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"Strong is What We Make Each Other": Unlearning Racism within Women’s Studies

Bettina Aptheker

In the fall of 1976 I was hired by the Women’s Studies Program at San Jose State University to teach one course which I had outlined and proposed to that program’s curriculum committee the previous spring. The course, entitled "Afro-American Women in History," began with "the legacy of slavery" as its theme and worked its way from the colonial era to modern times. The following year I taught the class again, this time under the auspices of the Afro-American Studies department. The first time I taught the class the students were overwhelmingly white. The second time they were overwhelmingly black. Only two men ever enrolled in the class. They were both black, and came when Afro-American Studies was the sponsoring agency. A year later, Afro-American Studies adopted the course as a permanent part of its curriculum.

This enrollment pattern absolutely reflects the racist and patriarchal structure of the university as it has been imposed upon us. It is a structure which separates Women’s Studies and Afro-American Studies from each other, and segregates both from the intellectual and fiscal "mainstream" of university life. Thus separated and segregated, we are pitted against each other by an institution that allows minimal material support for either. It took the most conscientious effort on the part of both programs to take the first cautious steps toward mutual support for the course on Afro-American women.

A survey of women’s studies programs in the United States today would disclose an overwhelmingly white faculty, enrollment, and curriculum. This is not said to conjure guilt (a useless psychological response, as Audre Lorde has pointed out), nor to induce a sputtering of apologies. It is simply a statement of fact. That this is true should come as no surprise since women’s studies programs operate within a racist structure. Every department in every predominantly white institution is centered on the experience, history, politics, and culture of white men, usually of the elite. What is significant, however, is that women’s studies, by its very reason for existence, implies a reordering of politics, a commitment to community, and an educational purpose which is inherently subversive of its institutional setting. Gloria Bowles put it succinctly when she wrote, "Women’s studies, by putting women at the center of inquiry, is truly a new and necessary approach to knowledge." Insofar as women’s studies replicates a racial pattern in which white rule predominates, however, it violates its own principles of origin and purpose. More to the point: it makes impossible the creation of a feminist vision and politics.

When we place women at the center of our thinking, we are going about the business of creating an historical and cultural matrix from which women may claim autonomy and independence over their own lives. For women of color, such autonomy cannot be achieved in conditions of racial oppression and cultural genocide. Moreover, a feminist vision in modern times is one in which the concept of equality goes beyond the notion of legal, political, or economic equality between women and men. In a modern sense, the concept of equality is a transformative one, a revolutionary idea. It means that women will have at least as much to say as men about everything in the arrangement of human affairs. In short, "feminist," in the modern sense, means the empowerment of women. For women of color, such an equality, such an empowerment, cannot take place unless the communities in which they live can successfully establish their own racial and cultural integrity. It is from this point of view that we say that the experiences of women of color must assume a co-central focus in the shaping of feminist thought and action. Without this the liberation of women cannot be either envisioned or realized.

There is, of course, a great diversity of experience among women within the boundaries of class and race, or within the same culture—for example, across generational lines. There is also a great diversity of experience across class and racial lines, and among women of color. But there is also unity in our diversity, since we share common labors as women; and since we have all been subordinated to the men in our respective communities—even when the men themselves are economically exploited and/or racially oppressed. Because of these common experiences women do not necessarily see diversity as a source of opposition and division, but rather as a source of enrichment, of potential unity and strength.

The commonality of female labor and shared subordination results in a qualitatively different dailiness of women’s lives. Women’s daily work experience gives them a consciousness of social reality different from men’s. Consummated in a feminist voice, this consciousness yields a different order of politics, a different concept of work, cooperation, time, space, love, growth, and change. Attention to the diverse ways in which women have coped in their day-to-day lives, and struggled to assert their autonomy and independence, gives us a way of looking at women’s experience. And it allows us to validate that experience on its own terms.

Assuming, then, that women’s diversity is a source of strength, and affirming the struggle against racism in the dailiness of women’s lives, I see as crucial in women’s studies the taking of affirmative action to overcome the institutionalized and subjective barriers to interracial solidarity among women. What can we do? In approaching answers to this question, a feminist process is essential on at least two counts. First, when we place women at the center of our thinking we open up an historical and political terrain in which the question of race itself, and of overcoming racist practices, may be looked at in new, and perhaps instructive, ways. Second, a feminist process demands that we act in ways which empower women, that we act in ways which heal.

When we deal with the subjective barriers between women of color and white women in a particular program or on a particular campus, we are dealing, in part, with a complex of political structures which take a specifically psychological form. These structures are designed to
socialize female children—and women—in ways which induce dependence and subordination. For example, most women in our society, across class and racial lines, are socialized primarily through a process of guilt. That is, "correct" behavior on a vast range of issues is induced by making a person feel guilty about deviating from the "norm." The specific content of "correct" behavior may vary, depending on the economic status, or racial and religious background, of the individuals involved. What is the norm in one culture may be deviant behavior in another. But the process of guilt-induced behavior is the same.

Another example: most women in our society, again crossing racial and class lines, are taught "to please" others. Attributes of accommodation (to others' needs and likes) and altruism are strongly rewarded. Physical attributes involving weight, countenance, and dress, and personality traits including cheerfulness, submissiveness, and not being angry—all of which are designed to please others, especially the men around us—are strongly encouraged. Again, the content, the specific form, of these norms may vary from one woman's experience to another's, but the process of accommodation and self-denial is fairly common.

A third example: women are taught and are expected to assume responsibility for the emotional stability and well-being in their relationships—with men, within their families, and often within their workplaces. For women of color, this emotional work often involves responsibility for the white people for or with whom they work, including white women. This emotional work is highly skilled and very exhausting. It is also often unacknowledged, and therefore invisible, sometimes even to the women themselves, who wonder why they are so tired at the end of the day.

These processes—of guilt, of pleasing, of responsibility for emotional work—are, of course, political structures (in highly personalized forms) which help to enforce female subordination. They make women dependent on others, especially men, for approval. They make it very difficult for women to learn to separate their own feelings and needs from those which they are expected to have. This is one of the reasons why anger, for example—an emotional response which is culturally unacceptable for many women—may be turned into guilt and/or depression when it is not validated or when it is suppressed. These patterns of behavior make it very difficult for most women to communicate directly and clearly with one another because such communication presupposes that a person knows what she thinks, why she thinks it, and what she wants. It is also possible to see women communicate directly and clearly one moment, acting with competence and decision in their work, and become submissive, pleasing, and helpless a few minutes later when confronted, for example, with a male presence.

A good example of this process of female socialization can be seen in an encounter described by Hope Landrine in Off Our Bucks (November 1979). Frustrated by her experiences with racism in the women's movement, and in particular by her efforts to establish relationships with white women whose attitudes were patronizing, Landrine arranged an experiment:
The patronage which I experienced from white feminists in New York City was so overwhelming that once I decided to test it. One evening I planted myself at a table in the Women’s Coffeehouse. Prior to and after the concert that evening, I attempted to engage in several serious discussions of politics with a number of well-known feminists...none of whom knew me. I began with a few serious, sensible, but controversial statements. The response was smiles and head-nodding. I went on to statements that were progressively more absurd. Still, no disagreements, but a few questions for clarifications and more smiles. Finally, while being sure that I did not appear insane, I made the most utterly absurd statements I could think of and one statement that I knew one feminist disagreed with, since she had publicly indicated her disagreement. To my surprise, her response was a smile, and agreement. (Emphasis in the original.)

The socialization of women in our society—to please, to accommodate, to avoid conflict—contributed to and reinforced the racism which Hope Landrine experienced. Had the white women spoken and disagreed, they might have said the “wrong” thing—i.e., made a racist comment. Such racist behavior is culturally unacceptable—i.e., guilt-producing. Fear of saying the wrong thing, therefore, causes many white women to retreat into silence or drip with indulgence, which, of course, is also racist. Communication requires equality, and equality demands dignity, not patronization.

White women here were caught in a double-bind because their process derived from a posture of subordination and submission. Black women are also ensnared in this bind because they have been unable to get white women to see their own racism. That Landrine resorted to this mode of communication with white women speaks to her anger and frustration in the women’s movement. But unless a white woman has an antiracist consciousness which is not motivated primarily by guilt and has broken out of the psychological constraints of her socialization, this particular dynamic is hard to break. Indeed, I think the initiative has to come from white women who want it to end.

Only the capacity for clear, direct communication based upon the assumption of equality, only a consciousness of the ways in which racism prevents the realization of a feminist politics, only the willingness to risk making a mistake and in this way to unlearn racist ideas and practices, will get us out of this double-bind. We did not create it, and many of us have been badly hurt by it. Women of color bear the brunt of racist oppression and must deal with its consequences every day of their lives. It is also true, I think, that however much a white skin may confer privileges on some of us for a time, wounds derived from this racist system have been inflicted on the majority of women who have grown up in this society. These wounds have been often intertwined with those resulting from our oppression as women.

Moreover, interracial connections between women in our society take place in a context in which relationships and friendships between women in general are denigrated and trivialized. These relationships are almost always seen as secondary in importance to the more serious ones among men. Love relationships between women are widely regarded as perversions, and lesbian women frequently endure severe economic, political, and personal sanctions, including the loss of their children. Social movements among women are frequently ridiculed if they are for women, and defined as charitable rather than political activities if they involve more general struggles. These movements, in either event, are still generally seen as secondary to the more serious politics of men.

Whether personal or political, women’s solidarity within or across racial barriers may be subject to criticism from men who feel threatened by any emotional energy which distracts women’s attention from them. It is useful, I think, to distinguish this process in male-female relationships from the merit of specific points which men may make about women’s friendships, organizations, and movements—points which may or may not be helpful, depending on the process in which the man making them is engaged.

Clarity on this point is important because the women’s movement is often accused of being a source of division between women and men. We are also sometimes accused of being separatist. The source of division between men and women is male supremacist ideology and practice. And it is men who have for centuries separated themselves from women: in employment, politics, education, health, sports, culture; or, if they have said that we could come along with them, it was on their terms and conditions and at their convenience. Unity between women and men is going to depend upon the assumption of equality in relations between them; and the burden is upon the men, not the women.

When we deal with the institutionalized barriers to interracial solidarity between women, it is helpful, I think, to consider what the concept of “white” means. In a powerful essay published in Ms. Magazine (August 1981) describing her experiences as one of only three Black faculty members in the English department at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, Mary Helen Washington wrote: ‘What does ‘white’ mean in this country? It doesn’t define a person’s ancestry, or culture, or language, or ethnicity. It simply defines their relationship to power and prestige’.

In a racist society, white people and people of color are formed in relationship to one another; this relationship is a racist one, by definition, because racism is institutionalized in the whole society. This is why Mary Helen Washington, in the same essay, wrote:

Any real communication among us in the classroom was obscured from the very beginning. The most fundamental illusion, of course, is that there can be any real equality in an institution where racism and sexism accompanied the bricks and mortars of the buildings.

Most white people, and, I think, especially white women, would prefer to think that they form relationships personally, and that they personally are not prejudiced. But it is not possible to form relationships in a social vacuum, as though those relationships—as friends, comrades, and lovers—were independent of social realities and conditions. In any institutional setting—universities, the courts, government agencies—white men in this society are at the center and people of color are on the margin, tokens notwithstanding. White people in general have certain privileges—of economic, social, and political status, for example—which are simply not available to people of color (not even to men of color, most of the time and in most circumstances). Those privileges are available to white women—especially white women in the university—as long as we remain “good,” i.e., within the orbit of patriarchal and class mores, values, and behavior.
As soon as we examine the issue in this way, we can see that the question of interracial solidarity within women’s studies is not primarily a question of “getting” women of color into the program, or of “getting” women of color to choose the women’s movement over something else. The choice is really one that white women face: it is the choice of privilege, which we can exercise as long as we remain attached to patriarchal and class values.

Most of us have been straddling this fence in women’s studies for ten years, without resolving many of the issues. For example: Do we argue for the retention and promotion of women who are good teachers and committed to the students; or for those who may be good teachers, but who have also published widely, “made it” in their disciplines, and will thus add prestige to the program? Often this choice is forced upon us because women who have been juggling academic careers, family responsibilities, and political activism haven’t had time to produce scholarly works. A similar question: Do we retain and promote lesbian women on our faculties, and acknowledge their presence and importance to the program; or do we beg their discretion for the “good” of the women on our faculties, and acknowledge their presence and importance to the program? When the question of race is faced, straddling the fence becomes even more difficult.

Recently I was reading an oral history in *Las Mujeres: Conversations from a Hispanic Community* (The Feminist Press, 1980). Patricia Luna, who works as a counselor, primarily with women students, at the University of New Mexico, was also a delegate to the International Women’s Conference in Houston in November 1977. In describing her campus work, Patricia Luna says:

I’ve done workshops on this campus a number of times about minority women. The Anglo women don’t show up because they feel it’s not their issue. To be a feminist or a human being is to learn about all people! If you’re a feminist, how in the hell are you going to know minority women if you don’t know what their needs are? Reading a book about them isn’t going to help you. You have to hear about these issues from people who are feeling them if you ever expect to become sensitized.

The reason white women have not attended minority workshops, Afro-American-sponsored seminars, cultural programs, and related events, in any significant numbers, is because we have felt no need to know, no need to listen, and no need to hear. I have posed the issue of race in this way because I believe that the real choice that women’s studies has to make is one which involves the relinquishing of privilege. If we become clear about wanting to shift our center we will know where to go and what to do, and we will listen and talk, argue and fight hard and love each other, because our lives will depend on it. The dynamics of privilege—how we get it, why we want it, how we can keep jobs and programs going without buying into it, how we integrate women’s studies into the mainstream curriculum, how we can reach and organize the thousands of women in colleges—is a subject we need to address in all the depth and diversity of our experience. It is the central struggle, in my opinion, in women’s studies. It is where we should focus our energy.

We have seen examples of this interracial solidarity and unity in the women’s movement: in the work of the National Women’s Studies Association at Storrs; in the planning of an NWSA California regional conference at San Francisco State University on ‘Women’s Studies and the Politics of Interconnection’; in an anthology of poetry by women in New York City called *Ordinary Women*; in an anthology of lesbian poetry published recently by Persephone Press; in the editorial collective producing the magazine *Conditions*; in the work of the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse; in the strike by city workers in San Jose, California, this summer for comparable pay for women’s work in city agencies. These examples are not touted as paragons of virtue. They are simply meant as examples of the potential, of the possibilities for unity and struggle.

I have also seen and felt the unwillingness to let go of the privilege. At the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, for example, I was filled with amazingly contradictory emotions—ranging from exhilaration to exasperation. I was exhilarated by the sheer numbers of people, the work, the energy, the depth of women’s research and knowledge and thinking; and by the new level of attention to lesbian history and experience. I was exasperated by the absolute “whiteness” of the conference, in terms of location, composition of panels, the attendance in general, and the choice of “ranking” sessions which filled auditoriums to overflowing. In such a setting, it came as no surprise that the women on the one panel which dealt with class and racial sisterhood—and it was a well-attended panel—gripped their papers and read straight through them. We were polarized on all sides from the beginning. When conferences are organized, the contradictions inherent in the problem of privilege are brought into the sharpest focus. We see most clearly that the class and racial center will remain where it has always been, unless a conscious program of affirmative action is implemented.

Acknowledging the subjective and institutional barriers to interracial solidarity—and overcoming them—means taking risks. It means doing hard emotional work. It means facing the pent-up anger of women of color. It means facing our own anger as white women. It means learning how to fight with each other in ways which are productive and meaningful. It means losing status and money, in exchange for other values which we define and claim for ourselves. It means a willingness to accept leadership from women of color, personally and politically. It means struggling with the complex of political, institutional, and psychological factors which we are already struggling with every day, but with the purpose of healing ourselves and overhauling the structures. It means helping each other, and being patient and brave and trusting. It means, in short, a different order of politics than any of us has ever known. It means being strong, and growing stronger, like the strong woman in Marge Piercy’s poem:

What comforts her is others loving her equally for the strength and for the weakness from which it issues….

Strong is what we make each other….

Bettina Aptheker is Coordinator of Women’s Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Her book, Women’s Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History, will be published by the University of Massachusetts Press in Spring 1982.