black person, have experienced so much overt and covert racism that it is hard to focus in on one specific area. When my white acquaintances tell me of instances in their lives that have made them feel uncomfortable because they were in "minority" settings, I find it hard to feel anything for them. Yet these instances stand out in their minds.

I was raised during the Negro era and gradually graduated to the Black era. My mother was raised during the colored-Negro era. My grandmother was raised during the colored or, as they said, "cullid" era. These are very distinct times in my development. I did not grow up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as a girl proud of her race. All I knew was what was on television, radio; what I learned from school, church, family and peers. I knew that my race came from Africa, but that was nothing to be proud of in the 1950s. How could I be proud when Tarzan, the white man, was always Tarzan, the right man? I felt proud of Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis, Jr., Harry Belafonte, Marion Anderson, Diahann Carrol, Johnny Mathis, Pearl Bailey, the Harlem Globetrotters, and a few others. But I only got to see these people when they were on the Ed Sullivan Show or the Nat King Cole Show. My white teachers led me to believe that this was all there was. As a people we did not do anything other than sing, dance, entertain, do sports, get in trouble, go to jail, drink and be on relief, a.k.a. welfare.

I can remember being the only Black girl in class when the teacher showed us an anthropological film on—where else but—Africa. It made me mad to be a Negro. Why did we have to look like that? Why were we always depicted as savages in skimpy cloth? The class laughed and said things like, "There's Sylvia." One tribe had plates in their lips, another suffered from elephantiasis. I felt so low, so bad that day. I was embarrassed and ashamed.

I was about 12 years old when I moved to New York. I blossomed into a singer and actor. It was a great way for me to break out of my shell, meet people, and be accepted for my talents. I'll never forget my first year in the All City High School Chorus try-outs. I had been called back for my second week of auditions. The altos were sitting in "posture" position to sing. I started a conversation with a white girl about how nervous I was. She said to me, "What are you?" I didn't know what she meant so I said, "First alto." "No, I mean you, you know, your background." What a joke! I am dark enough for it to be obvious so I just said, "Negro." "You talk real nice, you don't sound like a Negro." I busted out in this big beautiful smile. I was so happy that I did not sound like a Negro. She made my day.

In 1967 I joined a group called Hector Rivera and the Latin Renaissance. We had just cut an album and I had time off from rehearsals. One of my best friends, Author, asked me to go down South with her and her family for a visit. I smiled at the invitation but behind the smile was fear. The South, oh no, they'll kill me! I was so full of horror stories about what was done to my people in the South by white folks that it took a whole lot of convincing to ease my fears. I was told that at least in the South you knew who did not like you but in the North they'll pat you on the back with one hand and stab you with the other. I was convinced that the South had changed and that people got along better. Anyway, the "colored only/white only" signs were taken down.

My friend's family and I went to North Carolina to a dinky town called Chockowenity. We went out to eat one night at this restaurant that advertised that the food was so good that it tasted like Mom made it. By the stares we got when 12 Black people walked into this small town restaurant, you'd think that we had done something wrong. We ordered our food and waited. And waited. And waited. I got scared and started thinking about what they must be doing to my food. I got images of them grinding glass and other junk to make me sick. When the food did come, I did not eat it. I did not trust these white folks. They unnerved me. My only frame of reference for whites with southern accents was the Ku Klux Klan. It was like by day they were normal, by night they wore sheets. My family is mostly from the South and although most of them had lost their southern accents I could deal with a Black southern accent. Not a white one. Sometimes I still have problems with it.

Since I spent a great deal of my time singing throughout New York for various dignitaries and public officials, my racial horizons broadened. I figured that since I learned to discard my fears and prejudices that white folks were doing the same thing. So in 1969 I enrolled in Kingsborough Community College in Manhattan Beach. On my way to school one day I met a middle-aged white woman on the train platform. She asked me what was I doing in the neighborhood. I told her I went to Kingsborough. She looked relieved. I found out later that most Black people in the area worked there either cleaning homes, in restaurants, or as other workers. I was too young-looking for the above. She asked me what I was studying. I really had not made up my mind yet and I was torn between majoring in music or psychology. So I said I was a music major. She smiled and said, "Oh that's nice. Your people sing and dance so well." I didn't smile. I went to school and made a decision to major in psychology. I sang in the chorus and even won the music award but I refused to major in it. That's when I realized the difference between the North and South. The South may have "for colored only" signs but the North has "for colored only" minds. In fact every time a white person told me negative things, I excelled in spite of it.



My grandmother, Minnie Lou Jackson (third from left), with club members in Harlem in 1950s.

My first Black history course was taught by a white woman. She's the one who really changed the course of my life when she told me I was illiterate. After my first B in English, I aimed for and received A's throughout my college career. I could not wait to find this teacher one year later to show her that I had now become an English tutor. In my quest to please her, to have her accept me and take back those words, I worked my ass off. I remember going to her office on several occasions to talk to her. She asked me how come I never gave her eye contact. I didn't know. I never gave anybody eye contact. During the course of her class I learned about how eye contact could mean death to slaves.

In slavery, Blacks taught their children how to act and how not to act around white folks. Black people were lynched, beaten, and severely punished for merely looking a white person in the eyes. Eye contact was too close to equality, sharing personal space and meaningful communication. These lessons may have been painful sometimes in terms of discipline, but it kept many Black folks alive. I never learned this directly from my parents, but they do not usually look people straight in the eyes either. So here I was in my teacher's office, not giving eye contact to this white southern woman.

By 1973 I was well into my college life and digging it. This is also the year I experienced the Women's Movement, which changed my life. I somehow thought and was led to believe by various women that feminism embraced all women in a common struggle and that everything was better when women worked together. What a joke! I was never more patronized in my life. Queens College had a Women's Festival with a week-long series of talks, workshops, and films. I attended almost all of the activities. I walked into each one and experienced being either the only Black woman or one of a few. By the second day I began to see the same faces and women began to open up to me. I was patted on the back by white feminist teachers and told such things as, "You're great, you're so articulate," and other things that I at first thought were compliments. I started being invited to faculty and student feminist parties. I joined a CR group. I was still basically

Sylvia Witts Vitale, a sex therapist and sex educator, is a lecturer at various colleges in the City University of New York.



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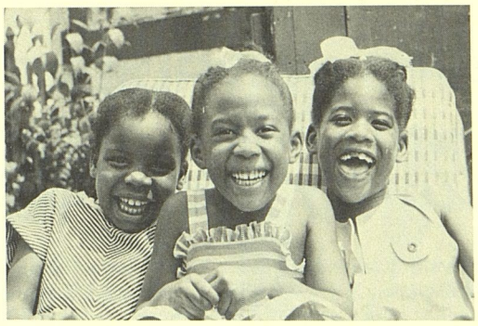



*Left to right*: My mother, Elizabeth Fennel Cohen, in the 1940s; me, growing up, from six years to the present. (Last photo by Yvonne Flowers.)

trying to figure out what feminism was and why so few Black women were in it. The following week Queens College was back to normal. Classes as usual. All of a sudden I missed the high I was on. A white woman, whom I met during the festival, saw me in the student lounge and came over to talk to me. She told me about this meeting that was coming up at the old NOW headquarters in Manhattan for Black women in the Women's Movement. She couldn't go because she was white and her Black lover did not want to go. So I thanked her for the information.

I showed up at this meeting. I was in a room full of approximately 30 Black women. This was the first time I had seen so many sisters together talking about feminism. Some faces I recognized from Queens College. I felt so good. People like Reverend Magora Kennedy, Michele Wallace, Lore Sharpe, and Faith Ringgold were there. Faith termed what we were experiencing "consciousness raging." I could dig it. I felt it. We knew we had to meet again. And we did. Again and again and again until we formed the National Black Feminist Organization. We held a press conference and our story was carried in the *New York Times*. Florence Kennedy, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and Shirley Chisolm were just a few who wished us well and gave substantive support.

In the meantime some of my white feminist friends began to have problems with our organization. They somehow thought that we were dividing and therefore weakening the movement. They could not see the need for Black women to gather and focus in on issues that specifically spoke to our needs. I said then and I still maintain that this autonomy is necessary. My analogy is simple: During the '60s Black folks had to go behind closed doors to redefine ourselves. We yelled, we screamed, we disagreed, but when we finished, we told the world, "We are BLACK! not NEGRO, not COLORED." We insisted on it and we succeeded. The tactics we used ended up being the mode of operation for all liberation groups to follow. Similarly, women had to go behind closed doors to scream, disagree, argue until we decided who we were. We emerged as WOMEN, not GIRLS, not CHICKS, not BITCHES, not LADIES. It was accepted. We defined ourselves with strength.

Somehow both of these groups who fought so hard to define themselves could not see the validity of Black women uniting to work on our issues. Black men and some Black women were led to believe, via Black Nationalist philosophy, that when Black people were liberated, all benefited. Not true. Thanks to non-Blacks like Daniel P. Moynihan, who wrote "The Moynihan Report," the focus was on finding jobs for Black men. The theory was that if the Black man had a job he could therefore take his rightful place as head of the household. He would marry Black and take care of his family. I even heard discussions from Black women about how if they were in a situation where the job opportunity came between them and the Black man, they would yield to the Black man. Although Black women worked just as hard as Black men in all of our liberation struggles, sexism was still a major problem. So when some Black women embraced the Women's Movement, somehow we felt that our common struggles were paramount. White feminists wondered where all the Black women were. One white feminist even told me that the Women's Movement needed Black women. That we were strong and good leaders. But some Black women soon realized that our issues went far beyond their issues. Black women could not afford to separate ourselves according to income, who lived in which neighborhoods, etc. Our movement consisted of the women who cleaned white women's homes. Our movement consisted of dealing with welfare mothers, household technicians, students, single mothers, triply oppressed lesbians, high school dropouts, teachers, lawyers, office workers—in other words, all Black women. We needed to lend support to one another, to network. We needed to see each other's faces, hear our stories. Herstory has shown just how strong Black women are.

So why didn't Black men and white women understand that? My dual identification had a tendency to force me to make unreal choices. That is, until I became aware and strong enough to deal with the D & C (divide and conquer) method. White women wanted me to identify as female and oppressed as if I had no color. That was their way of not dealing with racism yet being racist. Black men wanted me to identify as Black because being a female was not an issue. One day I was invited to speak at a women's conference. A woman asked me: What do I identify most with, being Black or female? That did it. I told the audience that I do not know what my mother noticed first, that I was a girl or her brown baby. I do know, however, that I was born head first and that is the way I will continue to operate—head first!

I can remember being at women's conferences where the slogan "Sisterhood is powerful" was used a lot. White women would address the audience with the word "sisters." Somehow I did not feel comfortable with the term because I knew that when I used it I meant women of African descent. Some white women challenged me one day and demanded to know why I could not call them sisters. So I told them. When my ancestors were stolen from Africa and brought to Amerika as slaves, families were divided. Some because of health were dropped in the Caribbean. We were bred, traded, bought, and rarely knew where to find one another, so when we were so-called "freed" most of us did not know where our relatives were. I have "family" throughout the Third World, in Brazil, Cuba, the West Indies, etc. So when I meet someone who says that I remind them of someone that they know, or I meet someone who reminds me of someone else that I know, I automatically think that somehow we are all "slave-ancestor-relatives." Therefore, the words "sister" and "brother" have very significant roots. I understood very well why I could not call a white woman my sister. They can be "cousins" only.

It is not good enough for me just to sport my brown skin and call myself Black. To be Black in Amerika is to be politically aware of my past, present, and future.



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# LOOKING BACKWARD IN ORDER TO LOOK FORWARD

## BY MAY STEVENS *Memories of a Racist Girlhood*

Quincy, Mass., 10 miles south of Boston. 1930. In elementary school: Scots, mostly, or Anglo-Saxons and Nordics. Lovejoy, Mackenzie, Scrimshaw, Rogers, Robertson, Gordon. My friend Frances Fitzgerald was Catholic as my mother had been before she married. I was safely Congregational and Scots-English with the slight stain of my mother's Irishness. My father despised the culture of poverty, Catholicism, sacrifice and forbearance she brought with her from Canadian mill towns.

Selma Brick and Faheem Hanna. Both dark as Italians, but less open, available, confident. The Italian community in my town was larger than any other minority. And though they were Catholic, they weren't Jewish or Moslem. Catholic was a known aberration. Selma was the only Jew in school. Thick black hair, huge grave eyes, face shaped like a mandala, she was invariably serious. We often ended up together receiving honors, A's, teacher's praise and students' envy. I longed to extract from her the admission that the story of the Nativity was beautiful *even if it wasn't true*. I didn't know if it was true but I knew it was beautiful and I loved it. I was afraid to ask her, afraid of insulting her. I did not know that while my culture disliked religious argument hers encouraged it.

Selma was a cherished only child but Faheem had brothers, sisters, cousins. They were part of a small Syrian colony, some of whom ran a bakery, sold good Syrian bread. I remember Faheem and his sister as not good in school; big, clumsy, slow. I think my mother too, feeling far from the place where she belonged, must have seemed, even *become*, clumsy and slow, out of her element.

On my street, on my block on all its sides, and on all the surrounding blocks; on the nearby beach where I spent nearly every summer day; in all my six years in elementary school, there were never any black people. Racism was something that went on in the South.

The geography lesson. Miss Marjorie Bassett wasn't pretty but she was well-coiffed. I remember softly-waved black hair and a pink satin blouse, very lush for a fourth grade teacher in a red brick building standing alone and treeless in the graveled schoolyard. The sun cast her profile, one lens of her glasses and her arrogant nose, distorted and dramatic, on the blackboard on which she had drawn a map of Mesopotamia, Land Between Two Rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates; Cradle of Civilization; the Fertile Crescent; probable site of the Garden of Eden. I was enchanted. I never dreamed that the beings in that land so full of history looked more like Selma and Faheem than me. I'm sure I thought without thinking they had red hair, blue eyes and freckles like my father's family or white skin and silky black hair like Miss Bassett's. But odd features like Selma's or undistinguished ones like Faheem's?

When I was small and behaved in a wild or "outlandish" fashion, my mother would sometimes call me an A-rab, her term for nonhuman. Did I know Faheem was an Arab?

At home my father talked against Jews, blacks, Italians and Catholics in general. He had his own internal chart*:

English
Scots
Scandinavians
Germans
Irish
French
Italians
Jews/Syrians
Blacks

He never said these things publicly, nor did he act on them. He had the Yankee character of reticence, common sense, responsibility, moderation. He hated *too much*: too much religion, passion, expression. He often told me I *gushed*.

He never said these things publicly, nor did he act on them—to my knowledge. But he said them over and over. To my child's ear it seemed to have something to do with drinking and laughing loudly. Doing somthing immoderately.

My father was raised by his older sister Addie, who kept house for her widowed father and five siblings. They both expressed pride in their Yankee heritage, Addie by reading American history and claiming she and I had the right to join the DAR twice over since we had two ancestors who had fought in the American Revolution, and by keeping the family archives and drawing in branches on the family tree. All this was done in a matter-of-fact and orderly way; it was an ordinary housekeeping task, keeping the records straight.

What in Addie appeared almost a virtue, was in my father a condoning of evil. He approved of Hitler's policies towards Jews; he said Jews were niggers with their skin turned inside out. Was it some sort of game he was playing? A playing at toughness, ver
mildly unhappy man? Was he far unhappier than I ever knew, he who had been motherless and was now in every way that counted wifeless? What does it do to a big, lumbering, laboring man to lose a son to illness at fifteen and carry along a wife whose mind is misshapen with anger, whose will is incapable of any action but refusal?

On through the public school system I went, Selma and I competing for and alternating first-in-class and head-of-honor-roll. In high school we were dispersed a little, met others who did equally well. Ruth Eng was almost as smart as we were. Her family ran the one Chinese restaurant in town. Ruth waited tables after school. She made fun of everybody and criticized non-Chinese people freely. I could not understand why she was not embarrassed, where she got her high spirits, her sense of self. I wonder now if she laughed more than she wanted to.

There were still no black people. Until art school where I met Skeeter. 4F, rejected by the military, slim, brown-skinned, he was always dismissing himself with soft apologetic laughter. Nobody could possibly take offense at him. Nobody knew what he really thought. But Marilyn who was Jewish and intense told everyone how she felt. She was passionate about Leonard Bernstein, claimed to be highly sexed, got herself sent home from a school dance for wearing a skin-tight knit top. There didn't seem to be any softness in her. The rest of us were tentative in our sexuality, in what we said and what we did. But under our huge sloppy sweaters and pleated skirts we seethed and moistened.

Marilyn and Selma. We caricatured them. They didn't seem to us fully human, *like us*. They were outside because they were different and different because they were outside. *Outside. Us. The rest of us.* Were we really so close? Did we know each other, care about each other? Was I more "in," closer to some center, more secure, to the degree that I dissociated myself from Marilyn and Selma, emotionally, socially? Did I really want to know what Skeeter thought?

My mother's sister Mary, Mary's daughter Dorothy, and I (still in art school) all faced the issue of our anti-Italian feelings when we all three fell in love, at slightly different periods, with men by the names of, respectively, Tardo, Puglisi, and Fabrizio. Only the names presented problems. I used to imagine myself married to Roberto and breaking into tears when asked my last name. I did not marry him because I loved only his melting Italianate good looks, but Mary and Dorothy took on those strong-flavored names and were installed in the middle of abundant and loving families. Was it Italian paintings (Raphael) and Greek marble athletes (Adonis, Hermes) that legitimized those features, made them seem less foreign?

Art school changed as returning GIs brought a new sense of reality into what had been essentially an all-female, protected environment. About to graduate as the war ended, we became aware of the dangers that lay outside. I dreamed I heard people crying in a foreign language; I wrote a poem about Hitler and the camps, about madness and individual evil. I had no tools for analysis, but a need to know, a desperate need to understand. The dream prefigured my meeting R. in New York; the murder of his family by Fascists in the Lithuanian countryside—those, I felt, were the cries I heard. Here was someone—a Jew who had fought with the American army in Europe, anti-racist, socialist—who could teach me what I needed to know. I fell in love. Missing pieces were falling into place.



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May Stevens. *Letter to Angela, Big Daddy and George Jackson*. 1972.

R. and I married and went to Paris to study painting. Paris in 1948 was in post-war turmoil. Art was dominated by Picasso, Léger, and Fougeron, around whom political and cultural controversies swirled. Picasso did a peace dove, Léger construction workers full of optimism, and Fougeron miners with broken bodies and missing limbs. Anti-Americanism ran high. A painter I met told me I was too sympathetic and humane to be an American.

It was the era of SHAEF and the Marshall Plan abroad and McCarthyism at home. Graffiti on pavements under our feet said AMERICANS GO HOME. We were actually afraid to return to our country. Abroad I felt patriotism for the first time. A sense of place. The desire to be with people I had grown up among, to hear my own language in the street, to have a fullness in my speech that comes only from stored-up images and remembered relationships. Paris was not beautiful to me until I had met someone on that street corner, had lunch in that cafe, and it developed a human history I could touch.

After three years we returned to newspaper photographs and television films of buses burning in Alabama and Civil Rights workers being hosed and beaten in southern towns and cities. The nonviolent nature of the struggle spoke to my New England upbringing. I lived out that drama daily and turned the media documentation into a series of paintings and collages I called Freedom Riders. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote an introduction to the catalog (a sign of white-skin privilege since I had access to him through largely white artists' groups). I wanted to donate a percentage of sales to CORE but the gallery said no. Nothing sold until later when the AFL-CIO circulated the exhibition to its New York and Washington, D.C. headquarters. Then someone bought a little painting on which I had written edge-to-edge:

WESHALLOVERCOMEWESHALLOVE
RCOMEWESHALLOVERCOMEWESHA
LOVERCOMEWESHALLOVERCOMEW

People who saw these works over my Anglo-Saxon name thought I must be black. John Canaday of the *New York Times* thought they were not violent enough. Others thought paintings and politics shouldn't be mixed. I almost despaired of being understood.

If I had been able to leave my five-day-a-week teaching job and my small son and go south, I would have painted different paintings. (Or perhaps not painted at all. How many paintings came out of that struggle, painted by people who were there?) Northern white that I was I romanticized distant battles. But I painted with a feeling of great excitement, risking my art in an attempt to move others as I had been moved. I would move out of the guilty past into a fighting present.

These collages, drawings, and paintings approached the social issue I cared most deeply about. The personal aspect was my father's racism and the racism I had breathed in growing up where and when I did. Since my father's ethnocentrism had many faces, I saw them as part of the same pattern in spite of their differences and the extremity and singularity of black history in America.

In my private emotional journal though this swamp, I
turned to a Jew and a radical and married him
turned against my Yankee racist father
publicly painted him as a bigot
turned toward my Catholic mother
celebrated her in poems and painted her as companion to Rosa Luxemburg
turned to Rosa Luxemburg, Jew, radical, as spiritual mother
bore a half-Jewish son in Europe when the smoke from the ovens was still in the air
painted the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights Movement
painted myself in the place of Courbet/male artist/leader/master surrounded by art world friends and supporters
painted contemporary women artists as they enter a new role in the history of art

I think I've come to a place where it's necessary to say: No single oppression justifies the practice of, or indifference to, or ignorance of, any other. No doubt there is need for different emphases at different moments and we each fight best our own particular victimization. But surely nobody believes any more we can take them in some sort of sequence, assigning values—whose pain hurts more, whose sense of rejection is more profound.

Strangely, my racist father taught me to hate racism just as his oppression of my silent, sick, lapsed Catholic mother taught that oppressions come in clusters. Somehow I must look at what he did and what he became in doing it, without throwing up on the wall of the cave another phantom that caricatures the world.

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May Stevens has used political themes in her art since the mid-60s, when she exhibited *Freedom Riders*.

Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) are abbreviated.

*In 1926 E.S. Bogardus published a social distance scale which spelled out this common stylization of prejudice, with only minor variations from my father's. In a lovely absurdist touch one investigator, E.L. Hartley, included in the groups to be rated three groups which he simply made up: Danirean, Pirenean, and Wallonian. People who tended to hold groups other than their own at a considerable distance placed these three nonexistent groups low on their scale. I wish to thank Nilüfer Reddy for drawing my attention to the following texts: E.S. Bogardus, "Changes in Racial Distances," *International J. Opinion and Attitudinal Research*, vol. 1 (1947), pp. 55-62; E.L. Hartley, *Problems in Prejudice* (New York: Kings Crown Press, 1946); Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, *Groups in Harmony and Tension* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953).



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# RACE? SEX? CLASS? PREJUDICE IN THE

*1199 New York is the largest district of the national hospital and health care union (AFL-CIO), with a membership primarily Black, Hispanic and female. Among the cultural projects sponsored by 1199's Bread and Roses program is a musical revue called "Take Care, Take Care," now touring hospitals all across the U.S. to an enthusiastic reception. Like its predecessor ("Take Care"), this revue is unique in that the materials for its songs and skits were gathered from a series of oral-history workshops within the union. The result, written by Lewis Cole, Ossie Davis, Micki Grant and Alan Marken, is real labor theatre, emerging from daily workplace experience of the rank and file. The excerpts below were edited from transcripts of the sessions on June 3 and June 9, 1981, led by Cole and coordinated by Tony Gillotte. The participants were housekeepers, social workers, technicians, nurses, maintenance and dietary workers: Bertha Aiken, Frankie Amoruso, Eugene Benjamin, Carleton Collier, Imogene Evans, Gwen Gittins, Linda Halliday, Juanita Hamilton, Carmen Jackson, Georgianna Johnson, Morris Klopot, Virginia Knight, Wanda Long, Lysbeth Mate, Anna Rodriguez, Toy True and Allen Walker. (—L.R.L.)*

People may talk down about 1199, saying, "You don't want to be in the same union as so-and-so; you don't want to be together with her, because of color." This is the garbage, the way they divide us. "You'll be more high class," they tell our nurses, who think they'd be stepping down to join us. This is *their* union, they said, and the union lost out.

I used to tell people you're not going to turn Black; you're not going to change.

Well, what about the fact that they're white and they're going to be joining a union which is predominantly Black and Puerto Rican?

And a lot of white too.

It is a predominantly Black and Latin union.

People always think that this is a Black union because the majority of the workers haven't really seen the full majority of the union members. I've had the privilege of going to the convention twice, where you get people from Kentucky, Virginia, Alabama—all white. What really made me very happy was that after the last convention we had a dinner first and then the white people had a jamboree on their expense for everybody. And we were all jumping together, holding hands together.

You associate words like "poor," "worker," "laborer," with color. In this country alone there are definitely more poor whites than poor Blacks because there's more whites in this country. This is a union of working-class people. It's just that simple.

It seems that for a lot of white people that in itself is a challenging situation, because they're used to being in organizations in which whites are the majority and suddenly, like in a chapter, they're a minority.

I find in organizing that money has no color. I started the ball rolling with the secretaries. Up until 1978 we only had the service people and we had the guild; we didn't have the RNs and we didn't have the secretaries. By 1978 I happened to be talking to a secretary; there I came to find her salary was $150 a week. I said to her, "A maid makes more than that." She goes to her office and starts talking to her people. And the next day she comes back to me, she says, "Can I go into the union?" I said, "Be my guest."

There's discrimination not only in terms of color but also in terms of job. One position being better than another position. One class being better than another class.

Some of the nurses are very prejudiced. They think because they wear a white dress, you are nothing if you wear a blue dress. A couple of days ago there was a problem with a patient. I showed it to a nurse and she didn't do nothing about the whole mess on the floor. So I said to her, "Why don't you get some soap and clean up some of that stuff?" and she said, "I have to do that? Why don't you do it?" I said, "No. That's your department." She had to do it. I just walk away and leave her. And she did it.

Sometimes when we hear the word "prejudice," the first thing that pops into our minds is Black and white. But it's not always Black and white. My boss, he wouldn't care if you're pink, brown, blue. He's just prejudiced. He's sick. Prejudice is a sickness. Like cancer. You might contract cancer in one part of the body but eventually it spreads out over the whole body.

In the health care field and in the hospital we have all nationalities, all colors, and we all work together for a common purpose; we all get along beautifully. Between management and your employee, there's the prejudice. Like you say, I don't think it makes any difference what color you are. If you're union, they don't want any part of you.

Part of this anti-union thing is everyone becomes supervisor. It becomes part of you. You got to make those workers produce, and you will get somebody on your back to make these workers produce. The process divides us. Racism, or any other kind of prejudice. You had college, whatever, that divides us. And that's what they want to do. You will see that all these management guides will bring in these things. They have these labor consultants that they hire, guys who come in with the most prejudices, in terms of nationality, in terms of color, because they really say what the boss wants them to say.

I heard my boss say (he didn't know I was there), "I want you to whip those guys into line. Come down on them. Let 'em have it. Whip those guys."

It *is* a racial prejudice thing, because over me I have managers, right? They don't want me as a supervisor in a department, so they will give my department more work to do than the department next to me which is doing the same job. I say it's color. I'm Black and she's white, and she has more people in her department than I have in mine. Why should they give my department the larger load?

If you're pushing to get more work out, the opposition is the worker, who says, "I just want to work like a human being; I don't want to be rushed." After a while you develop an attitude. It's like a guy becomes a cop. He may be a nice guy, but after going to a couple of riots and dealing with some of these people out there, he develops a hardness. And it's tough. And it's the same thing with supervision. We want to get him to do more work and he don't want to do it and he gives me a hard time, I'm going to say he's a creep.

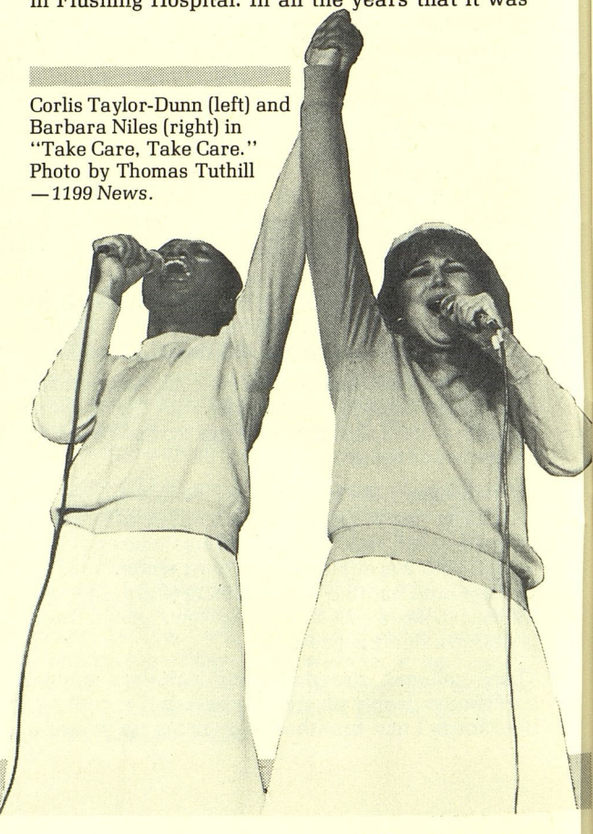
I think she's right. As far as prejudice between Black and white in our clerical.... Before they re-unionized, there was not one colored or minority in the whole clerical division in that hospital. And we were having problems bringing them in every time there's a job open. We had a battle royal for everyone we brought in.

Once there was a nurse and she was so prejudiced I was shocked. That attitude of prejudice towards the housekeeper. Everybody tried to get rid of her. If you're Black and you come in there to ask her about a patient, she goes: "You see me doing something, can't you read?" etc. If a white person comes in, it's: "Can I help you, ma'am?"

We have a cafeteria, and this cafeteria is for everybody—nurses, housekeepers. When everybody's off, it says "closed." A few minutes later when the nurses come marching down from maternity, you see the sign removed. They have to bar it up, so that we nurses' aides, workers, we won't sit there. But this is a cafeteria for everybody.

Uniformed workers and non-uniformed workers. Uniformed workers tend to have a harder way sometimes. This tends to cause a lot of friction. It gets into a class thing.

Going into a hospital division where we did have a race problem. They had a very large operation in Flushing Hospital. In all the years that it was



Corlis Taylor-Dunn (left) and Barbara Niles (right) in "Take Care, Take Care." Photo by Thomas Tuthill —*1199 News*.



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open, there was not one Black there who worked as an aide. When I became the delegate we had won seniority in our contract and there were nursing aides who worked there long years and wanted to come downstairs to central. Our supervisor, she would never admit to being a racist or prejudiced in any way, but I had to fight each and every one of those cases. She would hold them upstairs on the floors. I brought the first Black down and now it's even-steven. We even had it in the contract and they fought it. A white person, well, *she* wanted to come down. It was really a fight, even after we had seniority. So there you meet prejudice with a department head that wants to keep the department white. It's the other way too sometimes.

What are they afraid of? What are they afraid is going to happen if these Black and Hispanic people get treated equally?

They're afraid of unity. At our hospital, where the working people are concerned, the majority, like secretaries and RNs are solidly white. In the service unit we're majority Black. And they don't want us to have the power, because we do have it. We didn't need the organizer to come in there. We controlled the hospital. It would be nothing for us to pull 600 people and set them right in the lobby.

No one in the administration is Black. The only person that they put is a department head or a housekeeper because they feel they have to handle a lot of Blacks and Hispanics. Otherwise all of administration is predominantly white.

You ask what they're afraid of—having the Blacks in power. This is only my feeling. I may be wrong. They have a white majority in our administration too. They have meetings, and there are certain things they discuss. Say they want to cut the budget. And they sit around and make plans of how to work around cutting the staff. So they will make some dirty schemes: Well, look, force them to do some things that will get them fired, won't have to give them unemployment. Now if they had a Black there or a Spanish man there, he's not going to sit down and listen to that kind of thing and go along with it with his workers. Especially Spanish people. They stick together like glue. They're liable to take those workers in a corner and say, "Look, I want you to be careful. Don't spit, don't loiter, don't litter. There's a possibility you'll get fired." I feel that management wouldn't want those people up there to forward us, 'cause they couldn't have a chance to get rid of us.

Most hospitals act like they are run by the director, but are actually run by the board of trustees. And they're pressured. They just don't deal with Blacks. They hire you to do that dirty work.

What happens to all this equal rights legislation?

They pay into the educational system, our grading and upgrading fund. They have upgraded everything now.

What does upgrading mean?

For instance, when you went into housekeeping, you didn't use to have to know how to run a waxing machine, you didn't have to say that you knew how to mop a floor. Now you must have experience for that. Now in certain areas you must have high school education, so they'll say, "We are paying you the training and upgrading fund, we want something for our money." So this is how they're getting around the fact that we have a hiring hall, making them take the union people first. This person must have a qualification. If they hire someone off the street they don't have to have it. They're asking a porter for a high school diploma, just for moving a mop.

Was there ever a point in any of your organizing where you have openly discussed any kind of prejudice that arose, where it was talked about, the attitude the nurses had toward nonprofessionals?

On the ninth floor we have a monthly staff meeting. Our NPC—the head nurse—she always talked down to us. So we all got together at a staff meeting and brought it out to her; she wasn't aware that she was talking down to us. We told her, "Didn't you ever work around Blacks before?" She said, "I never have, you have to give me a chance and try to help me along." She was up there, and we were down here, and instead of coming on the same level, she would come out with, "You do this and you better do it," and she forgot you were a human being.

Like she wouldn't say "please."

No, she'd say, "Do it or you'll get written up." And we got tired of it, and mostly the union members. . . . she would demand us to do things in a way, and we told her there's ways to go about asking, you don't come out and just demand.

When she said that thing of not being used to working with Blacks, did she also work that way with white workers who were at the same level as you?

No, she never did.

So how did they respond when she said she's not used to working Blacks?

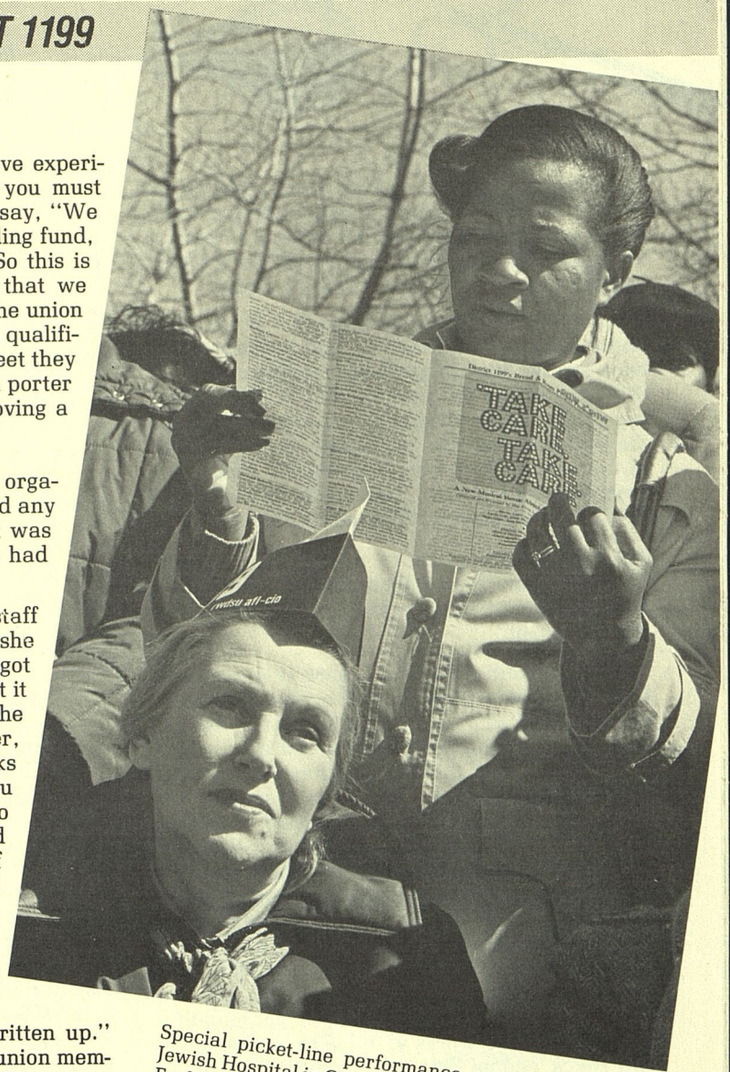
They were surprised, everybody was shocked. She said she came from a little hospital and there was all white people in Canarsie, etc., the whole thing. She still acts that way. She's improved a little bit, but you can see that it's still there.

What would you say is the main kind of prejudice that you find working in the hospital? Is it Black/white, age, male/female, status?

Male/female. I find that the female doctors, they're constantly on their guard, they constantly have to prove themselves, 'cause they're in the minority. And they constantly have to struggle, they're very very defensive, there's all this sexual innuendo.

What kind of sexual innuendos?

At my hospital recently a female doctor got hit by a male doctor, physically pushed, and it happened once and she reported it to everybody,




*Special picket-line performance outside Long Island Jewish Hospital in Queens on March 23, 1982. Photo by Earl Dotter—American Labor.*

then he did it again. She's having trouble getting anyone to take this seriously. People are amused by it instead of incensed by it.

Do you think it's because she's a woman?

Yes. He wouldn't take a chance with a man.

Maybe he pushed her because he likes her. [Laughter.]

I think it's an extension of what happens on the outside with male/female pick-up kinds of things. We had an incident—to give you an example of just how powerful the doctors are, and how limited the nurses are. I was working in the emergency room and this doctor came in; he crossed his legs and I saw he was wearing a gun on his leg. I said to him, "I'm petrified of guns; when a cop comes in I'm panicky." I said to him, "You don't need that thing here. Go put it in your locker. I'm afraid to work in the room if you're gonna have a gun." He said, "I have a right to defend myself, blah blah blah. . . ." I said, "Who's going to kill you? I'm here. I'll protect you." So sure enough, I called the administrator. Can't take that kind of responsibility, he could blow his toes off. The administrator came and said that every



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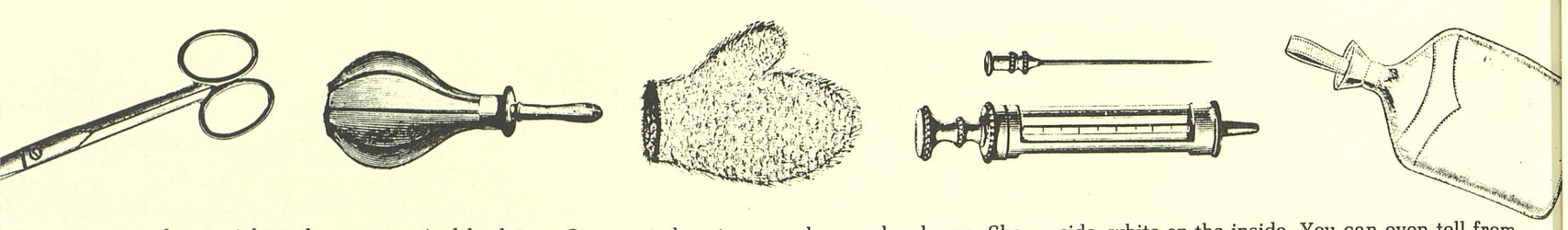

American has a right to bear arms. And he let the man work with a gun. I went to work in a different portion. But believe me, if it was a nurse or an aide or an orderly or the guy in the kitchen, you don't think they'd let them wear a gun.

I've gone to the Operating Room in a lot of cases and I just want to bear witness to what we've been saying. It's always been traditional almost that they abuse the nurses. And of course they say they're under strain, so forth and so on. But the language they use would make anybody blush in the street. And there's no doubt, when they have male technicians, they will be different than they are to the nurses. They respect them as men.

They wipe their hands on a towel. If I'm there, they will throw the towel on the floor. If there's a male taking care of them, they're going to put it in a linen basket.

Speaking about prejudice, I work in a unit with all kinds of kids. Now we had a Chinese patient come in, very sick with hepatitis. He was spilling blood all over the place. We found out that instead of putting it in the basin they were putting it in the garbage can right after cleaning. The patient died. A month later, the head of nursing came in: "Who was working with such and such patient? We got the report; he had the worst type of hepatitis. Who was working here?" She bypassed me. I'm standing there. We work every day on that unit. So I said, "What's going on?" "Oh," she says, "it don't call for you!" The idea was that these people who had worked with him had to get shots, or else they would get hepatitis. Everyone got the works with the exception of the two Black people that were working there. So when she was ready to leave, I said, "Excuse me, Miss. What the hell happened to me that I was on the ward and I don't need help?" She said, "Now don't get excited." I said, "Why? Is my skin the kind of skin that won't pick up anything?"

I've worked in recovery. Patients will say to me, "Oh, I can't believe I see a white nurse. I have all these chocolate people. And all the doctors are dark. Everybody in the hospital is dark."

I have a joke for you. This is both a joke and is true. This patient is sick. The nurse there says, "Good morning, I'm going to give you a sponge bath." "Who, *you*?" She said, "Yes." Patient says, "You ain't gonna touch me!" Nurse said, "Why?" She said, "Because no Black person gonna give me a bath. You have to get a white nurse in here." The girl's with tears, she is so embarrassed. I came in behind. We use black bags for the garbage. So in I come, shaking the bag. Patient says, "Where you gonna put that?" I said, "In the garbage pail." She says, "I don't need no *black* bag in my garbage pail!"

Sounds like a nut to me.

No, she was not. I wouldn't take that black bag out. The supervisor had to come with one of those small white plastic bags and put it in that garbage. Tell me if that's racist.

Some racially prejudiced patients like having a Black aide. They'll say, "That nice colored girl came in."

Reminds them of the past. They had that little taste of heaven, make them pancakes.

One wanted me to come clean up her house. She said, "I need a girl like you." I said, "Do you think you could pay my price?" "Oh yeah, my husband'll pay it."

Some of our ladies was upstairs serving the food, in microwave ovens, and they were having a fire drill. So the assistant security guard, he walked in and said, "Get this damn thing out of here, we're having a fire drill." I pushed it out of the way, and they made a big case out of it. So we went into the office, and as we walked in he said, "Come on down, girls, sit down, girls." These are ladies that are 45-46 years old. "Sit down, girls." I told him, "I think that's the problem; you forget these women are not girls. These are grown ladies, and I expect that you should treat them accordingly." He said, "Being that I'm so much older than they are, they're girls to me." Like I'm supposed to sop this shit up. I said, "Cool, that's the way you feel, but they're not girls." I'm not into the game part of it. I do a lot of laughing and joking; that's a side of me, but when it comes down to, what do you call it, nitty-gritty time? When it comes time to get down on it, I can get down just as hard as anyone else.

It's kind of hard for me to sit here and talk about prejudice because it's something that I have eaten my entire life, that I've had to live with, something that I've seen. I remember going to Cortland State, 250 miles, people looking at me like I'm a goddamned zombie. Ah, who is this? Because I was Black. It's hard to talk about prejudice when you know that it still exists. It hasn't slowed down at all. If anything it's speeded up. It's hard to talk about prejudice when you see children, Black children, who have problems, real problems when they go to school, and you see a timid white woman walks into the class. The main thing is that she wants to survive so she can go home, so her thing is surviving behavior. She spends so much time with survival, so much time trying to get everybody to behave, that teaching is a luxury. And then at the same time, this little boy grows up to be an ass, and can't get a job, has to sweep streets and things like that. And people still play along with that. There's a lot of prejudice in the hospitals; when you're dealing with the hospital workers and the guild workers, there's prejudice in that. There's a lot of prejudice when you're talking about education.

When you talk about rank and file, and status. As you go up the ladder, the more prejudiced you become. Now we can talk about Black and white prejudice which is always going to be there. You can sit back and look at it right now. How come as a Black person, I sit back and say well, hey, Black people in this country were waiting for the Italians, they was sitting here waiting for the Jews, and some of you might have come at the same time. And the saddest prejudice is the story of the American Indian. No one even talks about that; they don't even show it on TV. They show the cowboy honkies riding down. He's talking about the Indians are savages, right? Indians knew how to live among themselves. They was called savages.

Did you ever find a Black nurse prejudiced against her own kind?

There's a lot of oreos around, Black on the outside, white on the inside. You can even tell from the way they talk. They talk through their noses.

Do you think that's the position the person's in?

I'll be talking to some of the supervisors, and they'll say, "Well, you know I have to play this role." And I'll say, "What role do you really have to play? You might as well get into a burlesque show if this is the role that you have to play."

Uneducated Hispanics have the hardest time. Like interpretation, as they try to explain things. People take advantage of the fact that you have a language barrier. Like, we got one Spanish guy who works in our department, who washes pots all the time. Like, he's required to have every third weekend off, but sometimes they bring this guy in four weekends straight. I try to explain certain things to him, get someone else to talk to him, but then it's a matter of him feeling that he might lose his job. A lot of them don't know enough about the union to know that there are a lot of rights, they have a lot of benefits.

A lot of them can speak English. I take my time with any patient I meet. I find that the majority don't have any problem understanding me. Lots of times maybe it's that they're not comfortable, because of their English, or it's easier for them when they have somebody.

Was what you said an implication that they pretend they're not understanding? That used to be an old slave thing.

Of course a lot of them speak English but sometimes something gets lost in the interpretation; they might want to say something else and wind up saying something completely different because this is how they knew how to express it.

I'm Spanish and I don't agree. Came here 17 years ago from Colombia, South America. I speak English before I came here. One day I remember I had a big problem with a doctor and a patient. He wanted me to interpret this Spanish patient who didn't know one word of English and he wanted me to tell her that she must learn English, that he could not attend to her because she did not know English. And he made me so angry and I said to him, I said, "Why don't you go and learn Spanish?" I said, "You are on the same basis with that patient. You cannot learn Spanish, she cannot learn English." I said, "You know something, doc, I think you're nasty." And the nurse in charge, she says, "Mrs. Jackson, how dare you talk to the doctor like that?" I said, "I'm Mrs. Jackson and he's Mr. So and So."

I just want to say that all the prejudice that you find on the outside you find in the hospital. You find men against women, you find white/Black, you find West Indian Black against American Black, Jews against gentiles, gentiles against Jews, poor against rich, rich against poor.

As a matter of fact I would say it's amazing that we have gone as far as we have and got the kind of unity that we have, in spite of the fact that in the back of people's minds it's there. But they fight against it. I think there have been gains in that sense, because otherwise we wouldn't have here what we got here today. But we just reflect what goes on in the outside world. It's all there just to divide us, objectively speaking. That's what it's there for, and that's what it does.



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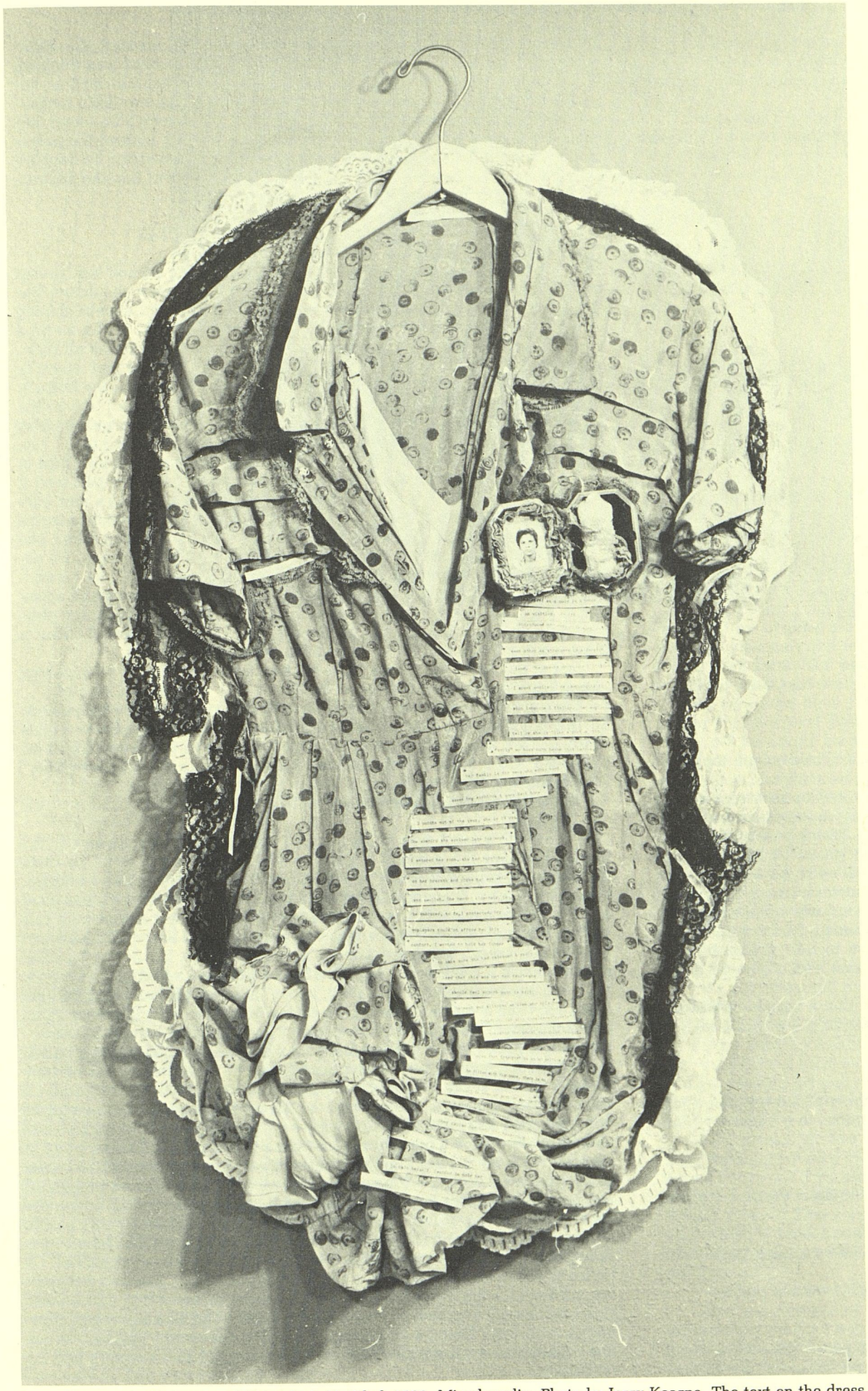

Lorna Simpson (with Irene and Rejendra). *Untitled*. 1982. Mixed media. Photo by Jerry Kearns. The text on the dress appears on the right.

## BY LORNA SIMPSON

**She works as a maid in a house I am visiting. We are introduced and recognize each other as strangers in a foreign land. She speaks Portuguese and Italian. I speak English. We communicate in sign language and Italian. Her employers tell me she is "like a part of the family." We have both heard that before. Her family is far away. She works hard, saves her earnings and goes back home two months out of the year. She is 19 years old. One evening she arrived late for work. I entered her room; she had scratches on her breasts and above her eye, which was swollen. She needed closeness, to be embraced, to feel protected. Her employers couldn't afford her this comfort. I wanted to hold her longer to make sure she had realized that this was not her fault. She should feel anger and want to kill. Between our silences we knew why this had happened: our skin considered "exotic," targeted for brutal fantasies in cultures that interpret us as an orifice to be filled with nightmare. There is no one to call in case of such an emergency. But calling on ourselves. They called her into the next room to sit and watch a TV comedy to calm herself. I wanted to hold her longer.**

Lorna Simpson, a photographer, is studying for her Master's degree at the University of California, San Diego.

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# BY ELENA PONIATOWSKA

## TRANSLATED BY ANNE TWITTY

# LOVE STORY

Teleca couldn't go to bed: "I'll bet she's gossiping in the doorway."

She peered over the balcony. The empty street leaped at her.

"Then she must have shut herself in the bathroom. She does it because she knows it infuriates me."

She yelled with heartfelt exasperation: "Lupe! Lupe! Lupeeeeeeee!"

The problem was, she couldn't think about anything else; nothing obsessed her like her relationship with Lupe, who could now be heard shuffling around the kitchen.

"Lupe! Where were you?"

"Upstairs, ma'am."

"Doing what at this hour, if you don't mind?"

"Having a bath."

The black hair was dripping down the damp back, the waist, the buttocks; very long hair, now wound up after the shampoo, held up by a red comb, a handful heavy as a horse's mane.

"Didn't you tell me to have a bath every day?"

"But not during your working hours."

The bather looked at her, and Teleca saw the red tree of resentment in her eyes.

"Bring me my breakfast."

"OK."

"That's no way to answer. Say, 'Yes, ma'am.'"

"Uh-huh."

"Say, 'Yes, ma'am,'" Teleca almost shouted.

The woman was silent. Then she seemed to make up her mind: "Yes, ma'am."

Teleca slammed the door as she left the kitchen. In her bedroom, she could do nothing but go from one place to another, pick up one thing after another, put it somewhere else, lose it, pace back and forth next to the door like a caged lion. She couldn't wait for the moment when she could go back to the kitchen, see what Lupe was doing, look at her face, smooth as a river pebble, begin again, choose more tactful words. "I'm going to wait five minutes." She went into the bathroom and brushed her hair furiously. The telephone rang. She thanked the lord for that phone call. Lupe was late in answering, dragged her feet toward the telephone, and slowly came to knock at the door.

"Somebody for you."

Teleca's heart beat faster.

"Say, 'There's a telephone call for you, ma'am.' Besides, you took your time about answering."

That wasn't what she wanted to say. She wanted to assume a serene expression, the smile trembling on her lips, ready to blossom and open. Drops of water were still falling from Lupe's mane. Teleca pushed her aside.

"Who is it? Oh, Arthur! How delightful. Are you all right? Well, just so-so. I feel so nervous, I don't know why, maybe it's the domestic dramas; you know those people just don't understand, however much one would like to approach them, there's just no way, at any rate I can't find one; oh yes, I know there are other topics of conversation, but you see that's my everyday experience and that's what I have to talk about. It helps calm my nerves. . . . At the Lady Baltimore? At five? Yes, of course. What fun! Bye-bye. . . Thanks."

Teleca walked toward the kitchen. "Can it be that a ragged Indian can get me into this state? But. . . it's impossible. It's not fair! It's this loneliness that's. . . "

"Lupe, my breakfast."

"Yes, ma'am."

At least she said, "Yes, ma'am." Lupe entered with the tea, the warm egg, the toast, the dazzling white cup, the sugar cubes in a sugarbowl just as dazzling.

"And the newspaper, isn't it here yet?"

"I'll go see."

"Haven't I told you to bring the paper up first thing in the morning and put it next to my place? It must be sopping."

The servant returned with the *Universal*, her face a mask of itself.

"Lupe, the marmalade. Why don't you put the bitter orange marmalade on the table? The marmalade and the butter."

"Last month you told me not to because you didn't want to get fat."

"But I'm not on a diet anymore."

"OK."

"Not, OK! How many times have I told you to say, 'Yes, ma'am'!"

Teleca tried to concentrate on the headlines; she realized she didn't care, nothing interested her except Lupe, to know what Lupe was thinking, to follow her, stop next to her as she stood at the washtub, look at her strong round arms, her arms, two apple trees extending into leafy twigs—how pretty her fingertips were, wrinkled from the washwater—hear her young voice, juicy as her hands. Lupe must have secretly noticed the power she had over her mistress, because she frowned and curled her lip haughtily, in a temper. When she finished breakfast, Teleca went into the kitchen.

"I'm going to take a bath."

Lupe was silent.

"Keep your ears open for the telephone and the doorbell."

"Uh-huh."

Teleca felt her nerves getting raw; she could have struck her, pulled that damp handful hanging over the Indian, Indian, Indian shoulders. But she also would have liked to see her smile, her eyes bright, cheeks shining—how newly washed brown skin glows!—to hear her ask, in the musical voice of earlier days, "Is everything all right, ma'am?" Everything all right, everything all right. . . nothing was all right. Teleca made her morning ablutions with Lupe on her mind, forecasting her one p.m. face, the friendly gesture or sparkle in her eye; maybe Lupe will be nice when I leave. She imagined the details: "Lupe, I'm leaving now; remember, I'm not lunching at home today, I'm going to the Güemes, as I told you yesterday." "Yes, ma'am, that's fine. I'll polish the silver. Have a good time, ma'am." Once in a while she's said, "Have a lovely time," and Teleca still remembered it gratefully. Lupe had stayed with her longer than any other girl. Her solitude made Teleca appreciate the shared hours, the other presence in the house. At first she used the familiar, but when something angered her, she brandished formalities to emphasize the distance. "When I leave, I'll casually tell her to take the radio into the kitchen, so she won't be bored," Teleca thought. "But what's happening to me? I'm paying too much attention to her, as if Lupe were the only person in my life. My nerves are playing tricks on me. What must Lupe think of me? Does she like me? What a close-mouthed woman! She's a blind lump of dough!"

Just at the doorway, Teleca adjusted her hat and said with false gaiety: "Lupe? I'm leaving now. See you at five."

The only answer was the hum of cars in the Avenue of the Insurgents. So Teleca yelled, in a less friendly voice: "Lupe? I'm leaving. Have my tea ready at five, and don't leave streaks on the silverware. Remember now, the polish and a flannel cloth, not soap and a scrub-brush, like last time."

Silence amplified her order.

"Lupe? Lupe, did you hear me?"

"Uh-huh."

The words echoed mournfully, coming perhaps from the kitchen or the ironing board or the inside of a closet or who knows where, from the thick darkness in which Lupe moved, that squaw, that idiot, that smelly creature, I don't know why I'm worrying about a beast like that. And Teleca marched out. "It will do me good to see some people of my own sort and give up this useless effort to uplift the ones who are past saving." She walked toward the Güemes' house, her dress swirling around her legs, but at the first corner she almost turned back. "I didn't tell her to turn on the radio in the kitchen," and she remembered that slow, heavy, muddy "uh-huh" and thought (with what she imagined to be a pedagogical impulse): "It will do her good. She'll miss me. Of course she'll miss me. It's awful to be alone in a house." She imagined herself in earlier years, alone in her kitchen with no one to teach good manners to, anxiously waiting for the water about to boil furiously in the tea kettle, defenseless against the attack of the bells, ready to start up a conversation with anyone, the first street vendor, the newspaper boy, yes, yes, like any alley cat; she remembered the warnings she had written for herself in a convent student's angular hand and had stuck up in plain sight, in the kitchen, the hall, not so much because she needed them as to keep her company: "Please close the door," "don't forget to turn off the gas," "check your keys before leaving," "the electricity bill is due the first Friday of every month," "any effort is a success in itself." And in large letters, the numbers that connected her to the outside world. Teleca was ready to scream, anxiety pressing on her heart: "Help, I can't breathe." Or to run as she now ran toward the Güemes' house, where she entered panting, ruffled as a sparrow that takes refuge in the rafters. "How are things? How are things? You look so pretty sitting here!" The Güemes raised startled eyes to their friend's fluttering. What did she mean, "pretty," when they looked like a couple of witches? Teleca immediately asked to use the telephone.

"I forgot to tell Lupe something."

"We're having souffle to start with, Teleca, don't be long."

"How marvelous, oh how marvelous, I'm so hungry, I'll be right with

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Elena Poniatowska, born in Paris in 1933 and now living in Mexico, is the author of many books, including *La noche de Tlatelolco*, about the 1968 student massacre in Mexico City, and *De noche vienes* (Grijalbo), from which "Love Story" is translated.



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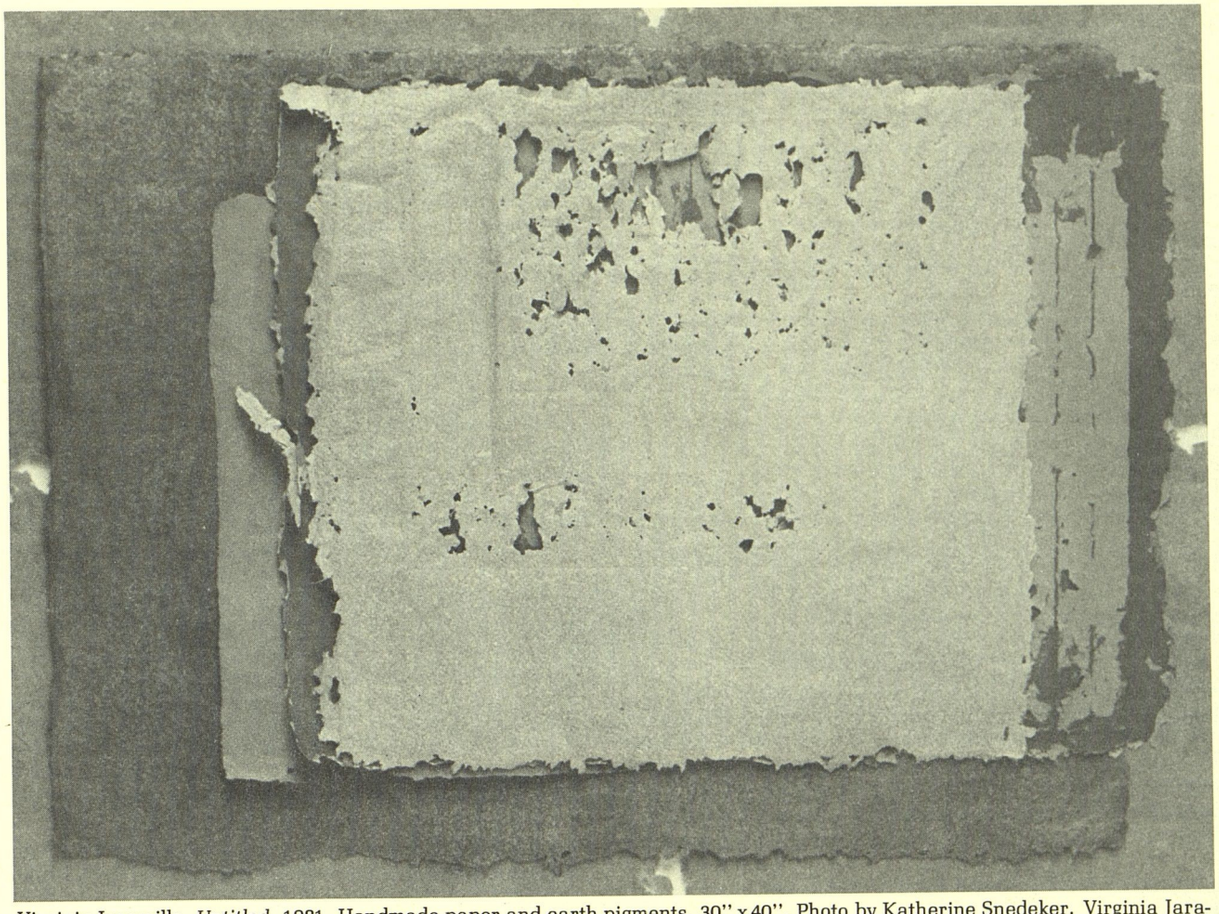

Virginia Jaramillo. *Untitled*. 1981. Handmade paper and earth pigments. 30" x 40". Photo by Katherine Snedeker. Virginia Jaramillo, a NYC artist, recently showed her work at Galería del Círculo, Mexico.

you."

She took the receiver off the hook. A bell sounded, extended itself on the air, an unanswered signal. How long would that lazy squaw take to answer? Teleca nervously dialed again. The third time was the charm.

"Lupe."

"Uh-huh."

"Haven't I told you....Oh all right, look, I want you to polish my father's polo trophy. It's been ages since you cleaned it and it looks terrible."

"The what?"

"The polo trophy."

"What?"

"Don't you understand? The polo trophy, the tall silver cup with the handles in the form of a swan....I forgot to tell you."

"The biggest cup in the living room?"

"Yes, that one, Lupe." (She almost said, "Dear Lupe," but caught herself.)

"I don't think there's enough polish."

"Why didn't you buy some?"

"You wouldn't let me."

She would have liked to go on talking with Lupe for hours, but the Güemes were calling, "Teleca, Teleca." How dear it was to speak to Lupe through that mouthpiece that fit her hand, without seeing her stubborn, stony, almost impenetrable face. Teleca would often call home to give some advice, to make sure Lupe was there. She would keep on and on until she found her and then scold her: "Where did you go? Who told you you could go out? You can't go out and leave the house empty, like a child!" That's why you (addressing an immense caravan of servants, a bevy of women in aprons and braids who were advancing towards her across the desert) are in this state, because you're irresponsible, deformed, stupid, because you have no ambition and no self-respect and don't even want to rise above your lethargy! She recalled that Lupe never moved a muscle in her face.

"Listen, Lupe, if Mr. Arthur calls, tell him I went to have lunch with the Güemes."

"Didn't you talk to him this morning?"

"Yes, but I forgot to tell him."

"Ah!" said Lupe suspiciously.

"Did you open the bathroom window? The towels have to be aired before it rains. You always forget."

Teleca hated the Güemes for interrupting the dialogue, but she had to give in. "All right, I'll call later to see what has been happening." She heard a murmur that sounded like "uh-huh" and the click of the telephone. "That dirty beast, she hung up on me, she didn't even give me time to say goodbye, but I'll get even, I'll call her after coffee."

The obsessed have the strange power of attracting everyone to the center of their spiral; they press harder and harder, closing tighter at each turn until the circle becomes a single point, a whirling drill. At the table Teleca brought the conversation around to servants—in French, of course, so the good Josephine wouldn't understand.

"Why are servants such idiots?"

"Because if they weren't they wouldn't be servants."

"It's because this is a brutish race. In France, in England, in Spain, servants are different. They know how to behave, they realize to whom they're speaking, they're responsible, they're of a different sort, but these brutes who don't... who don't even have a mat to drop dead on, aren't even grateful for the favor you're doing them."

"I think it's the sun. They're out in the sun so much they've all got sunstroke."

"Or the Spanish Conquest."

"Oh yes, they lost everything with the Conquest, even their sense of shame."

"It's the whole race. They're definitely low on gray matter."

Teleca went on talking without a break until coffee was served. It was her way of being close to Lupe, circling around her, evoking her. One of the Güemes sisters, fat and good-natured, suggested (to block the avalanche): "Why don't we play a little bridge, right now? We can take our coffee with us."

They agreed. At five Teleca cried: "I've got a date with Arthur in the Lady Baltimore at five. How awful! I'll never get there in time. If I'd thought, I would have put it off, since I knew I was having lunch with you."

What really bothered her was not calling Lupe. Now she couldn't. When? Where? There was no way to leave Arthur alone at his table in the tea room.

"What a shame the chauffeur isn't here, otherwise he could drop you off, Teleca."

"It doesn't matter. I just love taxi drivers."

Over tea, apropos of Teleca's comments, Arthur launched into a long dissertation on the Conquest according to Bernal Diaz del Castillo. That wasn't what she was after. Nobody could give her what she was looking for, nobody but Lupe. Would Arthur ever finish and go away? But Arthur, a dilettante of history, seemed ready to examine everything, down to the U.S. laws on racial segregation. Teleca felt sick to her stomach. Arthur stretched out his arm toward her necklace.



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"Look at that chunk of amber hanging from your chain. It's worth ten slaves."

"Because of the worm inside?"

"Precisely. Perhaps, on account of that worm, it's worth fifteen slaves."

"Oh, Arthur, let's *go*."

Defiantly, without waiting for him, Teleca got up. There was something of the clumsy boy about Teleca that disconcerted Arthur even while it attracted him. Her way of taking the stairs two at a time, her long thin legs that galloped rather than walked, her hipless body, her intent, tea-colored eyes—hadn't they taught her not to stare at people when she was a little girl? Her open smile, from ear to ear, that revealed wide white teeth, strong as grains of corn left out in the sun and wind. Teleca winked, too. "It comes naturally," she said when they reproved her.

"I'm going to play bridge at the Lucerne; I can drop you off in a taxi, Teleca."

"Thanks, Arthur. You're going to play with Novo and Villarrutia? Who's the fourth?"

"Torres Bodet. Haven't you read *The Counterfeiters* yet?"

"I told you I'm very nervous. I can't concentrate."

"If you read it, you'd forget your nerves. Look," said Arthur, pressing his nose against the window, "it's night already. In Mexico, it gets dark all at once. Either there's nothing happening at all and we're absolutely smothered in the thickest boredom, or else we have a catastrophe and everything's over. My God, what a country!"

"It's your country. . ."

Arthur smiled mockingly. "You're so contradictory, Teleca. This sudden patriotism doesn't suit you. After all, you're always talking about leaving for Spain."

"But meanwhile I stand up for the dark."

"The black holes?"

Teleca didn't answer. She felt a strange sense of solidarity with Lupe. She could kick her, but in front of anyone else she defended passionately anything related to Indians: the earth, the forest, beans, corn, warm stones.

"Look, she hasn't even remembered to turn on the light in the entryway."

Arthur got out of the taxi and stretched out his hand, a soft hand with very pink, fine, thin nails, like a newborn baby's. He bowed low to kiss Teleca's glove.

"Beautiful Teleca."

"She's left the street dark!"

Arthur made his nails dance like lightning bugs.

"Light, more light."

"Please Arthur, try to understand. Your mother takes care of everything for you, you don't understand how hard it is to deal with these people."

Arthur's lips, as rosy as his fingernails, curved in an annoyed grimace. He smiled, and they grew thin to the point of cruelty. Nevertheless, in their natural state they were full, so full that they stuck out.

"Telequita, do some reading. I'll talk to you tomorrow. I want your opinion."

Teleca abruptly stuck her key in the door. She could just glimpse Arthur striking the driver lightly on the shoulder with the handle of his cane, and the taxi drove off.

Teleca strode up the stairs. "Lupe, Lupe! Hasn't anything happened?" She went on up to the second floor. "Lupe?" She passed through the ironing room, the kitchen. "Where has that squaw got to? She must be snoring in her room." "Lupe? Didn't anyone call?" She stopped at the top of the maid's staircase. "Lupe. Lupeeeee!" Teleca never entered the room in the attic. It was one of her rules. "Maybe she's in the library waxing the furniture. I doubt it, but anyway. . ." She headed for it hopefully. When she opened the door, the bookcases gleamed, and Teleca followed the ray of light with her eyes; in the darkness they acquired the tonality of a Vermeer; some of the corners seemed to float in the air, cutting it, their edges shining; the round arm of a sofa lit up in the darkness, silky and electric as the humped back of a cat. Time polishes, time melts, time shapes. "It smells shut-in. Not only is she not here, she hasn't been here for a long time, even though I ordered her to. What a filthy woman." She went up the stairs again. "Lupe, Lupe," she went flying through the rooms, "Lupe." Again she stood at the foot of the maid's staircase and shouted, shielding her call with both hands, "Lupe!" She had never been so slow in answering. "Smelly old thing. Uppity Indian!" Finally, Teleca decided to climb the stairs. Her heels caught in the iron steps; she almost fell through. Above she heard the water tank dripping. There were no sheets on the washing lines. She burst into the room; it didn't even have a lock. The smell of feet, sweat, and confinement assaulted her and made her gasp in search of breath.

"She must have gone out to buy bread. . . but. . . at this hour? She never, never goes at this hour. Besides, I've told her never to leave the house empty. I'm going to get after her, I can't stand having her around, she's bad for me."

She went through the stripped room. She looked for the cartons Lupe had brought her things in. Nothing. She opened the closet. Nothing. The breeze lashed the bare window. At last Teleca had to yield to the evidence. "She's left." She went down the stairway without noticing what she was doing and went directly to her room. The key, yes, the key. No, she didn't take anything. There is the jewelry. She waited a few minutes in the middle of the bedroom, her arms hanging at her sides, not knowing what to do. There was not a sound in the house. Teleca allowed herself to swoon at the feet of her fear, beside herself from the search, her emotion. She tried to encourage herself. "Well, that's better. I'd planned to fire her anyway. She was always looking down on me. She's saved me a scene. I was bored with that flat nose, anyway. Traitor. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, or what's that saying? Traitor. It's the best thing that could have happened."

She began by taking off her hat, switching on the bedside lamp, closing the curtains one by one. A rosy light spread through the room. The houses of the rich always glow with a rosy light. Almost euphoric, she went to the kitchen to look for the water pitcher she kept beside her bed at night, and the glass. "Now I'm really going to read *The Counterfeiters*. I didn't plan on eating dinner anyway, so how could it matter?" She came and went, walked through the living room, crossed the dining room, her heels resounding like castanets, up, left, right, turn. "I sound like a flamenco dancing teacher," she told herself affectionately; she put two of the vases of flowers in the hall. "Pig, the water is green, she didn't even change it. Lupe! Lupe! But I must be crazy, she's done me a favor by getting out of here. Yes 'getting out of here,' the way they say it, even though it sounds so ugly." She hung up her coat, or rather tried to, in front of the closet. "Lupe, where are all the hangers? The wooden one for my coat is missing." "I'm obviously delirious, my mind is wandering, I keep talking to that wretch in my mind all the time tomorrow I'll wear lacquer red it's the color that suits me best has that idiot thrown my shoes out? Lupe! Lupe!" Exhausted, Teleca fell to the carpet and rocked her head in her hands. Only then did she notice that her cheeks were wet. She couldn't have been crying all this time! She forced back a sob, "Little Lupe! The best thing for me to do is lie down, take a tranquilizer, tomorrow I'll look for somebody else." Teleca often forgot she had a body—it was so light—but now it was burning, echoing, amplifying all the noises inside. Teleca stretched out her arms to turn back the beautiful, thick damask coverlet that had been her parents'; she did it slowly, carefully, and suddenly, there on the sparkling linen, at the height of the hand-embroidered A and S interlaced under the family emblem, she saw the excrement, an enormous turd that spread out in concentric circles, in a terrifying rainbow, green, coffee-colored, greenish-yellow, ashy, steaming. In the silence, the stink began to rise.

Years later, when Teleca told Arthur—she had never dared tell anyone—Arthur replied that it was impossible, that Indians were neither vulgar nor scatalogical, much less proctological, that they would never do anything of the kind; no doubt of that, it was not within their patterns of behavior, any researcher of Indian traits could confirm that. Perhaps Lupe had let a delivery boy in, a poor devil corrupted by city ways, a drunk, and between the two of them they thought up that piece of mischief which, from an impartial point of view, could be considered infantile, but Teleca, protesting, scowling, stubborn, hunched over, insisted.

"No, no, no. It was Lupe's."



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Colleen Cutschall. *A Victory Song*. 1982. Acrylic on canvas. Photo by Sandra De Sando. Taken from photographs of Lakota women in South Dakota in 1906. Colleen Cutschall, an artist and poet, helps run the only Native American art gallery in South Dakota.

# PLAIN ENGLISH BY NELLIE WONG

Plain English is not the flatlands, not doughnuts
with holes intact. When we speak plainly in poetry
it is not to say we deflower the English language,
its richness, its golden light.

When an Asian American speaks
when a Black American speaks
when a Native American speaks
when a Latin American speaks
he sings, she sings the language
of cultures, of songs and festivals
and bells and rhythms and dialects
of ancestors long buried but alive.

Why a poem, why not an essay?
Ah, but you see, we write poems in our essays
and essays in our poems.
We do not confuse the form from the content.
We fuse them, see threads of silk and cord intertwine.
We make love in the heart of sense
in the abdomen of pain and struggle
in the eyes that see clarity
in the roar and dancing of lions.

If you say that I am being ethnic
If you say that I am being reductionist
If you say that I am being limited
I say no, I do not consent
to your reducing me, my language, my learning, my life.
I say no, I resist
what white America has taught me
to obey its standards of beauty
because beauty is
the mountain in our eyes
because beauty is
the glow of our yellow, black and brown skins
and if we dance what you've never seen,
we say, "we are, we are."

So we must gather
we who are golden
we who are women, we who are men
we who are artists, poets, writers, singers, dancers,
to breathe this air fresh as fall chrysanthemums
even in the din, the momentary silences
the pollution of cigarette smoke.

We remove ourselves several hours each week
to gather our strengths, to forget racism,
a tool of oppression, a stranglehold
and we see our lives in new movements
in language of our making, our mothers' and fathers'
We venerate what we have rejected.
Call it heritage. Call it love. Call it what you will.

Plain English is not the flatlands, not the void
of human existence. Plain English is the love
we feel for ourselves, our sisters and brothers.
It is what we learn now to unlearn
the self-hatred of the colors of our skins,
our women's bodies, our brains, our hands
boxing shadows into the light
to talk to you with our whole selves
our lives hanging there on the laundry lines,
blowing in the winds in all colors that fly
in this land we call Gum Sahn, Gold Mountain, America.

If we see colors other than red, white and blue
do not accuse us of being unpatriotic
do not say we came to America to steal its gold
do not say we do not belong
for our generations prove you wrong
for our history in slavery, exclusion, incarceration.
We sing in plain English
to understand the richness of our struggles
not to blend in a melting pot
but to see the dignity and elegance
of our people
who seek to rise
and feel the sun on their backs, their faces
to seek our rights to speak out
and not be silenced by a gun,
by censorship, by ignorance.

Physical death is no monster.
Cultural genocide snakes around our necks
and until we loosen free
until you hear us
as we've heard you
until you see our backs break
we will sing in plain English
flowering from our own tongues.

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Nellie Wong, a poet and writer living in Oakland, has published *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park* (Kelsey Street Press).

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# SOME PERSONAL NOTES ON RACISM AMONG THE WOMEN

## BY DONNA ALLEGRA

In some circuits, Black women have become valuable commodities on the social scale. As feminism has become respectable and Black women criticize white women on their racism, a lot of whites want to prove it's just not so. They invite us to submit articles, perform, read, or speak on panels. This has brought about a relatively new situation in my life—whites coming to me, asking for input.

Once I welcomed being in this position; often I went for it. I consciously figured on getting across as a token. That position would be my point of entry to places where white racism would ordinarily have left me out of the program. Now, with a Black women's community to live and work in, white structures are not so appealing. I look back with bitterness at whites whose dealings with me were not based on who I am, but on what I look like: a Black woman to fit into their program.

It was a real disservice when white women looked at me, saw the Black, and greeted me with eagerness because of a hidden agenda. It took a while before I realized it wasn't my charm and personal magnetism that was operating—I've got a big ego and I'm a slow learner. How bitterly I remember the white women who took me in as a token and how bitterly I remember myself going for the bait—hook, line, and sinker. I want to be treated as an individual, not seen with awe and fear as someone's dream nightmare. I want to be seen as a person who wants to do a job for reasons not unlike their own: a person subject to pride, fear, greed, anger, ambition, high ideals, willingness, trust, and love, like themselves. Instead, many see me as a "Third World" woman to be used to make a project look good if I act right.

I feel a personal shame for having been willing to be that statistic or chocolate chip in the sea of white cookie. From that token's position, I tried to take myself somewhere, but doubted underneath that I could have gotten in on my own merit, not being sure of my place in the structure. That's the legacy I inherited from the perverted relationship where some whites looked good practicing tokenism and I was willing to let them get over through me. I was left not knowing where I really stood with them, trying to figure out what they thought I was, and then trying to be that so I could do what I wanted to do in service of who I really was.

Once I looked with trust to the feminist option. It was the minority viewpoint I would read and hunger after and identify with. I appreciate that there is a women's community with networks and publications, and that we do share a general point of view. With feminism established as a part of the current order, some things are easier for me, but elements of the old ways do continue to take on new forms. Now that a feminist angle is being targeted into cigarette commercials, I feel ripped off all over again. In a like manner, Black is "hip"—well, not so hip anymore. More accurately, now white women are supremely sensitive to being accused of racism and try to avoid the word like the plague; it makes their shit turn to water if anyone even thinks the word in their direction. Now that they are conscious of Black women who come out with such very hip analysis and delivery, many of them want to hold onto us.

I resent feeling that they want us around for the power of our image: picture a handsome, angry Black woman on the cover of many a magazine that ever so rarely deals with a Black viewpoint. So many women who are talking about racism are more concerned about public relations than they are with gut-level sisterhood. They want us so that they don't have to feel uncomfortable should any Blacks call them on the question, or should any other whites get into the game of reminding their sisters that there are no women of color in evidence. Real reconstruction is bypassed. It's easier to opt for the cosmetic treatment. This is like being a nice girl. You smile at anyone who smiles at you and you don't dislike anyone because that's the way you've been brought up. But the truth of it all is that only by trading honest viewpoints can people negotiate and work out frank differences.

White women deny that they seek out women of color because pressure has been put on them. These white women are almost trained to respond with a politically correct manner when they're questioned. If some of them would acknowledge resentment or that they are bewildered that they can't seem to do anything right by Black women anymore, some truth could emerge that'd free us on all sides. But so many are afraid to come from anything other than masks of good behavior.

Yet I know now when whites are running from me, trying to deflect any confrontations they fear I will want to bring into play. I can tell by their aggression on the subjects of race and racism—as though it were outside of them somehow, or as if by giving an appropriate nod to guilt, blame, and responsibility in a politically correct stance, they'll be safe from the anger they seem to expect from me. They are ill at ease and run from a feeling of discomfort that they project onto me. When whites beat their breasts and talk about what's being done to the poor darkies, they are still taking the missionary position and fucking Black people.

I have yet to hear white women talk about Black women as people, as individuals they like or dislike. In the conversations I have heard, we are either "heroic," "surviving," or "triply oppressed." They'll urge sympathy on us for Black men's purported sexism or condemn white men as a class group, but never voice a criticism of Black women. It makes me wonder. When a white woman assumes I'd be interested in something just because I'm a Black person, I withdraw one giant step inside. I'm dismayed when I see women at concerts or poetry readings knowing how to clap in all the right places and saying a nervous "yeah"—as if by verbal affirmation of Black women's performance their guilt can be discharged and penance done so blame is deflected from them.

Today, white women see a lot of Black women who want to give their energy solely to Black women rather than deal with whites. I imagine white women often don't know what to do and feel perplexed. A good number of Black women don't want to be bothered teaching or working with them because whites aren't as innocent in their racism as they put out. Others get mad at whites for trying to include Black people. It seems like you're damned if you do and damned if you don't—so what's a poor little white girl to do?

This thinking is, of course, not leading to the real truth. I think the answer to the seeming paradox is for the white women to do their own consciousness-raising and examine what they come up with among themselves. The working out of racist attitudes is process work for white women to do for themselves, with one another. Once they can see themselves through the rough stuff, they will actually be freer and truer to themselves. I appreciate that kind of honesty in an individual more than a correct line. Honesty is something I sense, can open up to and trust. Race differences are real, but they're not everything. We work out our real differences from honesty.

But after they've done their own CR, I hope these whites don't come to me for a stamp of approval. I'm having a hard enough time dealing with my own stuff and hoping my women will give me the pats on the back I crave. I don't think many Black women are going to credit whites for doing their own homework. Whites seem to want this at some level and when it doesn't come, they feel pissed and neglected. Well, that's not enough for Black women who have other concerns and don't want to play nanny in any mode. I've been brought up to feel I should be grateful for every little bit of progress, but I frankly do get angry at white women who are actively trying to deal with their racism and the new trips they lay on me in their growth process. Those white women who aren't so anxious and eager to clean up their acts and attitudes around race are the ones I can have friendships with. It's a tricky balance to find, but I think the important personal quality I respond to is honesty.

What is going on with all our concerns about racism is, indeed, change. There is a willingness among some white women to do some work, but the transformation isn't complete yet. Racist attitudes linger because the job isn't all the way done. People who haven't seen that change is possible can't wholeheartedly believe in it. If they haven't lived it in their personal lives, it's hard to see change in political terms. It won't all come together in one fell swoop. After the major reconstruction, there will be corners to straighten out and the maintenance work will be a day-to-day job. But this is Life Work. Any attempt to make it better can only come to good.

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Donna Allegra, a NYC poet and writer, produces programs for WBAI (radio).

The piece on the facing page is by Janet Henry, an artist living, breathing, and ruminating in NY.

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# OBJECT INTO SUBJECT: SOME



Danese Cattaneo. *Black Venus*. Mid-16th c. Bronze. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In my room there is a postcard of a sculpture by the Venetian artist Danese Cattaneo, done in the mid-16th century—*Black Venus*. The full-length nude figure is bronze. In one hand she holds a hand-mirror in which she is looking at herself. On her head is a turban, around the edges of which her curls are visible. In her other hand she carries a cloth—or at least what appears to be a cloth. Who was she? A slave? Perhaps in the artist's own household, or maybe that of his patron—one of the many Black women dragged from Africa to enter the service of white Europeans. I have no idea who she actually was: she was an object, then as now.

Around this image are other images of Black women: Bernadette Powell, who killed the man who beat her and is now in Bedford Hills; Fannie Lou Hamer; Billie Holiday; Elizabeth Freeman, who sued for her freedom and won it, in Massachusetts in the 19th century; Josephine Baker; Harriet Tubman, portrayed in a linocut by Elizabeth Catlett; women students making basket furniture at the Hampton Institute; Lucy Parsons; Ida B. Wells-Barnett; Audre Lorde; Phillis Wheatley; two women in Botswana seated around a gourd; Sojourner Truth; women in the Black Liberation Movement in England; Betye Saar's Aunt Sally HooDoo; a girlchild balancing a basin on her head in southern Africa.

My moving toward the study of the work—written and visual—of Black women has been a moving toward my own wholeness. My interest in this work is a deeply personal interest, because through these words and images I begin to capture part of who I am.

I should begin with my title—"Object into Subject." What does it mean? We live in a society whose history is drenched in the philosophy and practice of racism, the oppression of Black and other Third World peoples. This is the point at which my definition begins: If you study racism—if you understand the history of the United States—you will find that under racism the person who is oppressed is turned into an object in the mind of the oppressor.

The white anti-racist southern writer Lillian Smith was among the first to offer a metaphysical and psychological explanation of racism as a personal and political American practice.[1] One essential to the maintenance of things as they are in this society. Smith—whose influences included Kierkegaard, Jung, Freud, and Sartre—traced the origins of racism, and its more apparent manifestation, segregation, to that place in the human mind she called "mythic": that place where dreams, fantasies, and images begin; where they continue and take form as art, literature, politics, religion. The mythic mind is a source of psychic energy—it contributes the motion necessary for sustained thought. But the mythic mind needs a structure in which to function, so that its products will be understood. This structure is provided by reason. Reason, Smith argued, is merely a technic, an enabler; its sole purpose is to create the form which will support the ideas moving out of the mythic mind. Reason is incapable of moral judgment, and therefore will support any idea or image, regardless of its moral basis.

When the mythic idea of whiteness, the obsession with skin color which is the irrational and immoral basis of racism, is given a construct from which the myth takes its form—i.e., the philosophy of white supremacy—the result is cultural or institutionalized racism, contained in the politics, literature, art, and religion of the dominant culture. An insane idea now exists within a reasonable reality, not an irrational dream.

Whatever we may feel about Smith's analysis, or her sources for that matter, her treatment of American racism as something embedded in the white mind, regenerating itself within a psychological construct, is extremely important. She recognized early on the character of racism as in a sense "larger than life," something which could not be removed by congressional legislation or Supreme Court decisions, unless these actions were the result of a completely radicalized mindset within the dominant culture. I think that the resurgence of white racism in this country today bears witness to her understanding.

Within the rationale reason lends to racism, Smith argued, is the practice of objectification, an absolute necessity in the racist effort to oppress. (I use the word "effort" because it is and has been so; one which has been carried on on every level of this society, against constant, historic opposition.) Through objectification—the process by which people are dehumanized, made ghostlike, given the status of Other—an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition, self-realization; and overarching all this, denied selfhood—which is after all the point of objectification. A group of human beings—a people—are denied their history, their language, their music. Their cultural values are ignored. This history, this language, this music, these values exist in the subculture, but in the dominant culture only certain elements are chosen, recast, co-opted, and made available to the definition of these people. And these elements presented by the dominant culture tend to serve the purpose of objectification and, therefore, oppression.



Francis Benjamin Johnston. *Students Making Barrel Furniture at Hampton Institute*. 1900.

The practice of objectification stands between all Black people and full human identity under the white supremacist system: racism re-



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# THOUGHTS ON THE WORK OF BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS

## BY MICHELLE CLIFF

quires that Black people be thought different from white; and this difference is usually translated as less than. This requirement has been stated in various ways throughout the history of America. Did you know, for example, that Thomas Jefferson held the popular view that the Black race was created when Black women mated with orangutans?[2] (I do not know where the original Black women were supposed to have come from.)

Last October on my local PBS station I watched the film *Birth of a Nation*, introduced by a rather hearty film buff as an American classic, the work of a "tragic poet." I had never seen the movie, nor had I read the book *The Clansman*, upon which it is based. I felt I "had to watch it." The first thing I noticed was that all the Black characters were portrayed by white actors in "blackface." Throughout the film the thing most evident to me was that this was a playing-out of a white American's image of Black people, crude and baroque to be sure, but not that far removed from *Gone with the Wind* (another American classic), or even from such white-inspired television programs as "The Jeffersons." If anything, the very coarse brutality of *Birth of a Nation* is closer to the history of the slavocracy than perhaps any other American film. I could see as I watched this film how white people were capable of committing both the acts of the slave period and the lynchings which flourished during Reconstruction and thereafter. D. W. Griffiths's imaginings of Black women and men attempted to justify this history by replacing a people with the fantasies of his tragically racist mind. The very title gives his intention away.

The playwright and activist Lorraine Hansberry, in her essay "The New Paternalists," observed:

> America long ago fell in love with an image. It is a sacred image, fashioned over centuries of time: this image of the unharried, unconcerned, glandulatory, simple, rhythmic, amoral, dark creature who was, above all else, a *miracle of sensuality*. It was created, and it persists, to provide a personified pressure valve for fanciful longings in [white] American dreams, literature, and life. . . . I think, for example, of that reviewer writing in a Connecticut newspaper about *A Raisin in the Sun*. . . and marvelling, in the rush of a quite genuine enthusiasm, that the play proved again that there was a quaint loveliness in how our "dusky brethren" can come up with a song and hum their troubles away. It did not seem to disturb him one whit that there is no single allusion to that particular mythical gift in the entire play. He did not need it there; it was in his head.[3]

Just as this white reviewer could hear Black people humming as he watched Hansberry's play, others could declare it a play about insurance money, one which proved that all Black people really wanted was to live alongside whites. Many white people perceived the ending of *Raisin* as "happy," unaware perhaps of what it meant for a Black family to move into a white neighborhood in Chicago in the post-World War II years. Did any of these white people know of Hansberry's own childhood experience when her family moved into a white Chicago neighborhood? The response to this move was white violence: the eight-year-old Hansberry had a brick thrown through her bedroom window by the white mob. Her father, supported by the NAACP, took the case all the way to the Supreme Court and established a precedent for nondiscriminatory housing—but nothing in Chicago actually changed.

If anything, the ending of *Raisin* is hopeful, not happy. And the hopefulness one feels derives not from any expectation of a white change-of-heart, but from the fact that Hansberry has tested her characters throughout the play and they have emerged as people of integrity, capable of facing reality and white racism. She was, I think, attempting to create Black characters who would disrupt white imagery of Black people. But many in her audience could only see these characters through their own screen of objectification.

It is objectification that gives the impression of sanity to the process of oppression. The centuries-old image of which Hansberry speaks, actually a collection of images, is necessary to maintain racism. To hate with no justification for hatred, to oppress with no reason for oppression, would be recognizably insane. Once an object is provided—an object endowed by the oppressor with characteristics that allow hatred, that allow oppression—then hatred and oppression of the object can be defended as logical. An insane idea has been made rational. Lillian Smith portrayed this basic insanity of segregation in the South she knew:

> As I sit here writing, I can almost touch that little town, so close is the memory of it. There it lies, its main street lined with great oaks, heavy with matted moss that swings softly even now as I remember. A little white town rimmed with Negroes, making a deep shadow on the whiteness. There it lies, broken in two by one strange idea. Minds broken in two. Hearts broken. Conscience torn from acts. A culture split into a thousand pieces. That is segregation. I am remembering: a woman in a mental hospital walking four steps out, four steps in, unable to go any further because she has drawn an invisible line around her small world and is terrified to take one step beyond it. . . . A man in a Disturbed Ward assigning "places" to the other patients and violently insisting that each stay in his place.[4]

"Segregation," for Smith, described a phenomenon deeper than legal statute or town custom. She saw segregation as a form of dichotomizing within the white Western male tradition. She observed, for example, that white women are segregated from Black women and also objectified within the dominant culture:

> Another split took place. . . . Somehow much in the white woman that [man] could not come to terms with, the schizophrenic split he had made in her nature—the sacred madonna and the bitch he had created of her—could now be projected, in part, onto another female: under slavery, he could keep his pure white "madonna" and have his dark tempestuous "prostitute." . . . Back of southern people's fear of giving up segregation is this fear of giving up the "dark woman" who has become a symbol which the men no longer wish to attach to their own women.[5]

Smith's observation is important: White and Black women were/are both objectified and split from one another. I feel that Smith oversimplified the split, however. For example, the sacred madonna, in order to maintain her status (and most often she was intent on maintaining her status), had to objectify the Black woman according to the white male imagination. The white woman on the slave plantation knew that white men used rape against Black women. She knew that Black women were for the most part fieldhands, working alongside men—when they were pregnant, when they were nursing. The Black woman was made into a sex object, yes, but Smith's use of the word "prostitute," even in quotes, suggests more choice than any slave woman ever had. It also denies or glosses over the use of rapism by white men against Black women as an instrument of terror, of oppression.

Black women have been doubly objectified—as Black, as women; under white supremacy, under patriarchy. It has been the task of Black woman artists to transform this objectification: to become the *subject* commenting on the meaning of the object, or to become the subject rejecting the object and revealing the *real* experience of being. In her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker ponders the degree of difficulty faced by a Black woman in the United States with artistic ambition: "What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmothers' day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood."[6]

In her novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison makes the following observation about the seemingly destructive nature of her main character:

> In a way, her strangeness, her naiveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.[7]

Sula's tragedy, and the tragedy she represents, *is* "cruel enough to stop the blood." Because of her race, perhaps also because of her sex, she has been shut out from art and denied access to art forms. She is an intelligent, thinking woman, who ultimately has nowhere to go.

The objectification of Black women has taken many forms: The Mammy, Mama—wetnurse, midwife, cook—usually large, usually dark, combining humility and capability. The temptress, sex-object, whore—sometimes mulatto (from the Latin for mule, i.e., a creature unable to reproduce herself)—misbegotten and tragic, the power of the master coursing through her powerless veins. These are but two examples which recur in white Western literature and art. And these have been repeated by white women as well as white men. There is, of course, "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*; and there is Julie, the woebegone quadroon in Edna Ferber's *Showboat*. Another novel, *Imitation of Life* by Fanny Hurst, attempts to "deal with" both Mammy and mulatto.

By many accounts, Fanny Hurst was a well-intentioned liberal. Much has been made, for example, of the fact that she employed Zora Neale Hurston as her secretary in 1925. But some of that history suggests Hurst's insensitivity to Hurston's identity as a Black woman, not to mention a brilliant novelist and writer, among whose subjects was the self-definition of Black women. On one occasion Hurst, intent on integrating a restaurant in Vermont, prevailed upon Hurston to

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Michelle Cliff is the author of a forthcoming novel, *Abeng*, and co-editor of *Sinister Wisdom*.



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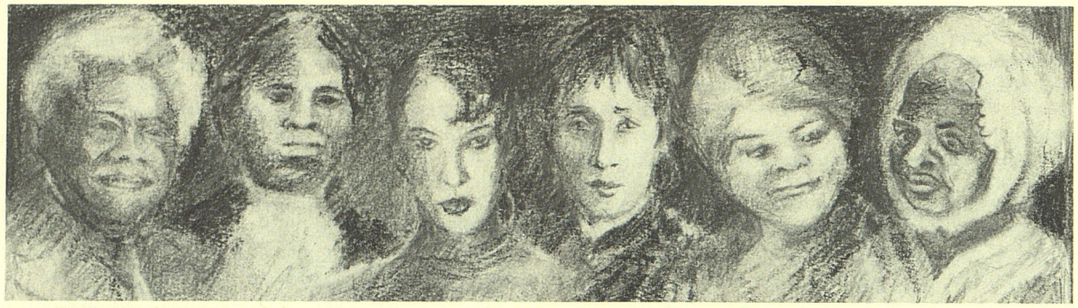

Drawing by Vivian E. Browne. *Left to right*: Mary McLeod Bethune, Harriet Tubman, Josephine Baker, Lucy Parsons, Ida B. Wells, Elizabeth Freeman.

accompany her—passing Hurston off as an "African princess." Hurston remarked, "Who would have thought that a good meal could be so bitter." [8] In this incident Hurst, the would-be liberator, reveals herself as objectifier. This phenomenon occurred over and again during the Civil Rights Movement. It was most commonly expressed in the notion that unless Black people behaved in certain ways, allowing whites to oversee and control their access to liberation, that liberation would not be achieved. What is present is the need for whites to maintain power, and limit the access of Black people to that power, which, finally, is the power of self-definition.

*Imitation of Life*, published in 1933, concerns the relationship between two dyads: a white woman and her daughter and a Black woman and her daughter. Both pairs are essentially alone in the world. The Black woman, Delilah, is hired to run the house by the white woman, Miss B., who has been recently widowed. Delilah carries with her various recipes, and these prove to be the "salvation" of Miss B. and family. In a relatively short time, Miss B. is the proprietor of a chain of restaurants in which Delilah's food is the main attraction, and which are recognized by a likeness of Delilah on the sign. When Miss B. hits on the idea of photographing Delilah as the advertising gimmick for the enterprise, she dresses Delilah as a chef. Delilah, faithful servant throughout the book, in this one instance asks her employer not to humiliate her but to allow her to wear her best clothes.

Miss B., however, prevails. Hurst describes the final result: "Breaking through a white background, as through a paper-covered hoop, there burst the chocolate-and-cream effulgence that was Delilah." [9] Here is Aunt Jemima; the female server of Sanka; even Mrs. Butterworth, whose color literally pours forth. Here is an instance of the brainchild of a Black woman, her recipe, her art form, passed through generations of Black women, co-opted and sold, with a caricature of the artist used to ensure its success.

In and around the main theme of the novel—the "success" of Miss B. as an "independent businesswoman"—is the subplot concerning Delilah's light-skinned daughter, Peola—unable to be white, unwilling to be Black, in the course of her dilemma denying her mother. Peola moves west, works as a librarian, passes for white, and marries a white man. She has herself "sterilized," eliminating any chance of "throwback." Her husband is also mutilated, having lost part of a hand. Perhaps he is all she is entitled to. Delilah has the final say: "Black women who pass, pass into damnation."

Taken together, Delilah and Peola represent what George Frederickson has characterized as "soft" and "hard" stereotypes. [10] Bell Hooks also juxtaposes two stereotypes of Black women: Mammy and Sapphire.

> It is not too difficult to imagine how whites came to create the black mammy figure. . . . She was first and foremost asexual and consequently had to be fat (preferably obese); she also had to give the impression of not being clean so she was the wearer of a greasy dirty headrag; her too tight shoes from which emerged her large feet were further confirmation of her bestial cowlike quality. Her greatest virtue was of course her love for white folk which she willingly and passively served. . . . In a sense whites created in the mammy figure a black woman who embodied solely those characteristics they as colonizers wished to exploit. [11]

> As Sapphires, black women were depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful, in short all that the mammy was not. White men could justify their de-humanization and sexual exploitation of black women by arguing that they possessed inherent evil demonic qualities. . . . And white women could use the image of the evil sinful black woman to emphasize their own innocence and purity. [12]

To talk about the history of Black women in America, and of the various images I have mentioned, we must begin with the woman who was a slave. Who was she? How did she survive? How many of her did survive? What did she teach her children? What was her relationship to her husband? What were her options?

She could be lynched, beaten, tortured, mutilated, raped. She could have her children sold away from her. She was forbidden education. She was considered a beast of burden. She was subject to the white man's power and the white woman's powerlessness masking as whim. Her womb was a commodity of the slavemaster, and her childlessness, a liability of the slavemaster. She was not expected to love—but she did. She was not expected to run away—but she did. She was known to commit infanticide and induce abortion rather than have her child be a slave. She was known to commit acts of violence and rebellion—with magic, poison, force, even with spit. And she sometimes learned to read and write and sustain the art forms she had carried with her.

In 1960 Lorraine Hansberry was commissioned to write a play about slavery for national television. She wrote *The Drinking Gourd*, about a Black family and a white family under slavery. In it, as in *Raisin*, Hansberry attempted to contradict the myths about Black people and to recapture and recast history. Her play was never performed; it was judged "too controversial" by the network. Hansberry had described Lena Younger, her mother-figure in *Raisin*, as an "affirmation," as

> the black matriarch incarnate, the bulwark of the Negro family since slavery, the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she, who in the mind of the black poet scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create black diplomats and university professors. It is she, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, who drives the young on into the fire hoses. And one day simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery. Or goes out and buys a house in an all-white neighborhood where her children may possibly be killed by bricks thrown through the windows by a shrieking racist mob. [13]

With her mother-figure in *The Drinking Gourd*, Hansberry went further. Rissa, the slavemother, does what the Black mother-figure in white American mythology has never done: She, in effect, kills a white man (the "good" white man), and gives his guns to her children, after her son has been blinded for learning to read. The play ends as Rissa and her band of revolutionaries escape into the woods.

We know that Black women—mothers and nonmothers—have been intrinsic to the activism of Black history. There is the following story, for example, quoted by Angela Davis:

> She didn't work in the field. She worked at a loom. She worked so long and so often that once she went to sleep at the loom. Her master's boy saw her and told his mother. His mother told him to take a whip and wear her out. He took a stick and went out to beat her awake. He beat my mother till she woke up. When she woke up, she took a pole out of the loom and beat him nearly to death with it. He hollered, "Don't beat me no more, and I won't let 'em whip you."
>
> She said, "I'm going to kill you. These black titties sucked you, and then you come out here to beat me." And when she left him, he wasn't able to walk.
>
> And that was the last I seen of her until after freedom. She went out and got an old cow that she used to milk—Dolly, she called it. She rode away from the plantation because she knew they would kill her if she stayed. [14]



Drawing by Vivian E. Browne.

This story tells of a Black woman in the act of freeing herself. A selfish need for freedom, and a recognition that freedom is their right, is something usually denied to Black women historically, even when they are recognized as liberators of their race. But Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, Sojourner Truth—and the many women whose names we do not know—all felt a personal desire for freedom, which came from a feeling of self-esteem, self-worth, and they translated this into a political commitment that their people also be free. Harriet Tubman said:

> I looked at my hands to see if I was de same person now I was free. Dere was such a glory ober eberything, de sun came like gold trou de trees, and ober de fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.
>
> I had crossed de line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but dere was no one to welcome me to de land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in de ole cabin quarter, wid de ole folks, and my brudders and sisters. But to dis solemn resolution I came; I was free, and dey should be free also; I would make a home for dem in de North, and de Lord helping me, I would bring dem all dere. [15]

The artist, like the liberator, must begin with herself.

Edmonia Lewis (1843-1900?) is the first woman of color we know whose work as a visual artist was recognized by the dominant culture. During her life as a sculptor she was confronted with the objectification of herself as Black and female.



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While her work was not ignored, it was given a secondary place of importance by most critics. Lewis was seen as a "wonder," a work of art in herself—a curiosity. The following excerpt from an abolitionist newspaper describes the artist and her marble group *Forever Free* (1867):

> No one...could look upon this piece of sculpture without profound emotion. The noble figure of the man, his very muscles seeming to swell with gratitude; the expression of the right now to protect, with which he throws his arms around his kneeling wife; the "Praise de Lord" hovering on their lips; the broken chain—all so instinct with life, telling in the very poetry of stone the story of the last ten years. And when it is remembered who created this group, an added interest is given to it....Will anyone believe it was the small hand of a girl that wrought the marble and kindled the light within it? —a girl of dusky hue, mixed Indian and African, who not more than eight years ago sat down on the steps of City Hall to eat the dry crackers with which alone her empty purse allowed her to satisfy her hunger; but as she sat and thought...of her homeless state, something caught her eye, the hunger of the stomach ceased, but the hunger of the soul began. That quiet statue of the good old Franklin... kindled the latent genius which was enshrined within her, as her own group was in marble, till her chisel brought it out. For weeks she haunted that spot and the State House, where she could see Washington and Webster. She asked questions, and found that such things were first made in clay. She got a lump of hard mud, shaped her some sticks, and, her heart divided between art and the terrible need for freedom...she wrought out...an admirable bust of [Col. Robert Gould Shaw, white Bostonian commander of a company of Black troops organized due to pressure from Frederick Douglass].[16]

When this article was written Lewis was a well-known sculptor living in Rome, with a degree in liberal arts from Oberlin College. She had studied sculpture with Edward Brackett, a prominent neoclassical artist. She was not particularly interested in creating likenesses of Franklin, Washington, or Webster—her interest in these pieces would have been purely technical, not inspirational. The only "leader" of white America she ever depicted was Abraham Lincoln. All her other subjects were drawn from her history as the daughter of a Black man and a Chippewa woman, and her consciousness of racism.

Just as the author patronizes the artist, so does he minimize the political statement of her work. For instance, he uses the word "gratitude" rather than "pride," or "triumph," in his comments on the male figure; he focuses on the arm which embraces the woman, rather than on the hand which is raised, the broken chain dangling from the wrist. He cites the struggle of the last "ten" years with typical white solipsism. In addition, his "Praise de Lord" does not allow us knowledge of the politics of Black Americans, to which religion has been historically intrinsic. Rather, it can be read in such a way that the triumph is taken from the hands of those who have won it and placed somewhere "out there."

It is commonly believed that the slaves were freed by white Northerners. But as W. E. B. Du Bois observed: "In proportion to population, more Negroes than whites fought in the Civil War. These people, withdrawn from the support of the Confederacy, with the threat of the withdrawal of millions more, made the opposition of the slaveholder useless, unless they themselves freed and armed their own slaves."[17] The journey out of slavery was one in which Black people played a dominant role. It is this that Lewis is commemorating in her work. She had earlier commemorated the slave-woman in her piece *Freedwoman on First Hearing of Her Liberty* (which has been lost to us).

In an interview with the *Lorain County News*, Lewis spoke of her childhood:

> My mother was a wild Indian and was born in Albany, of copper color and with straight black hair. There she made and sold moccasins. My father, who was a Negro, and a gentleman's servant, saw her and married her....Mother often left home and wandered with her people, whose habits she could not forget, and thus we were brought up in the same wild manner. Until I was twelve years old, I led this wandering life, fishing and swimming... and making moccasins.[18]

Alice Walker speaks about looking "high—and low" for the artistic antecedents of Black women; she speaks specifically of her own mother's garden—how this was the place of her mother's creative expression, the background against which Walker's own work proceeded: "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden I found my own."[19] This statement makes me think of Lewis's mother, her independence and her craft. The fact that she trained her daughter in her art form. That she taught her strength.

Lewis's sculpture, because she chose primarily to depict subjects directly related to her own and her people's experience, has a certain power. Where her pieces lose power is in the style she adopted and the material she used: the neoclassical style, with its emphatic focus on Greek idealization, and the pristine whiteness of the marble, which supports the narrowness of the style—so that a black face must appear white and be carved according to principles of beauty which are white, "fine" features as perfection. The 19th century was the century of jubilee, of a women's movement, and of a revolutionary movement in Europe. But these moral reactions need to be understood against the immorality which dominated that century: the "white man's burden," the political/religious/economic affirmation of the supremacy of the white race. The neoclassical style arose quite naturally from all this, based as it was on the imitation of fifth-century Athens, a slave-owning, gynephobic society, but one popularly regarded as high-minded and democratic. In Lewis's *Forever Free* the limitations placed on a Black and Indian artist working in this style and with this material are evident: the curly hair of the male figure and the broken chain are the only signs that these are people of color.

Of her sculpture *Hagar* (1875), Lewis said: "I have a strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered."[20] Again, we have to look beyond the actual figure to the story Lewis is illustrating to find the political/historical statement in her work. Hagar was an Egyptian, a woman of color, the slave of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Hagar was "given" to Abraham by Sarah so that he might have an heir; and she was the mother of his first-born son, Ishmael. Then Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. The book of Genesis continues the story:

> Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the lad and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendents be named.... So Abraham rose early in the morning...and sent [Hagar] away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.[21]

It is quite impossible to read this story and not think of the Black woman under slavery, raped by the white master, serving the white master's wife, bearing a child by the white master, and bearing the responsibility for that child—with no power over her own fate, or that of her child. Lewis's choice of Hagar as a symbol for Black slave-women also fits into the Black tradition in America, one immersed in the stories of the Bible (often the Bible was the only access slaves had to the written word), and characterized by the translation of these stories according to Black history.

In reading this account from Genesis, I am also thrown back to Lillian Smith's description of the split between Black and white women. It is Sarah who is made responsible for the banishment of Hagar. Her husband and his god remain blameless, even noble.

After approximately ten years of recognition, Edmonia Lewis "disappeared." This sort of falling out of fame is usually seen as tragic, but I wonder what happened to her? Was her disappearance by choice? Or did she disappear because she was a Black woman artist who was no longer in vogue, because she was no longer seen as "exotic"?

In contrast to Lewis's white marble sculptures, Elizabeth Catlett's figures are done in brown wood or terra cotta, or another material which suggests the color of her subjects, or at least that her subjects are people of color. No white Western features replace the characteristics of Black and other Third World people. But Catlett is a contemporary artist, one who rela-



*Left to right*: Lillian Smith, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Phillis Wheatley.



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tively early in her career left this country and moved to a country of colored people—Mexico.

Yet her piece *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1969), when we make allowances over



Edmonia Lewis. *Hagar in the Wilderness*. 1896. Marble. 4'4" high. Frederick Douglass Institute, Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.

time and across space, is not that far removed in political intent from Lewis's *Hagar*. In form the differences are enormous: Hagar's hands are clasped in front of her, in resignation, in supplication—in the wilderness she has to turn to Abraham's god to save the life of her son. The female figure of *Homage* has one arm raised in a powerful and defiant fist. The similarity between the two pieces is that both, I think, represent part of the history of Black women, particularly Black motherhood, in America. The midsection of the *Homage* figure is an open space, which I take as Catlett's statement of the historical white denial of Black women's right to motherhood in any self-defining way, and of the theft of the children of Black women, and of what these children represent—whether through the laws of the slavocracy or those of postindustrial America.

Catlett uses the theme of Black women and children often in her work, depicting over and again the heroism required of Black women simply to survive. In her lithographs, engravings, and linocuts, Catlett seeks to tell the history of Black women, breaking away from the objectification of the dominant culture. We might, for example, look at her wood engraving of Harriet Tubman (1975), in contrast to Judy Chicago's Sojourner Truth plate in the *Dinner Party*.[22] Catlett's Harriet dominates the foreground; one powerful arm points forward, the other holds a rifle. She is tall and she is strong and she is Black. In the background are the men and women she leads. What is interesting to me is the expression on Tubman's face—she is fiercely determined. This expression is repeated in the group she leads. There is no passivity here, no resignation, no impotent tears, no "humming." Rather, this is a portrait of the activity of a people in conflict with their oppression.

Catlett has stated that art should be obviously political, available to the people who are its subject. We have no such clear statement from Lewis, but we must wonder for whom her work was done, finally; and whether she stopped working as she did because of a distance between her art and her subjects.

Harriet Powers (1837-1911) was a quilt-maker (only two of her quilts are known to survive). She worked in appliqué, a method of needlework devised by the Fon of Dahomey, brought to this country on slave ships.[23] Betye Saar is a collector; an artist who constructs images with various objects, mementos, photographs, bits and pieces picked up here and there and saved; things used in another context, by other hands. Both Powers and Saar endow their work with a belief in the spiritual nature of the ordinary. Powers's quilts, constructed from the scraps saved by a poor Black woman, convey a real portrait of one Black woman's religion and politics. Marie Jeane Adams states: "The more one examines the style and content of Harriet Powers's work, the more one sees that it projects a grand spiritual vision that breaks out of the confines of folk art."[24]

The employment of once-used objects by these artists is one aspect of their work which needs further thought. In the history of white Western art there is an obsession with the purity of materials. And also with their value. For one example: In the art of 15th-century Italy, and even earlier, the color ultramarine was often used to depict the most important figure or feature in a painting or fresco. This choice was made with the knowledge that the color was created by crushing lapis lazuli, the most expensive source of pigment after gold.[25] And this choice extended to the very meaning of the work produced. In the art of Powers and Saar, the sources of the artist's materials are also important, but the choice is more deeply personal. We might ask: How much does the power of a work of art consist in the material which makes up that work? What is the difference between a work of art made with things specifically employed in that work and never before, and one which uses only things used before? Is one more useful than the other? More magical than the other?

We know of Harriet Powers's work partly because of a white woman—Jennie Smith, herself an artist—who left an 18-page monograph on the artist. She recorded the following in 1891, when Powers finally agreed to sell her a quilt:

> I found the owner, a negro woman, who lived in the country on a little farm whereon she and her husband made a respectable living. . . . Last year I sent word that I would buy it if she still wanted to dispose of it. She arrived one afternoon in front of my door . . . with the precious burden . . . encased in a clean crocus sack.
>
> She offered it for ten dollars, but I told her I only had five to give. After going out consulting with her husband she returned and said, "Owin' to de hardness of de times, my old man 'lows I'd better teck hit." Not being a new woman she obeyed.
>
> After giving me a full description of each scene with great earnestness, she departed but has been back several times to visit the darling offspring of her brain.[26]

Powers's second quilt—now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts—was commissioned in 1898 by the wives of professors at Atlanta University. This quilt, known as the second Bible quilt, consists of five columns, each divided into three frames. All the frames deal with the theme of God's vengeance and redemption, illustrated through Biblical images and representations of cataclysmic events in 18th- and 19th-century America.

> This . . . much-exhibited quilt portrays fifteen scenes. Ten are drawn from familiar Bible stories which concern the threat of God's judgment inextricably fused with His mercy and man's redemption, among which are the Fall, Moses in the wilderness, Job's trials, Jonah and the whale, the Baptism of Christ and the Crucifixion. . . . Four others depict astronomical or meteorological events, only one of which, an extremely cold spell in 1895 in the eastern United States, occurred in Mrs. Powers' adult life. Given Mrs. Powers' intensely religious outlook, she interpreted these events in the celestial atmosphere as messages from God to mankind about punishment, apocalypse, and salvation.[27]

The one frame which does not fit into this categorization is the one which, as Marie Jeane Adams observes, is the key to the quilt. Powers left a description in her own words of all the scenes in the quilt; of this particular frame, she said:

> Rich people who were taught nothing of God. Bob Johnson and Kate Bell of Virginia. They told their parents to stop the clock at one and tomorrow it would strike one and so it did. This was the signal that they had entered everlasting punishment. The independent hog which ran 500 miles from Ga. to Va. Her name was Betts.[28]

The frame has a clock in the center, stars and a moon scattered around, two human figures. At the bottom is the independent hog named Betts, the largest figure of the quilt. Metallic thread outlines the clockface and creates a tiara around the head of the white woman Kate Bell. Betts is made from gray cloth, but she is placed over a



Harriet Powers. *Bible Quilt* (Detail). 1895. Cotton fabric. 68" x 105". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



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swatch of orange so that her figure unmistakably stands out.

This quilt represents a great spiritual vision, but it also represents a great political vision: as



Betye Saar. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. 1972. Mixed media. 11¾" x 8" x 2½". Courtesy Monique Knowlton Gallery.

well as hope, it represents rage. It is a safe guess that Bob Johnson and Kate Bell of Virginia were a son and daughter of the slavocracy. They stand surounded by scenes representing the punishment meted out to those who are arrogant and self-serving, and the redemption promised those who are righteous. In this particular frame it is their sin of pride which has damned them; and Powers is clear in her belief that their damnation is well-earned. In contrast is the dominating figure of Betts, who in an act of self-liberation goes free. Her 500-mile flight from Georgia to Virginia is, as Adams points out, a reference to one route traveled by runaway slaves. And Betts is undeniably female—her teats hang down from her gray-cloth body. I think of Dolly—the cow in the anecdote cited above—being ridden away by a Black woman. And I think of the white idea of Black women as beasts of burden, "mules," farm animals; of the image of Harriet Tubman being forced to draw a wagon for the entertainment of white folks. I take Betts to be a metaphor for this experience. Angela Davis has quoted Frederick Law Olmstead's description of a slave crew in Mississippi returning from the fields:

> [I saw] forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; they were all in a simple uniform dress of a bluish check stuff; their legs and feet were bare; they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing like chausseurs on the march.[29]

It would be very simple to romanticize this group of women. But, as Davis says, it is not slavery and the slave system that have made them strong; it is the experience of their labor and their knowledge of themselves as producers and creators. She quotes Marx: "labor is the living, shaping fire; it represents the impermanence of things, their temporality." Davis makes a brilliant connection here:

> . . . perhaps these women had learned to extract from the oppressive circumstances of their lives the strength they needed to resist the daily dehumanization of slavery. Their awareness of their endless capacity for hard work may have imparted to them a confidence in their ability to struggle for themselves, their families and their people.[30]

Black women were not dehumanized under slavery; they were dehumanized in white minds. I return again and again in my own mind to the adjective "independent," which Powers uses to describe Betts, a "chasseur on the march."

It is not that far a distance from Lewis's *Hagar*, to Catlett's *Homage*, to Powers's Betts, to Betye Saar's *Aunt Jemima*. Saar's construction, entitled *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, is perhaps the most obvious illustration of what I mean by the title of this essay: "Object into Subject." Here is the most popularized image of the Mammy—in the center of the piece she is a cookie jar, the source of nourishment for others; behind her are faces cut from the pancake mix. In front of the central figure is another image of Mammy, holding a white baby. And there is a broom alongside the central figure. But she also holds a pistol and a rifle; and the skirt of Mammy with the white baby forms an unmistakable Black fist. Saar's message is clear: Aunt Jemima will free herself.

In an interview in *Black Art*, Saar described the components she uses in her work:

> They are all found objects or discarded objects, so they have to be remnants. They are connected with another sensitivity so it has to be a memory of belonging to another object, or at least having another function.[31]

Aunt Jemima has been created by another sensitivity than that of the artist who has made this portrait. Aunt Jemima has a memory of belonging to someone else, of being at the service of someone else. She exists against an image, which exists in another mind. The cookie jar is a remnant of another life: most likely she "lived" on the kitchen counter of a white family, maybe Saar found her discarded on a white elephant table, or at a garage sale. She has appeared to me in my travels, usually turning up in rural antique stores or church basements, labeled "collectible." The picture of Mammy with the white baby reminds me first of old magazine advertisements, usually, as I recall, for soap or cereal or other necessities of the servant role. And I additionally recall the many films of the '40s and '50s about white middle-class America, in which a large Black woman who worked in the kitchen was always present but only occasionally given a line to speak. She was played by Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, or Ethel Waters—and she was usually characterized by her loyalty to the white family for whom she worked. She also appeared on television: "Beulah" was a program in which she was featured. She was kind, honest, a good cook, always with a song to hum her troubles away; and as usual, devoted to those white folks.

All but three of the elements in Saar's construction are traditional to Aunt Jemima; the two guns and the fist are not. Saar, by including these unfamiliar aspects has changed the function of the figure she is representing. She has combined the myth with the reality of Black women's historic opposition to their oppression.

This representation of Aunt Jemima is startling. All of us who have grown up with the mythical figure of Aunt Jemima and her equally mythical attributes—whether or not we recognized they were mythic—have been affected. We may not have known her, but aren't we somehow convinced that somewhere she exists, or at least has existed? The last thing we would expect would be that she would carry a gun, or raise a hand. As a child in Jamaica I was taught that the women who worked for us were to be respected and



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obeyed, and yet I remember my 12-year-old light-skinned self exercising what I felt was my authority over these women, and being quite taken aback when one of the women threatened to beat me—and my mother backed her up. Just as I was shocked to find that another houseworker had tied up my cousins and shut them on the verandah because they were interfering with her work.

So while we may know the image is an image, the expectations of Black women behaving according to this image persist. As far as I can tell, Harriet Tubman carried both a carbine and a pistol. And she threatened to shoot any slave who decided to turn back on the journey north. Just as Lorraine Hansberry's slavemother armed her children and set out with them—after leaving a white man to die.

1. For Lillian Smith's definition of racism, see "The Mob and the Ghost" and "Words That Chain Us and Words That Set Us Free," in *The Winner Names the Age*, ed. Michelle Cliff (New York: Norton, 1978).
2. Erlene Stetson, "Studying Slavery," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, & Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1981).
3. Lorraine Hansberry, quoted in *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 206.
4. Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: Norton, 1949), p. 31.
5. Smith, *Winner*, p. 204.
6. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *Working It Out*, ed. Sara Ruddick & Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 94.
7. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 105.
8. Quoted by Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 24.
9. Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1933), p. 105.
10. Although Frederickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind* deals primarily with stereotypes of Black men, with some alterations his categories apply to stereotypes of Black women.
11. Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston: South End, 1981), p. 84.
12. Ibid., p. 85.
13. Hansberry, *Winner*, p. 210.
14. Angela Davis, "The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* (1971), p. 13.
15. Quoted by Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: Moses of Her People* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel, 1974, rpt.), pp. 30-32.
16. Quoted by Phebe A. Hanaford, *Daughters of America* (Augusta, Me: True, n.d.), pp. 296-97.
17. Quoted by Sara Bennett & Joan Gibbs, "Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community," in *Top Ranking*, ed. Bennett & Gibbs (Brooklyn: February 3rd Press, 1980), pp. 14-15.
18. Quoted by Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage* (New York: Paddington, 1974), p. 159.
19. Walker, "Gardens," p. 101.
20. Tufts, *Heritage*, p. 163.
21. Genesis, 21: 9-14.
22. For a brilliant analysis of the Sojourner Truth plate in Chicago's *Dinner Party*, see Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own," in *But Some of Us are Brave*.
23. This detail, and most of the information about Powers and her quilt, comes from Marie Jeane Adams, "The Harriet Powers Pictorial Quilts," *Black Art*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 12-28.
24. Ibid., p. 16.
25. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 9 ff.
26. Quoted by Mirra Bank, *Anonymous Was a Woman* (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), p. 118.
27. Adams, "Powers," p. 14.
28. Mrs. Powers's description of the quilt appears in both Adams and Bank.
29. Davis, "Black Woman's Role," p. 11.
30. Ibid.
31. Betye Saar, "Interview with Houston Conwill," *Black Art*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 9.

# is it true what they say about colored pussy?

## by hattie gossett

**hey**
**is it really true what they say about colored pussy?**
**come on now**
**dont be trying to act like you dont know what i am talking about**
**you have heard those stories about colored pussy so stop pretending you havent**
**you have heard how black and latina pussies are hot and uncontrollable**
**and i know you know the one about asian pussies and how they go from side to side instead of up and down**
**and everybody knows about squaw pussies and how once a whiteman got him some of that he wasnt never no more good**
**now at first i thought the logical answer to these stories is that they are ignorant racist myths**
**but then i thought: what about all the weird colored stories about colored pussy?**
**cuz you know colored pussies werent always treated with the highest regard we deserve in the various colored worlds prior to our discovery by the european talentscout/explorers**
**and we still arent**
**so now why is it that colored pussies have had to suffer so much oppression and bad press from so many divergent sources?**
**is it cuz we really are evil and nasty and queer looking and smelly and ugly like they say?**
**or**
**is it cuz we possess some secret strength which we take for granted but which is a terrible threat to the various forces which are trying to suppress us?**
**i mean just look at what black pussies have been subjected to alone starting with ancient feudal rape and polygamy and clitoridectomy and forced child marriages and continuing right on through colonial industrial neocolonial rape and forced sterilization and experimental surgery**
**and when i put all that stuff about black pussies together with the stories i hear from other colored pussies about what they have had to go through i am even more convinced**
**we must have some secret powers!**
**this must be why so many people have spent so much time vilifying abusing hating and fearing colored pussy**
**and you know that usually the ones who be doing all this vilifying abusing hating and fearing of colored pussy are the main ones who just cant leave colored pussy alone dont you**
**they make all kinds of laws and restrictions to apartheid-ize colored pussy and then as soon as the sun goes down guess who is seen sneaking out back to the cabins?**
**and guess who cant do without colored pussy in their kitchens and fields and factories and offices?**
**then theres the people who use colored pussy as a badge of certification to ensure entre into certain circles**
**finally when i think about what would happen if all the colored pussies went on strike even for a day**
**look out!**
**[especially if the together white pussies staged a same day sympathy strike]**

**the pimps say colored pussy is an untapped goldmine**
**well they got it wrong**
**colored pussies aint goldmines untapped**
**colored pussies are yet un-named energies whose power for lighting up the world is beyond all known measure**

---

hattie gossett work herstory: babysitter paid companion secy cleaning person still seeking insightful and venturesome publisher for her collection *presenting sister noblues & the original wild & free wimmins jazz & blues desert caravan & fish fry.*



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Ana Mendieta. *Silueta Series*. 1980. Earth and grass, San Felipe del Agua, Mexico. Life-size. Cuban artist Ana Mendieta has been making earth-body sculptures since 1973. She exhibits at A.I.R. Gallery in NYC.

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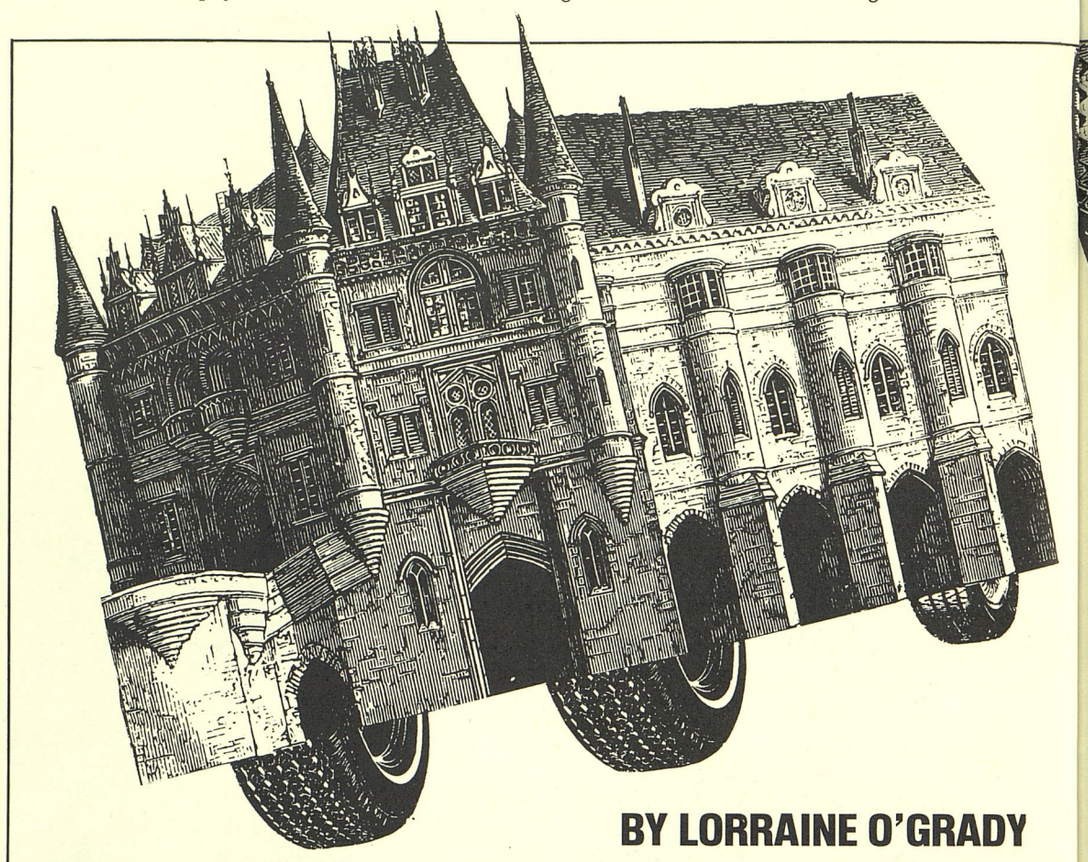

BY LORRAINE O'GRADY

# BLACK DREAMS

"Which would you guess was the biggest category?" I said as I handed my new black woman therapist the organization chart I'd made of nine months' worth of dreams.

I'd finally located her in September. Even in New York it hadn't been easy. Only one percent of the therapists in America are black, and I'd spent July and August going to one white therapist after another who'd ask the standard question: "Why have you come into therapy?" When I was too embarrassed to answer directly, they'd accuse me of being an aesthete, of wanting to take a symbolic journey in self-discovery.

There was the estrangement from my son, of course. But even if I'd been able to talk about it, I couldn't have placed it in its deepest perspective by describing the spectre standing behind not just my problems with motherhood, but those with my family, sex, and my artistic persona. With these male and female white therapists I couldn't break out of the defense I'd adopted toward the whole white world, the mystique that everything was all right, that *I* had no racial problems. Even when I trusted their capacity for empathy, I couldn't talk to them about the subtle identity problems of a fair-skinned black woman, born and raised in Boston at a time when "social" blacks (the families who sent their children to Ivy League schools) were still trying to be white.

Meanwhile, shopping for a therapist was becoming expensive. Jung had said that series of dreams were far more informative than dreams taken singly, and since I'd begun collecting my dreams at the beginning of the year, I now had nearly 150. To save time and money I decided to organize them. At the end of August, after saying goodbye to my last white therapist, I took my journal to Martha's Vineyard and arranged the dreams into 24 categories with names like *Upstairs/Balconies* and *Downstairs/Basements*, *Papa*, *Mama*, *Devonia* (my sister), *Sex*, *Art*, *Fear of Ending Up Alone*, and *Blacks/Racial Attitudes*.

The results were startling. The *Blacks/Racial Attitudes* series was the largest, with roughly 30 dreams containing the motif, 10 more than the next largest series. I knew I'd been kidding myself, as well as white people, about the extent of my problem, but seeing it statistically tabulated like this unnerved me.

The black women psychiatrist, Vassar-educated and 10 years older than me, looked over the list. "I don't want to guess which category contains the most dreams, Lorraine, because I don't know you. But," she hesitated, "experience would lead me to...could it be *Blacks/Racial Attitudes*?"

On Thursday, August 20, I was feeling depressed about Reagan, and paranoid about the fascism lying in wait just below the surface of the country. In my worst-case fantasies, the dragon breaks out and, as in Nazi Germany, gobbles up those closest at hand: assimilated blacks first.

That afternoon I wrote in my art journal a proposal for an installation to be called *Walter Benjamin Memorial Piece* (*A Black Intellectual Gets Ready in Time*), with a wall plaque containing the following quote:

> On September 26, 1940, Walter Benjamin, who was about to emigrate to America, took his life at the Franco-Spanish border. The Gestapo had confiscated his Paris apartment, which contained his library (he had been able to get "the more important half" out of Germany) and many of his manuscripts. How was he to live without a library? How could he earn a living without the extensive collection of quotations and excerpts among his manuscripts? (Hannah Arendt)

Mounted on three dry walls was to be a life-sized photo reproduction of my library alcove (the shelves contain 3,000 volumes). In the center of the alcove, my actual desk, extremely cluttered, a typing table and chair, and scattered about on the floor, a jumble of packing crates with labels not yet filled in.

That night I had the following black dreams. I made the journal responses a couple of months later and gave them, together with the dreams, to the black woman psychiatrist.

**Dream 1 THE INTERNMENT CAMP**

A prison camp, like the Nazi concentration camps or Nisei internment camps of World War II. Fifteen or 16 people have been rounded up from the general prison population to be specially tortured. No rhyme or reason to the selection, just the private hatreds and prejudices of the guard, a small-boned, rat-faced Hispanic male about 35 years old.

Men and women, mostly white, but one or two blacks, including me. As a whole, an intellectual group. Forced to sit in straight-backed chairs, four or five to a row, facing rigidly front. I am in the front row. The rat-faced Hispanic guard paces back and forth, issuing peremptory commands at unpredictable moments.

Kept in this position for days, without sleep, without food, without being able to get up and stretch our legs. Soon the chairs are covered with shit, the place begins to stink. But somehow everyone manages to keep themselves looking presentable. This group has pride. As a result, when the international inspection team comes through, they don't think we're really being tortured.

"Do you see that?" I say, pointing to the back of the chair. Draped over the wooden slats are dripping pieces of intestine where even I had expected there to be just shit. "Do you see that?" I say. "That's *me*."

Perhaps this is what finally convinces the inspection team. We are released back into the general prison population. When I pass the rat-faced guard, who'd had a special thing against me (I really set him off in some way), his face glazes over as if he didn't recognize me.

"Shit. So that's the way it's going to be," I say to myself. "We're going to pretend that it didn't happen, that it never really was."

Needless to say, this pisses me no end. It's a pattern I recognize only too well, and this time I'm determined not to play along with that game. I'm getting the hell out of there.

**Response:**

No matter who revolts against whom, I won't be safe. If the whites decide to quarantine, or if the blacks and the browns rise up, there I am. In the middle.

Driving to work with my boss, Alice Shurtcliff, a Brahman from Boston's Beacon Hill, but now my neighbor in the fluid Dupont Circle area. She talks about buying a co-op in a more exclusive part of Washington. It is the early '60s. The new apartment has "reasonable resale restrictions, of course."

"How many rooms will you have?" I ask, and

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Lorraine O'Grady, a NYC performance artist, teaches literature at the School of Visual Arts.



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the car does not explode.

Back from Europe, temporarily teaching in an inner-city high school. Valerie, a 16-year-old shy beauty, my pet, arrives one morning, eyes swollen, red with tears. She's been assaulted by a white male customer outside the restaurant where she has to work midnights after school.

"What do you know?" she hisses at me as I try to put my arm around her to console her. "The way you live, the way you look. What do you know about being black?"

Marty, my beautiful Jew, my big love, after two years of mutual fantasizing about permanent commitment, announces: "I just don't want to marry a . . ." He can't even say the words.



Carr

Later I see him at a party with his not very attractive French-Canadian wife. We smile and chat.

This time, though, I am not going to play along. I vow to get the hell out of there. But what will I do when I leave? Will I avoid and sublimate, or will I revolt? Against whom?

**Dream 2 THE FUTURIST DREAM**

I am alone, walking across an empty lot. When I get to the main street, I don't know where I am. The people coming toward me look unfamiliar. They are dressed strangely, heterosexual couples joined inside sarongs of colorful cotton wrapped three times around the women and once around the men, leaving each room enough to move.

As I continue, I realize I have walked into the future. I am on a narrow business street, like the kind they have in Copenhagen. Music is issuing from the steeple of a bank. Phenomenal Latin jazz. I'm amazed: You mean the future has good taste? I go indoors and find myself in a private living room. People are sitting in intimate attitudes, talking, reading, playing solitaire. The decor is dark red, faintly Middle Eastern, and reminds me of the apartment Marinetti described in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.*

I sit down at one end of a couch in front of a coffee table. At the other end, a small black man plays chess by himself. When he looks up, he is quite taken with me. As I get up to leave, he offers to take me home.

I say, "No. Someone is going to be there."

As I say this, I seem to half-believe that someone *will* be there. But when I'm walking down the stairs, I realize I've only told this man no because he was black, and that the man I'm hoping to have home is white, but he won't be there.

When I get outside, I'm in a back alley. A cab is standing there. I have a feeling that someone else wants it and I have to rush. I run over, open the front door quickly, and throw a piece of fruit (a pear) down on the seat to claim the cab. Then I open the rear door. Before I can get in, I am shoved aside. I am pushed away by a large white man, with a large white wife, and several stupid-looking kids—real middle-American types. He has taken my pear and tossed it on the ground, and thrown a greasy, airy sugar donut down on the seat instead. Somehow I end up with this donut as the consolation prize. As the cab drives away, I look down at the donut in disgust.

**Response:**

Passing a mirror in the company of a man, a sudden clear glimpse of what I've become. The more independent and self-validating, the more like Mama and my West Indian aunts, turning men into children by waiting on them like slaves. The deeper I get into my career, the more simply convenient men are for me.

In the future I see men and women yoked, not like the undivided parts of Plato's androgyne, but in a *shammah,* the shawl Ethiopian women wrap around their shoulders and carry their infants in.

What does it matter that Latin jazz is blasting from the steeples of European banks? What difference does taste make in Erewhon? *Plus ça change, plus la même chose.* I have brought the past with me, and so have all the people playing solitaire.

The slightly-built jazz musician with a limp who takes me to lunch, without asking me a single question about myself, talks non-stop about his hatred of white people. The famous black judge takes me to dinner and tells me of the day when, a senior in high school, the dean of the Ivy League college denied him the scholarship he'd already won on seeing that he was black. Then he says: "I can't imagine that you'd ever find a black man interesting, either intellectually or aesthetically." I decide that black men of a certain age are carrying a heavier burden than I can cope with.

But I already know the white man won't be there, that he won't bring me *that* protection.

And something must be wrong if I'm competing for the same cab as the middle-American.

Something has to give. But what? Where?

**Dream 3 CARRYING MY SUITCASE ON MY BACK**

I'm at a "therapy camp." I have to prove that I belong there. Two or three therapists, including a black woman, keep asking me the same question: "Why are you here?"

I struggle with the words, but I can't sort out the answer. I realize that I am going to have to leave.

In the camp's community room, a young black woman is singing, rehearsing for a concert she's giving in a few days. She is extraordinarily talented. Her song is excellent and I listen to it with rapt attention. The words seem very significant (but I can't remember them). She goes over to straighten out details of the show with the musicians, a signal that it is time for me to begin packing. When I ask someone about the singer, I'm told she is an off-duty policewoman. I marvel at this, and feel the police are no longer as bad as people think. I finish packing, and go outside to get a cab.

Suddenly I have many relatives with me. Mama, and the various aunts. They are supposed to be helping me with my bags, but they really don't. When we hail a cab, Dan Goldberg comes along driving a gorgeous antique, fully outfitted as the living room of a European country house on wheels. Mama and the others are fascinated by the decor and climb in.

First I put the small suitcase inside, and then I have to go back for the big one. I return carrying it on my back. Bent over under the load, I think: "That's interesting. I would have expected it to be much heavier. Perhaps that's the best way to carry heavy loads. On your back. It distributes the weight more evenly than carrying them by hand."

I dump the suitcase into the cab, still filled with relatives, and climb in. Danny is in a good mood. I tell him to put the meter on, because I know he's been waiting a long time. We drive off.

**Response:**

The black woman singer, whose song is so significant, is the most positive black figure of my dreams to date. She determines me to leave my German-American male Jungian analyst from Wisconsin and look for a black woman therapist.

But I still have to struggle with the question: "Why are you here?"

Mama and the aunts can't help me—they're part of the baggage I'm carrying. Problems of racial identity. It's their fascination with European elegance that's been transmitted to me.

The "European country house on wheels" is driven by Dan Goldberg, a friend whose rich, liberal parents sent him to a racially mixed high school. Danny identified so completely with his black classmates he became a junkie to keep up with them.

Are we meeting in the middle here? Is this a projection of my belief in the mulatto as the crucible and the solution?

Earlier today, flipping back through pages of responses to dreams in other categories, I felt short-circuited. I had an intuition:

YOU KNOW, LORRAINE, YOUR UNCONSCIOUS MAY CONTAIN TOO MANY ISSUES FOR ONE CONSCIOUSNESS TO INTEGRATE. Mama. Papa. Dee. Blackness. Child abuse. Dozens of others. YOU MAY HAVE TO MAKE ARBITRARY DECISIONS, DEAL WITH EACH PROBLEM AS IT COMES UP, AS IF THE OTHERS DIDN'T EXIST.

But now, seeing the image of the two suitcases make me feel less depressed. The easier, lighter one first; then the heavier, more difficult one. Spread the weight out evenly.

And at the end of the dream, a vision of opposites reconciled: the black white man, the white black woman, the "European country house on wheels" transformed by laughing Caribbean women.

This cab actually drives off. Is it possible that change can take place after all?



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# BLACKANDWHITE SNAPSHOTS

BY ANNE TWITTY

### bringing to light

Chiriquí Province Panama — A fat, cross little girl, strapped on the back of a mule, glaring. To one side, holding the reins, the rail-thin man, black as wrought iron, still as the monkey figures in in cap and uniform that used to serve as hitching posts and later stood as ornaments on lawns.

At the Harlem Center — A pointy-chinned woman sits next to me in the sewing room, gazing curiously, and finally asks: Are you West Indian?

—No—I answer, slowly, carefully, truthfully—not as far as I know. But I was very close to a West Indian woman when I was a child.

My mother, asking, after my son and I came back from London: Do all of Gerardo's English friends have those wonderful rosy cheeks?

—Well, not exactly. Most of them are West Indian.

She laughs: You know, Ethel, our old cook down in Panama, was from Jamaica. You took your first steps toward her. She was a big, tall woman, you used to hang on to one of her legs —she had huge legs—and she'd carry you around the kitchen that way. You wouldn't let go...

**Now there was a daughter and her mother living all alone in the bush. They lived in a tree. And when the mother went out hunting, she would leave porridge and dried meat hanging in the tree.**

...Ethel was a very dark woman, but she had a light-skinned daughter named Elma who was married to a very black man. When you were following Ethel around the kitchen, she used to say, She laihk my Elma, she laihk de blahk skin.

**The chief sent his men to carry the daughter away, but the mother returned in that moment and dropped down into the tree, singing:**

**Many as you are, I will stitch you with the big needle.**

**And they died. All of them died.**

(Where is Ethel? Why are there no pictures of Ethel?)

**But one day a dove came to tell the mother that her daughter had been carried off to the village. She knew, she already knew, and already she was coming down the path, carrying a pot full of magic powders and swinging a whisk made from a zebra tail.**

—Tell me more about Ethel.

—Oh, Ethel? Well, you know, she was very superstitious. She was always dreaming numbers for the lottery: Mistress! Mistress! I've dreamed! she'd say. And then she'd tell me—oh, all about her dreams. She loved you so much. I remember you never wanted to eat with us. She used to cook herself West Indian food—she ate in a little anteroom off the kitchen—and you never wanted to eat with us, you always wanted to go in there and eat West Indian food with Ethel. She'd say: Mistress, she laihk de blahk food.

**She stood over the spot where her daughter had sunk into the ground. She took the pot full of magic powders and began to blow on them**

**Whoo**
**Whoo**
**Whoo-oo**

**Three times she blew, and listened. And faintly, her daughter's voice came up from under the ground, singing.**

**Whoo-oo**

**She blew again. The singing came louder...**

### Miss Anne

At the Harlem Center — Months after Bill does the oral history interviews, Ms. B. comes in to examine her transcript. I have brought it; she expected Bill. She can change anything she wants to, I explain.

She tosses her head, sits down, crosses her knees. Begins to pick the transcript apart, delete a phrase here, add a comma there, insist on quotation marks. Saying: This isn't correct, at all. If I'd known it was going to turn out like this, I'd never have agreed to it.

I want to say to her: You're a tall, graceful, lively lady. You've had half a dozen careers. During the war you drove a 2½-ton truck and loved it. (Bill asking: Did you ever think about getting a job driving a truck after the war?—A woman? and a *black* woman?—her eyebrows arch—Impossible!) You walk fast, like to dance, like to laugh. Do you think I judge you by semicolons?

Yes, she obviously does think. She knows where to put them and proceeds to do it, shutting me out. I am Miss Anne.

Bill, during one of those hour-long phone calls: Do you know what the female equivalent of Mister Charlie is?

—Nope.

—It's Miss Anne. Now, you're going to get Miss Anned sometimes.

We laugh. It's my first name.

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## stand-in for history

At the Harlem Center

—I used to just HATE whitefolks—the voice comes loud from the side of the room—My mother told me: You're just gonna have to get used to them.

Bill jerks his head toward the door: Let's get out of here. Takes me into the office, angry, jaw set, Bill angry so easily, especially with his own people, the ones he loves so much and demands so much of. I tell him of the

summer night coming out of Fiñana, no room at the hotel, riding in a town taxi through the night of the olive groves, beyond the few streetlights, toward the railroad tracks. I go inside to buy tickets to Guádix. Francisca, Damian, Gerardo, wait on the platform.

From the window of the cramped office comes the dim glow of a kerosene lamp. I buy tickets for all of us and take them back to the platform, quiet in the middle of that Andalusian night. A few groups of people standing, waiting, like us, for the train to make its way up the coast, through the bare hills and sparse mining towns.

There, in front of me, is the stationmaster. A young man.

—You're American?

—Yes.

—We don't want Americans here. We don't need Nixon—a torrent of Spanish—What we want is Mao and Ho Chi Minh (still living then). No Americans. (Franco still living then, too.) Mao and Ho Chi Minh!

And going on to apologize. It wasn't me nothing against me, it was . . . America. Mine, the only reachable ear to receive that stored-up wrath, accumulated as he read alone, night after night, in the circle of the kerosene lamp.

I am crossing a side street off Broadway, halfway across when a grey van suddenly swerves toward me with a vicious jerk. I see

a long straight flat two-lane highway running between no horizons in the Salinas Valley. Wartime. A coupe speeding down the road the only moving shape, except: the black-and-white puppy rolling in shaggy fat along the edge of the road, ears flying—until the car swerved, intentionally, smacked the leaping, rolling body, which was then quite still, and, when we reached it, broken, and regaining the asphalt, sped away.

Intent. Anger, bred deep somewhere on a dust-bowl farm, saved and savored all across the country, aggravated here. Somebody's jaw clenches, hand slips the steering wheel smoothly to one side. 1943, it might have been, or 4.

The van squeals and stops as I scramble up the curb. Looking back at me over his shoulder, the driver's dark face, his eyes burning rage.

## tourist in the city

At the Bushwick Center

Dorothy Jones, when I ask the time (I always have to ask what time it is), saying: We don't wear watches. We don't dare wear jewelry around here.

Two people mugged in front of the center last month. One of the women, 63, grabbed a pair of sewing scissors and stabbed the mugger in the chest. He ran off. Her friend was knocked down and kicked, though.

Harlem Nighttime

Sunday. Number Two train that speeds up the eastside instead of the west. First chance of reversing is 125th. How do I get back to meet the people waiting for me?

Out on the street, doubtful about it, but maybe I can find a cab. Dim light, nothing metered out there. Street repair. Barricades.

I start to walk west, quick and fast, ask a young woman as I pass where I might find a cab.—Nothing but car services up here—she tells me, walks with me to a promising corner, says: I'll wait with you. It's not too cool around here at night.

Which I knew, I definitely knew.

Crown Heights Bus Stop

Grateful as on a corner when a woman passing by glances at my open shoulder bag—nothing but books and papers in there—and says: You be careful with that bag, honey, they's *bad*, around here.

Post Office Anywhere

Early in the morning, buying three 30-cent airletters with a 20-dollar bill, I laugh and apologize, saying: You know, yesterday I was reading an essay my students liked and getting mad because it said women never had change, and here I am with a 20-dollar bill.

The woman behind the counter says firmly: Don't you worry, honey, I've had four people in here already with 20-dollar bills, and they was all *mens*.

Crown Heights Center

Reading "The Silent Couple" with a class. Having made their bet, the couple sit, tight-mouthed, while thieves roll up the rugs underneath them. Wife, at last, cries out to save her husband from a beating by police.

—You know, it seems men just has a hard time understanding anything. Why is men so *stubborn*?

We shake our heads, considering.

## lordmakeusalloneheart

His name is St. John Love (given him, he says, in a dream). I have just told the audience in wheelchairs a Creation story. Dark as the pupils of his eyes, he sits up in his chair, head thrown back, lips stretched wide and skinny, wheezing it out: Cainem. Cainem. Cainem in you, Cainem in me.

I come closer and stand. Puzzled. He repeats, moving the hand with the crooked fingers toward me, then, bringing it to his own chest. I listen, staring at the pattern of pink gums and the gaps between long yellow teeth.

The aide comes up to say: I think it's something Biblical.

Canaan? I wonder. Cain . . . something or other?

*Cain*em, he insists.

Suddenly I know: Kingdom! Kingdom in you, Kingdom in me!

He nods energetically: Cainem in you, Cainem in me.

His eyes are shining.

For Anne Twitty, writing, storytelling, teaching, and translating are all ways of allowing interwoven patterns to reveal themselves.

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# SEX, COLOR, AND CLASS IN CONTEMPORARY PUERTO RICAN WOMEN AUTHORS

BY MARGARITE FERNÁNDEZ OLMOS

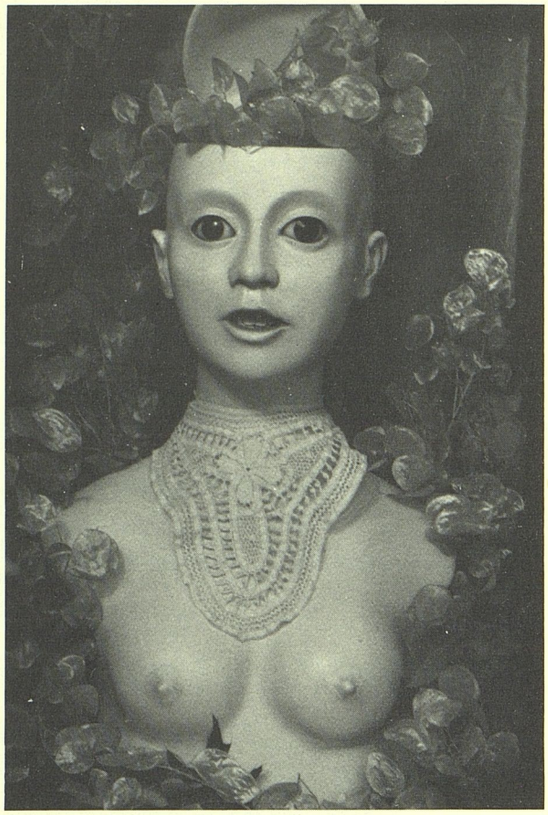
*If a study is made on the race composition of the people who live in slums and low-cost housing, who attend the mediocre public school system, who make up the bulk of the jail population, who patiently wait long hours at public hospitals, the result would be that the majority of these people are black, or as Puerto Ricans would rather say—trigueños. Until it is realized that the racial prejudice inherited from the Spaniards and further cemented by the North Americans has barely changed, a cultural and class integration will not be achieved. Only when Puerto Ricans stop imitating the white images created and nurtured by mass media, and accept . . .that this is an island whose racial composition is* mestiza, *only then can there be integration and thus unity to struggle as a whole.* [1]

Contemporary Puerto Rican writers are dealing with the issue of racism and its divisive effect on Puerto Rican society. Many women writers are producing critical works that confront race and class problems as they affect relations between women, as well as the consequences of racial constrictions in the larger society. Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are all, regardless of skin color, considered "non-whites." Yet, for Puerto Ricans, the ability to determine racial origins according to gradations of color and physical characteristics is a highly developed skill which everyone learns from childhood; this reveals the racism of Puerto Rican society. [2]

One of the more noteworthy examples of contemporary writing which deals with the theme of race and class differences among women is the short story "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" ("When Women Love Men") by Rosario Ferre. An accomplished young writer born of a wealthy and prominent family, Ferré focuses on the upper classes and their social relationships. In this story, published in 1976, a white middle-class widow—Isabel Luberza—meets her late husband's Black mistress—Isabel la Negra. The theme of the Black or mulatta mistress can be found throughout Caribbean literature and is related to the historical difficulty persons of different races had in legalizing a marital union. Not until 1881 was it possible for a white man to marry a woman of color in Puerto Rico without securing special permission. The laws, and the ideology that created them, forced Black and mulatta women into the role of mistress and contributed to the myth of the dark-skinned woman as the sensual, forbidden fruit.

In contrast to the traditional literary presentation of the Black mistress, in Ferré's story Isabel la Negra (based on a legendary madame) thrives economically as she perfects the art of sex with the young white men of the town. She eventually supplants the white widow at charitable and social functions. As a "self-made" woman, she has gained a certain respectability and power. The widow, on the other hand, withdraws into an enclosed world of resentment and pain in which she clings to an imagined superiority based on marital status, social class origins, and color.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the story is that Ferré presents these very different women as mirror images. She meshes their two voices in an interior monologue that combines their flow of consciousness so as to demonstrate the commonality of their roles as women—both exploited by a man of wealth and power. Ferré does not dismiss the social and economic advantages of the white middle-class wife, but she seeks to give light to the unrecognized affinities between women who share a common victimization:



Norma Bessouet. *Vigil*. 1978. Papier mâché and wood, with glass eye. Norma Bessouet is an Argentinian artist living in NYC.

> We, your lover and your wife, have always known that a prostitute hides beneath the skin of every lady. It is apparent in the way they slowly cross their legs, rubbing themselves lightly with the silky insides of their thighs. It is apparent in the way they get bored with men, they don't know what we go through, plagued by the same man for the rest of our lives. It is apparent in the way they jump from man to man in the tips of their eyelashes, hiding a swarm of green and blue lights in the depths of their vaginas. Because we have always known that each prostitute is a potential lady, drowned in the nostalgia of a white house like a dove that will never be held, of that house with a balcony of silver amphoras and plaster fruit garlands hanging over the doors, drowned in the nostalgia of the sound of china when invisible hands set the table. Because we, Isabel Luberza and Isabel la Negra, in our passion for you, Ambrosio, from the beginning of time, had been growing closer; had been blessing each other without realizing it, purifying ourselves of everything that defined us, one as a prostitute and the other as a lady. [3]

For the poet Sandra María Esteves, whose experience has been primarily in New York's barrios, her African origins are a source of pride, strength, and cultural identity—something frequently denied to Puerto Ricans in the metropolis, where they fall into a category described by the historian Manuel Maldonado-Denis as

> . . . an unknown terrain equidistant from Blacks and whites. From the point of view of the class structure of the metropolis, the classification in question performs an important divisive function: instead of placing us alongside Afro-Americans, who are united with us by their common experience of slavery, as well as intermarriage, it opens a gap between Boricuas and Afro-Americans. What stands out, therefore, is not what unites both minority groups—exploitation and discrimination—but rather the alleged "color line" that separates us. [4]

New York Puerto Rican poets of the '60s and early '70s were conscious of the affinities of their struggles with those of the militant Afro-American writers, and their works were greatly influenced by Black writers in style, tone, and theme. Identifying with the Black community was an important step in the direction of class unity, which has yet to be realized.

For women writers, there are particular political dilemmas as they examine their roles within Hispanic culture and in relation to North American women and the feminist movement. They must defend and affirm their language and traditions in the face of cultural penetration and aggression in which the ideal of assimilation into North American society would eliminate Puerto Rican culture both on the island and in the metropolis. Latina writers, however, must also identify and denounce the internalized myths concerning their reality in Hispanic culture itself, and the constrictions and contradictions of its traditional, patriarchal values if they are to achieve true dignity and equality. Many Latinas feel that a definition of themselves as Third World women, based on racial origins alone, fails to take into account the cultural and socioeconomic complexities of their reality, limiting their ability to unite with other women who may share common concerns:

> 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? [5]

Sandra María Esteves' poetry proclaims her Black ancestry within a Puerto Rican and working-class context as she deals with the difficulties of life in the barrio: "My name is María Cristina / I am a Puerto Rican woman born in el Barrio / Our men. . . they call me negra because they love me / and in turn I teach them to be strong." [6] In her poem "From the Commonwealth," Esteves combines the issues of culture, race, and a woman's search for dignity:

> So you want me to be your mistress
> and find dignity in a closed room
> because you say your first real love is music
> even though I too am music
> the sum total of contrary chords and dissonant notes
> occasionally surviving in mutilated harmony
> even though my great grandmother was black royalty
> traded off in marketable conceptions of how black should brown be
> even though the organic fruit of my womb carries your living blood
> while I am slowly crushed under the weight of disenchanted solitude . . .



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Y si la patria es una mujer
Then I am also a rebel and a lover of free people
and continue looking for friction in empty spaces
which is the only music I know how to play[7]

Her longing for synthesis and integration, the ultimate goals of a people who understand that their survival depends on unity and the recognition of common struggles and goals among all colors, is best reflected in the poem "Blanket Weaver." Esteves—like Ferré and other contemporary Puerto Rican women writers—attempts to go beyond the traditional barriers of race and class that have separated women in the past. She and other Latinas are creating psychic bridges and blending the different tones of our experiences into a harmony, "a song of many threads / that will dance with the colors of our people / and cover us with the warmth of peace."

weaver
weave us a song of many threads . . .

weave us a song of red and yellow
and brown
that holds the sea and the sky in its skin
that holds the bird and mountain in its voice
that builds upon our graves a home
for injustice fear oppression abuse and disgrace
and upon these fortifications
of strength unity and direction

weave us a song to hold us
when the wind blows so cold to make our children
wail
submerged in furious ice
a song pure and raw
that burns paper
and attacks the colorless venom stalking hidden
in the petal soft sweetness of the black night

weave us a rich black that lives
in the eyes of our warrior child
and feeds our mouths with moon breezes
with rhythms interflowing
through all spaces of existence
a black that holds the movement of eternity

weave us a song for our bodies to sing

weave us a song of many threads
that will dance with the colors of our people
and cover us with the warmth of peace[8]

1. María Crístina Rodríguez, "Poor-Black, Rich-White: Women in *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*," *Studies in Afro-Hispanic Literature*, Vol. II-III (1978-1979), pp. 252-253. *Trigueño* (a dark-complexioned brunet) is a euphemism for persons of mixed racial origins. *Mestizo* refers specifically to mixed blood and in general to the mixed heritage of Latin American culture.
2. See Angela Jorge, "The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society," in *The Puerto Rican Woman*, ed. Edna Acosta- Belén (New York: Praeger, 1979).
3. Translation by Cynthia L. Ventura, in *Contemporary Women Authors of Latin America*, ed. Doris Meyer & Margarite Fernández Olmos (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1982).
4. Manuel Maldonado-Denis, *The Emigration Dialectic* (New York: International, 1980), p. 99.
5. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981), p. 105.
6. From *Herejes y mitificadores: muestra de poesía puertoriqueña en los Estados Unidos*, ed. Efraín Barradas & Rafael Rodríguez (Rio Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 1980), pp. 112-114.
7. From *Vórtice: Literatura, Arte y Crítica*, Vol. II, No. 2-3 (1979), p. 73.
8. From *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*, ed. Miguel Algarín & Miguel Piñero (New York: Morrow, 1975), pp. 134-135.

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*Right*: Sue Heinemann is a NYC performance artist.

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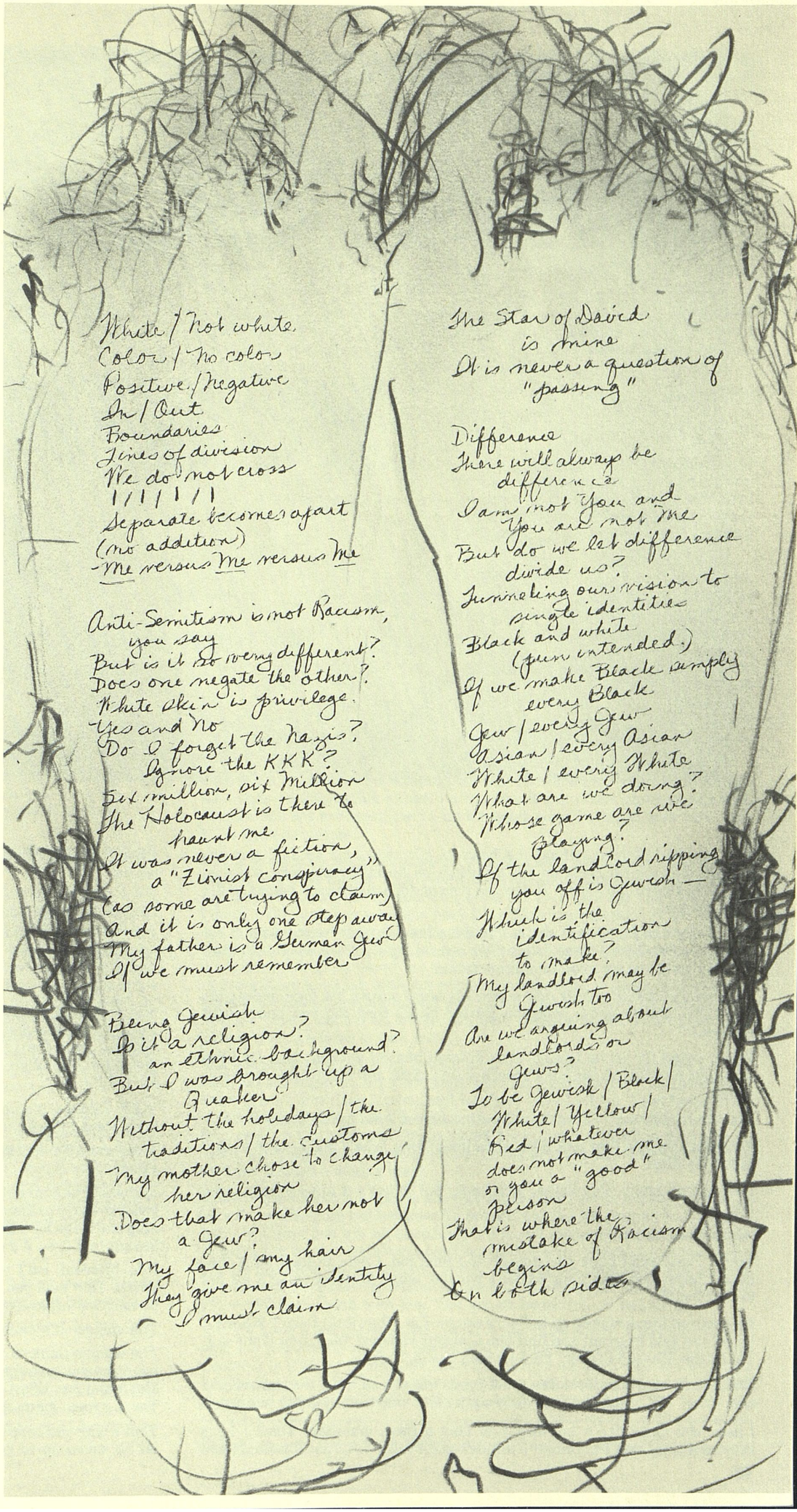


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# MATSUDA'S WIFE

BY KEIKO KUBO

*The sun had slipped behind the horizon, the dust was settling into the ground and the tin roofs on the buildings on Main Street were popping. People too were cooling off. It was the time of day when sweat begins to dry on a person.*

*Tom Reilly and Jim Owens sat at a table in the bar. Dust was caked in the cracks in their boots. They drank their beer in big swallows to quench their dryness as much as to quench their thirst.*

*Tom settled into his chair and wiped his hand across his face feeling the dampness and coolness from the frosted glass.* Hey, did you hear about Massoda?

Who? *asked Jim as he leaned back fanning himself with his hat. He liked the chills he made as his hat's breeze hit his shirt, still damp from the day's sweat.*

You know, Massoda. That little Jap that moved onto Miller's place.

You mean the one that took off a while back? Hey, who's taking care of that place for him?

Hell, I don't know. Hey listen, he's back. So? What's it to you? Japs come and go.

He came back with a wife.

Well? They come back married all the time too. Come to think of it that hasn't happened in a long while. I wonder why? Well, so what's all the to-do about?

He married him a nigger up in Sacramento, Jim. That little feller? Where'd he get the guts to go out and find him a nigger woman? Well, you don't say. That little Massoda feller. Fast-looking is she, Tom?

Nah, Jim. I hear she looks the quiet type. Not one of them fat mammies is she, Tom? It'll seem like that little squirt was outsized by a big woman.

I hear she looks like a hot one, Jim. One a them mulattas, Tom? I hear they're a sexy woman. Damn! I wonder what folks in Little Yokohama are saying? One thing about those Japs, Tom. They hate niggers as much as we do.

*On the outskirts of town Kenji Yasuda and his hired hand Tak Ito still worked in the Yasuda fields. Their bodies silhouetted against the thinning colors of the sunset. They had just opened the sluices and were standing and watching the water spill into the ditches. Around the troughs the thirsty earth darkened as it soaked up the water.*

*Ken crouched beside the gate wiping his brow with the back of his hand. Tak sat cross-legged next to him. They spoke in their native Japanese.* Mmm...even that dirty water looks good after a hot day like this one, doesn't it, Ito? What do you think about Matsuda bringing back a kurumbo for a wife, eh?

Well, Yasuda, it's been five years since Japanese women, since any Japanese were allowed to come to America.

Five years. That's right. 1929—five years since that damn law. Time passes quickly.

Perhaps it passed quickly for married men like you, Yasuda, but for bachelors like me it passes slowly. And do not forget California has laws forbidding marriage with hakujins. We have had little hope for the future and for having families. We're watching Matsuda. He is the first to try this.

It is different, isn't it, Ito? Different from running away with other men's wives. That's all you young men have tried to do so far, isn't it? Yes, all of us married Japanese are happy to see that Matsuda married.

*Tak smiled.* It's true Matsuda is a flashy one. Almost like a Filipino.

The women think so too, eh *Ito said, Ken nodding his head.* Lotsa younger wives have a weakness for Japanese men who act more like Filipinos than like Japanese. What can a man who's fifteen years older than his wife do? There are so many unattached younger men around.

That's why you keep me out in that shack *Tak thought to himself.* Afraid to let me come up to your house. Afraid pretty Masako will like me. Yes,



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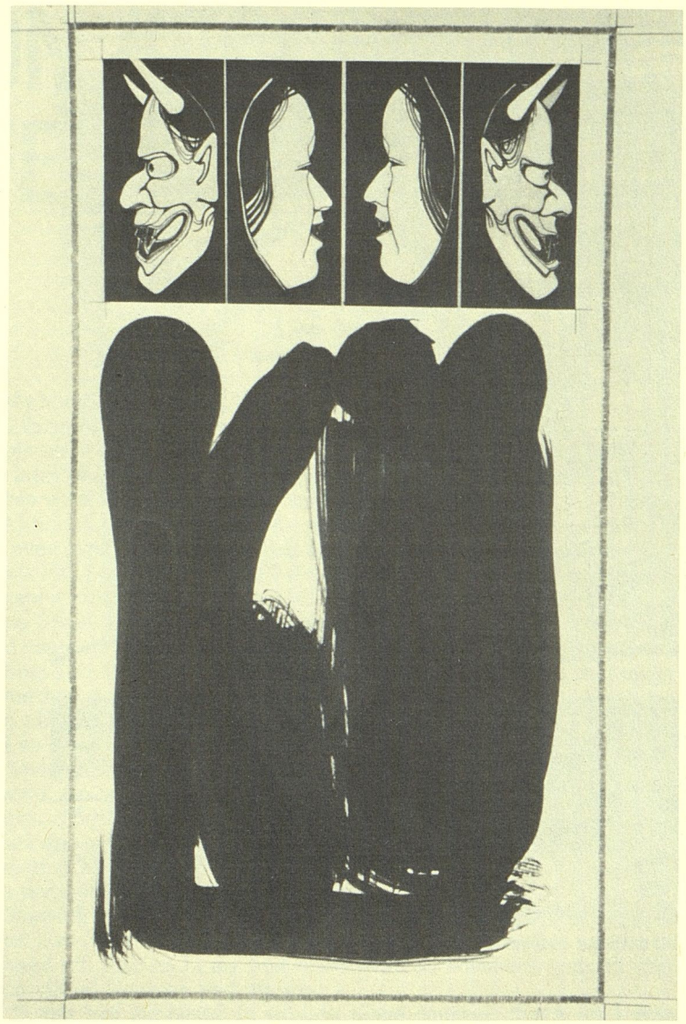

Tomie Arai. *Dialogue*. 1979. Pen and ink. 20" x 30". Tomie Arai, an artist and graphic designer, has directed several community mural projects in NYC.

Yasuda, those damn laws are hard on us all *he spoke aloud.* We will all watch Matsuda and his wife to see how things go with them.

Tell me, Ito, what do you think of Matsuda marrying a kurumbo? I don't like the mixing of races like that myself. Never liked it when Japanese chased after hakujin women. It's a Filipino thing to do.

I don't know, Yasuda. I have never known a kurumbo. Never talked to one. They seem a strange people.

When I came to America, Ito, Japanese had to work on farms owned by hakujins. Young men like you now can work for other Japanese. Back then there might be a kurumbo or two working with us. Mostly there were poor hakujins called hobozu I think. A few Mexicans and Filipinos. Some Chinese and few kurumbos. I did not get to know them. The owners hired mostly one nationality at a time. If they changed they changed everyone.

And me, I worked hard saving money to marry and to buy this land I now own in my son's name. They made it hard for us, these hakujin laws. Laws to stop our coming. Laws to not marry. Laws to not own land. But we found ways to do these things. I worked hard. I had no time to spend or money to waste like the wilder Japanese. No time to get rowdy and drink and sing with Mexicans and kurumbos. Anyway most of us stayed with our kind. Left the others alone. Matsuda is like those wild ones back then. I don't understand this marriage *Kenji said, shaking his head.*

If it weren't for the children *she thought* I would have left long ago. Giving up my children is too hard. Ah men! Always mysterious and confusing.

*Outside Fumi carried Jun piggyback. His laughs distracted Masako. Smiling she waved to them.*

Yes, yes, Tetsuo, for the children I stayed. *Sighing softly she remembered the rare moments they spent together. Her body recalled Tetsuo's caresses, sometimes gentle, at others forceful. Arousing then satisfying her. The feel of his hands stroking her through the cloth of her clothes or of his fingers lightly brushing the inside of her thighs.*

Those were fine moments. Tetsuo, I never spoke with you about Kenji, so awkward compared to you. Either hesitant, as if he is unsure of me or of himself perhaps. Or roughly pulling at me, pressing me down with his weight to be sure of his possession of me.

*Shaking her head she thought to herself.* I am never to know why. My husband never talks to me. Is it possible to love someone one does not understand?

But then, Tetsuo, you were always a mystery too. Fumi and Jun were an excuse. My marriage was arranged by my family. With you Tetsuo, came my first opportunity to choose for myself. I found I did not know how to make my own choice. What did I want? How was I to decide? And who was I to ask for help? You, Tetsuo? I never understood you either. Why you did things. Can I say I knew you or you me?

And now, Tetsuo, you are married. A strange wife you have brought back with you. Is she able to penetrate your shell? And I am surprised, Tetsuo, I do not hate her. Is this because I felt no claim on you beyond one on your body? Or because I gave no more of myself?

Mama! Mama! *she heard Fumiko calling to her.* Mama, we're hungry! Will dinner be ready soon? Yes, Fumi-chan *Masako called out to the yard.* I'm putting the rice on now. *She hurried to get the rice. Pumping water into the pan, she rinsed away the rice's glutinous covering. Each time she filled the pan the water became less cloudy and was poured into a pail to later water the garden.* If only my thoughts and my understanding could become clearer as you do, water. I would rinse and rinse and think and rethink if only I thought it possible. *When the water remained clear, she measured fresh water into the pan up to the first knuckle of her smallest finger and added a pinch of salt.*

*As she had stoked the fire when she first came in from the fields, the rice began to cook right away. Masako watched as the water bubbled and gained momentum into a boil. Her thoughts returned to Matsuda's wife.* What will you feed Tetsuo? Can you cook rice? Will he teach you to prepare the osushi and the misoshiro he loves to eat? Or will he come to love the food your people eat? And what food do you eat? Our food is so different from hakujin food. It is strange to go into their markets and see the odd things they sell there. How will you feel in a Japanese market? A stranger in both places? I know so little. But if you know him and he you perhaps you will come to know the things the other has lived with. I wish I could know.

*That night as Masako sat combing her hair her thoughts returned to Matsuda's wife.* I'd like to talk to her. I'd like to ask her if she understands him. My life has not prepared me to understand men. Perhaps hers has. Perhaps she can tell me.

It will be difficult for her among us. We Japanese are not an open-minded people. It is easy for me to sit here wondering about her and wanting to ask her questions. And yet another matter for me to go and talk with her. Could I do it? Will any of us welcome her? It's difficult to imagine. What would I say to her? Tetsuo knows some English. Probably they speak in English. I've wanted to learn to speak English too. If I could I might go talk with her. But my husband does not want me to learn. It is because we women don't get opportunities to speak with Americans and thereby to learn that we stay dependent on our husbands. But will Tetsuo teach his wife Japanese? If he doesn't, won't she be as lonely as I am? Lonelier even. Who other than Tetsuo will she have to talk with?

*She imagined herself trying to talk to or to approach this woman.* Heyro. Mah namae Masako. How far could our conversation go? The questions I want to ask delve deep into me and into her, I would think. I am barely able to introduce myself. It is a hopeless thought to imagine conversation. And do I really want to know Tetsuo now? Now that he belongs to another? What meaning would it have for me to understand him—the husband of another woman—among men?

Masako *her husband's hoarse whisper came from across the room.* Masako *he said, walking up behind her. He began running his fingers through her hair.* Masako, you are so beautiful. . . *She felt the roughness of his hands stroking her arms. Kenji buried his face in her hair. She had just washed it and he breathed deeply her fragrance. Rubbing his face back and forth in its coolness, he felt the heaviness of her hair in his hands.* Masako! Masako! Come with me. Come with me. You are so beautiful, so beautiful.

*Feeling Kenji's weight upon her, Masako let out a moan. Through the window she saw the sky clear of clouds and the night at its darkest black. Stars twinkled in it like a field full of fireflies. Across the field was the Matsuda house. There too the lights went out.* Who is this woman, Matsuda's wife? *she asked herself.* Does she understand better than I?

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Keiko Kubo, born and raised in Detroit, is now living and working in Oakland.



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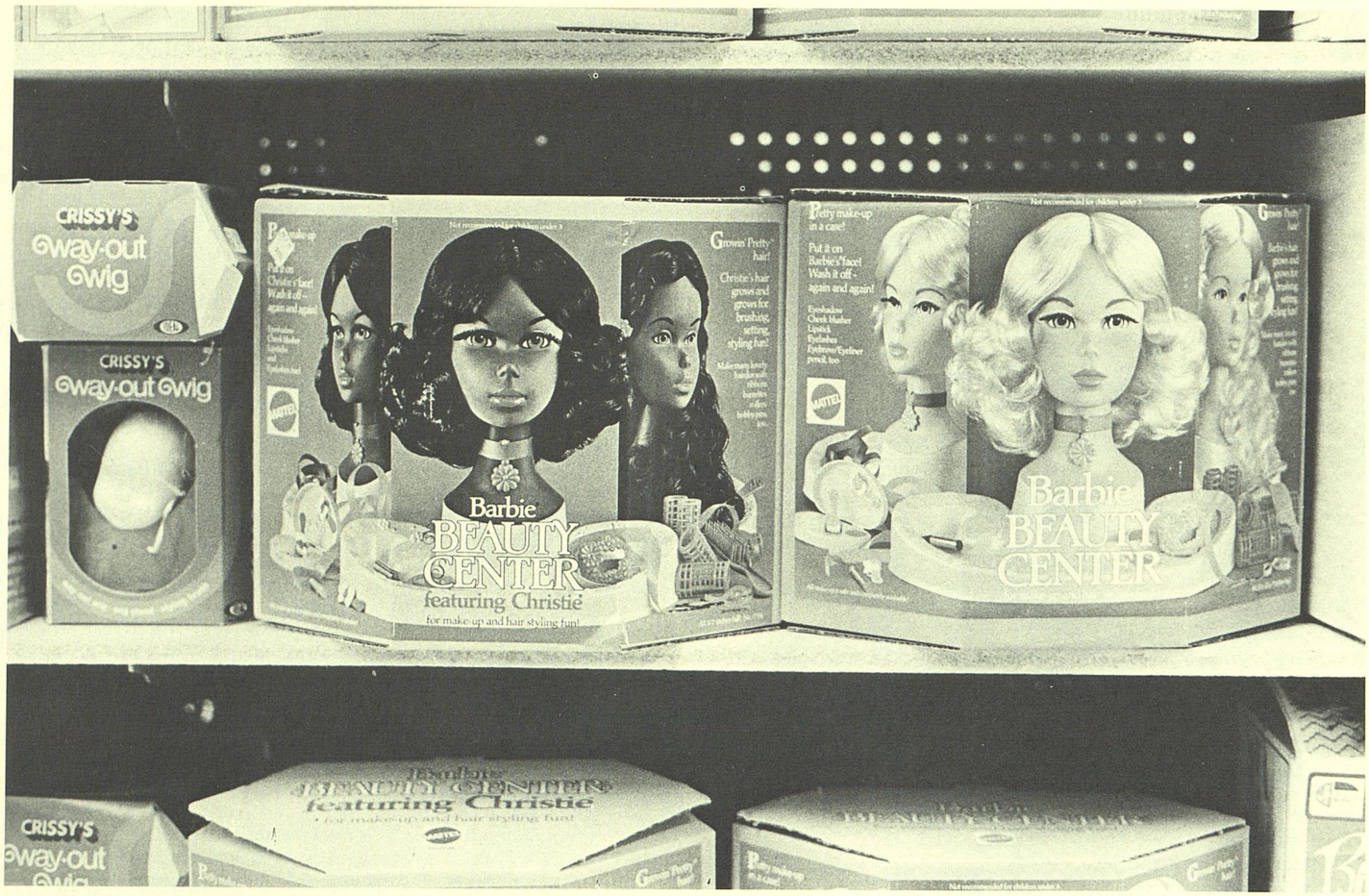


Cathy Cade. *Toys-R-Us.* ©1973. Cathy Cade is a lesbian photographer living in Oakland with her 4½-year-old son.

# A WOMAN IN THE WORLD

BY JAN GADSON ELLIS

Growing up, when I looked in the mirror, I used to see a skinny little girl, with slanted eyes and dark coppery skin, and I was pleased. I had not yet learned that dusky color would lock me in a prison for which there was no key.

Much of my childhood, I was protected from obvious racial slights because Momma thought the world of her pretty brown baby, and Grandma too. They worked hard, Momma and Gram, and they provided me with examples of the realities of being a Black woman. Momma always told me, in verbal and other ways, that I was important, that I was as good as "anybody" and better than most.

During my adolescence, many Black people, insecure about their own self-worth, projected their fears onto me and other dark brothers and sisters. It made our lives miserable. All too often, I would overhear people remark to Mama: "Such a pretty child, with such long hair, too bad she's so Black!" My soul cringes even now, whenever I remember those careless remarks that hurt so much.

In my later teens, I rebelled because of the limited societal and cultural roles dictated for a Black woman. White society and Black culture are still defining roles for women and Black people. They are ever-enduring, long-suffering, supportive, nurturing, mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and wives. The common thread is dependency. The roles identified as "appropriate" are narrow and restrictive. They would not let me live up to my full creative potential.

Now, I am careful about my life. I know I am not finished; there are several choices I have yet to make, and many things I have not experienced. I am still in process, giving rebirth to myself. My life, connected to Gram's and Mama's, is a work in progress—a great Black woman's tapestry that I am working on. What a legacy these women have left me. I still experience deep bitterness and frustration as I struggle against oppression to make my voice heard. I rage against the injustices that wore my grandmother down, and limited Mama's life to one of survival. I rage for Gram, Mama, and me. The lessons they have taught me, these strong, tough, loving women, are a wonderful gift. I treasure the spirit of self-sufficiency as I travel, bound to them, yet still unprotected, a Black woman in the world.

The above is excerpted from a longer piece by Jan Gadson Ellis, a Black feminist based in Massachussetts.



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# ON BECOMING A FEMINIST WRITER

## BY CAROLE GREGORY

My hands were soft instead of agile like my mother's and grandmother's from farming they had done in Mississippi. My thoughts were pictures of purple sunsets over the steel mills and Shakespeare's tragedies. I had what was later to be called an "artistic temperament." This sensitivity led me to choose writing and teaching English as purposes for living.

Although my hometown was racially segregated, no one in my family had ever explained white racism or white male sexism to me. Racist white sexists had convinced a friend of mine that he should go into the army "to become a man." However, in 1963 I waited in brown hush puppies and a cotton dress to register for freshman classes. I was paying my own tuition and I could not afford the expense of Central State or Wilberforce, colleges for Negro youth. I knew little about my family's roots except that my grandmother had come North under strain. A white landowner had run her husband off their small farm and my grandfather had been told to choose the land or his life. Then, this same white man had come to my grandmother and insisted that she become his mistress. "I told you that Charlie wasn't no good. Go with me and I'll help you raise your girls," he said. Grandmother, a Seminole African Negro, did not believe in submitting to white racism and so she managed to bring her four girls up North. In her maturity, my mother had married my father, a steelmill worker. I was the first child from my mother's side to attend college.

Chewing on a brown pipe, a white professor said, "English departments do not hire Negroes or women!" Like a guillotine, his voice sought to take my head off. Racism in my hometown was an economic code of etiquette which stifled Negroes and women.

"If you are supposed to explain these courses, that's all I want," I answered. Yet I wanted to kill this man. Only my conditioning as a female kept me from striking his volcanic red face. My murderous impulses were raging.

Moving like a man putting on boxing gloves, he pushed a university catalogue toward me. I memorized his hate stare which said that Negroes were irrational and women were intellectually inferior. Picking up the catalogue, I went outside for relief.

"English departments do not hire Negroes or women" echoed inside my head. After eating a baloney sandwich in the cafeteria, I returned to register. Another staff person enrolled me.

After graduation from the upper third of an elite white school, I had worked as a page in the public library to pay my tuition on installment plan. Pages shelved books, cleaned fingerprints, and checked out books for librarians. Many white workers resented my presence and refused to speak to me. On my breaks I started reading the new books about the Civil Rights Movement. I planned to read my way past the bigots in the English department. All Negro authors were excluded from the English curriculum, but I found some of them in the library.

Negro women were rare in the library. Mrs. Elsie Lee, a graduate of Tuskegee University, told me that I could not make any mistakes. She was a gentle woman who reminded me of the Negro teachers I had as a child. My second and third grade teachers taught me to read independently. My father's sister stressed that I should always be independent. These women protected me. "I have a librarian's degree, but they will only let me work as a clerk typist," Mrs. Lee confided one day. I felt more anger.

Hostile white attitudes often permeated my dreams. Frankenstein, a stumbling white man, emerged from a coffin to haunt me. "Whiteness" chased me in my sleep. During the day I wrote some of these dreams into a journal I started in creative writing class. I thought that I was going to write like Sarah Vaughan sang. This adversity was not "sweet" as Shakespeare once said. I was afraid to tell my family because they might have suggested that I get married. To counter my nightmares about racism, I joined the campus NAACP chapter and then I took a job typing at the adult branch of the NAACP. Although I enjoyed talking to people who discussed "racism," I found myself identifying with the more militant SNCC.

One day I was doing a mailing for the local NAACP chapter and a tall, Lena-Horne-looking woman walked into their office. Wearing a blue negligee, she stood in satin blue slippers.

"I'm cold," she whined.

Her name was Cora Emerson and her father had owned the first Negro funeral parlor in our town. The NAACP rented a room from the Emerson mansion. Cora's parents were dead and she missed the company of Negroes.

"You don't have any clothes on," remarked Mr. Lee, the NAACP president.

I jotted down their exchange, which became a short story later. I was writing about conflict because my mother was demanding that I pay our rent. She and my father had separated without him providing child support or alimony. I was barely able to pay our rent and my tuition. Typing brought me extra money, but completing college seemed remote.

After working late one evening, I left to walk home. White cab drivers did not drive into Negro neighborhoods and they would not let Negroes drive cabs. Angry, I thought about my dinner which my two brothers always ate before I arrived home. Cora called out to me and invited me to stay with her for the school year. She was lonely.

I accepted Cora's offer and left my mother's home. Seated on a chaise-lounge, Cora told me many stories about our race. Her legal mother was white-looking, but would not have sexual relations with her wealthy husband. Mr. Emerson had taken a mistress and had Cora by her. Mrs. Emerson was forced to raise Cora and adopted a son. After Fisk University, a medical doctor for a husband, and concubinage to a rich white man, Cora had returned home to drink. Those were my options—to look white, to marry a professional, or to suffer, according to Cora. Her words injured me more deeply than the racist professor who hated Negroes and women. She said, "Negroes have to go to schools like Fisk. You'll never get out of a white college. You're a pretty brown. My step-mother sent me with two trunks of clothes and a fur coat. I was the only woman with a full-length mink coat in 90 degree weather." Her words stung me and I wrote a term in my journal —mulatto racism. This was white bigotry transformed into an art among middle-class, European-looking Negroes.

As the years passed, I became aware of a link between racism and sexism. Teachers in English departments would teach Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to analyze the degradation of women. However, they would not give me credit for reading Richard Wright's *Native Son* because white men feared any images of a Black man and a white woman together. I could understand imagery of white women, for they were seldom excluded from literature. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" portrayed man's love for science, which rivaled his love of woman after electricity was discovered. Hawthorne portrayed a scientist who killed his obedient wife by removing a birthmark to make her a perfect woman. His story predicted white Western man's affair with technology which has led to much human destruction. White women were feeling this symbolic death and depersonalization when Black women were combatting racism.

We read Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* in which men were "pregnant" with bullets and the heroine died in childbirth. I was sensitive to how harmful technology had become because of the anti-war movement on campus. Yet literature did not reflect the destruction I was experiencing. Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* came the closest to expressing some of my reality. A Black male father with a white-looking mistress showed his son the body of a castrated Black man. His father tried to teach him to have sex with women as "whitish" as possible, but to avoid the blacker-skinned woman. He said, "Son, there ain't nothing a white woman's got that a black woman ain't got. . . . When you in the presence of a white woman, remember she means death." Ironically, our integrated Civil Rights Movement became middle-class white women's opportunity to fight racism and to mate with Black men. Black women who did not have sex-role problems in the Black community had racist white women conflicts. My grandmother saw white men castrate Black men, but I witnessed my white friends setting up remedial reading programs to seduce older, illiterate Black men.

The women in our student NAACP chapter started reading more Negro authors. How had decent white people and some Negroes acquired hateful feelings about our race and sex? I turned to Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Dr. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Then the library purchased Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, Margaret Walker's works, Dr. King's speeches, and authors called "protest writers." These writers indicted the African slave trade, racism, and economic discrimination for the condition of Negroes. All of them described an alienation from the land of our birth. Some of the women like me cut our hair into "Afros" and wore African clothing. We bought Nina Simone and Miriam Makeba records. We tried to blacken our "double consciousness" which Dr. Du Bois examined in *Souls of Black Folks*. Feeling like a Negro and an American was a strife that could tear our souls apart. I felt that tension.

Because Black and white protest writers lessened my despair, I continued to search for their writings. I found books with poems and essays against slavery by Frances Watkins Harper, John Greenleaf Whittier,

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James R. Lowell, Henry W. Longfellow, Ralph W. Emerson, Henry Thoreau, William C. Bryant, and Walt Whitman. One of the librarians, a German from World War II, encouraged me to read and to remain in college. She was more honest about race hatred than a white female instructor who boasted of Oberlin once having been an Underground Railroad stop. Then, the Episcopal Church rented some space in a loft and opened a coffee house for students. The link between racism and sexism surfaced again. While Black women were reading anti-racist poetry to sympathetic students and faculty from the university, a Black male priest tried to exploit us sexually. Our men expected us to be loyal to our race and to keep our condition away from white men's ears. This exploitative attitude spilled over into our student NAACP chapter and older Negro women told young women to be quiet. "A stiff dick has no conscience," they said and our chapter was so fragmented that we could not introduce a strong Black Studies department.

After graduation in 1968, I married and moved to Pittsburgh. Writing teachers had said writers did not need a doctorate. I had published in Shuman's anthology, *Nine Black Poets*, in my senior year and so I could easily make friends with younger writers. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka annoyed me because of his anti-Black woman poetry, his anti-Semitism, and his rape-the-white-woman lines. Needless to say, I became more interested in feminism. We moved to New York City and I applied to Columbia's School of the Arts. I became friends with Kgositsile and read African writers like Buchi Emecheta. In the meantime, my husband had withdrawn funds from our joint account so I could not afford Columbia. Frank McShane gave me a working scholarship and I wrote a draft of a poetry book, a collection of short stories, and a novel. One day a fiction instructor said, "Don't write about Negroes. James Baldwin has already done that theme." Frank Polite, a poet with a bread and wine disposition, had taught me that honesty was the core of writing. Discouraged, I ended my studies at Columbia and my marriage. An artist must create from the love of humanity; I found a position teaching expository writing and literature at New York University.

Every teacher in the English department was superb; however, they were not accustomed to poor Black people. I was still working with Mary Bethune's notion of uplifting the race and I misunderstood my colleagues. I told one Hindu teacher to take Iceberg Slim off his reading list; I added African and Caribbean authors to the curriculum. I could not understand middle-class Black insanity. The Black administrators preferred to assist middle-class foreign students from the Third World. These students were arrogant tutors and they were hired by Miss Lawrence, the coordinator of English. When I resumed my studies at Columbia, Miss Lawrence was furious. Oddly, my success with Black students made me the target of Black insanity. Every obstacle was placed in my path. I enrolled in a fiction class with Paule Marshall, the West Indian novelist. Miss Lawrence thought that she had scheduled me so I would have to miss studying with the author of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. I sketched a journal question: "Which is worse—Black insanity or white racism?"

Our Black insanity warfare was unbelievable. I left NYU, earned a Master's on Black writers, and wrote a text at Teacher's College. That text, *English for People Who Hate English*, served to get me an interview to teach in the CUNY system.

When many of my male students argued that neither Nanny nor Leafy in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had been raped, I knew that male supremacy was retarding male development at York College. Male supremacy repressed thought in academia. For example, my Nigerian chairman did not know my references—John O. Killens and Gwendolyn Brooks. Yet, as I taught, he respected my ability and supported me when Black male students protested against my feminist critique.

Black women felt the violation of Nanny and Leafy in very personal ways. They cried for Nanny and despised Leafy. Several women said that they hated having to look like their oppressor, the white woman, to be considered beautiful by Black men. In addition, native New Yorkers had mixed feelings about Leafy's daughter, Janie. Brown- and black-skinned women with wooly hair said that they were tired of losing Black men to mulatto women, Latin women, and Asian women. Ironically, they liked to identify with Janie because darker women had a chance to experience being desired by Black men.

Women in the class observed how the wife of a slavemaster had beaten Nanny and had said this battering was one cause of hostility between white and Black women. Could white women encourage sexism in white men? The white wife said to Nanny, "Ah wouldn't dirty mah hands on yuh. But first thing in de mornin' de overseer will take you to the whippin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yaller back." Not only did slave women have to tolerate rape by owners, but they also had to bear the jealous rages of white wives.

The rights of male supremacy were so upheld that the Black men excused the rape of Leafy, Nanny's blonde child. Didn't the marriage proposal revoke the schoolteacher's use of force on this blonde virgin? *Their Eyes* allowed us a way to discuss sexism. Black or white men could brutalize a "fox" like Leafy, for she was a bastard. Several Black men said that they could dominate bastards like Leafy and Janie more easily than darker women. Janie was not a feminist; she would bow.

Caribbean women were more open to a critique of male supremacy and more oblivious to racism. In a 1938 essay, "Women in the Caribbean," Hurston wrote: "Naturally women do not receive the same educational advantages as men. This sex superiority is further complicated by class and color ratings. But if a woman is wealthy, of good family and mulatto, she can overcome some of her drawbacks. But if she is of no particular family, poor and black, she is in a bad way indeed in that man's world." Caribbean women helped Black American students to see sex as a metaphor for power. Thus, to discuss the element of conquest in sex was not to be disloyal to Black men. I argued that Hurston probably felt more free to examine sexism in the Caribbean. Their men protested less.

I raised this question of sex as a metaphor for power in a Caribbean literature class, as well as Folklore, Negritude, and Black Church classes. Since there were no white students present, we were able to analyze authors of African descent. Three women had given us insight into the particular kind of sexism our men practice. They prefer European-looking women. Hurston's "Women in the Caribbean," Gwen Brooks' *Maud Martha*, and Paule Marshall's essay "To Da-duh, In Memoriam" explained that women with African features have been made neuter by slavery and that they have been kept defeminized by bigoted attitudes in our families.

Most of the men in literature about people of African descent have a racist male-supremacist outlook on women and life. To show that they have status, some men want white women. This was why a man like Frederick Douglass, who married a white feminist, was resented by the Black women of his day. Oddly, Ida B. Wells' acceptance of Douglass' second wife caused him to support her anti-lynching campaign, but Ida came to understand the racist nature of Black male sexism when Dr. Du Bois humiliated her at the founding of the NAACP. (He refused to read her name on the list of NAACP founders.) The white woman had become the ultimate power symbol to some men. Thus, Ida B. Wells wrote about Mary White Ovington, who served as chairman of the NAACP executive committee. She said: "She has basked in the sunlight of adoration of the few college-bred Negroes who have surrounded her, but has made little effort to know the soul of a Black woman; and to that extent she has fallen far short of helping a race which has suffered as no white woman has ever been called upon to suffer or to understand. I cannot resist the conclusion that, had I not been so hurt over the treatment I had received at the hands of the men of my own race and thus blinded to the realization that I should have taken the place which the white men of the committee felt I should have, the NAACP would now be a live, active force in the lives of our people all over the country." The power of a white woman in a social change group rendered an early Black feminist powerless. I stopped wondering why Black American women suspected the Women's Movement, for Ida's wounds were still bleeding.

There are many women, however, actively fighting racism in the Women's Movement. Dr. G. Berger of the Brooklyn College Institute of Women's Studies for Secondary School Faculty is one such woman. Because so many students in New York City are of Black and Hispanic origins, Dr. Berger hired me and a Puerto Rican feminist to teach the literature of Black and Hispanic women. Some of the white feminists resisted our curriculum. They said that the high schools would not allow them to teach feminist writers. Also, a few women did not want Black or Latin teachers. My colleague did not have sufficient enrollment and so she lectured on Hispanic women writers in my class, which was overcrowded. At the end of the summer course, most students said that they enjoyed Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*, Hurston's *Their Eyes*, Audre Lorde's poetry, Hansberry's essay on the Adolf Eichmann trial, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*, and other Black women's voices.

A few Latin women and white men were very supportive and argued that they would struggle to change conservative curriculums in the public schools. The three Black women in the course said that they had learned about the Black woman's vision, but criticized feminism for not strengthening the family. One poem everyone liked was written by Gabriela Mistral. "Miedo" (Fear) inspired the students. She wrote:

*Yo no quiero que a mi nina/la vayan hacer princesa*
("I do not wish that my daughter/grows up to become a princess.")

I marvelled at the progressive thought of Latin and Caribbean women. Were it not for fiction writers like Zora Neale Hurston, some Black writers would be behind our sisters of color.

Many years ago, an American literature professor had cursed the destiny of "Negroes and women." There was truth in his ugly words. Have you ever had a Black woman for an English teacher in the North? Few of us are able to earn a living. For the past few years, I have worked as an adjunct in English. Teaching brings me great satisfaction; starving does not. Ironically, publishing houses are saying that they are not going to publish Black writers anymore. As I revise the second draft of my novel, I still remember the red color of the face which said, "English departments do not hire Negroes or women." Can women change this indictment? These are the fragments I add to my journal.



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# SIFTINGS BY VIVIAN E. BROWNE

I was on my first trip to Europe—my companion, a white friend who was a gregarious, charming and experienced traveler. I was just the opposite. We were on a large, slow ship which boasted a German crew, German cuisine, a large number of first-generation German-American passengers, and a Panama flag. In tourist class, where we were, everyone shared the communal bathroom. We lined up with washcloths and toothbrushes each morning. There were usually two lines for everything. My line was always the shorter one, with me at the end, since a point was made by the other, white passengers not to use a cubicle or any other facility after I did. It took eight days to reach England. During that time, with the exception of my friend, no one ever did stand behind me.

I opened my eyes at the sound of a radio placed in the sand at the edge of my beach towel. I was stretched out basking in the Mediterranean sun on the beach at Ashkelon. Two feet appeared near the radio, then two more and two more, until the towel was completely surrounded. A number of young, muscular Israeli men stood looking down at me. They spoke quietly to each other in Hebrew. The English-speaking one of them asked where I came from. I told him. He asked what I was doing there. They moved closer, peering down at my afro. Then, abruptly, without another word, someone picked up the noisy radio and they all left.

El Al is reputed to be the most punctual, the most secure, the safest of airlines. They pay attention. The travel agent booked me with them on a flight to Israel. At the security tables at Kennedy Airport I was questioned so closely that other passengers later remarked on it. El Al security wanted to know what I was carrying to Israel, the purpose of the trip, the length of stay, the names and addresses of friends there, how long I'd known them, and even more. They thoroughly examined my luggage. Other passengers watched and listened to all this with great curiosity. I had been chosen for this scrutiny at random, the way they do with income tax returns, I thought. When the same thing happened at Lod Airport when I was leaving Israel (this time they spread the entire contents of my two bags of luggage the length of the taple tops and unwrapped everything), I knew I had been singled out. I was convinced, finally, that it was because of my appearance. I suffered the humiliating inconveniences with as much dignity as I could muster and wrote a scathing letter to the airline as soon as I got home. They never answered.

A colleague and I drove to Washington, D.C. to spend a weekend museum-hopping. We left New York on a Friday immediately after our last classes, driving the length of the New Jersey Turnpike and beyond. We stopped just outside Baltimore at the last diner before the city. My friend went to the counter to order. I went to the ladies' room. I returned to find my kind, 64-year-old white friend standing transfixed with a terrible look on her face. "They say they will serve me, but you will have to take your food out," she said. We left the diner—without food. I spent the weekend consumed with shame. Back in New York I called the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC. They were all familiar with that diner. It was one of the last holdouts against integration on that route. They gave me numbers to call. They told me what to say; how to act when I was arrested, being certain this would happen if I went back. Two friends, both male and white this time, drove down with me. (Black males were asked, but refused because they could not trust themselves to be nonviolent.) We arrived and sat. We were under constant observation through the windows of closed kitchen doors. Someone (the proprietor?) got on the telephone and stayed on it. We were given the water treatment. Other customers stared. After an hour or so, the man got off the telephone. Someone served us. I had ordered a black and white sundae.

In Cuba I listened, along with other American visitors, to a government official relate the history of the Cuban government. One of the questions, when he stopped speaking, had to do with the employment situation of Black people and women. As I was the only Black person present and therefore represented the entire American Black population, the first answer was directed at me. I was told that the Cubans do not have a racial problem. All races are now equal in Cuba. There was this difficulty in the past. However, the Spaniards did do one good thing about the races. They produced the mulatto. The next day I photographed workers laboring to renovate the old city of Havana. They were all Black. Other workers at the drawing boards, directing the restoration and planning, both men and women, were all white.

I had struck up an acquaintance with Black Americans living in Paris on my second trip to Europe—alone this time. I and my salad fixings were invited to Sunday dinner. That day at that time it was difficult to find a vegetable stand open and when I did it was far from satisfactory. I questioned the price of the rather unsavory-looking tomatoes chosen for me by the shopkeeper. In one motion he grabbed the bag of tomatoes—threw it across the shop. They splattered over the floor and the wall. In French, which he could not have supposed I understood, he roughly, loudly declared that if I did not want them at that price and as they were, they're not for sale to me. He had charged me three times the normal price.

Vivian E. Browne is an artist living in NYC.

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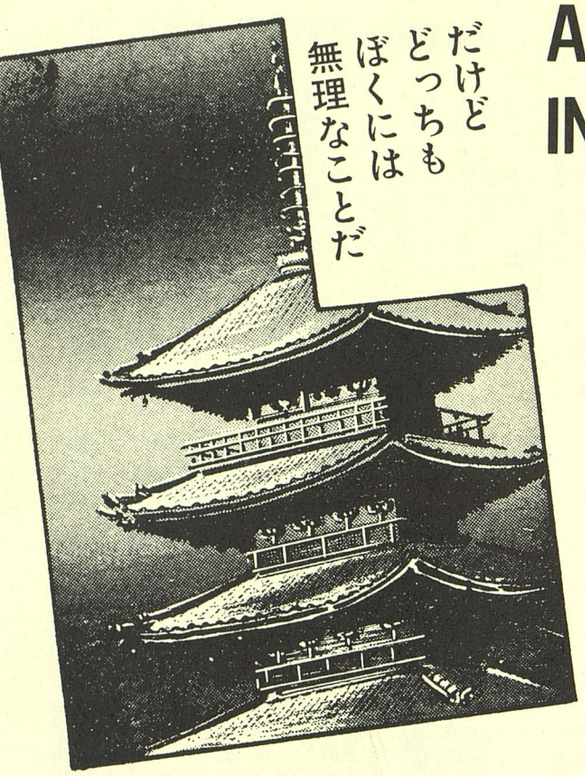
# AN AMERICAN BLACK WOMAN ARTIST IN A JAPANESE GARDEN

BY HOWARDENA PINDELL




My first June day in Tokyo, I wandered confused, dazed by the 12½-hour flight, the 13-hours-ahead time change, and the blitz of words I could not read. My previous trip to Japan in 1979, courtesy of a Japanese newspaper, had been an Eastern Cinderella story complete with adoring prince, (the semi-honorary white male status bestowed on a Black woman represented, to the Japanese, a formidable institution). Reentry as the artist, without the protection of "benevolent" corporate sponsors, was what one might imagine it would be like for a non-white person granted temporary white status in South Africa only to find herself stranded unannounced in the wrong restroom.

The pointing at close range, the stares and the laughter, took courage to face daily. Central Tokyo, around the Ginza, was one of the few places where non-Japanese faces did not produce unexpected responses. Wandering out of a small radius of the tourist mecca revealed another Japan—not the polite one of the package tour propaganda, but a sometimes harsh, fragile and unhappy, brittle reality. (My short afro often brought crisis to the public bath. Before I could undress, women would run screaming, thinking a foreign male had strayed into the wrong place.)

On the long wooden stairs of a small shrine near Taiyiun Mausoleum, Nikko, was a sign which read in English: "Please take off your shoes." I removed my shoes and ascended. A young woman sitting in a glassed-in room, left of the entrance, waved violently to me to go away. At first I thought there was a private ceremony in progress, but the shrine was small and open enough for me to see that it was absolutely empty. I decided to ignore her and proceed, seeing no activity. The attendant became extremely agitated and relayed to me as best she could that it was absolutely forbidden for me to enter. I felt angry and puzzled. Why have a sign in English, if foreigners are not allowed to enter? Several experiences later it struck me that she perceived me as defiling her precious shrine as I was a non-white foreigner—hence "impure." I later read in Mikiso Hane's *Peasants, Rebels and Outcasts* (New York: Pantheon, 1982) that the *brakamin* (Japan's "untouchable class") are not permitted to enter temples and shrines as they are considered "unclean." They are relegated to earning their living in professions the Japanese consider dirty, such as butcher or tanner. The *brakamin* are Japan's scapegoat group, along with the Koreans and all non-Japanese Asians. For them it has been a seemingly endless history of discrimination and segregation in education, housing, and jobs. Some say, according to Hane, that it is because "they" are descendants of vanquished clans like the Tiara (Heike) who were defeated by the Minamoto, or that it is because "they" are descendants of the Koreans or Ainu (Japan's original "native" people, who are referred to as Caucasian because they have more body hair than the "Japanese"), or that it is because "they" eat meat in a vegetarian, Buddhist, fish-eating nation. (Several people I met during the course of my seven months—in some odd attempt to reassure me—stated point blank with pride, "I am racially pure Japanese!")

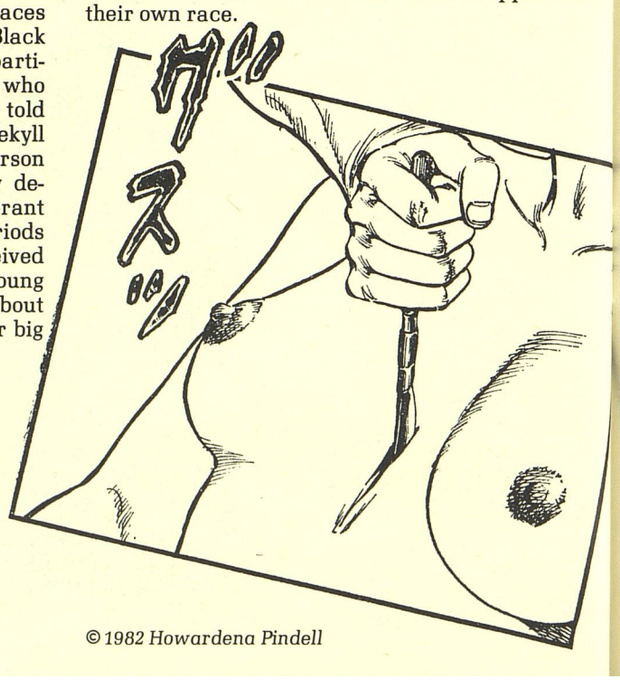
I stumbled constantly over taboos and codes of behavior deeply embedded in a rigidly hierarchical society. Rich was superior to poor, old superior to young, men superior to women, with few questions asked in passive obedience to the demands of conformity. One moment, I felt I had grasped the system—the next, I was thrown into confusion by some new pattern of behavior that did not fit what I thought were their rules. I learned to carry the conspicuous signs of the temporary tourist, the camera and the map. People would scurry to my aid, taking me by the hand to my destination, or would lash out at me, the intruder, in ridicule. (One male child on a country road in Nara tried to kick me as hard as he could. Fortunately he missed and lost his shoe in mid-air.)

The person in charge of my grant arrangements, a man in his late twenties, told me soon after I arrived that it was forbidden for me to speak directly to an older man in authority, that I could speak only to the women in the room, and that it was forbidden for me to visit certain places because I was a woman. I was the first Black woman and the first single woman to have participated in the program. The married women who preceded me were white. They were never told these things. I often felt I was faced with a Jekyll and Hyde dilemma in which the same person would act in a diametrically opposite way depending on who he was dealing with. Grant money would be withheld from me for long periods of time, whereas the other grantees received their money unhindered—except for one, a young puppeteer who encountered questions about whether or not his puppets, "because of their big noses," were Jewish. When I showed my videotape *Free, White and 21* privately (I was not offered a public screening, although other grantees were invited to show their tapes), the remarks were always accompanied by laughter at how Jewish I looked in white-face.

Women, along with "non-Japanese," were used as a target for all the rage that had not been deposited elsewhere. Late evening TV burst with images of women being raped, mutilated, stabbed, hanged. It seemed as if all classes of Japanese men devoured comics filled with sadomasochistic pop images of the rape and torture of Japanese and foreign women. White women, in an odd contradiction in terms of the preferential treatment I saw them receive, were used in very much the same way that non-white women are used in the American media—as stereotypes of the reckless wanton, the prostitute, the mistress. The Black woman was portrayed as the cold, aloof high-fashion model.

After World War II, children of a Japanese mother and Black father were deported to Brazil. In fact, to this day, children of Japanese mothers and non-Japanese fathers are not born with Japanese citizenship. This is a "gift" which may only be bestowed by a Japanese father. The Koreans, although they were made citizens during the war to add to the cannon fodder, are denied citizenship today unless they are willing to give up their Korean heritage and adopt a Japanese name. An article last summer in the *Japan Times* revealed that during the war the Japanese planned to build death camps modeled on the Germans' extermination camps for Jewish people in order to rid the world of "impure" races, starting with the Korean people.

I think often about the Japanese and their frantic attempts to emulate the white man's more negative aspects—magnified by their own singular history of repression and harsh, discriminatory feudal laws. Their franticness to emulate seems to root itself in an unconscious realization that they too are the targets of racism—an "if you can't beat them, join them" game. They cannot forget that twice they received the bomb that whites at the time would never have dropped on their own race.



Howardena Pindell lived and traveled widely in Japan from June 1981 to February 1982 on a U.S.-Japan Friendship Commission Creative Artist Fellowship. She is currently teaching at SUNY, Stony Brook.



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The first few days home I was struck by superficial differences—the cleanliness of Japan versus the filth of New York; the raw emotions displayed by Americans as opposed to the ritualized repression by the Japanese of thoughts and feelings, punctuated by outbursts of rage at scapegoats or the internalization of anger turning into suicide. The elation at being home gave way to a feeling of despair over the changes which seemed to have taken place during the seven months I was away. I read about immigration authorities raiding Spanish, East Indian, and Asian communities for illegal aliens; about the detention of Haitian refugees in prisons while Polish refugees were detained in churches. I heard on national public radio about a white fraternity at the University of Cincinnati that held a Martin Luther King trash party—a costume ball where white students were invited to wear KKK sheets or a costume parodying Blacks. And I see the antics of the "art world," tribal as ever in their tall huts in Soho and on Tiffany Run—still whiter than white—tucking their hooded designer silk sheets behind slick, insincere, "sympathetic" nods.

What drew me home was the relative freedom to protest and to work toward positive alternatives, a freedom I have rarely witnessed elsewhere. I have been asked why I stayed in Japan if after the first two months my hair had begun to fall out—why I didn't come back sooner. What kept me alive and alert in the midst of intense stress was a determination not to cave in to other peoples' unfortunate behavior—what nourished me and gave me energy was the extraordinary beauty I found in the traditional Japanese way of organizing space, images, and color and the brief refuge of peace I found in the Japanese gardens resplendent with the change of the seasons.

# WRATH OVER RACISM AND RAPE

The American Indian Community House joined with the New York Chapter of NOW, the Women's Liberation Center of Nassau County, and Women Against Pornography outside the New York Hilton on October 14, 1982 to protest the introduction of a new video game which features the naked figure of General Custer, macho in western hat and boots, picking his way through a barrage of arrows to take his "prize": a bound and helpless Indian woman. The president of American Multiple Industries, the game's manufacturer, described the scenario: "There is no rape and ravage scene. He does make an impression on the Indian girl, but you can see she's having a good time. A smile comes across her face."

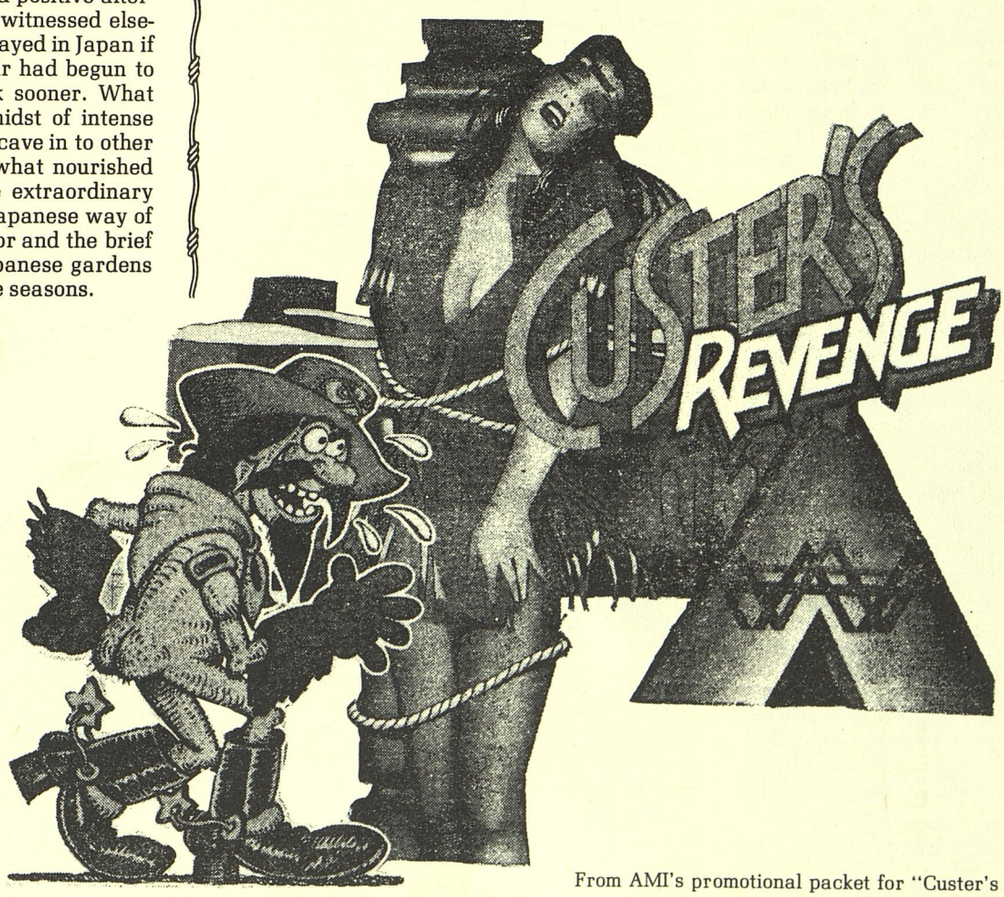
"Custer's Revenge," with its mix of rape and racism, is only the most repellent of three new products AMI brought to the Hilton's National Music, Sound and Video Conference. Other titles in this line of so-called adult entertainment are "Beat 'Em and Eat 'Em" and "Bachelor Party." The Custer cartridge promotes a version of sex as "conquest under threat of obliteration, which is what rivets adolescents to consoles in the first place," writes Richard Goldstein in the *Village Voice* (Oct. 23).

The American Indian Community House statement says in part: "As American Indians, we are vehemently opposed to the exploitative use of our race for the titillation of the public. We see this disgusting video game for what it truly is, a sexist, racist, sadistic expression, the sole purpose of which is to fill the pockets of its creators and promoters. . . . Would the caricaturization of a people be acceptable if the depicted were: Begin attacking a Palestinian woman? Prince Charles chasing a female IRA member? Hitler have his way with a Jewish maiden?"

"If it were a kid's game, I'd say take it off the market tomorrow, but it's not," the company spokesman said. But Robin Quinn of Women Against Pornography believes these games invariably wind up in the hands of minors, and Diane Wood of NOW adds, "I don't think adults should be playing it either" (*Daily News*, Oct. 14).

The gamesters learn the thrill of danger, the risk of personal injury—prongs raining on prongs, dodging projectiles—as the lascivious general aims for the woman of darker skin, who is tied up and immobilized. "The very idea that rape could be considered as a reward—what type of aberration of the human spirit is that?" asks Diane Wood. "It's meant to be funny, not erotic," replies its manufacturer (*Daily News*, Oct. 14).

Into the electronic age with the same old primitive prejudices: sexist, racist computer graphics aimed at producing men who master machines, who objectify women and use push-button violence without a qualm.




From AMI's promotional packet for "Custer's Revenge."



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# IF THE PRESENT LOOKS LIKE THE PAST, WHAT

*Equally important, however, [to "What it is, brother?"] is "What it is, sister?" No one dares to utter the plight of her reality, not even my black sisters themselves. But what it is, is the great cannon of cruel racism directed toward the black black woman by the black middle class. The black middle class has for generations excluded the black black woman from the mainstream of black middle-class society, and it has, by its discrimination against her, induced in itself a divisive cancer that has chopped the black race in this country into polarized sections; consequently the black middle class has devoured its own soul and is doomed, a large number of black working-class people believe, to extinction.*

*What it is, is an insanity that has helped whites turn blacks on themselves and that has caused the black middle class to claw itself into a form of psychic annihilation.*

*Thus the black working class is beginning to ask itself the questions: "What is a people that props itself up on the color of its skin? And what is a people that excludes the womb-source of its own genetic heritage?" For certainly every Afro-American is descended from a black black woman. What then can be the destiny of a people that pampers and cherishes the blood of the white slaveholder who maimed and degraded their female ancestor? What can be the future of a class of descendants of slaves that implicitly gives slaveholders greater honor than the African women they enslaved? What can be the end of a class that pretends to honor blackness while secretly it despises working-class black-skinned women whose faces reveal no trace of white blood?*

—Trellie Jeffers, "The Black Black Woman and the Black Middle Class: A Personal Viewpoint," *The Black Scholar* (March-April 1973).

For many years I pondered Jeffers' statement, then turned to black literature, because it is so very instructive, to see whether it had support. I began with three 19th-century novels by black women, as background, and this is what I found.

In the first novel one character says to another:

"But if you'd seed them putty white hands of hern you'd never think she kept her own house, let 'lone anybody else's.

"My! but she's putty. Beautiful long hair comes way down her back: putty blue eyes, an' jez ez white as anybody in dis place. . . ."

In the second novel, it goes like this:

Meg Randal opened wide a pair of lovely dark eyes and raised two small, white hands in surprise.

Ethel sat down and took one of Meg's perfect little hands in her own. Meg's hand was her one source of pride, and it would almost seem as if she were justified in this pride. Such a delicate, white, slender, dimpled hand it was!

In the third novel:

Her dress was plain black, with white chiffon at the neck and wrists, and on her breast a large bunch of "Jack" roses was fastened. . . . Tall and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long, dark lashes which swept her cheek, just now covered with a delicate rose flush, she burst upon them—a combination of "queen rose and lily in one."

The novels quoted from are: *Iola LeRoy, Or Shadows Uplifted* (published in 1895) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper; *Megda* (1891) by Emma Dunham Kelly; and *Contending Forces* (1899) by Pauline E. Hopkins.

Photographs of the novelists show them to be identifiably "colored" if not literally black. Why are their black heroines depicted as white—and non-working-class? After all, Frances Watkins Harper—the most notable of these writers—did not spend most of her time with white-skinned, middle-class black women, but, following the Civil War, she worked as a lecturer and teacher among the black- and brown-skinned freed people during Reconstruction, in the briefly "liberated" South. She wrote of the women:

I know of girls from sixteen to twenty-two who iron till midnight that they may come to school in the day. Some of our scholars, aged about nineteen, living about thirty miles off, rented land, ploughed, planted, and then sold their cotton, in order to come to us. A woman near me urged her husband to go in debt five hundred dollars for a home, as titles to the land they had built on were insecure, and she said to me, "We have five years to pay it in, and I shall begin today to do it, if life be spared. I will make a hundred dollars at washing, for I have done it." Yet they have seven little children to feed, clothe and educate. In the field the women receive the same wages as the men, and are often preferred, clearing the land, hoeing, or picking cotton, with equal ability.

No "queen rose and lily in one," here. No "*delicate* white hands." Brown hands, and black hands, all—if not because of genetics, then because of the work. Yet no 19th-century black novelist, female or male, wrote novels about these women.

Indeed, the very first novel by an African-American to be published, *Clotelle; Or, The Colored Heroine* (1853) by William Wells Brown, in the very first paragraph of the 1867 edition not only offers black womanhood as indistinguishable, physically, from white, but slanders, generally, the black woman's character:

For many years the South has been noted for its beautiful Quadroon [one fourth black and capable of passing as white] women. Bottles of ink, and reams of paper, have been used to portray the "finely-cut and well-moulded features," the "silken curls," the "dark and brilliant eyes," the "splendid forms," the "fascinating smiles," and "accomplished manners" of these impassioned and voluptuous daughters of the two races—the unlawful product of the crime of human bondage. When we take into consideration the fact that no safeguard was ever thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave-women to be pure and chaste, we will not be surprised when told that immorality pervades the domestic circle in the cities and towns of the South to an extent unknown in the Northern States. Many a planter's wife has dragged out a miserable existence, with an aching heart, at seeing her place in her husband's affections usurped by the unadorned beauty and captivating smiles of her waiting maid. *Indeed, the greater portion of the colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man* [my emphasis].

Notice how adroitly Brown places the responsibility for rape, child abuse, incest and other "immoralities" squarely on the shoulders of the persons least responsible for them, being enslaved and powerless—black women—whom he sets up for this calumny by describing them as "voluptuous" and "impassioned."

It is unlikely that a raped, enslaved servant to a planter's wife assumed, because of this rape, that she had "usurped" the wife's place in the rapist's "affections." Brown obviously intended blacks to feel proud of the insulting "attentions" of the rapist and victorious because of the suffering of the wife. In fact, Brown would have us believe the enslaved woman was as powerful as the enslaver, since with her smile she "captivate[d]," i.e., captured, him, just as he captured her with his gun and his laws.

Nor does Brown consider the millions of raped, enslaved African women who had no likelihood whatsoever of becoming "finely-dressed," or ever attaining "mistress" status.

"Bottles of ink, reams of paper. . . ," he says. But who were these writers? They were, in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, with few exceptions, white men, writing out their own sadistic fantasies about black women, and describing—in lurid detail—their own perverse sexual preferences, where enslaved women were concerned. These feverishly imagined "quadroon" women were not real, and had more to do with the way white men *chose* to perceive black women than the way black men perceived them or black women perceived themselves.

And yet, Brown, our first black novelist, in this, our first black novel, gives us scene after scene and crisis after crisis in which pale, fragile blondes and brunettes—burdened under the weight of their alleged "color"—grapple with the tedium of slave life—always involved with some faithless white man or other, and rarely doing anything resembling ordinary slave work.

The three black women novelists of the 19th century turned away from their own *selves* in depicting "black womanhood," and followed a black man's interpretation of white male writers' fantasies. Consequently, as late as 1929 it was unheard of for a very dark-skinned woman to appear in a novel unless it was clear she was to be recognized as a problem or a joke. As in the case of Emma Lou in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), which explored the very real trials of a black black woman in a white and a color-struck black society:

She should have been a boy, then color of skin wouldn't have mattered so much, for wasn't her mother always saying that a black boy would get along, but that a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment?

The heroine of this novel thinks of her black color as something unnatural, even demonic. Yet for millions of quite contented women, here and in Africa, black skin is the most natural, undemonic thing in the world.

It is interesting to note the changes wrought in the male hero of William Wells Brown's novel, over the course of its several versions. In the first version he is white-skinned, even as Brown was himself (his father was white, his mother "mulatta"), and capable of passing. In the final version he is black-skinned, though with *straight* black hair. The heroine, however, remains fair, and never becomes darker than a "dark" European:

There was nothing in the appearance of Clotelle to indicate that a drop of African blood coursed through her veins, except, perhaps, the slight wave

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This essay was first printed in *Essence* (July 1982). Alice Walker grew up a "definite brown" in Eatonton, Ga. Her most recent novel is *The Color Purple*.



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# T DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE? . . .

BY ALICE WALKER

of her hair, and the scarcely perceptible brunettish tinge upon the countenance. She passed as a rebel lady.

One reason the novels of 19th-century black authors abound with white-skinned women characters is that most readers of novels in the 19th century were white people: white people who then, as more often than not now, could only identify human feeling, humanness, if it came in a white or near-white body; and because, although black men could be depicted as literally black and still be considered men (since dark *is* masculine to the Euro-American mind), the black-skinned woman, being dark and female, must perforce be whitened, since "fairness" was and is the standard of Euro-American femininity.

Of course in the 19th century, few of the former slaves could read at all, having been denied literacy under penalty of law, and certainly could not hope to struggle through a novel, however true it might have been to their experience. It is understandable that writers wrote to the capacities of the audience at hand. Yet their depictions of themselves and black people as whiter than we are has led to a crippling of the imagination and of truth itself for which we pay dearly—in anger, hurt, envy and misunderstanding—to this day.

Fortunately, for us, there came a black woman writer—Zora Neale Hurston—who did not view her black women characters through the eyes of men, black or white, and it is in her work—coming after Brown, Watkins, Kelly and Hopkins in the 19th century—and after Jesse Fauset, Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer in the 1920s (writers who still depicted black women as fair-skinned, if not actually *white*-skinned, and in other ways atypical)—that black women begin to emerge naturally in all the colors that they exist, predominantly brown skin and black, and culturally African-American. Though Janie Crawford, Hurston's best-known heroine, is described as being light of skin and feathery of hair, as soon as she opens her mouth we know who and what she is—and her hands, though genetically "light," are brown from the labor she shares with other blacks, from whom she is not, in fact, separate; though all three of her husbands attempt to convince her that she is.

Many dark-skinned black women find it hard to identify with Janie Crawford and speak disparagingly of her "mulatto privileges." "Privileges" that stem from being worshipped for her color and hair, and being placed—by her color-struck husbands—above other black women while not being permitted to speak in public because her looks are supposed to say it all.

And, for the black man, based on our literature and too often, unfortunately, on reality, the white-looking woman's looks *do* say it all. But what do these "looks" in fact say? For the dark-skinned black woman it comes as a series of disappointments and embarrassments that the wives of virtually *all* black leaders (including Marcus Garvey!) appear to have been chosen for the nearness of their complexions to white, alone. It is true that Frederick Douglass' first wife was black-skinned, but he managed to hide most of her activity in his life. According to research done by Sylvia Lyons Render, Annie Murray Douglass sewed the very sailor suit Douglass escaped from slavery wearing, yet nowhere does he give her credit for her help. His second wife, the wife he chose in Freedom, was white; this marriage continued a pattern that began in the days of slavery, when white was right and the octoroon or quadroon offspring of a raped black or mulatto mother was the next best thing to white. A look at the photographs of the women chosen by our male leaders is, in many ways, chilling, if you are a black-skinned woman. (And this "chilling" experience is one which the dark-skinned black woman can hardly escape having, in these times of black pictorial history.) Because it is apparent that though they may have consciously affirmed blackness in the abstract and for others, for themselves, light remained right. Only Malcolm X, among our recent male leaders, chose to affirm, by publicly loving and marrying her, a black black woman. And it is this, no less than his "public" politics that accounts for the respect black people, and especially women, had for him, and this that makes him radical and revolutionary in a way few of our other black male leaders are.

Black black women are not supposed to notice these things. But to tell the truth (and why shouldn't we?—we may be living our last months on earth), this is often *all* we notice. We are told such things are not "serious" and not "political" and mean nothing to the black liberation struggle. And some of us, after all, marry white men; who are we to "complain"? But no black woman pursues and proposes to octoroon and quadroon or white men as a matter of female prerogative; the patriarchal society in which we live does not permit it. The man chooses; frequently with the same perceptivity with which he chooses a toy.

Every black man in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* lusts after Janie Crawford. They lust after her color and her long hair, never once considering the pain her mother and grandmother (one raped by a white man, one by a black) must have endured to "pass along" these qualities to her. Never once thinking of Janie's isolation because of looks she did not choose, nor of her confusion when she realized that the same men who idolize her looks are capable of totally separating her looks from her self. These were all backcountry folk, and they wouldn't have thought of it in these terms, but their true interest in Janie is sadistic and pornographic, just as that of the white men of the time would have been. And I think this is one of the reasons Hurston (with her usual attention to the difference between what black folks said and what they meant) made her character so "fair." To point this out to us.

The first few times I read *Their Eyes* I managed to block the implications of the scene in Chapter 17 in which Tea Cake beats Janie. Feminists have often flagged my attention to it, but I always explained it as simply a "mistake" on Hurston's part. In truth, I missed the point entirely of what happened, and what happened is one of the most important insights in the book.

As the Hurston reader will recall, Tea Cake is very jealous of Janie, where Mrs. Turner's brother—he of light skin and flyaway hair—is concerned. There is no reason for this, as Janie time and again insists. One reason Tea Cake is jealous is because it is so unusual for a woman as light and well-to-do as Janie to be with a man as poor



Dogon kneeling female figure. Mali. Wood. 23½".



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and black as he is. Not because all the light-skinned women chase after and propose to light-skinned men, but because both light- and dark-skinned men chase after and propose to light-skinned women. Since the light-skinned men generally have more education than the blacker men, and better jobs (morticians to this day in the South are generally light-skinned blacks, as are the colored doctors and insurance men), they have the advantage of color, class and gainful employment, and so secure the "prizes" light-skinned women represent to them. Like all "prizes," the women are put on display and warned not to get themselves dirty (other black black people often being this "dirt"). Their resemblance to the white man's "prize," i.e., the white woman—whom they resemble largely because of rape (and I submit that any sexual intercourse between a free man and a human being he owns or controls is rape)—must be maintained at all times.

Unlike Janie's first two husbands, Tea Cake has discovered that his "prize" is as attractive dirty as she is clean and supports her in her determination to dress, speak and act as she likes. But he must still show his male friends, and the ubiquitous Mrs. Turner, who wishes to bring Janie and her brother together (light belongs to light, in her mind), that his ownership is intact. When Mrs. Turner brings her brother over and introduces him, Tea Cake has a "brainstorm." Before the week is over, he has "whipped" Janie.

He whips her not, Hurston writes, "because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams."

An astute reader would realize that this is the real reason Tea Cake is killed by Janie in the end. Or, rather, this is the reason Hurston *permits* Janie to kill Tea Cake in the end. For all her "helpless" hanging on to him, Janie knows she has been publicly humiliated, and though she acts the role of battered wife (from what I read, coming out of battered women's shelters, the majority of such batterings end in sex and the total submission—"hanging on helplessly"—of the wife), her developing consciousness of self does not stop at that point. She could hardly enjoy knowing her beating becomes "visions" for other women—who would have to imagine themselves light and long-haired, like Janie, to "enjoy" them—or "dreams," i.e., sexual fantasies, for Tea Cake's male friends.

> "Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man," Sop-de-Bottom told him. "Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. Take some uh dese ol' rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn't tell you ever hit 'em. Dat's de reason Ah done quit beating mah women. You can't make no mark on 'em at all. *Lawd! would'nt Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She jus' cries, eh Tea Cake?*" [my emphasis].
>
> "Dat's right."
>
> "See dat! Mah woman would spread her lungs all over Palm Beach County, let alone knock out mah jaw teeth. You don't know dat woman uh mine. She got ninety-nine rows uh jaw teeth and git her good and mad, she'll wade through solid rock up to her hip pockets."
>
> [To which Tea Cake replies:]
> "Mah Janie is uh high time woman and useter things. Ah didn't get her outa de middle uh de road."

What is really being said here?

What is being said is this: that in choosing the "fair," white-looking woman, the black man assumes he is choosing a weak woman. A woman he can own, a woman he can beat, can enjoy beating, can *exhibit* as a woman beaten; in short, a "conquered" woman who will not cry out, and will certainly not fight back. And why? Because she is a lady, like the white man's wife, who is also beaten (the slaves knew, the servants knew, the maid always knew because she doctored the bruises) but who has been trained to suffer in silence. Even to pretend sex is better afterward, that she enjoys it because her husband obviously does. A masochist.

And who is being rejected? Those women "out of the middle of the road"? Well, Harriet Tubman, for one, Sojourner Truth, Mary McCleod Bethune, Shirley Chisholm, Ruby McCullom, Assata Shakur, Joan Little and Dessie "Rashida" Woods. You who are black-skinned and fighting and screaming through the solid rock of America up to your hip pockets every day since you arrived, and me, who treasures every 99 rows of my jaw teeth, because they are all I have to chew my way through this world.

That black men choose light and white women is not the women's fault, any more than it was their fault they were chosen as concubines to rich plantation owners during slavery. Nobody seems to choose big, strong, *fighting* light or white women (and these have existed right along with those who could be beaten). Though there used to be a saying among black men that *fat* white women are best because the bigger they are the more whiteness there is to love, this is still in the realm of ownership, of "prize." And any woman who settles for being owned, for being a "prize," is more to be pitied than blamed.

We are sisters of the same mother, but we have been separated—though put to much the same use—by different fathers. In the novels of Frank Yerby, a wildly successful black writer, you see us: the whiter-skinned black woman placed above the blacker as the white man's mistress or the black man's "love." The blacker woman, when not preparing the whiter woman for sex, marriage or romance, simply raped. Put to work in the fields. Stuck in the kitchen. Raising everybody's white and yellow and brown and black kids. Or knocking the overseer down, or cutting the master's throat. But never desired or romantically loved, because she does not care for "aesthetic" suffering. Sexual titillation is out, because when you rape her the bruises don't show so readily, and besides, she lets you know she hates your guts, goes for your balls with her knees, and calls you the motherfucker (in the original sense) you are until you knock her out.

Perhaps one problem has been that so many of our leaders (and writers) have not been black-skinned themselves. Think of William Wells Brown, who could pass; Charles W. Chesnutt, who could and did pass; Jean Toomer, who passed with a vengeance; Langston Hughes, who could pass (when young) as a Mexican; Booker T. Washington, John Hope Franklin, James Weldon Johnson, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Arna Bontemps, Nella Larsen, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Frank Yerby—all very different in appearance from, say, Wallace Thurman, who was drawn to write about a black black woman because he was so black himself, and blackness was a problem for him among other blacks lighter than himself, as it was among whites. We can continue to respect and love many of these writers, and treasure what they wrote because we understand *America*; but we must be wary of their depictions of black women because we understand ourselves.

In his landmark essay "Of the Dawn of Freedom" (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois wrote: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War." This is a true statement, but it is a man's vision. That is to say, it sees clearer across seas than across the table or the street. Particularly it omits what is happening within the family, "the race" at home; a family also capable of *civil* war.





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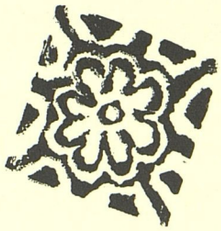
In paraphrase of this statement I would say that the problem of the 21st century will still be the problem of the color-line, not only "of the relation of the darker races of *men* [sic] in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea," but of the relations between the darker and the lighter people of the same races, and of the women who represent both dark and light within each race. It is our "familial" relations with each other in America that we need to scrutinize. And it is the whole family, rather than the dark or the light, that must be affirmed.

Light- and white-skinned black women will lose their only link to rebellion against white America if they cut themselves off from the black black woman. Their children will have no hip pockets in which to keep their weapons, no teeth with which to chew up racist laws. And black black women will lose the full meaning of their history in America (as well as the humor, love and support of good sisters) if they see light and white black women only as extensions of white and black male oppression, while allowing themselves to be made ashamed of their own strength and fighting spirit: that fighting spirit that is our birthright, and, for some of us, our "rusty black" joy.

As black women, we have been poorly prepared to cherish what should matter most to us. Our models in literature and life have been, for the most part, devastating. Even when we wish it, we are not always able to save ourselves for future generations: not our spiritual selves, not our physical characteristics. (In the past, in our literature—and in life too—the birth of a "golden" child to a dark mother has been perceived as a cause for special celebration. But was it? So much of the mother was obliterated, so much changed in the child, whose birth as often as not was by her unplanned.) But perhaps we *can* learn something, even from the discouraging models of earlier centuries and our own time. Perhaps black women who are writers in the 21st century will present a fuller picture of the multiplicity of oppression—and of struggle. Racism, Sexism, Classism and Colorism will be very much a part of their consciousness. They will have the wonderful novels of black African women to read —Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head and others—as 19th-century black women did not. They will have a record of the struggles of our own times. They will not think of other women with envy, hatred or adulation because they are "prizes." They will not wish to be prizes themselves. How men want them to look, act, speak, dress, acquiesce in beatings and rape will mean nothing whatsoever to them. They will, in fact, spend a lot of time talking to each other, and smiling. Women of all colors will be able to turn their full energies on the restoration of the planet, as they can't now because they're tied up with all this other stuff: divisions, resentments, old hurts, charge and countercharge! And talk about the need for teeth and hip pockets then! Women who are writers in the 21st century will undoubtedly praise everyone.

In any case, the duty of the writer is not to be tricked, seduced or goaded into verifying by imitation, or even rebuttal, other people's fantasies. In an oppressive society it may well be that *all* fantasies indulged in by the oppressor are destructive to the oppressed. To become involved in them in any way at all is, at the very least, to lose time defining yourself.

To isolate the fantasy we must cleave to reality, to what *we* know, *we* feel, *we* think of life. Trusting our own experience and our own lives; embracing both the dark self and the light.



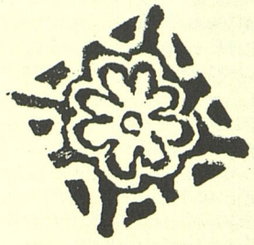


## FOR THE WHITE PERSON WHO WANTS TO KNOW HOW TO BE MY FRIEND

## BY PAT PARKER

The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black.
Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.

You should be able to dig Aretha, but don't play her every time i come over. And if you decide to play Beethoven—don't tell me his life story. They made us take music appreciation too.

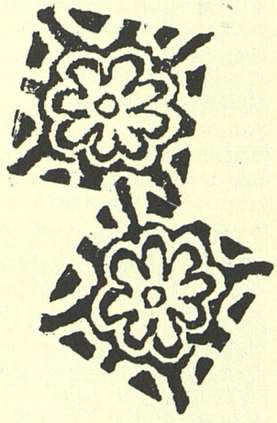


Eat soul food if you like it, but don't expect me to locate your restaurants or cook it for you.

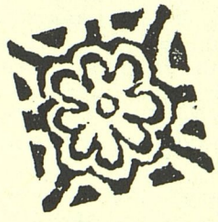
And if some Black person insults you, mugs you, rapes your sister, rapes you, rips your house or is just being an ass—please, do not apologize to me for wanting to do them bodily harm. It makes me wonder if you're foolish.

And even if you really believe Blacks are better lovers than whites—don't tell me. I start thinking of charging stud fees.

In other words—if you really want to be my friend—*don't* make a labor of it. I'm lazy. Remember.







## THE SUBURB DREAMS OF EVIL IN NEWARK, NJ

## BY HILDY YORK

Small groups of teachers huddle like prisoners within circles of students, mostly Black;
all the department stores are filled with sleazy rayon blouses and the signs are in Spanish;
they have stolen the horses of the mounted police
and canter arrogantly through the parks, not even stopping
several rapes and muggings, even laughing and shouting obscenities;
the city is completely locked, barred, gated, burned, or looted;
the people are all thieves, rapists, murderers, or shiftless;
all they do is drink, laugh, dope, pimp, collect welfare and stand around on corners;
someday they will screech toward the suburbs in Cadillacs with fins or old jalopies with missing fenders,
and we will have to give up our maids and hide in our split-level closets.

---

Pat Parker lives and works in Oakland. Her most recent book is *Movement in Black*.

Hildreth York, an art historian and artist, is an Associate Professor and currently Chair of the Art Department of Rutgers University, Newark College of Arts and Sciences.

Linoleum prints by Michele Godwin, who studies at the School of Visual Arts, NYC.

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# ASIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: IDENTITY AND ROLE IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

BY LIANG HO

**Scene 1: Small Publishing Company Office, San Francisco, March 1974**

Overworked and underpaid as an Editorial Assistant, I am conscientiously banging out the large daily volume of correspondence for three editors. My white male boss comes over and asks what is going on behind my "inscrutable face." I stop my typing, look up at him and stare in disbelief. After working almost two years in the office, he still sees me as an "inscrutable Oriental"! Shortly thereafter I quit, realizing that I am not going to get the promotion promised me when I started my job. Did my "quiet and agreeable Oriental personality" have something to do with that?

**Scene 2: International Women's Year Tribune, Mexico City, July 1975**

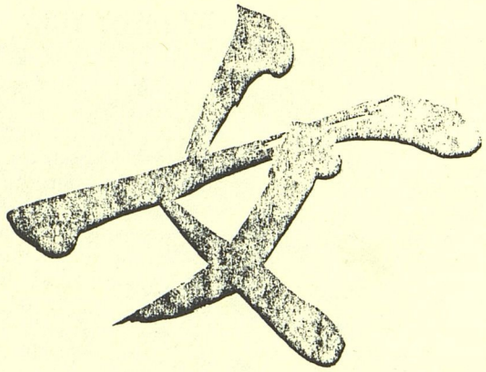
Several of my San Francisco Asian-American women friends and I eagerly approached other Asian women as "Third World sisters," an identity we naively brought with us to the international gathering. To our shock and dismay, our Asian sisters could not identify with us; we were "part of the enemy: rich, capitalist Americans"! In addition, a gulf had arisen over time, and transplantation had created cultural barriers which could not be bridged for the short duration of the conference. We were acutely and painfully aware of the different perception of feminist priorities we had in contrast to our overseas sisters. One example was our concern within a racist society to gain some degree of political and economic self-determination while their major objectives were often basic agricultural, rural development and education out of illiteracy for their sisters and brothers.

**Scene 3: San Francisco International Women's Year Conference, San Francisco, October 1975**

Before a packed house, an Asian-American woman panelist addressing the "Concerns of Third World women in the United States" likened the invisibility of Third World Americans to that of Jews in Germany under the Third Reich. The lack of general public knowledge of and understanding about Third World cultures in America was one major indication of this "benign neglect" by historians, among others. Such a dismal state of affairs exposed the emptiness of the "melting pot" and "assimilation" myths for non-white Americans. And when Native Americans did not readily "assimilate," genocide was the calculated government policy practiced upon them. The audience groaned in disbelief.

**Scene 4: Honolulu, Hawaii, May 1976**

On a short vacation, I'm sipping my breakfast coffee in a Waikiki restaurant. A white woman, about 45, sits down next to me at the counter and asks: "Are you Puerto Rican?" (And I thought I looked all-American!) I answer in my clearest, most articulate East Coast English: "No, I'm not." She tries again: "Are you Eskimo?" Should I laugh or cry? Controlling my feelings, I reply: "No, I'm Chinese." I didn't even get "American" in that time. "Oh, you look so exotic." That's a compliment so I smile and ask her where she's from. Someplace in the Midwest and here on vacation too. How nice. Then it occurred to me that this was how many white Americans viewed non-whites—"exotic" people who all look alike. (To me, Puerto Ricans, Eskimos, and Chinese all look *very* different.) Should I have asked her if she was Italian or Greek or English? I was, after all, an American too, wasn't I?



This character, pronounced "onna" in Japanese and "niu" in Chinese, is the symbol for woman.

This essay is reprinted from *Feminist International No. 2: Asian Women '80* (June 25, 1980).

These personal experiences out of my life are not uncommon for Asian-Americans. And they persist for non-white Americans whether they have lived here for several generations or are newly arrived immigrants. Regardless of our dress or mastery of "standard English," our common bond is that we cannot "pass for white" and therefore, our identity and role in America is subject to uncertainty. We don't easily fit into our ancestral ethnic shoes, and we can't pass for "all-American" either. Because we continue to experience other people viewing us first as "exotic Orientals," we are forced to respond to a double image of ourselves. Our dilemma is built into the requirements of living in America as non-whites.

Facing our bi-cultural identity and role is more than just facing reality; it's coping with a far more complex and delicate balance of different cultural realities based on tradition, upbringing, and survival. Cultures structure and condition the ways in which their members experience themselves and relate to the world. For instance, what we feel, how we feel, when we feel it, and in what way we express it, vary greatly from culture to culture. (See Edward T. Hall's *The Silent Language* [1959], *The Hidden Dimension* [1969], and *Beyond Culture* [1977] for a brilliant critical examination of cross-cultural differences.) The principles and dynamics of bi-cultural identity and living are remarkably similar no matter what cultures are compared in various place and time settings.

For example, my own cultural background is Chinese. One basic way Chinese approach life and living is through a situation-appropriate view, emphasizing sensitivity and adjustment to human interaction, and the maintenance of interpersonal harmony, particularly in public. Proper respect and deference are shown to others according to age, rank, and gender. Open display of strong emotions and personal opinions, especially negative ones, is suppressed or even punished by Chinese parents when raising their children. In this context, there is discouragement of the development or expression of "individuality" as white Americans think of it. Our psychological formation is more directed toward adjusting our behavior to suit the situation, not imposing our personality on it.

A good example of different cultural perspectives is a public social function where Chinese and white Americans are interacting. From the Chinese point of view, we want very much to "let you have face" so we tend to go along and be more agreeable with what you say. For us, the merits of what you say are often not as important as good interpersonal relationships. Even today, Chinese-Americans who are too "independent and assertive" in their behavior, and not sensitive or deferent enough to the group, may find other Chinese showing strong disapproval. In general for Chinese, open public conflict and dissension are to be avoided because they still carry a strong connotation of being "bad, abnormal, and unhealthy." Conflict literally means loss of control, and therefore "social face," which also leads to illness.

White Americans would experience and interpret this same public interaction differently. They would expect a discussion or verbal response in some detail, pertaining to the issues raised from their end. They would also expect someone Chinese to express her or his personal, individual opinion. Better still, different or opposing opinions should be offered for discussion in order to arrive at the "superior position or truth." The American would interpret the Chinese person's agreeableness, smile, and perhaps nod of head as a personal affirmation of the statement

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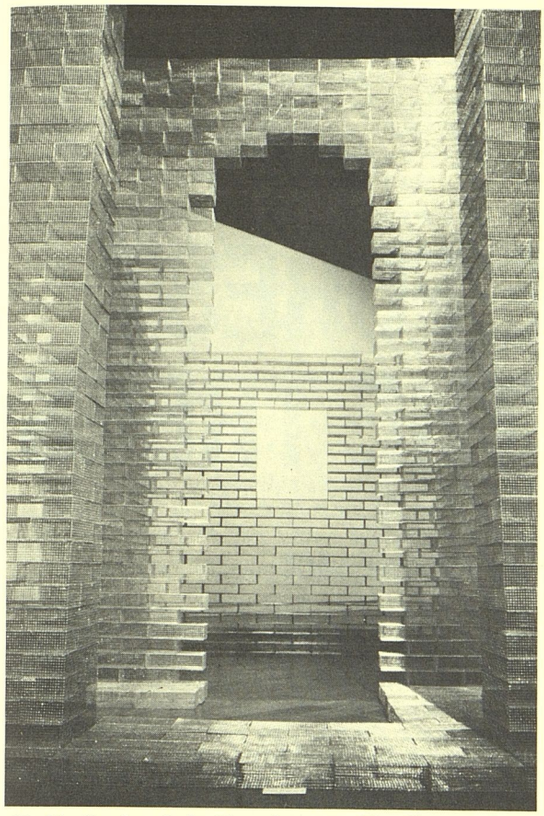

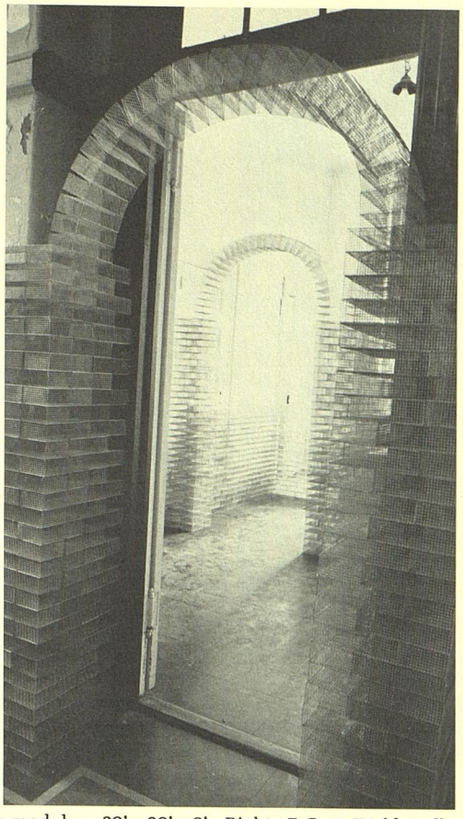

Kit-Yin Snyder. *Left: Piece for Arco* (detail). 1979. Wire mesh modules. 20' x 20' x 9'. *Right: P.S. 1-IV* (detail). 1980. Wire mesh modules. 8' x 4' x 2'. Kit-Yin Snyder, a NYC sculptor born in Canton, China, has received NEA and CAPS grants and most recently showed at Just Above Midtown.

or proposition. That may or may not be the case. Coming from a more individualistic, issue-oriented culture which values independent thought and expression, both in private and public, white Americans are likely to misconstrue Chinese motives, thoughts, and behaviors. In general for white Americans, open public expression of different opinions and dissension is "good, normal and healthy" because it "gets the matter out into the open" for the purpose of arriving at the "truth of the matter." (Refer to Francis Hsu, *Americans and Chinese* [1972] for a detailed analysis and comparison of the differences between these two cultures and how misunderstandings arise.)

To function in America, then, an Asian or non-Western person must at least adapt some basic attitudes and approaches in order not to be misunderstood and to compete successfully by American standards in American society. This brings enormous conflict of both identity and behavior unless the individual is aware enough to handle and deal with it consciously. This underlying conflict of cultural roles is important to keep in mind to correctly interpret the role of Asian-American women in the women's movement.

Before examining the feminist priorities for Asian-American women, a brief look at how the women's movement expanded in America is appropriate here. When the women's movement gained national attention and momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was the logical successor to the Civil Rights push a decade earlier. That movement had grown out of the demand for equal opportunity in employment, housing, and education by Black Americans and their supporters. Washington, D.C., politicians, who set the national political trends, and the mass media shifted the spotlight from the already "worn-out" racial battles of the urban inner cities and diverted the public's attention to the "newer issue" of women's rights. Federal money was withdrawn from Civil Rights programs and a portion pumped into women's programs. In the new political ball game, it helped to be both a minority and a woman to get your "fair share of the pie."

Many Asian-American women at first balked at the switch, refusing to split or switch their loyalties and limited resources from their ethnic communities and racial struggles to join the front lines of the women's movement. However, regardless of individual sympathies and degree of identification with part or all of what white feminists were demanding, Asian-American women who did not get involved in feminist politics only lost out that much more in government-funded programs like affirmative action training and employment, where white women benefitted the most since they were numerically the racial minority in America.

Even when they did join, the rewards were not always equitable or just. All too frequently, Asian-American women labored quietly behind their more vocal and demonstrative white sisters, and watched them get the better jobs and the limelight, while they were still laid off their jobs along with their Asian brothers under the penalizing "last hired, first fired" policy of employers. White women obviously stood to benefit from having their movement "legitimized" by the presence of women of color; but all too often, they did not seriously promote or support non-white women's priority claim to better jobs, leadership roles, and other opportunities, both within the women's movement and outside of it. Women of color were invited to join the white feminist movement, and go to their meetings in white neighborhoods. But rarely did white women seek out or join non-white women at their gatherings, and in their community on their terms.

All along, Asian-American women did not seriously ask themselves what were the tradeoffs and prices to be paid, or problems to be accrued, in the process of obtaining this newly defined liberation. For example, would increased independence and equality bring greater conflict and turmoil into personal and family life? If so, would they be able to handle this and reach a tolerable level of balance? And would this new freedom and equality suit their special status and needs as minority women in America? Even with such questions a moot point in hindsight, it is apparent that Asian-American women must, nevertheless, understand and articulate as best they can their own concerns and priorities from this point on, lest others speak for them.

What, then, are their major priorities? Asian-American women must first of all be assured of economic security and legal protection. These must also be secured for family and community since their minority status places racial, community, and group needs as primary, even before feminist considerations. This is true, no matter how financially well-off an Asian-American woman may become. She cannot afford to entertain the fantasy that she has become totally accepted as American because her face, features, and body will mark her as Asian first. She is, by birth, a "marginal person" in America. If she has maintained a greater part of her native ethnic culture, she will have to deal with deeper issues of cultural conflict in her personal values and behavior, wherein she may be required to act more Asian among Asians and more American among non-Asians. She may have to learn to "talk up" like a white American to lessen the chances of job discrimination and then switch to a different behavior at home with her family and community.

Second, no matter to what degree she identifies with and works alongside white feminists for her personal and collective liberation, she cannot lose sight of the fact that she will always be viewed and treated by many white Americans in a compromising way: they may both admire and resent her advancing status and role in society. Will they, for example, acknowledge and share or transfer their power and resources into her capable hands to manage? In this battle zone of power politics, she needs to have her security and identity firmly built on her ethnic and cultural base, or else she will not be able to survive the crossfires of upward mobility. She can never forget that if she loses, she will be thrown right back into her ethnic community, seeking support and sustenance.

Third, she needs to examine her priorities carefully and budget her time wisely because her fractured bi-cultural identity and life in America demand it. Is her main concern where to build her career and how to get there? If so, she needs to acquire more culture-appropriate American skills and strategies to increase her chances of success. If, however, she is trying to survive with her husband and children, she may decide to devote more of her energies to community efforts which benefit her family directly. If she is a young and single woman, she needs to decide if she is going to be "more Asian" or "more American" in her dating preferences, her social patterns, and what her own cultural tradition means to her.

Finally, her bi-cultural background and role in America offers her a greater range of choices from which to adopt values and approaches than a mono-cultural role would permit. She can progress in the American culture of mobility and independence when it suits her, but can also retreat into her Asian cultural haven of interdependence and stability when she is tired and worn out from struggling to get ahead. She can work for equality through women's groups *and* join her local ethnic community to combat racism. In all her varied choices and roles, she is an Asian-American woman who knows that her identity and future in America depend on a greater awareness and employment of her dual cultural heritages.

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Liang Ho lectures on cross-cultural communications, women's concerns, and politics.



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From *Tree: A Performance with Women of Ithaca*. *Left to right*: Helen Blauvelt, Eleanor Washington, Suzanne Lacy. Photo by Noni Korf.

# THE FOREST AND THE TREES

BY SUZANNE LACY

*I want to welcome each and every one of you this evening. It's really a pleasure to see so many of us here. We have the races represented, we have people from all walks of life represented, and we are here in friendship to share a meal and honor women from our pasts. This is a very special occasion.* —Carolyn Whitlow, co-mistress of ceremonies

On October 15, 1981, one hundred women in Ithaca, New York, brought a "dish to pass" to the Unitarian Church parlor. They came to honor Eleanor Washington, great-grand-niece of Harriet Tubman, and Helen Blauvelt, town historian and daughter of a suffragist. This evening and the week-long process that preceded it was a performance artwork commissioned by the Johnson Museum at Cornell (*Tree: A Performance with Women of Ithaca* was created by Suzanne Lacy and Marilyn Rivchin). From an open workshop on art and politics, the major metaphor for our dinner emerged:

*We're fortunate in Ithaca to have a herstory rich in both Abolition and Suffrage Movements. It seems appropriate we think about the context of women's friendships in relationship to these two movements and how we can build upon the ways in which anti-sexist work and anti-racist work among women who are friends can move forward, perhaps starting from tonight.* —Nancy Bereano, co-mistress of ceremonies

We were not trying to gloss over the suffragist betrayal of black women, nor the distrust that exists now between the races. But we hoped that the pride in the strong women of our heritages and an experience of warmth would provide a context for a future dialogue about the fragile relationship between women of different races.

*I knew I'd learn something tonight. Being a freshman and all, I feel it's my time to listen, and I was right, because I was able to hear the beauty of your history, your color, and I thank you for the wisdom of your presence. I didn't have to wait till you spoke; I felt it the moment I walked in. . . . It made me remember my great-grandmother, her touch, her color, and a line from Ntozake Shange, who wrote, "We must all learn our commons and bring them and share them with the world."* —Participant

So we created a potluck dinner, with a program equally balanced between white and black music, poetry, and history, and we invited each woman to bring the name of a woman important to her own past to sign in the roots (with her own name in the branches) of a large painted tree.

*I look around tonight and I see my mother; I see Mrs. Montell, Mrs. Eastman. . . . I see churchwomen here. Mrs. Washington has been a presence in my life as long as I can remember. Sitting together around the kitchen table, we talk about what was, what will be, what could have been, what ought to be—all of the beautiful things in life and some of the troubled things too. In our community we sit down together in our kitchens every day of the week. It's nice that tonight is so large and all, but it's not new to me and not new to them. I think the beautiful thing about the women I know is the gathering of the different generations. There's a long continuity from grandmother to children to children's children. Mrs. Washington and others here tonight have made the path, and made it easy for me. These ladies are my thing; check them out!* —June Williams

There were students, churchwomen, artists, housewives, cooks, clerks, administrators, teachers, scientists, and organizers. There were vests and suspenders, knit hats and felt. There were paisley scarves and rope pearls, levis and t-shirts, silks and polyesters and 100% cottons. Older women baked sweet potato pies and sponge chiffon cakes; college students sautéed vegetables and made miso soup; working women ran into markets on their way from their jobs to pick up cheese and bread. In short order the food was gone, all of it, down to the last slice of pie, and the room grew quiet as Nancy Bereano and Carolyn Whitlow announced the program. That program was in itself something of a miracle:

*Can you imagine only five short days ago tonight was just an idea in a few people's minds? Sunday we began planning. On Monday we started to talk to women in the community. On Tuesday we invited the guests of honor. On Wednesday the singers were approached. This woman came forward to offer a poem, that one to hang an etching from Harriet Tubman's grave. "Backstage" we who've been planning it feel like a miracle somehow happened, and that miracle is your spontaneity and strong networks that made this possible!* —Suzanne Lacy

One woman sang spirituals, another sang Emily Dickinson's poems set to music. Someone read Susan Griffin's poem on Harriet Tubman, and Mrs. Washington read from a book about how her great aunt was the first woman to receive a pension from the army. Mrs. Blauvelt told us about the history of women's suffrage in Ithaca and how her red-haired mother became a feminist after visiting a sweatshop. In the warm interlude after they spoke, the guests settled deeper into their seats, and someone asked what came next. It seemed to all as if we had come to a beginning rather than an ending. . .

*I am amazed by how few people I know in this room, and I've been here 11 years. I think it would be just fantastic to do this again, if we each brought the people we know. . . . To begin a dialogue is very very important—to view this as a beginning, not as a once in a lifetime happening. That would be very sad.* —Carolyn Whitlow

One at a time each woman in the room rose to introduce herself to the others. After the first few women spoke, it was clear that here, in the experiences of each woman, was the real "heart" of the evening. This was the beginning of the dialogue:



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*I retired here from New York about 19 years ago. I'm so glad to see that something else is coming up to take the place of my old women's club. For 14 years or so we had a lot of "dish to pass," but for some reason they were discontinued. I think it's the nicest thing when women get together and eat together, and I love to see these young people. I can remember when suffrage came up and I worked for it, and I can see that women have really come a long way.*

*I'm Lillian Johnson and I came here and ate a lot of food! When I heard about the dinner this afternoon I said, "Oh! My CR group is held tonight, what am I going to do?" So I ran over there and said, "Come on to this thing!" and here we are!*

*I'm Sally Lee and I'm a cytologist at the community hospital. I'm a divorced woman and I feel wonderful being here tonight. We need this very badly. When I first came here it was very lonely, you know, and this woman here next to me took me under her wing. History-wise, I was the first black woman to work in the J.J. Newberry's here, and as a woman I was the first to work at Tomkins Hospital cytology lab.*

*I am Kumiko. Originally I came from Japan, 22 years ago. That makes it exactly half my life in Ithaca. I am an architectural designer; I am an artist; I have four children. . . a husband also. And a dog and a cat.*

*I am Kumiko's daughter, Noni, and I was born in Ithaca.*

*I was coerced into coming here tonight, but I'm glad I did. My name is Deborah Jamison. I'm the administrative assistant loan officer in Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services. We're the people that run around and do all the little fixin' up in the downtown area. I'm also on the board of the Southside Center and I want to do a little advertising plug for our auction. There will be assorted objects there for people to browse around and look at and better prices. You cannot miss it! Tonight has been some experience, let me tell you.*

*My name is Joan. I've wanted to say something all evening but I'm so shy. I've always felt the meals I prepare for my family are works of art.*

*I'm Blanche Thompson and I used to work with Mrs. Washington in the women's club. In 1940 we met with a group of women at Southside Community Center and we unveiled a monument to Harriet Tubman. I praise God for being able to be in your midst tonight, because one time today I told Mrs. Washington I wouldn't be able to come. I have arthritis and heart condition and I didn't think I'd be able to drive, but truly the Lord made the way for me to be here tonight. I enjoyed the dinner and I enjoyed being with you tonight, so just pray for me.*

*I'm Bernice Miller. I've been knowing Mrs. Washington a long time, and she and I talk half the night all the time!*

*I'm Pearl Murray, and I cook at one of the fraternity houses at Cornell. From there, I cook at home. The door is always open so that anybody that would like to, come, and there's always a cup of tea or something waiting there. Mrs. Washington is a lovely person, a lovely friend, and we don't talk at night. . . I can never get her on the phone! Everybody else is talking to her! Anyway, I catch her on the weekends. Many many more happy nights like this, and food—I love to cook!*

*My name is Joan Alber. I'm a member of the Bernadette Powell defense fund. I spend a lot of time organizing cooking at Moosewood Restaurant where I work, and I would love to do it for a function like this!*

*I feel really tongue-tied around all you fascinating people. I'm a part-time secretary at Cornell, a mother and a grandmother, and I've been active in the nuclear weapons freeze campaign. [I just so happen to have a petition with me tonight if anyone's interested.] This has been a great night and I'd like to see it continue. There's so many important issues we could work on, something for everybody and even still there's work to go around.*

The morning after the dinner, a small planning group met to brainstorm ideas for the future. Nancy had always wanted to stage tours of underground railroad stations with dramatic enactments along the way. Marilyn suggested a city-wide patchwork quilt, each square a portrait of a woman important to a woman resident. The tree painting could be signed again and again, becoming a symbol of evolving networks. Another dinner might honor all the ethnicities in Ithaca—big enough to fill the football stadium!

We met that morning because we knew that our single dinner, no matter how successful as a first experience, would not *substantially* address racism and sectarianism among the women of Ithaca (as one black woman said before the dinner, "It's the *second* meeting where the shit starts to come down!"). Nor would it create a particularly deep experience of women's community where there was as yet little recognition of it. It seemed to us that the process we had set in motion needed to be nurtured with subsequent events. I left a tired but enthusiastic planning group and returned to Los Angeles. They continued meeting two or three times, and then stopped.

When I went to Ithaca I set up a question for myself: How long was it necessary to be in a place in order to produce a networking performance, and how long could the process set in motion by the artwork be sustained afterward? I wondered if it would be possible to adopt the model of the suffragist "stumper" who traveled from town to town raising the vote—a person-to-person consciousness-raising and community building process, a kind of interaction subsumed in our culture by mass media. Could we create a network among women across the country through performances? In Ithaca I learned that in the right community, with the support of activists there, a very moving event could be produced in a week. But the lack of time to build a follow-up group and the unfamiliarity of the goals and processes of such performance events, together with the press of people's normal lives, seemed to contribute to our inability to sustain energy after the performance.

This issue is related to another problem with such performances: as rich an experience as one evening might be, the real problems of racism, the daily perpetuation of oppression and its institutionalization, are staggering in their enormity. How can we even presume to touch upon them with a single evening, particularly one clothed in good feelings rather than with real underlying hurt and anger? The contradiction with broad-based networking is that the purpose (at least the apparent and stated purpose) must be unthreatening and wide enough in its appeal to attract many different kinds of women—sometimes appearing hopelessly "liberal" when measured by a radical yardstick—yet were we to pose more difficult political issues at these beginning stages we might run the risk of attracting only the converted.

It is important to remember when assessing such artworks that though they may *approach* the problems of real life, the things they offer are not always the same as political strategies. Artists cannot take the place of activists; exactly *what* they can offer to political movements, aside from "illustrating" the cause, is not always clear. They may be able to offer us models and strategies; only careful analysis and questioning will show that. The *Tree* dinner was developed on the premise that overcoming oppression on an individual level begins with dialogue, and that a dialogue is facilitated by experiences of pleasure in being with one another—building, if ever so slowly, situations of trust. This may or may not be an effective long-term strategy for dealing with racism; in the short term, for that night, the experience of love among the women in that room was undeniable. I'm really not sure how much art can do toward social change. One thing I'm sure it can do, however, is to offer us a vision of the possible; it can realize, over and over, metaphors for community that create for us, if only temporarily, the experience of the relationships we one day hope to have with each other.

Suzanne Lacy is a feminist performance artist from Los Angeles. She explained, during the performance at Cornell: "I'm an artist but I don't paint; I do performance art, which is essentially theater that takes place in real life with each of us as an actor playing herself."



From *Tree*. Photo by Marilyn Rivchin.



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## *what did you learn in school?*

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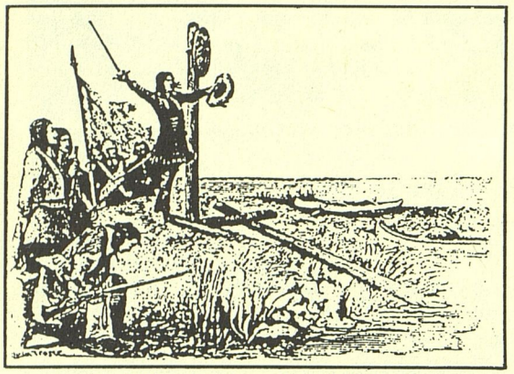
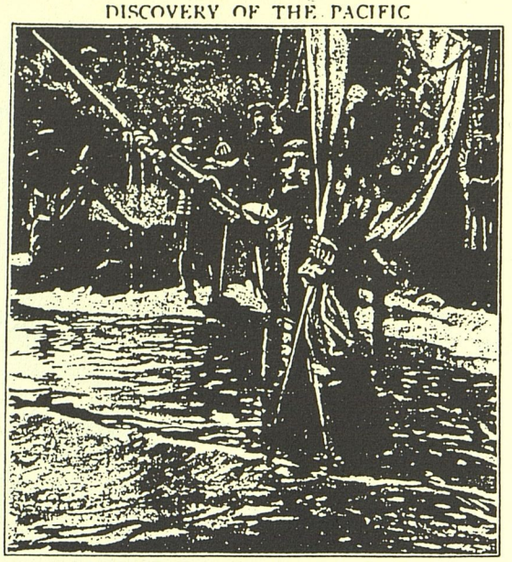


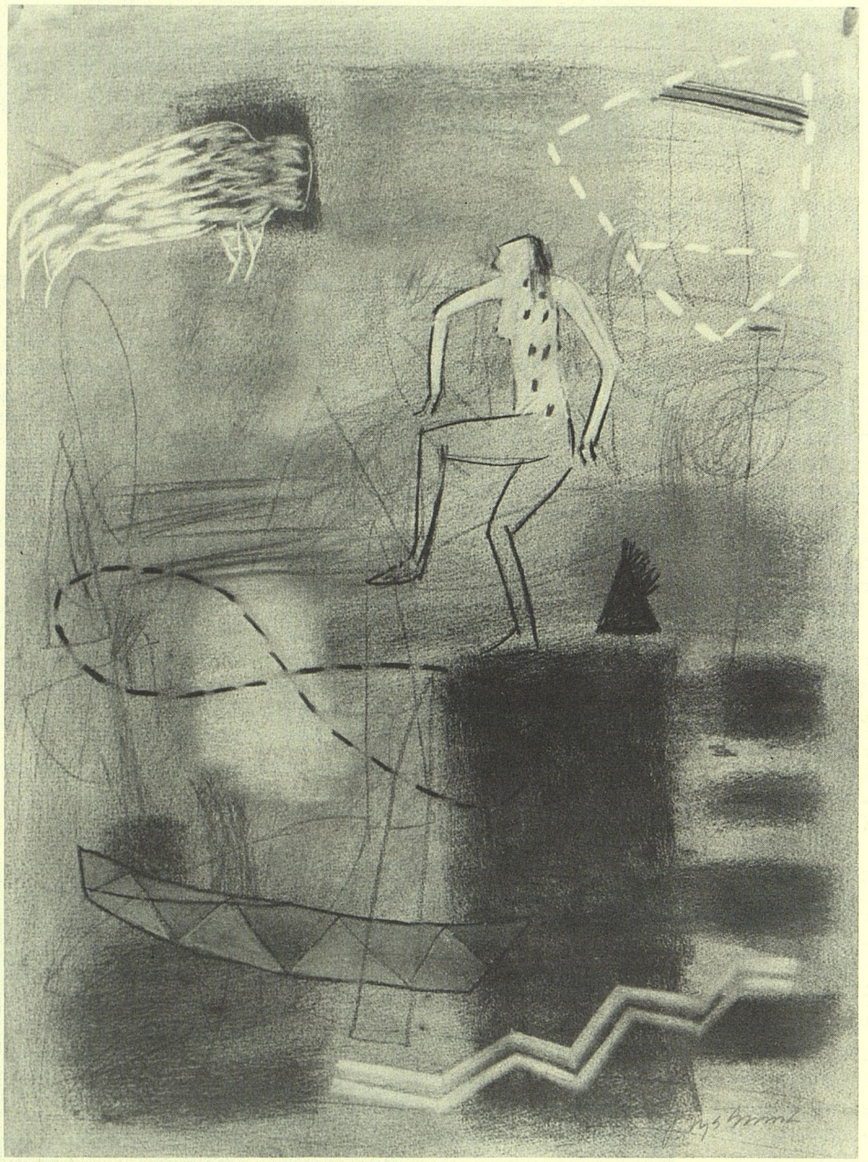
La Salle takes possession of the land.




Balboa takes possession of the Pacific.

# STATEMENT TO THE RACISM WORKSHOP

BY JUANA MARIA PAZ



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. *Ghost Dance Series*. 1981. Pastel. In the late 1880s, ghost dances (performed at night) were started by a Native American who thought that if you kept on dancing, the white people would go away, the buffalos would return, and everything would be the same again. "My *Ghost Dance* is a symbol of what is going on in this country now, of all the anguish society is going through. This is my own personal ghost dance about these conditions," explains Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, a Flathead, French Cree, and Shoshoni born on the Flathead Reservation in Montana.



© *1982 Jaune Quick-to-See Smith*

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I am glad to hear white women are planning racism workshops. I would like to feel people have my best interests at heart. I have done a lot of thinking about this group and this is what I want from all of you.

I want you to stop talking in abstractions and about historical facts. I want you to talk about real things that are happening in this community and *make a commitment to change*. I want white women to take responsibility for their actions and consciously and publicly affirm the need for change in themselves so what happens in this group is not an isolated, sheltered discussion but can affect the community immediately.

The first thing I want people to examine is how they have helped women of color in this community. And how they haven't helped.

When you helped third world women in our struggles, did you do it in a condescending way and on your terms? Did you make it clear that you would make your own choices about what support to give and that you did not want to be asked next time or every time? Did you make it clear that women of color have no claims on your time, energy, home, resources?

In situations where you knew a woman or child of color needed help, did you decide it wasn't your responsibility? Did you make yourself unapproachable so you wouldn't have to be asked? And therefore, couldn't be criticized for refusing?

When you talk about women and children of color in this community, do you talk about how difficult we are—unreasonable, negative, hard to deal with and demanding? Do you validate that we have a right to be angry, or do you try to get your friends to feel sorry for you for having been victimized at the hands of a bitter third world woman?

Do you know that you do this? Do you realize that you treat us like monsters who are soiling your pure lily-white world when we fight back? Again, do you positively affirm that we have the right to be angry? Can you say that out loud?

Do you expect women of color to be in a "butch-type" role? Racism is very sexual in nature. What are your sexual feelings toward the women of color in this community, including the children? What do you do when you're attracted to a woman of color? Do you freak out and feel sorry for yourself, tell yourself she'd never be open to you because you're white? This puts all the responsibility on the woman of color to deal with the energy you know she must be feeling. Do you have fantasies of being seduced by a third world woman? Do you find us beautiful, exotic, fascinating? Do you feel attracted and afraid at the same time by the differences you see in us?

What about money? Do you have money in the bank, stocks, resources, trust funds, left-over privileges from a white world that destroys us? Do you share these resources, or again is it only with lovers that you open up?

When a woman and child of color come to town, do you open your home to them? Do you extend yourself in any way? Do you take enough interest in the situation to see what they need—rides to the welfare office, co-op, help with childcare, a place to stay, information on resources in town?

Do you avoid possible confrontations and criticism from women of color by withdrawing your energy as soon as things get tough? Again, white women punish us for our separatism. The subtle message is that if we don't take the racism, we don't get the privileges either. In other words, if we don't take you as you are, you won't feed us, or whatever help we happen to need at the time.

Do you assume you're not being racist unless someone tells you you are? What do you do when a woman of color tells you you're racist? Do you say she's not accepting you as you are and try to make her feel guilty? Do you cry and try to make her feel sorry for you? Are you such a pig about it that she wants to run away and forget the whole thing? Do you go back to your white friends and try to get support for feeling attacked? *Do you take any responsibility at all for your actions?*

When someone tells you you are racist, do you get defensive and demand that she prove it?

Do you do the worst thing of all—the old divide and conquer tactic—do you try to get another third world woman to say you weren't racist and defend you? Do you try to get the woman who defends you to attack the woman who criticized you?

Do you try to turn women of color against each other to cover up and disguise your own racism?

Have you ever in this community gone to a woman of color on your own and copped to your racism in dealing with her WITHOUT BEING CONFRONTED FIRST?

Are you laying all the responsibility for calling the racism on us so that when we do you can say we're attacking you?

Bearing all this in mind, this is what I want from you—I want you to examine the ways you have been racist to women of color in this community and our children.

I want you to take responsibility for your actions without being confronted. I want you to support each other to deal with your racism and change—not feel sorry for yourself and soothe each other's guilt.

I want you all to come out of this group knowing how you have been racist to specific women and children of color in this town in real things that have happened. I want you to examine your behavior before you go to that woman and cop to it. Then I want you to seek that woman out, already knowing how you can change; be more supportive, so no one has to tell you that. Do not place the responsibility on the woman of color to deal with your racism; in other words, tell you what you did and how to stop.

The subtle message of that is that if we want you to stop hurting us—and that's what racism is, hurting people, remember that—then we have to talk you into it and support you every step of the way.

I want this to stop.

In case I haven't made myself perfectly clear, I expect every woman in this group to make a public verbal commitment to go to the women of color they have been racist to and take responsibility for their actions.

This includes our children, who get the double oppression of being women of color and power-tripped by ALL the adults.

Again, I want you to go to the women of color you've had struggles with in this town and take responsibility for your actions; in other words, admit your racism to the people whom you directed it to. Do this without expecting to be comforted or supported or forgiven for your racism.

Do not expect thanks for this recognition of your own power and the pain you inflict. Also, your privilege not to see and deal with it.

This may be a big step to you. Believe me, you have a long way to go.

*This essay has an interesting herstory. It was read aloud at the first meeting of the Fayetteville women's racism workshop in March 1980. From what I understand, the statement was very well received. Sexuality was selected as a key issue to focus on in future meetings.*

*Numerous white women thanked me in the following weeks for sending the statement. It was typed by someone in the workshop on a good typewriter and I got the original. A group on the way to the west coast asked my permission to reprint the article.*

*All of which is very gratifying, except that the racism workshop fizzled out. Fewer and fewer people showed up for the meetings, until the workshop ended, only weeks after it began.*

*As far as I know, no white woman took responsibility for individual acts of racism toward any women or children of color. However, a white woman did criticize me for trying to intimidate all the white women and make them feel guilty, because I'm Puerto Rican. She also intimated that no one was having problems with the issue of race except me.*

*The essay sat in my writing box for two years before I resurrected it. I submitted a copy to a woman of color who was editing an anthology on dialogue between lesbians of color and white lesbians.*

*She loved it. Her lover loved it. She wanted to use it to open an anti-racism workshop.*

*This raised an important question in my mind: Why did this essay sit in my box for two years? Did I let the silent message of the racism workshop convince me that my work wasn't valid, no matter what people verbally said? Because they obviously weren't going to deal with it.*

*The realization is overpowering to me that that's what words like "support" and "validation" mean—the difference between important work sitting in a box for two years or being circulated.*

*It is not that women of color do not write. We don't get recognition for it. We don't get identified as "important feminist writers" the way white women do, either.*

*It takes a lot of time and money to pursue publication, even in women's presses. I saw a notice in a women writers' newsletter recently that said all manuscripts received without a stamped, self-addressed envelope would be trashed unread.*

*Who do women think they are excluding by doing that? You can bet your ass Gloria Steinem and the ladies at* Ms. *magazine will still see their names in print. Besides, often the cost of return postage is greater than the cost of xeroxing an article. And who the hell wants to pay to receive their own rejection slip?*

*These may seem like small details, but it doesn't take too many of them to pile up before people like me are excluded. Again.*

*The message the racism workshop transmitted to me was: "Okay, spic, we can't just ignore you this time and you may have some valid gripes but we're sure as hell not going to encourage people like you."*

*If you validate my struggle, what comes next—confrontation or freedom?*

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The above is excerpted from a longer piece, which appared in its entirety in *Common Lives-Lesbian Lives*. Juana Maria Paz is a writer and poet living in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

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# FACE-TO-FACE, DAY-TO-DAY RACISM CR

BY TIA CROSS, FREADA KLEIN, BARBARA SMITH, BEVERLY SMITH




Boston women demonstrate against budget cuts. Photo ©1980 by Nadine Rosenthal.

*On April 4, 1979, the four of us met to discuss consciousness-raising guidelines for women's groups working on the issue of racism. All of us had had experiences, as white and Black women, thinking and talking about racism with white women's groups, or participating in ongoing racism groups ourselves. We taped our discussion, and the ideas and guidelines that follow are based on it.*

*We feel that using consciousness-raising to explore our racism is particularly useful and appropriate. It is a feminist form based on the ways women have always talked and listened to each other. The CR format encourages personal sharing, risk-taking, and involvement, which are essential for getting at how each of us is racist in a daily way; and it encourages the "personal" change that makes political transformation and action possible. The women's movement has begun to address racism in a way that no previous movement has, because we have a growing understanding that our racism often manifests itself in how we interact with other women. Doing CR acknowledges that how we feel can inhibit or lead to action, and that how we actually treat people does make a difference.*

*Theoretical and analytical comprehension of the political and historical causes of racism is essential, but this understanding on an intellectual level doesn't always help to make face-to-face meetings with women of color real, productive, or meaningful. We need both a political understanding of racism and a personal-political understanding of how it affects our daily lives. Many women start doing CR about racism because they are already confronting it in other areas of their lives and need a place to explore what is happening. CR about racism is not merely talk, talk, talk, and no action, but the essential talking that will make action possible. Doing CR is based on the fact that as a person you simply cannot do political action without personal interaction.*

*We also want to stress, however, that these guidelines are not instant solutions. You cannot spend 15 minutes on each topic and assume that you're done. Racism is much too complex and brutal a system for that. The absence of language to explore our own racism contributes to the difficulty and is in itself part of the problem. Only one term, "racism," exists to describe the range of behavior from subtle, nonverbal daily experiences to murders by the Ku Klux Klan. "Racism" covers individual acts and institutional patterns. But this stumbling block of language presents another theme to explore, not a reason to give up. CR is just one step in the whole process of changing the legacy of oppression (based on difference) that white male rule has imposed on us.*

*Actions can grow out of the CR group directly. For example, the group can find out about and publicize the resources which exist in its area, such as other CR groups, study groups, Third World women's groups, and coalitions of Third World and white women. The group can compile reading lists about Black women, racism, and white women's anti-racist activity. It can spread the word about the CR process through writing articles, and by giving workshops and talks. It can also compile its own CR guidelines. The legacy of racism in this country is long. It will take a great deal of time and ongoing commitment to bring about change, to alter the insidious and deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes we learn from the time we are children. It is important to show other women what is possible.*

*The following guidelines are divided into three sections: (1) Early Memories/Childhood Experiences, (2) Adolescence/Early Adulthood, and (3) Becoming a Feminist/Racism in the Women's Movement. The group should plan to spend a substantial amount of time sharing personal histories and feelings in order to build trust, especially at the beginning. It is good to pose questions constantly that make women backtrack and remember their own pasts. General questions which can be applied to any topic and which should be raised along the way are: "How do you experience yourself as a white person?" "What were your fears and what was your anger?" "What did you do with your fears and anger?"*

*We have included some guidelines that deal with anti-Semitism, but the primary focus of the guidelines is white racism against Black people. It is important for groups to discuss the ways in which anti-Semitism in America is similar to and different from racism aimed against Black people. It is also important to connect racism aimed at Afro-Americans with the racism and oppression aimed at all people of color and with the discrimination aimed at white nationality groups who are not Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Insights about how class identity connects with racism should also provide an ongoing topic for discussion.*

**Early Memories/Childhood Experiences**

1. When were you first aware that there was such a thing as race and racial differences? How old were you? Recall an incident if you can. How did you feel?
2. What kind of contact did you have with people of different races? Were they adults, children, playmates?
3. How did you experience your own ethnic identity?
4. How did you first experience racism? From whom did you learn it? What did it mean to you? How did it function in your perception of yourself? How did it make you feel? How did it affect you in relation to other people?
5. When did you first notice yourself treating people of color in a different way?
6. When were you first aware that there was such a thing as anti-Semitism? How old were you? Recall an incident. How did you feel?
7. What did you learn at home about Black people and other people of color?
8. What did you learn about Jewish people?
9. How was what you learned about Black people and what you learned about Jewish people connected?
10. What terms did your parents use to refer to Black people and other people of color? If these terms were negative, how did hearing these



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terms make you feel—curious, uncomfortable, angry?

11. In the group say out loud and make a collective list of *all* the terms you were ever taught or heard about people of color. Also do the same activity with all the terms used for other ethnic and religious groups.

**Adolescence/Early Adulthood**

1. What kinds of messages did you get about race as you entered adolescence? Did your group of friends change?

2. Discuss the connections between coming of age sexually and racial separation. (When the four of us discussed being a teenager, one woman pinpointed the sexual-racial dichotomy by saying, "It's about who you can't date!")

3. If you went to integrated schools, what messages did you get about Black people in general and about Black males specifically?

4. In what ways was race used by you or your friends as a subject of so-called teenage rebellion?

5. How did different groups of students get along in your school? Were you aware of divisions by race and class? How did it feel?

6. How were different groups of students treated by teachers and the school administration?

7. When you were growing up, what kind of information did you get about Black people through the media? How much of it was specifically about Black men?

8. If you had interactions with Black people through work during the '50s and '60s, through political groups, or socially, what proportion of these interactions were with Black men? With Black women?

9. What were your experiences as white women with Black men? What were the racial-sexual dynamics of these relationships? In what ways did these experiences help you to explore your own racism? In what ways did they fuel your own racism? How did they affect your developing feminism?

**Becoming a Feminist/Racism in the Women's Movement**

1. When did you begin to make the connection between your own experiences and the experiences of other women?

2. As you became a feminist, to what degree did you feel connected to women of all different backgrounds and lifestyles?

3. How do you see yourself as different from a Black woman? How do you see yourself as the same?

4. Think about your relationships with Black and white women who are co-workers, neighbors, and acquaintances. What are the differences resulting from race in these relationships? Have you ever had a really close woman friend who was Black? Can you imagine having such a friendship? Why or why not? Have you ever had a sexual relationship with a Black woman? Can you imagine having such a relationship? Why or why not?

5. How does your class background affect your racism and making connections with women different from yourself? What are the barriers you have to overcome to connect?

6. Everyone in the group fills in the blanks in the following statements. This exercise could be done out loud or by each person writing her response down first before hearing from the group. "Black women always _____." "When I am with Black people I always feel or usually feel _____." "I wouldn't want Black people to _____." "When I'm with Black people I'm afraid that_____." "I'm afraid I will _____." "I'm afraid they will _____."




Boston women demonstrate against murders of Black women (see page 69). Photo © 1979 by Tia Cross.

7. Discuss different values you think white and Black women have about family, sexuality, childrearing, clothes, food, money, upward or downward mobility, and other issues.

8. How does racism affect your daily life as a white woman? The group could discuss Lillian Smith's statement (from *The Winner Names the Age*): "Back door treatment is humiliating to all who participate in it. Both leave stains on the soul."

9. Each week the group has the "homework assignment" of noticing racist situations—things each member sees, hears, or reads. Begin each session by sharing the things you have noticed.

10. Discuss what happens when you confront another white woman about her racism. What are your fears? How does it feel to do this?

11. In what way does being a lesbian connect to the whole issue of racism between white and Black women? What kinds of racism have you noticed in all-women social situations, at bars and at cultural events? In what ways can shared lesbian oppression be used to build connections between white women and women of color?

12. Discuss the ways in which white women lower their standards for being feminist for Black and other Third World women. Do you find yourself "hiding" your feminism in a situation where there are Third World people? Are you afraid to confront Black women's anti-feminism?

13. Discuss issues that the women's movement has worked on which might be considered racist because they did not address the experiences of women of color. Discuss feminist issues that cut across racial and class lines, touching the lives of all women. Which of all these issues have you worked on or considered a priority?

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This article is reprinted from *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Feminist Press). The four authors came together as feminist activists in Boston.

# TEACHING ABOUT RACISM IN THE CLASSROOM AND IN THE COMMUNITY

BY LINDA L. SHAW & DIANE G. WICKER

**Introduction**

In this article we will describe teaching methods intended to raise consciousness about the personal and political nature of white racism as well as what can be done to work against it. This work originated from our search for ways to teach about racism to classes of predominantly white students, and from our commitment that whites need to raise consciousness about racism among other white people. In every class we teach, both in the community and in the Women's Studies program...we present materials concerning the experiences of women of color, whatever our specific topic. But we think it is crucial to focus specifically on the ways in which institutional racism victimizes all people, and especially how it functions systematically to oppress people of color.

In order to accomplish these goals, we first provide information about institutional racism that clarifies the relationship between personally held beliefs and attitudes about people of color, and the structural and political means by which racism is maintained in our society. When we first began teaching about this issue, our focus was almost entirely on this structural level, and some students responded with defensiveness, helplessness, and even anger and blame toward one another. We were dissatisfied with these results because we felt they did little to change students' understanding of racism or enable them to act more effectively against it.

A more productive approach, we felt, would be one that facilitated nonjudgmental and nondefensive ways for participants to explore the stereotyped thoughts, feelings, and actions toward people of color that whites, through no fault of their own, have internalized from childhood. Thus, we included several experiential exercises that would encourage participants to express the feelings of guilt, anger, or sadness they may have in response to increased awareness of racism....

Our techniques are designed for use within

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traditional educational settings as well as in community workshops. The content and the order in which they are presented are carefully planned. These materials may be presented either during three or four class sessions or as one longer, intense workshop experience.

Finally, we believe it is imperative that anyone leading these exercises must first have participated in them herself. Because these are difficult and sometimes intimidating exercises, using them effectively requires a firsthand understanding of what students or workshop participants may be experiencing. Even though we have participated in these exercises and conducted them many times, there is still a possibility that a situation will occur that we cannot handle well.

**Ground Rules**

Before proceeding with this work on racism, we have found that ground rules are helpful in order to create a safe, nondefensive environment for both participants and workshop leaders. Some of these rules more easily fit into a community workshop, but they can be adapted for use in the classroom setting.

1. We make the assumption that each person is attending the workshop because she wants to work against racism and has a sincere desire to change.

2. We state that the purpose of the workshop is not to attack or blame each other. We are not playing the game "You are more racist than I."

3. We use some guidelines from Gracie Lyon's book *Constructive Criticism: A Handbook*, which gives information on how to give and receive criticism.[1] If someone makes a statement participants feel uncomfortable with, we ask her to think to herself: "What is my intention in telling her?" "Do I want to make her feel guilty, or stupid, or do I want to help her in her struggle against racism?" We give examples of both positive and negative ways of responding to people.

4. We ask each person to answer these questions: "What is my greatest fear about participating in this workshop?" "What prevents me from combating my racism?" "What do I want to get out of this workshop?" Finally, we ask each person to share something positive about herself for participating in the workshop.

**Defining Racism**

We begin teaching about racism by defining what we mean when we use the term. While this may seem elementary, our experience has confirmed that students have many definitions in mind when they use the word, and that this diversity can be a source of serious misunderstanding. To clarify these differences and to involve students in the discussion of the issue, we ask class members what the word "racism" means to them. Typically, the answers include examples of racial stereotyping or instances in which one person has acted in a bigoted or prejudiced manner toward another, implying that racism is simply a matter of individual attitudes or behaviors. This, of course, reflects much of the day-to-day experience each of us has with racism. Our purpose, however, is to facilitate an understanding of the relationship between the personal, internalized attitudes of individuals and institutional racism, through which whites have power and privilege, and Third World peoples are systematically denied access to rights and resources in the society. We read the following descriptions from a pamphlet entitled *Definitions of Racism.* [2]

> PREJUDICE: Unfavorable opinion or feeling formed beforehand without knowledge, thought or reason [*Random House Dictionary*, 1967].
>
> RACISM: Any attitude, action or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of their skin color. . . . Racism is not just a matter of attitudes: actions and institutional structures can also be a form of racism [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Racism in America and How to Combat It*, 1970].
>
> Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred or discrimination. Racism involves having the power to carry out systematic discriminatory practices through the major institutions of our society [Delmo Dell-Dora, *What Curriculum Leaders Can Do About Racism*, New Detroit, 1970].
>
> WHITE RACISM: Power + Prejudice = Racism [Pat A. Bidol, *Developing New Perspectives on Race*].

We then discuss the reasons why many people view racism only in personal or individual terms, and what some of the implications are, especially in regard to how we approach social change. We stress that racism persists despite individual efforts to free ourselves from racist attitudes and behaviors; nor are individual attempts to convince relatives and friends a sufficient strategy to combat racism. This lays the foundation for pointing out that all whites, regardless of their intentions, are implicated in racism. Again from *Definitions of Racism:*

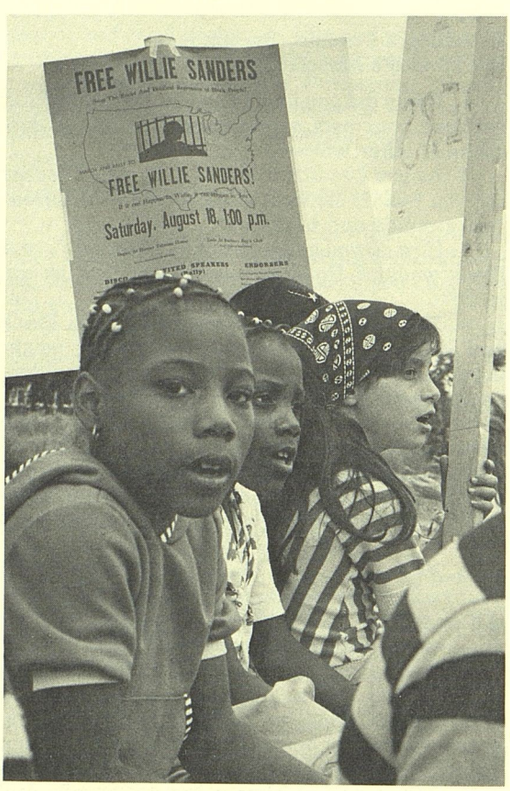
> WHO IS A RACIST? All white individuals in our society are racists. Even if a white is totally free from all conscious racial prejudices, he remains a racist, for he receives benefits distributed by a white racist society through its institutions. Our institutional and cultural processes are so arranged as to automatically benefit whites, just because they are white. It is essential for whites to recognize that they receive most of these racist benefits automatically, unconsciously, and unintentionally [National Education Association, *Education and Racism*, 1973].

Typically, most students listen quietly to our presentation up to this point. . . . From some white students we encounter resistance, defensiveness, even some anger, and lively discussion ensues. Many of those who have followed our explanation so far and accept our analysis of power relationships and institutional racism as a reasonable argument reject this part very strongly, denying their own implication in racism. Yet, we think it is important to stress that just as racism is not only an individual problem, it is also not simply a distant, impersonal force operating independently of each of us.

When we hear responses from white students such as, "Not me. I'm not racist. I don't have any power," we believe a number of reactions have been triggered, including denial, anger, helplessness, white guilt, and sometimes genuine self-righteousness.[3] It is painful and frustrating to hear that if we are white, we are still implicated by being beneficiaries of institutional racism, especially if we have made efforts to rid ourselves of racial stereotypes, discriminatory actions, and have even been activists against racism. It is especially difficult for many white students in Women's Studies classes, who are just becoming conscious of their own oppression, to accept that they too benefit from the oppression of people of color. Knowing how difficult and painful it has been to work on our own racism, we anticipate the students' reactions. Yet, there are few things more difficult to deal with in teaching about this issue.

Because we know this reaction is part of the process involved in working on racism, we listen and take seriously the expression of these feelings, remembering what they reflect and realizing that their expression is necessary. Our ability to work with such reactions is critical for the rest of the process. Although we challenge and disagree with students, we recognize that anger or personal disapproval from us will only result in withheld resentments. We ask students how they feel, and when they say, "I feel bad, or I feel guilty," we talk about guilt: What is it? Where does it come from? What are its consequences? Students often say they feel hopelessness and at fault for something they did not create and are powerless to change. Some express anger, even hostility at us for stimulating unpleasant feelings. Recognizing these feelings of guilt, we again recall how racism functions through the institutions of the society, and how whites receive these benefits automatically and unintentionally. As whites, we are not personally responsible for the existence of racist institutions within capitalist society. We participate in the perpetuation of racist institutions, but we did not start them, nor as single individuals can we bring racist oppression to an end.

Once students have made a good start in processing their feelings of guilt, and we have communicated as clearly as possible that it is not our purpose to create guilt because we think it cannot contribute to a struggle against racism, we give more examples of institutional racism in employment, health, education, housing, etc., from a pamphlet entitled *Fact Sheets on Institutional Racism.*[4] This helps to demonstrate that racism is pervasive and systematic in its denial of rights, privileges, and resources to people of color. We point out, for example, that large income differences exist between whites and Third World people, that whites live longer, have a lower infant mortality rate, and suffer less malnutrition, while Third World people are used without their knowledge or consent as subjects in scientific experiments and are the victims of forced sterilization. From such documentation, white students begin to see that racism systematically denies rights, privileges, and resources to people of color, and that they, without any overt or conscious action of their own, benefit. Without this concrete information, we find the tendency




In 1979 in Boston, Willie Sanders, a Black man, was accused of raping a white woman. While he was being held in jail, another, similar rape occurred. He was later acquitted of all charges. Photo ©1980 by Tia Cross.



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still remains for seeing whatever instance of racism we discuss as an exception. Listing these examples also enables us to refute the myth that anyone can escape racism if s/he will just try hard enough.

**Cultural Roots**

While not everyone experiences racist oppression as directly as people of color, racism nevertheless diminishes the lives of each of us. One consequence of racism is that people of color are defined as different or the "other" by the dominant white culture. Further, whites who have an awareness of the destructiveness of white racism often think they have no distinctive cultural roots or feel ashamed of being white. One result is that whites come to identify with or to romanticize the lives of Third World people, which only perpetuates their objectification. . . . When white people value their own roots and acknowledge the differences that exist between themselves and Third World people, they are better able to be their allies in the work against racism.

Thus, we begin the experiential work with an exercise which focuses on validating each person's roots.[5] We ask each participant to take five minutes to make positive statements about her background. . . . These statements generally bring people into contact with pain, fear, embarrassment, and/or anger about their internalized oppression, and crying and laughing will occur. We continue to have the person speak proudly about herself, allowing for feelings to emerge. Finally, participants are asked to give several examples of how they are allies to people of color by, for example, interrupting a racist statement that is made at the workplace or by family and friends. Throughout, observers are urged to be supportive and to encourage the speaker to say more about her life. In a small workshop, there is time for each person to speak in front of the entire group about her ethnic, class, and cultural background. In a larger classroom setting, we work in dyads or in small groups. This exercise, including time for feedback, takes 20 minutes to complete.

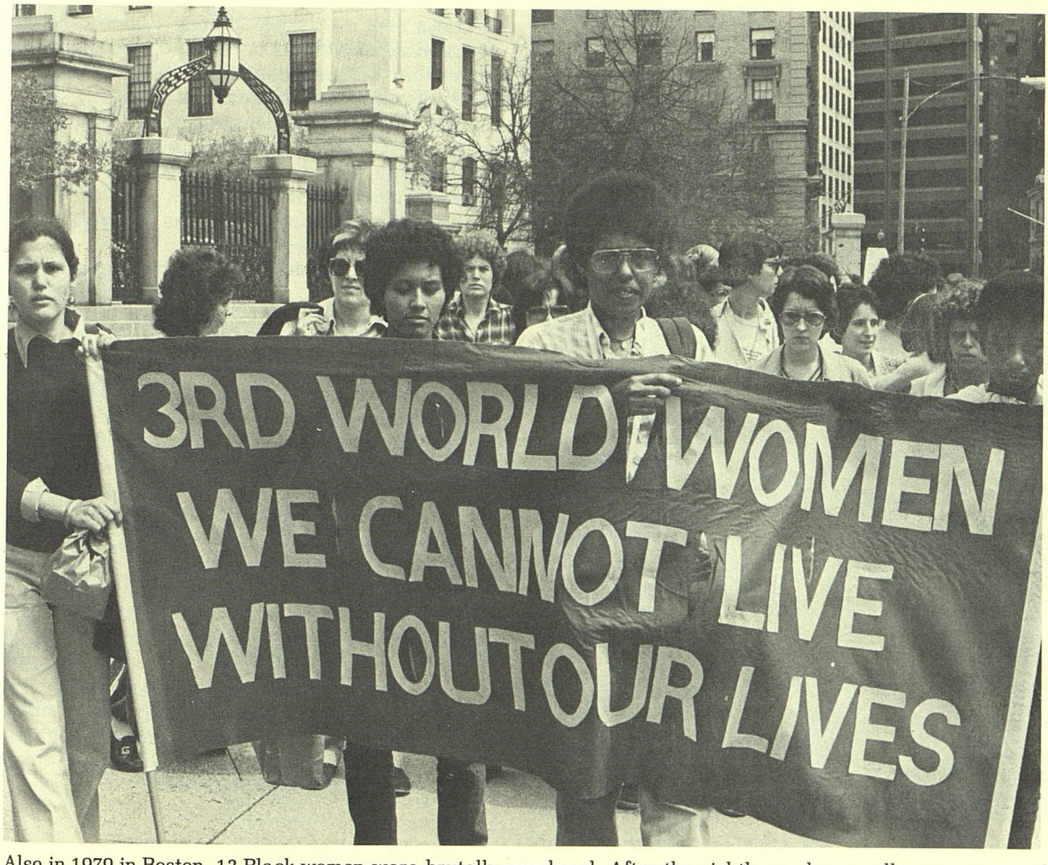
**Fantasy**

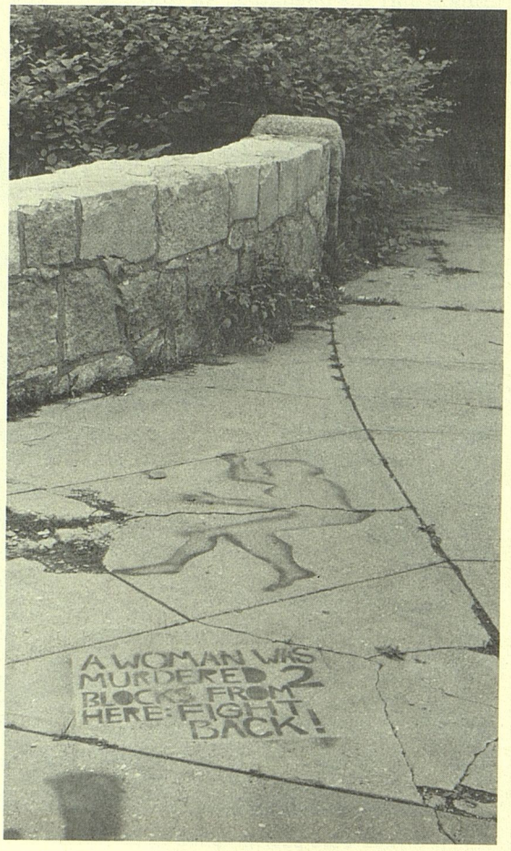
At this point we lead a fantasy experience about being a person of color in order to create a nondefensive, sharing atmosphere, as well as to encourage heightened awareness of white racism. The fantasy begins with a mini-relaxation exercise which enables participants to have a full experience. We say: "Put down all articles in your hands; kick off your shoes; close your eyes and begin to do deep belly breathing." We then give the following instructions:

1. Imagine yourself being the same person you are now, living in the same environment, but belonging to another racial group.
2. You are alone in your apartment; you look at your hands. How do you feel about them? You go to the mirror and look at your face. . . . How do you feel? Touch your hair and so on. . . .
3. Go outside; say hello to your neighbors. How do you feel about them? What kind of feelings do you pick up from them? Do you live in a predominantly white neighborhood? What does it feel like to be a person of your skin color there?
4. Imagine yourself sitting in your classes where most of the faces around you are white and the teachers are almost all white men. How do you feel in this situation? What does it feel like to be learning about mostly white experience from the books you read in these classes?
5. Go to the grocery store (embellish as above).
6. Go to work (embellish).
7. Go visit your parents, relatives. How do they feel about you?
8. Go back home. Your family, lover, or friends are there. How do they feel about you? How do they react to you? If you have children, what is their reaction?
9. Now you are alone again in your house. Sit down in a comfortable place and reflect on your day. Look at your hands again; look in the mirror. Tell the person in the mirror something you felt today and then something you learned. Take some time to say goodbye to her.
10. Now you have changed back to your own color. Look at your hands and look at your face in the mirror, experiencing what this feels like.
11. Slowly begin to come back to this room. Don't talk to anyone, but stay with your feelings from the fantasy. Slowly open your eyes and let your feelings be there.
12. Choose a partner now and share your experience with her. (Or you may have the class divide into small groups to share their fantasies. Some people may also want to share with the total group later.)

During the fantasy, it is important to go slowly with many pauses so that people may elaborate their experience. This exercise has been useful in helping white women become aware of white racism on an intense, emotional level. Many women have found it to be a profound experience enabling them to understand the meaning of the more subtle forms of racism in a way that discursive analysis alone could not teach. In the discussion following the fantasy, responses can be varied, including sadness and anger, although occasionally there will be little reaction. It is important to remind participants to listen to each other in a nonjudgmental manner. If judgments begin to take place, participants will become defensive, and the purpose of the exercise will be lost. We allow 15 minutes for the fantasy and 10 minutes for discussion of feelings in the larger group. Afterwards, students often write moving papers in response to the fantasy.

(When we have used this exercise in multiracial groups, some interesting experiences have been verbalized by women of color. For example, a Black woman chose to assume a skin color lighter than her own, and imagined what it would have been like to have experienced rejection by her peers during childhood. Another Black wom-




Also in 1979 in Boston, 12 Black women were brutally murdered. After the eighth murder, a rally was organized overnight. The next morning, demonstrators heard that yet another women had been killed. The media and police virtually ignored these murders of Black women. Photos ©1979 by Tia Cross.



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an chose to be a darker skin color, and was better able to understand some of the anger and hurt that dark-skinned women feel.)

**Concept of Discharge**

Thinking about racism or acknowledging the racist words and stereotypes taught to us as children often brings feelings of anger, guilt, shame, helplessness, and embarrassment to the surface. Unable to deal with these feelings, white people often become detached, denying the existence of internalized racism and carefully controlling actions that would betray its existence. We doubt we could go through a single day without feeling outraged by racism if we did not become detached and indifferent in this way. Yet, denial of these thoughts and feelings makes work against racism very difficult. To deal with this problem, Sara Winter, a co-counselor and radical therapist in the Berkeley community, implemented a reevaluation counseling technique called "discharge."[6] Her basic premise is that through work with one another to acknowledge and to express racist words, stereotypes, and images, whites will be less controlled by them and better able to work against racism.[7]

We will describe several discharge exercises which enable us to do this emotional work. We ask participants in the classroom/workshop to work in dyads. Since one purpose of this exercise is to help white people to discharge their racist stereotypes and feelings, *people of color should not work with whites. Third World people do not need to hear any more racist statements; they do not need to listen while whites work out their racist thoughts and feelings. . . .*[8]

Each white woman takes about five minutes to state, one by one, all the racist words, thoughts, feelings, stereotyped images and experiences she has accumulated since childhood. (This is only the beginning, as students can continue this work on their own once they are skilled at the technique.) The idea is for the participants to hear their statements and to confront them, allowing their feelings to be exposed (i.e., embarrassment, anger, fear, sadness). The partner is to listen attentively and to encourage and be supportive to the one who is discharging. Judgmental statements should not be made during this process.[9] You may want to visit these dyads to support participants when they become embarrassed or scared. After they have finished this exercise, which takes about 20 minutes, these groups can stay together to discuss specific means of struggling against racism as described later in this paper. . . .

In another discharge exercise, students spend 10 minutes talking in dyads about their earliest memories of racist messages that were given to them by their parents or other significant adults. It is important for students to describe specific incidents and the feelings they had as children in as much detail as possible.[10] Next, each person in turn treats her partner as her parent, saying the thoughts and feelings she has about the incident as well as those she may not have been able to express as a child.

Again working in dyads, each person describes a time when she felt victimized, and then a time when she acted in ways that were oppressive to someone else. For some students, this may involve examples of racism or sexism, while other students may recall incidents concerning physical appearance or sexual preference. Next, each person talks about a time when she interrupted a racist incident. She then recalls a racist situation which she did not interrupt, what stopped her, and what she could do differently were she in that situation again. The purpose of this exercise is to sensitize students to the fact that nearly everyone in this society shares some understanding of oppression or victimization from their own experience, to examine the circumstances that have inhibited them from taking action in the past, and to emphasize instances in which past actions have been taken to interrupt racism.[11] Each person takes three minutes to respond to these questions, with both partners being allowed to answer the question before the next one is given. . . .

**Third World Panel**

Only after we have done work together on our own racism, do we ask Third World women from the campus and the community to come to class and talk about their experiences. We emphasize the importance of doing prior work because of our belief that racism is a white problem against which whites must actively struggle. Also, by this stage, the raised consciousness about racism enables students to integrate more effectively the information and experiences shared by Third World women and to ask informed questions. We invite Third World women with diverse backgrounds, who may or may not identify themselves as feminists. . . .

We describe to the women in advance the work we have been doing in class and we ask for their feedback. We suggest that they talk about such topics as their family backgrounds, socialization, school experience, when they first experienced racial sexual oppression, how they feel about the feminist movement and how they are combating racism. We also emphasize that we would like as much dialogue with the class as possible. We want students to understand how the double oppression of racism and sexism personally affects the lives of Third World women. We especially want the class to see firsthand the diversity of women's lives, to understand that the concerns that are important to women of color may not be the same as those to which white feminists give priority. In addition to the broad range of experiences, politics, and lifestyles, we want students to see the strength reflected in the different ways each woman has struggled in response to the conditions of her life.

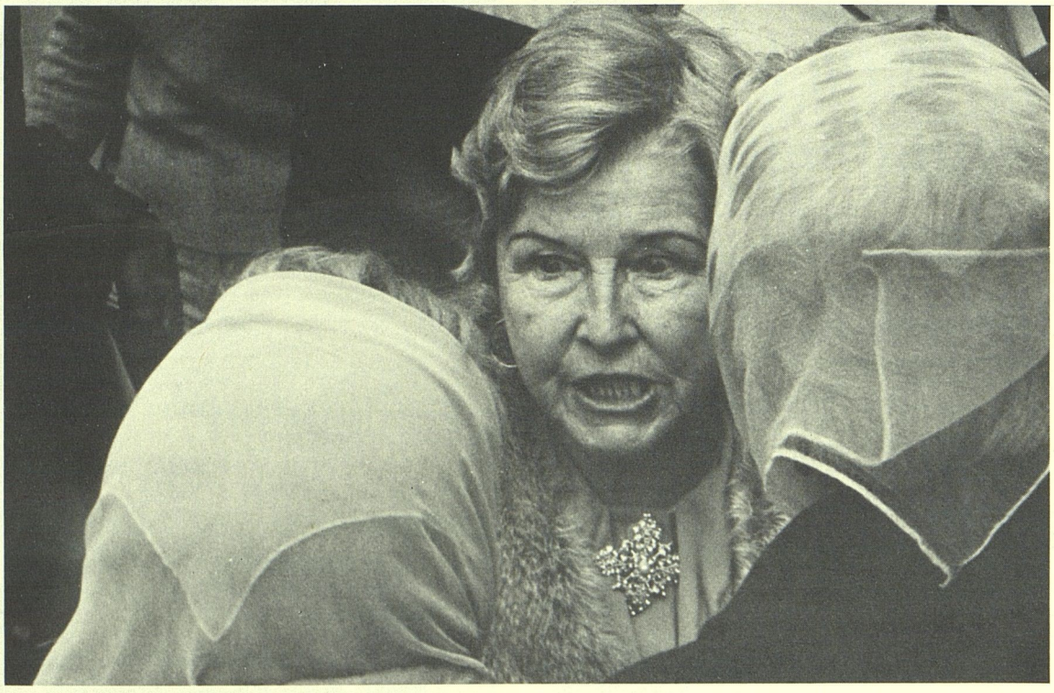
**Small Groups**

The next step is for the class to work in small groups of not more than six for about 20 minutes. These groups allow each student to participate more fully in the discussion than in the larger class. We ask students to think of examples of racism from their own lives. We then discuss with the class as a whole some of these instances, which include white professors teaching most of the classes the students take, cutbacks in university funding for ethnic cultural programs, material presented in classes that is almost entirely about white experience. . . . White students begin to see that the tensions they feel in relating to Third World students in their classes are also a result of racism. We discuss at some length concrete examples from our own campus which provide us with a common experience in our daily lives. By making the instances we work with more immediate, they are not as likely to be interpreted as exceptional cases.

Finally, we spend time in the small groups and in the larger class discussing further work we can do against racism. We suggest that we all think especially about what we could do about the examples just discussed, or we give study questions such as: How can you deal with either personal or institutional racism at your workplace or in classes? . . . These groups can also be self-directed and choose their own topic. We talk about individual and collective actions as well as short- and long-range ways of working against racism. Examples that have come from our classes include interrupting racism at the workplace, forming a coalition with ethnic student groups to protest cutbacks in funding for Third World student organizations on campus, participating in the INFACT boycott of Nestle products, and supporting efforts to integrate public schools. It is crucial to conclude the work on racism with a discussion of specific ways to struggle against racism so that students are not left feeling overwhelmed, helpless and inactive.

**How Hard It Is**

Over the time we have used and developed these methods for teaching about racism, we



These women were photographed on the Boston Common, just after a knifing incident between a Black man and a white man. The police arrested a Black man in nearby shop, despite the crowd's cry that it was the wrong man. Photo ©1978 by Tia Cross, a Boston anti-racist worker and photographer.



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have encountered a number of problems. Like all whites, we experience our own resistance to working on racism, which results partly from the fact that we had no models for dealing with the complexities of teaching/learning about racism from our own educational experience, and our colleagues in the university provide few examples. We also find it painful to acknowledge and point out the racism that exists among feminists because we spend a great deal of time with students, analyzing our experiences as women, the interrelatedness of racism and sexism, and the hope feminism offers for change. To say now that feminists, too, are racist is bitter medicine, indeed. On a personal level, we experience our own white guilt and, as we examine racism, we have to be willing to see ourselves in everything we say. Because racism is such a difficult issue, we know that a confrontation could develop among students or between ourselves and students.

But such frightening possibilities demonstrate the necessity of doing this work. Pushing these fears aside in the hope that none of this will occur results in "over-control" of the class and prevents any real learning. It is more helpful to admit that we are scared and to discuss with students our difficulties. There are real reasons for these reactions, and it is important not to blame ourselves for them. As a result, we do not have to put energy into keeping up a front and can work more effectively. We hope that by sharing our feelings with them students will feel free to explore the issue and be less fearful that they may appear racist or that they need to demonstrate how free of racism they are. We ask students for support for ourselves and for one another, and we ask for feedback that will help us evaluate the work we are doing together on this issue. Students are most often very helpful in teaching us and each other about racism and in assisting us in improving the methods we use. Racism is a difficult issue to teach, and the support we find in talking to one another and others who are struggling with ways to teach about it has also been *crucial*. We offer each other suggestions for improving the process, and reassurance that this work is vital.

It is imperative that white people work against racism at a personal/emotional level as well as a political/intellectual level. Working on racism emotionally can help clear out an accumulation of racist material from our consciousness. We hope we can then more effectively focus our political work against institutional racism.

1. Gracie Lyon, *Constructive Criticism: A Handbook* (Oakland: IRT Collective, 1976).
2. *Definitions of Racism* (New York: Racism/Sexism Resource Center for Educators, 1978), p. 3.
3. Sara Winter, "Rooting Out Racism," *Issues in Radical Therapy* 17 (Winter 1977), pp. 18-19. We wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to Sara Winter and the co-counseling and radical psychiatry communities whose ideas provide the theoretical basis for the experiential work discussed here.
4. *Fact Sheets on Institutionalized Racism* (New York: Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1978).
5. Ricky Sherover-Marcuse, Co-counseling Workshop on Racism, December 1972.
6. Bernard Somers, "Re-evaluation Therapy: Theoretical Framework," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 12 (Spring 1972), pp. 43-45.
7. Winter, p. 19.
8. Winter, p. 19.
9. Winter, pp. 18-19.
10. Tia Cross, Freada Klein, Barbara Smith, and Beverly Smith, "Face-to-Face, Day-to-Day—Racism CR" (see this issue, p. 66).
11. Ellen Ledley and Lillian Moed, Co-counseling Workshop on Oppressions, September 1979.

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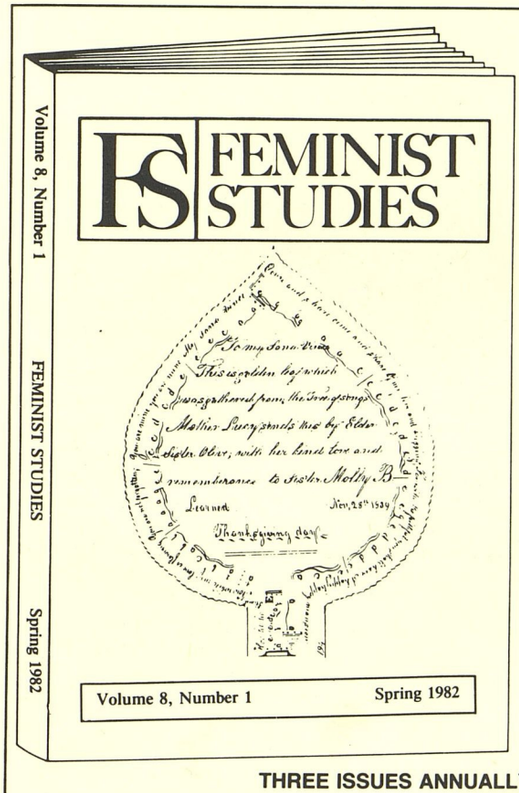
This article is reprinted from *Radical Teacher* #18. Linda Shaw and Diane Wicker are teachers and activists in southern California.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(continued from inside front cover)

The legacy of U.S. slavery is racism. The Civil Rights Movement changed some of that racist history. I didn't feel powerless and I didn't give up. (C.G.)

I use ethnocentrism to *include* racism and all bigotry. The basis as I see it—and this is a very deep psychological thing—is "I and my kind are superior." (M.S.)

Ethnocentrism starts to sound like the umbrella and underneath it is racism and bigotry. When I hear it, feel it, experience it, it's racism. But I'm glad you were part of the collective so we could get your perspective on the word. It's different. I was so anti the word "ethnocentrism."...I'm sorry we could not get more into racism and anti-Semitism—the Black/Jewish conflict—because it's about to explode again. I didn't have the courage to do it because I'd get fired up, can't take no more. Maybe sometimes it's *too* close. You know, having a mother named Elizabeth Cohen and whatever *she* went through with black skin.... (S.W.V.)

Most of the material is by U.S. Black women or white women; there isn't much from an identifiable Lesbian perspective. It's hard to say why. Flyers were mailed to many groups and individuals around the world; various racial and work-related and sexual-preference grapevines were utilized. This final working collective included Latina, Black and white. Two of us are Lesbians and the others are hets. All seemed to know a wide range of women and were committed to involving them in working on the issue and bringing in material reflective of a wide range of women's experiences. Still, there are many voices that should be here that aren't. This is not an apology or an excuse, just a statement of fact and concern. I guess it's also reflective of where women are right now. The problem of broadening the participation in the women's movement is very real and will not be solved in any single or simple manner. (H.G.)

Since racism comes up everywhere, every day, in all kinds of situations, I can conceive of this body of literature being used and discussed by everyone, everywhere. Teachers can use it as a discussion-stimulator or as the basis for written assignments. My past experience has shown me how white folks do not like to feel uncomfortable about racism so they change the topic. I don't want it changed. I want folks to deal with it. Discuss it. Understand it. I would hate to see racism pushed aside as a side issue. It is not. In government, schools, work, play, entertainment, racism is prevalent. I also do not want white folks to run away from the issue screaming about how they "heard enough about this already so let's move on to more relevant things." Now, what gets me about some of my Black folks is how they can say things like: "Look, I'm tired of dealing with this racism stuff. That's the white girl's problem. Let her deal with it." Or the ones who say: "I can do anything I want to do. I don't let racism hang me up. That's what's wrong with Black people today, they always...." Both of these Black approaches are as bad as their white counterparts.... On the whole, I would say that working with this mixture of women's cultures proved to be very positive for me. It restored my initial good feeling about the women's movement and the need to collaborate, network and dialogue. We were able to get through what could be labeled as very controversial topics without killing anyone, calling names or just being downright disrespectful. I was pleased. I've been in groups that have done the former. That we didn't says something real mature about us....Of course, I work with integrated groups all the time, but I usually get paid for it. (S.W.V.)

This time you get glory! (M.S.)

What are your reactions to this issue? Do you have additional ideas? We'd like visual and verbal responses to publish in a new "opinion" section, starting with Issue 17.

This issue was typeset by Myrna Zimmerman, with display type by Talbot; printed by Capital City Press, Montpelier, Vt.
Special thanks to the following women who participated in the Issue 15 Editorial Collective through most of our deliberations: Yvonne Flowers, Ana Mendieta, Lorraine O'Grady, Angela Salgado. Thanks also to all the women who came to our early meetings and fed us with ideas. Finally, thanks to the women who helped in various stages of production: Linda Cunningham, Sandra De Sando, Abigail Esman, Vanalyne Green, Patricia Jones, Kay Kenny, Adrienne Weiss.

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## Heresies Collective Statement

HERESIES is an idea-oriented journal devoted to the examination of art and politics from a feminist perspective. We believe that what is commonly called art can have a political impact, and that in the making of art and of all cultural artifacts our identities as women play a distinct role. We hope that HERESIES will stimulate dialogue around radical political and aesthetic theory, as well as generate new creative energies among women. It will be a place where diversity can be articulated. We are committed to broadening the definition and function of art.

HERESIES is published by a collective of feminists, some of whom are also socialists, marxists, lesbian feminists, or anarchists; our fields include painting, sculpture, writing, anthropology, literature, performance, art history, architecture, filmmaking, photography, and video. While the themes of the individual issues will be determined by the collective, each issue will have a different editorial staff, composed of women who want to work on that issue as well as members of the collective. HERESIES provides experience for women who work editorially, in design and in production. An open evaluation meeting will be held after the appearance of each issue. HERESIES will try to be accountable to and in touch with the international feminist community.

As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts, and our ideas have been suppressed. Once these connections are clarified, they can function as a means to dissolve the alienation between artist and audience, and to understand the relationship between art and politics, work and workers. As a step toward a demystification of art, we reject the standard relationship of criticism to art within the present system, which has often become the relationship of advertiser to product. We will not advertise a new set of genius-products just because they are made by women. We are not committed to any particular style or aesthetic, nor to the competitive mentality that pervades the art world. Our view of feminism is one of process and change, and we feel that in the process of this dialogue we can foster a change in the meaning of art.

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### UPCOMING ISSUES

**No. 16: Media—Film and Video:** An in-depth look at the work of feminist filmmakers and video artists. Also offers pointed analysis of the impact of feminism on commercial films and TV. Pub. date: February 1983.

**No. 17: Women's Groups—Time to Raise Hell!** Projects and plans from progressive political and cultural groups all over the world. An action-oriented issue with suggestions for organizing and mobilizing the public. Pub. date: Spring 1983.

**No. 18: Acting Up! Women in Theater and Performance Art:** Please send us essays, original scripts, technical designs, documentation, visuals, and interviews exploring the diverse work by women in contemporary theater and performance art. Deadline: February 1, 1983. Pub. date: Summer 1983.

**No. 19: Mothers, Mags and Movie Stars—Feminism and Class:** We want cultural/social/economic analyses of the institutions that shape the mother-daughter relationship—to use this relationship to understand family, class, and culture. How do women's magazines and movie stars point up issues mothers and daughters are in conflict about (or agree on)? Deadline: April 1, 1983. Pub. date: Fall 1983.

**Guidelines for Contributors.** Each issue of HERESIES has a specific theme and all material submitted should relate to that theme. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced and submitted in duplicate. Visual material should be submitted in the form of a slide, xerox or photograph. We will *not* be responsible for original art. All material *must* be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for it to be returned. We do not publish reviews or monographs on contemporary women. We do not commission articles and cannot guarantee acceptance of submitted material. HERESIES pays a small fee for published material.

We would like to thank all the women artists who helped to make our Third Annual Benefit Art Sale at the Frank Marino Gallery in New York City a success. A full listing of all the women who donated work will appear in the next issue.
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# RACISM


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