Women's Voices, Feminist Visions

CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY READINGS

Susan M. Shaw • Janet Lee
As women, we are as different as we are alike. Although we share some conditions, including having primary responsibility for children and being victims of male violence, our lives are marked by difference. This is a result of the varying conditions of women’s existence in communities around the world and the societies in which these communities are embedded. We inhabit different cultures whose norms or cultural expectations prescribe different ways of acting as women and different sanctions if these norms are broken. It is therefore important to recognize difference and avoid using “woman” as a universal or homogeneous category that assumes sameness.

In the United States, women’s lives are also marked by difference. This difference is illustrated by the material conditions of our lives, the values and cultures of the communities in which we live, and even the geographic region of the country we inhabit. In particular, we are different in terms of race and ethnicity, religion, age, looks, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ability. Just as it is important to question the homogenizing notions of sameness in terms of the category “woman” across societies, it is also important to understand that these universalizing tendencies work against our understanding of women in the United States as well. Often we tend to think of women in comparison to a mythical norm: White, middle-class, heterosexual, abled, thin, and a young adult. Women not fitting these categories often tend to be considered different. The important question to ask, however, is, different from what? Such a question reveals how difference gets constructed against what people think of as normal. And what is perceived as normal is that which those in power are able to define as normal.

It is important to recognize that the meanings associated with differences are socially constructed. These social constructions would not be problematic were they not created against the notion of the mythical norm. Being a lesbian would not be a “difference” that invoked cultural resistance if it were not for compulsory heterosexuality, the notion that everyone should be heterosexual and have relationships with the opposite sex. This concept is illustrated in “The Social Construction of Disability” by Susan Wendell. She makes the case that ableism, discrimination against the mentally and physically disabled, is a direct result of social factors that actively create standards of normality against which ability/disability is constructed. In this chapter we focus on differences among women and explore the ways systems of privilege and inequality are created out of these differences.
DIFFERENCE, HIERARCHY, AND SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION

Society recognizes the ways people are different and assigns group membership based upon these differences; at the same time society also ranks these differences. Male is placed above female, thin above fat, economically privileged above poor, and so forth. These rankings of groups and their members create a hierarchy where some ways of being, like being abled or heterosexual, are valued more than others, like being disabled or gay or lesbian. In this way, rankings occur against societal notions of the mythical norm.

The hierarchical ranking of these differences is constructed through social processes such that patterns of difference become systems of inequality and privilege. Inequality for some and privilege for others is the consequence of these processes. Privilege can be defined as special advantages people have by virtue of their status or position in society. In “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” Peggy McIntosh

Learning Activity: Unpack Your Knapsack

Peggy McIntosh lists a number of ways that she experiences White privilege. Based on your various non-target statuses, make lists of the ways you experience the following categories of privilege:

- White
- Middle or Upper Class
- Male
- Young
- Heterosexual
- Able-bodied

writes that White privilege is the “invisible package of unearned assets” that White people can count on cashing in every day. And, as McIntosh explains, it is easier to grant that others are disadvantaged than to admit being overprivileged. Men might be supportive of women’s rights but balk at the suggestion that their personal behavior is in need of modification. Whites might be horrified by the stories of racial injustice but still not realize that such taken-for-granted White privilege is part of the problem.

Systems that facilitate privilege and inequality, subordination and domination, include: racism based upon racial/ethnic group membership (African American, Asian American, Latino/a, Native American—note this also includes anti-Semitism, or discrimination against Jews and those of Semitic descent), sexism based upon gender, classism associated with socioeconomic status, heterosexism, concerning sexual orientation, ageism relating to age, looksism, concerning body size and looks, and ableism, about physical and mental ability. Systems of oppression can be defined as systems that discriminate and privilege based on perceived or real differences among people. Given this, sexism discriminates and privileges on the basis of gender, resulting in gender stratification, racism discriminates and privileges on the basis of race, and so forth for classism, heterosexism, ageism, looksism, and ableism.

Every woman is in multiple places vis-à-vis these systems. She might not have access to race and gender privilege because she is African American and a woman; she might have access to heterosexual privilege because she is heterosexual and class privilege because she lives in a family that is financially secure. This is the confluence, the flowing together of various identities. As Patricia Hill Collins explains in “Toward a New Vision,” it is not as useful to think of these various identities as being stacked or arranged in a cumulative manner. Lives are not experienced as “Here I’m a woman, here I’m able, here I’m poor,” as if all our various statuses are all stacked up; we experience ourselves as ordinary people who struggle daily with the inequities in our lives and who usually take the privileges for granted. Various identities concerning these systems of equality and privilege are usually thoroughly blended.

Systems of inequality like racism, sexism, and classism interconnect and work together to enforce inequality and privilege, each mostly supporting the other. As Babba Copper explains in her article on ageism, age discrimination is very much connected to sexism as well as to looksism. Women learn to “age pass,” that is, we do not want to be mistaken for 40 when we are in our 30s, or mistaken for 70 when
Learning Activity: Hate Crimes Based on Sexual Orientation

Hate crimes are a national problem. In the 1990s almost every state in the nation experienced hate crimes based on sexual orientation. Many of the crimes have been documented by the Human Rights Campaign, the largest lesbian and gay political organization in the United States, with 300,000 members. Data collected by the FBI indicate that 1,102 hate crimes based on sexual orientation were reported to local law enforcement agencies in 1997. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs reported 2,552 incidents of bias based on sexual orientation in 1998—in only sixteen cities/jurisdictions. The Human Rights Campaign's document, "A Decade of Violence: Hate Crimes Based on Sexual Orientation," lists many of the incidents reported throughout the '90s. Five incidents are related from our home state, Oregon:

- July 14, 1991, Eugene, OR: Police arrested a 28-year-old woman and 21-year-old man for allegedly attacking a gay man outside a bar while using offensive language about his sexual orientation.

- September 26, 1992, Salem, OR: A lesbian and gay man died after a firebomb was thrown into their apartment. Three men and one woman, all under the age of 23, were charged in connection with the murders.

- October 27, 1992, Eugene, OR: A conservative activist holding a sign in support of Oregon's anti-gay ballot measure was attacked by two men who apparently mistook him for a gay activist.

- December 8, 1994, Medford, OR: Two prominent lesbian activists, who had been domestic partners for many years, were killed by a man who said he thought their lifestyle was sick.

- February 2, 1998, Corvallis, OR: A gay high school student was allegedly beaten by three youths who used anti-gay epithets. Two teenagers were charged with third-degree assault and first-degree intimidation.

Go to the web page of the Human Rights Campaign at www.hrc.org and find the "Decade of Violence" document. Look up your state and see what hate crimes based on sexual orientation occurred near you. How do you feel about these crimes happening in your state? Do you think there should be national hate crime legislation?

only 60. This is part of the pursuit for youth and beauty that encourages women to participate as agents of ageism as we fulfill the expectations of gender. Similarly, Suzanne Pharr writes about the ways homophobia functions as a weapon of sexism. Homophobia is the fear and dislike of lesbians and gay men. Pharr emphasizes that homophobia functions as a threat to keep women apart from one another and under male power, thus reinforcing sexism.

Another way that systems of inequality and privilege are maintained is by coercion and force. The best example of this is hate crimes, crimes whose motive is hate and bigotry and whose perpetrators are most likely heterosexual White males. There has been a substantial increase in hate crimes in the last decade, especially against people of color and lesbians and gay men, although it may be that improved reporting systems are also increasing our awareness of hate crimes. It is
Learning Activity: Combating Hate

Many web pages provide valuable information about hate, hate crimes, and hate groups in the United States. Go to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s homepage at www.splcenter.org. Click on "Intelligence Center" and then on "Hate Incidents." Put in your state to see a list of hate crimes where you live. You may also want to visit these websites as well: www.wiesenthal.com, www.adl.org, www.stopthehate.org, and www.hatewatch.org. Using information from these sites, make a list of ways you can help stop hate.

Important to emphasize that gender as a category is omitted from many hate crime statutes despite the fact that women suffer from crimes of misogyny. Women are often hurt and killed because they are women. Hate crimes against women also involve a form of sexual terrorism, the threat of rape and sexual assault that controls a woman's life whether or not she is actually raped or assaulted.

Although hate crimes vary in the amount of terror and violence they involve, all leave women feeling vulnerable and victimized. Here are some examples. In 1994 the White neighbors of a Black woman in a Los Angeles suburb burned a cross on her lawn, kicked her children, hanged and gassed her pets, and placed "White power" signs on her property. In Oklahoma City, following the bombing of the federal building, an Iraqi refugee in her mid-20s miscarried her near-term baby after an attack on her home in which assailants pounded on her door, broke windows, and screamed anti-Islamic epithets. In Minneapolis in 1996, an African American lesbian found a note reading "Hate Nigger Faggots" at her door. After a burned cross was left outside her door, she decided to move. These are just a few examples of a widespread problem.

Institutions

Institutions are social organizations that involve established patterns of behavior organized around particular purposes. They function through social norms and established rules and/or laws. Major institutions in our society include the family, marriage, the economy, government and criminal justice systems, religion, education, science, health and medicine, mass media, the military, and sports. Usually patterns of rules and practices implicit in major societal institutions have a historical component and reflect political, military, legal, and socioeconomic decisions made over decades and centuries. Although institutions are intended to meet the needs of society generally, or people in particular, they meet some people's needs better than others. These social organizations are central in creating systems of inequality and privilege because they pattern and structure differences among women in relatively organized ways. Institutions are important channels for the perpetuation of what Hill Collins calls "structures of domination and subordination."
Marilyn Frye focuses on the institutional aspect of systems of inequality and privilege in her article “Oppression.” She emphasizes that people who suffer under systems of inequality are oppressed by these systems. Frye goes on to explain the difference between being oppressed and being limited and writes that a fundamental aspect of oppression is the double bind: All potential options have limitations. She uses the metaphor of a birdcage to explain the networks of related barriers that function in systems of oppression. One wire might be like an individual-level prejudice; a bird could just move around it and escape. But a birdcage involves patterns of wires, systematically arranged so that escape is thwarted. The wires of the cage symbolically become institutionalized into a system of oppression.

Institutions encourage the channeling of various systems of gendered inequality to all aspects of women’s lives. In terms of the patterning of resources and practices, three institutional functions support systems of inequality and privilege. First, institutions assign various roles to women and men and are also places of employment where people perform gendered work. Educational institutions, for example, employ a considerable number of women. However, as the prestige of the teaching position increases, the number of White males in these positions increases, along with higher salaries. Also, it is very difficult for openly lesbian teachers to find employment in schools, and many states are attempting to pass laws preventing lesbians and gay men from teaching in state-funded educational establishments.

Second, institutions distribute resources and extend privileges differentially to different groups. Sports are a good example of this. As an institution, athletics has traditionally been male dominated. Men’s sports are more highly valued than women’s sports and are a major focus for sports entertainment. Compared to men’s professional sports, women’s are grossly underrepresented. Despite Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendments Act, which barred discrimination in education, many colleges still are not in compliance and spend considerably more money on men’s sports than on women’s. Female athletes on some campuses complain that men receive better practice times in shared gymnasiums and more up-to-date equipment. And, within women’s sports, some are more “White” than others. Examples that immediately come to mind are gymnastics, ice skating, equestrian sports, tennis, and golf (all relatively expensive sports). In addition, most women’s sports—outside of basketball, volleyball, and track—are dominated by White women. In this way, sports and athletics are an example of an institution where resources are inequitably distributed.

Another blatant example of inequitable distribution concerns the economic system. Other than inherited wealth, the major way our economic system distributes resources is in terms of remuneration for the work that we do. Women tend to work in jobs that are heavily occupied by women; examples include clerical work, service and retail sales, and semiprofessional occupations like teaching and nursing. These jobs are undervalued in our society, contributing to the fact that a woman’s average salary generally for all occupations is about 77 percent of a man’s wage. Some women work under deplorable conditions at minimum wage levels; some work with hazardous chemicals or have to breathe secondhand smoke.
throughout their workday. Old women and women of color own a tiny percentage of the wealth in this society—another example of the inequitable distribution of resources.

Third, major institutions in society are interconnected and work to support and maintain one another. Often this means that personnel are shared among major institutions; more likely it means that these institutions mutually support one another in terms of the ways they fulfill (or deny) the needs of people in society. For example, close ties to economic institutions include the military (through the military-industrial complex), the government (corporate leaders often have official positions in government and rely on legislative loopholes and taxation systems to maintain corporate profits), health and medicine (with important ties to pharmaceutical companies), the media (whose content is controlled in part by advertising), and sports (through corporate sponsorship).

**IDEOLOGY AND LANGUAGE**

In addition to distributing resources and practices, institutions produce messages that shape our understandings of gender. Importantly, ideas and values (like stereotypes and jokes) or sets of beliefs (often called ideologies) provide the rationale for injustice. Hill Collins calls this the "symbolic dimension" of systems of domination and subordination. For example, the media often reinforce stereotypes about women like dumb blondes, passive Asian Americans, or pushy African Americans. Another example of gendered messages comes from the institution of religion. This institution is especially powerful because it implies the notion of divine sanction. Traditional religious texts tell stories (for example, Eve’s behavior that led to the banishment from the Garden of Eden or the chaste role of the Virgin Mary) that convey important messages about moral thought and behavior as well as women’s place in society. These messages tend to be strongly gendered and often support different behaviors for women and men. A central code of much religious teaching is that women should be subordinate to men in their spiritual and everyday lives.

An example of an ideology that is supported by various institutions and that affects women’s lives is the bootstrap myth concerning economic success. Propagated by the economic system, it paints economic success as a result of hard work and ambition. All people, if properly motivated and willing to work hard, can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Given this set of ideas, those individuals who are not able to provide for their families must have deficiencies. Perhaps they were unmotivated, did not work hard enough, or were not smart enough. Such ideas encourage blaming the poor for their poverty rather than understanding the wider societal forces that shape people’s existence and maintain classism. Notice that a particular ideology need not be supported unanimously for it to influence society. Many would disagree vehemently with the bootstrap myth, yet, still, this is a key part of the ideology of capitalist countries. In this way, institutions perpetuate sets of ideas and practices and use them to justify the institution.
Activist Profile: Fannie Lou Hamer

She began life in Mississippi in 1917 as the granddaughter of slaves and the daughter of sharecroppers, but Fannie Lou Hamer was to become one of the most important leaders of the civil rights movement in the United States. Although Hamer became a sharecropper herself, by 1962 she'd had enough of the second-class life of the segregated South. She joined seventeen other African Americans taking a bus to the county seat to register to vote. On the way home, they were stopped by police and arrested. After Hamer returned home, she was visited by the plantation owner, who told her that if she insisted on voting, she would have to get off his land, which she did that same day.

The next year, when Hamer joined other civil rights workers in challenging the "Whites only" policy at a bus terminal diner, she was arrested and jailed. The police ordered two other African American prisoners to beat her with a metal-spiked club. Hamer was blinded in one eye from the beating and suffered permanent kidney damage.

In 1964, Hamer helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the all-White Mississippi delegation to the Democratic Convention. Hamer spoke to the credentials committee of the convention, and although her live testimony was preempted by a presidential press conference, it was aired by national networks in its entirety later that evening. The MFDP and the credentials committee reached a compromise, giving voting and speaking rights to two MFDP delegates and seating the others as honored guests. Hamer responded, "We didn't come all this way for two seats when all of us is tired."

In 1968 the Mississippi Democratic Party did seat an integrated delegation.

Throughout her life, Hamer continued to work for justice, supporting Head Start for Black schools and jobs for poor African Americans, opposing the Vietnam War, and helping to convene the National Women's Political Caucus in the 1970s.

Hamer died in 1977 and was buried in Mississippi. Her tombstone reads, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."
Classism is also addressed in the article by Donna Langston titled “Tired of Playing Monopoly?” Here she explains how class is not just about socioeconomic status, that is, how much wealth you have access to or how much you earn. She writes,

Class is also culture. As a result of the class you were born into and raised in, class is your understanding of the world and where you fit in; it’s composed of ideas, attitudes, values, and language; class is how you think, feel, act, look, dress, talk, move, walk; class is what stores you shop at, restaurants you eat in; class is the schools you attend, the education you attain; class is the jobs you will work at throughout your adult life. Class even determines when we marry and become mothers.

Stereotypes and ideologies that support systems of inequality involve prejudices. Prejudice means, literally, to prejudge and involves making premature judgments without adequate information or with inaccurate information. Often these ideas support systems of inequality and privilege because prejudice is often adopted when there is no other basis for understanding. For example, many White people have little contact with people of color, and many young people do not interact on an everyday basis with old people. As a result, there is a lack of accurate information, and stereotypes or images from television or the movies are used instead. This kind of ignorance and misinformation breeds prejudice. In “Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name,” Gloria Yamato writes about different kinds of prejudice: aware/blatant, aware/covert, unaware/unintentional, and unaware/self-righteous. In this article she emphasizes that much prejudice comes from misinformation and is very often unintentional. She also notes that social norms against racism have pushed some racism underground.

Prejudices are internalized (assimilated, integrated, or incorporated into our thoughts and behavior) by all of us. If we are members of the target group, the group against whom the prejudice is aimed, it can lead to low self-esteem, self-loathing, and shame. Sadly, it can mean individuals are encouraged to believe they are not worthy of social justice and therefore are less likely to seek equality. Although members of target groups may internalize negative messages, members of non-target groups, groups (often part of the mythical norm) against whom the prejudice is not aimed, also internalize these messages as well as messages about their own privilege. This can encourage or justify hostility against target groups.

Internalizing oppression means that we not only police ourselves, but we also police one another, encouraging compliance with institutions that may oppress. When individuals direct the resentment and anger they have about their situation onto those who are of equal or of lesser status, this process is called horizontal hostility. As a strategy, it is similar to the military notion of “divide and conquer” where groups are encouraged to fight with one another in order to avoid alliances that might collaboratively overpower an enemy. Babba Copper remarks on this horizontal conflict when she writes about woman-to-woman ageism and the ways women compete “for the crumbs of social power.”

Language, or the symbolic means by which we communicate, is a central aspect of what makes us human. It is an incredibly sophisticated process of symbols that
Ideas for Activism

- Find out how your university ensures access for people with disabilities. If some structures on your campus are inaccessible, advocate with your administration to create accessibility.
- Plan a celebration of Black women during Black History Month.
- Find out what programs your university offers to recruit and retain students and faculty of color. If programs are not in place, advocate with your administration to develop such programs.
- Find out if your university's antidiscrimination policy includes sexual orientation as a protected classification, and find out if your university provides benefits for domestic partners. If not, advocate with your administration to include sexual orientation in its policy and/or to provide domestic partner benefits.

we learn at an early age and mostly take for granted unless we are confronted with trying to communicate in a language not our own. Because language not only allows us to name the objects of our experience but also to typify them (experience them as similar to something of a similar type), it creates as well as reflects our reality. It shapes as well as expresses thought. And because language helps us sort and anticipate our experiences, it has a primary influence on our lives.

The English language is structured in such a way that it maintains sexism and racism. In “Gender Stereotyping in the English Language,” Laurel Richardson explains how the English language helps shape our understandings of gender and limits women's options for self-definition. This article encourages us to think about the ways that language shapes our reality and helps structure the everyday realities of women's lives. When you grow up knowing twenty different words synonymous with slut, you learn something powerful about gender. The English language also maintains racism. For example:

Some may blackly (angrily) accuse me of trying to blacken (defame) the English language, to give it a black eye (a mark of shame) by writing such black words (hostile). They may denigrate (to cast aspersions; to darken) me by accusing me of being black hearted (malevolent), of having a black outlook (pessimistic, dismal) on life, of being a blackguard (scoundrel)—which will certainly be a black mark (detrimental act) against me. Some may black-brow (scowl) at me and hope that a black cat crosses in front of me because of this black deed. I may become a black sheep (one who causes shame or embarrassment because of deviation from the expected standards), who will be black-balled (ostracized) by being placed on a black list (list of undesirables) in an attempt to blackmail (to force or coerce into a particular action) me to retract my words. . . . The preceding is of course a white lie (not intended to cause harm), meant only to illustrate some examples of racist terminology in the English language.*

In this chapter we focus on the social construction of difference and how systems of inequality and privilege based upon these differences function and are maintained. A next step is to consider how to effect change to improve the conditions of women’s lives. Several of the readings focus on this. In particular, Peggy McIntosh suggests we recognize our privilege and work on our internalized prejudices and privileges. Babba Cooper writes about identifying and acknowledging sources of inequality and specifically the ways we have been taught to hate old women and deny them power. She hopes for alliances across our differences. Patricia Hill Collins echoes this and writes about the necessity of developing empathy for others as well as creating coalitions around common causes. Suzanne Pharr points out the homophobia of the women's movement and its failure to achieve solidarity when the rights of all women are not recognized. Donna Langston presents ways to challenge classism that involve confronting the behavior in ourselves, making demands on behalf of poor communities, and learning from the skills and strengths of working-class people. Similarly, Gloria Yamato has good ideas for Whites who want to be allies to people of color. The message in all these articles is the need to recognize difference, to understand how the meanings associated with difference get translated into privilege and inequality, and to celebrate those differences through coalitions and other expressions of personal and social concern.
meeting—big deal. At least you **have** a job."

"So, your husband keeps forgetting his promise to help out with the housework—At least you **have** a husband."

Always implied, but unspoken: "It could be worse." But things could also be better. That will not happen if you do not act heroically.

Telling a rape survivor that she's "exaggerating the trauma in order to get attention" is not useful. Nor is asking her: "Why did you go out with that guy in the first place?"

Comments like these shame a woman into silence and inaction. They imply that there is nothing she can do or say that will change anything so she might as well give up and accept things as they are. Such comments forbid her to storm the gates of power. In a sense, this kind of gatekeeping constitutes bystander behavior. Survivors of serious atrocities say they are haunted by those who heard their screams but turned their backs, closed their doors, remained neutral, refused to take any stand other than an opportunistic one.

One cannot remain a bystander without becoming complicit. Morally, one must "take sides." But, once a person takes the side of anyone who's suffered a grave injustice, listens to her, believes what she says, tries to help her—

that quiet act of humanity and courage will be viewed as a traitorous act.

Commit such treason as often as you can.

Women's hearts, men's hearts, are irretrievably broken when people default on the dream of a common, moral humanity (we are all connected, what happens to one happens to all) and do nothing.

I think such interventions are possible when we are inspired by a larger vision, guided by a great dream. Not otherwise.

Women do not need a room of their own. Feminists, both men and women, need a very large continent of our own. Nothing less will do.

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**READING 3**

**Feminist Activism**

**Historical Context**

*Sheila Ruth*

*WHEN DID THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT BEGIN?*

It is often asked: When did the women's movement begin? Some historians attempt to fix the origins of feminist ideas in relatively recent times—specifically, in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, in the drive for the abolition of slavery, or in the American civil rights and war resistance movements. These attempts have a certain logic, but they can be misleading. They tend to focus attention not on one movement but on many: on eighteenth-, nineteenth-, or twentieth-century movements, each with a discernible starting point, each built around distinct goals, and each with separate and characteristic political attitudes, personalities, and strategies. A traditional reading in this vein might be summed up as follows:

The first stirrings of the women's movement were felt with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. The women's rights movement in the United States was born during the drive for abolition, particularly in the activities and writings of the Grimké sisters in the 1830s. It culminated in the winning of the vote in 1920; and then, because women had exhausted themselves in the fight for suffrage, it died, until Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* brought it back to life in 1963.
A way of looking at the women’s movement more accurately is simply that of women moving toward greater strength and freedom both in their awareness and in their sociopolitical position. This has been happening through the centuries, often for individuals, sometimes collectively. It has progressed, and it has receded; it has sometimes been subterranean, and sometimes it crests into waves of activism. It has expressed itself in many ways: in poetry, in marches on courthouses, or in the quiet but sturdy resistance of women in their households. It has been expressed in various contexts—political, economic, psychological, or even physical—and it is not easily confined to one model. From this perspective, no discernible “beginning” to the women’s movement exists...

Such an approach has manifold value. First, it reveals the universality of women’s concerns. It reveals the startling continuity over time of feminist issues, values, goals, and challenges and, in so doing, allows us to see that each wave of activism is not separate and anomalous, destined for an end or for limited achievement at best, but rather is an integral part of a progressive development. Finally, this approach affords us a context for evaluating challenges not only to feminist goals but also to the very legitimacy of feminism as a world movement.

KEY THEMES OF WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

For centuries, in groups and as individuals, women have spoken out consistently on certain key issues. Although they may reflect the character of the times and the issues prominent in their age, the goals of feminist women’s efforts have been remarkably consistent: They have to do with the quality of life for women and for the entire human community.

Again and again in poetry, political treatises, personal letters, speeches, and social analyses, we see these themes reiterated: the folly of grossly distorting women’s physical, emotional, and intellectual development; the injustice of denying to half the world’s population their rights, opportunities, and contributions; the great need for humanitarian treatment of the young, the sick, and the powerless in the face of the insensitive and selfish values of traditional masculist institutions; the unlikeliness of peace and harmony in a world permeated with the aggressiveness and arrogance of martial power values.

The consistency of the themes in our history underscores the continuity of the movement, the character of feminist concerns, and, it would appear, the legitimacy of our claims. Feminist analysis is not transitory, but rather is part of the mainstream of ongoing political thought, although it has not been perceived or treated that way.

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JUST A DISAPPOINTED FEW

The contention that feminists are not of the majority of women or are not like “normal” women bears looking at, first, because it is an attack so often made, and second, because it raises the question of how accurately feminists may claim to represent women’s concern. The argument is phrased in various ways: “Feminists are just a bunch of losers who couldn’t make it in the man-woman world.” “Feminism is just a white middle-class movement.” “Feminists are just a bunch of bored, selfish middle-class women trying to get more for themselves when there is real oppression in the world that affects millions of people.” Let us consider those charges one by one.

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A White Middle-Class Movement

To a movement that proposes to speak to all women, a movement in which the term sisterhood is of first priority, the charge that we are composed of and concerned with only a small
part of the female community, and that part the more privileged segment, is a serious matter.

Certainly, a great deal of writing and activism originated with middle-class women (some from working-class backgrounds). An examination of history reveals, however, that almost all movements for liberation and change have originated among those people who appear privileged beyond the means of those most sorely oppressed. It was they who had the education and training to see beyond their condition to reasons and alternatives; they who could articulate issues and instigate strategies for change; they who had the time and the wherewithal to act. The themes liberté, égalité and fraternité of the French Revolution originated among the well-educated, well-placed philosophers of the Enlightenment, not among the wretched poor who suffered most and most needed change, and to whom help eventually flowed. Marx and Lenin were intellectuals, and although they hoped for a rising of the masses, Lenin ultimately came to believe in the necessity of an educated vanguard of leadership.

Although the movement may appear to have been instigated by the white middle class (and even this appearance is misleading), it was not meant to be a movement of the white middle class. That is, it was not about only the white middle class, nor is it today. Obviously, ending violence against women is the concern of every woman on the globe. The drive for jobs and occupational equity certainly concerns working-class and poor women as much as it does middle-class women. Opening skilled and semiskilled unions to women, reforming clerical and secretarial occupations, and expanding women’s place in government-funded poverty relief projects are all goals of the feminist movement. Securing the right of women to control our own bodies affect poor women even more than it does the affluent. Welfare reform in favor of women and their children has long been a feminist goal. The extinction of racism, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry is a major feminist target.

Where the women’s movement originated was not in its intentions, but in individuals’ failure to see; this was a result of lack of development, lack of sufficient perceptiveness. Like much of the society around us, feminists need greater sensitivity to difference and to the difference in our lives that difference makes. This has led many of us to lump all women into one category—woman—and to assume that female experience is always the same. . . .

Tension arises over strategies and issues and between black and white, gay and straight, moderate and radical feminists—but diversity and interchange are creative. The ultimate values have stood.

A Diversion from “Real” Oppression

Feminists have been told that the movement, being about “peripheral” and “trivial” matters, dangerously diverts resources away from “real” problems that are far more serious than that of women. That charge is neither new nor unique to our times. When Abigail Adams—a young, intelligent, spunky woman of the emerging republic—wrote to her husband to “remember the ladies,” she met with little success. Husband John, at that time a young firebrand in the cause of liberty but eventually the second president of the United States, cautioned her to be patient, for more important matters were at stake. In a letter to his compatriot James Sullivan, Adams revealed that although good reasons existed to consider the rights of “the ladies,” it was consciously decided not to ensure the rights of women citizens in the new society because it would be impractical and raise too many problems. The egalitarian founders of the new republic were too busy, it seems, to open such a messy can of worms as rights of women.

. . .

The charge of triviality is a constant in women’s history and should not surprise us. Reducing women’s suffering to trivia is not
only an enduring masculist perspective but a misogynist strategy as well. To the sane and right-minded, it is self-evident that denial of autonomy and freedom, denial of political, economic, and educational equity, and daily exploitation and violence are as destructive in women’s lives as in men’s. A revolution that advances only the position of men cannot justly be called a revolution for human rights. Similarly, “affirmative action” that guarantees jobs for men but not for women cannot claim to be a program for “equal” human rights. When political activists demand parity for the poor, the colonized, and the oppressed, they must remember that more than half of those poor, colonized, and oppressed are female and that women are doubly tyrannized in being exploited even within their own subgroups, as women, by men. History shows that, when all is said and done, women’s movement has been a drive to free all women from the tyrannies of misogyny and all humanity from the tyrannies of masculism—hardly trivial.

ENLIGHTENMENT THEMES

The eighteenth century was a period of tremendous upheaval and change both in its social organization and in the philosophical themes that developed out of it. The major issues focused on what rights people should have in society and in government. Certain ideas, although hotly debated and often maintained more in principle than in fact, came to occupy a central position in political philosophy. New importance was given to the ancient idea of natural human worth—that is, the value of the individual, which was held to be cosmic in its source (Nature or God) and prior to any privilege or status that could be bestowed by “civiled” society. Men were said to be equal in that value, brothers to one another, rational, and essentially good. Education for all, freedom of opportunity, and the exercise of reason were seen as supplying the major ingredients of progress and harmonious community. Privilege, hereditary wealth and power, and unearned status were represented as villainous. Authority unchecked and exercised without consent was tyranny. Human excellence was composed of rationality, responsibility, emotional and physical health, independence, and tolerance. These were the major ideals of the political thought that we later called the Enlightenment. Although there was often great controversy over how these ideals might be institutionalized, the values themselves were taken as fundamental by a very large portion of the intelligentsia.

Note that men were said to be equal in worth. “All men are created equal”—not women. It was left to thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft to remind the great liberal egalitarians that all they had said regarding worth, rights, opportunity, and freedom, as well as the condition and potential of the poor and oppressed and uneducated, could and should be applied to women also.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND ABOLITION

[W]omen learned much from their work in the abolition movement. It was a combination of the Quaker conviction in the equality of people and the Enlightenment commitment to human liberty that they brought against slavery, and it was not a far distance from the rights of slaves to the rights of women. Many women learned for the first time about the effectiveness of political organization, and they experienced the potential and the joy of female unity and assertiveness. They learned to say openly, “Me, too.” As women came to see clearly the hypocrisy and cruelty of black oppression, they gained the insight to recognize it in the lives of all women and the strength to reject the absurdity and meanness of masculist values, behavior, and rules.

Presenting so well the analogy between the oppression and liberation of blacks and that of
women is the speech of Sojourner Truth at a rights convention in Ohio in 1851. An ex-slave who had become a lecturer and a preacher, Truth was described by the convention's president, Frances Gage, as an "almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piercing the upper air like one in a dream." Truth's "Ain't I a woman?" speech is a most powerful and stirring statement of masculinist injustice and irrationality.

**THEMES OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

The first half of the twentieth century saw the people of the world drawing closer together, albeit painfully. The rise of industrialism, the need for increased trade, the Great War, the rise of Marxism, and other factors all brought internationalistic questions to the foreground and forced reexamination of many issues. People had to place themselves in a wider context and reconsider the limits of authority; the sources of government; the uses of knowledge; the concepts of community, social responsibility, and freedom; and even the nature of happiness. During this period the social sciences—sociology, psychology, and anthropology—were evolving, and they, too, were raising new questions: What have we learned about what is desirable and undesirable in our own society, and how should we change it for the better? What does the new study of human behavior tell us about possibilities for the future of life and society? What are the proper limits of science in changing our lives? That is, what should we not or could we not tamper with? What part of us comes from nature (and is therefore unchangeable), and what part originates somewhere else?

The debate over women's issues was affected by the emerging intellectual models. A belief, prevalent among many feminists and nonfeminists alike, is that the women's movement simply died in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and the winning of suffrage. It is claimed that because the movement narrowed in the latter part of the nineteenth century from very wide-ranging concerns to a total involvement in suffrage, and because the winning of that goal required a Herculean effort, when it was won, activists simply folded in exhaustion. This argument has some basis. Certainly, political activity on a scale of the preceding seven decades did diminish. One could look for reasons in the Depression of the 1930s, in the political turmoil of the entire world during that same decade, and in the vast energy output in World War II during the 1940s. Such monumental events, coupled with the belief that suffrage created the opportunity to cure all women's ills, might indeed have led to a decrease in organized activism.

In the first half of the twentieth century, America's economic system underwent tremendous changes, as did women's participation in it. After World War I, women moved into the public workplace in growing numbers on every level. Frequently, as they grew in numbers, they organized. Women were particularly active in the trade union movement. In the professions, organizations such as Business and Professional Women (BPW) not only supported women in gaining better educational and business opportunities but also lobbied—and still do—for other women's goals in the legislatures and with presidential commissions.

Given all this activity, it is clearly not the case that exhausted women let their movement die. It is more accurate to say that many suffrage activists moved into different areas of activity and that new feminist women expressed their values through these different models. The movement—less centralized, less political, less visible in some ways, even less populous—was nonetheless alive.

**THE SECOND HALF AND THE SECOND WAVE**

Although women's issues as a major focus of public discussion receded in importance dur-
ing the 1940s, conditions that would change this continued to ferment. The Depression had had a negative effect on women's position in the economy. What jobs existed had gone to men, and women lost ground in education, professional status, work rights, and salary. During World War II, however, conditions changed. Positions left empty by men gone to war and jobs in the burgeoning industrial sector had to be filled by women. Laboring in factories and offices, managing small businesses, running farms, teaching college, and building tanks, women did very well. Jobs that, until then, had been deemed “for men only” were effectively accommodated by women, and they learned an unforgettable lesson: There is no masculine or feminine occupation.

From 1945 on, even immediately after the war, when many women lost their jobs to returning veterans, the number and percentage of working women of all kinds—married and unmarried, young and mature, parent and nonparent—increased dramatically, and the realities of women's lives changed. But what changed very little, and what eventually was to cause much of the conflict that crystallized in the 1950s and exploded in the 1960s, was the cultural mythology, the projected ideals of femininity and the “place” of women. Except for the brief wartime appearance of the patriotic Rosie the Riveter, America’s dream-girl image never adjusted to women’s new realities and changing needs. In fact, the gap between myth and reality widened. In the late 1940s and 1950s, popular culture stressed the vision of the virginal, naïve girl-next-door and the softly pliant housewife in cotton dress and spike heels tending single-mindedly to family and home. On the surface, at least, it was a time of traditional values and “togetherness.”

Betty Friedan, in The Feminine Mystique, credits the wars, especially the Korean War, for this period of retrenchment. Disillusioned and emotionally exhausted, people (particularly men) craved the security and nurturance of a stable family and home, and they retreated to the familiar comforting arrangement of marriage, or at least the image of it, and to the concept of the nurturing, tender wife-mother. This is at least partly true.

Again, however, one must be careful not to oversimplify, and one must seek explanations for women’s situation with an eye to events in the wider culture. A period of apparent quiescence, the 1950s nevertheless harbored the seeds of turmoil. Although the decade was known for a kind of apathy toward political and national events, it also saw the Cold War, the second “red scare,” and McCarthy and McCarthyism. It may have had “the corporation man” and the man in gray flannel, but it also had Jack Kerouac and anticonformist Beatniks. It was a day in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus that touched off the civil rights movement. These and other events were as much a part of the personal history of the new feminist women of the 1960s as were the television images of the superwife.

Somewhere between the opposing realities, between prom gowns and Rosa Parks, between affluence and Vietnam, between maternal admonitions of sexual purity and the realities of displaced homemakers, the feminists of the second wave emerged alive and kicking.

Early in the 1950s Simone de Beauvoir’s book The Second Sex had appeared in English in the United States, offering a profound philosophical analysis not only of certain aspects of injustice toward women, such as economic and political discrimination, but of the whole distorted conceptualization of femaleness in a patriarchal world. In 1963 Betty Friedan published The Feminine Mystique, treating the hidden disappointment and unhappiness of many American women in male-female relationships, in the structures of marriage and motherhood, in their lives, and exploding the cultural myth of the happy homemaker. These and other writings in novels, newspapers, and magazines were part of a widening examination of women’s lives, not only among academics but among a growing number of ordinary women.

In the mid-to-late 1960s, civil rights activism and opposition to the Vietnam war generated
scares of activist groups and organizations on
college campuses all over the United States.
Women's participation in these activities and
groups had a variety of consequences. Just as
their ill treatment by many men in the abo-
litionist movement made nineteenth-century
women reflect upon their own circumstances,
discrimination and misogyny in twentieth-
century activism had the same effect—young
women began to question society and politics
not only from a class or racial perspective but
from a female perspective, a gender perspective.
Furthermore, they found that concepts and
strategies learned in a drive for international or
racial justice could be employed in a drive for
women's justice, and increasingly they were.
Finally, as many women activists were students,
they carried the perspectives, terminology,
ideas, values, attitudes, and expectations they
had developed in social activism into their
studies and their writing. What emerged was
the feminist analysis of the "women's liberation
movement," as it was called in the early years
of the second wave.

The word *radical* is a relative term. Where any-
one is placed on the spectrum of radical-to-
conservative has at least as much to do with the
person doing the placing as it does with the
person described. Yet there have been strong
differences of opinion among feminists regard-
ing a number of issues: strategy (for example,
militancy, demonstrations, and strikes versus
painstaking political or legal action), proced-
ural rules (for example, complete separatism
versus male participation), and even language
(for example, reform versus revolution).

Some theoreticians have associated moder-
ation or conservatism with the women's rights
organizations aimed basically at securing
equality for women and men through institu-
tional reform. They have reserved the term *rad-
cal* for those groups that wish to go beyond insti-
tutional reform, beyond equality, to bring
about profound changes in the culture as well
as a complete redefinition of gender itself. It
has been said that moderate feminists want to
secure for women a piece of the pie; radical
feminists want to change the pie. We must,
however, use even this characterization with
care, for clearly there is overlap. Radical femi-
nists usually support institutional reform, and
moderate or conservative activists realize that

THE SECOND WAVE—
THEMES AND THEORIES

Although there are issues upon which most
feminists agree, there are others upon which
there is great difference: in philosophic orienta-
tion, strategy, and treatment. These issues,
which can generate conflict, are internal themes
of contemporary feminism developed during
and since the early 1960s. Because they have a
strong effect on the strategies that movement
leaders choose, because they often determine
how we articulate our concerns, and because
opponents of feminism often seize upon them
to split unity among women, these issues de-
serve our careful attention.

In the introduction to the first edition of the
book *Feminist Frameworks*, Alison Jaggar and
Paula Rothenberg (Struhl) outline four basic
feminist frameworks or theoretical orientations:
(1) *liberal feminism* (some call it *moderate fe-
nism*), which essentially seeks opportunities
for women's advancement in the existent soci-
ety through institutional changes in education
and the workplace; (2) *Marxist feminism*, which
locates the source of women's oppression in the
general problems of a capitalist society and the
remedy, therefore, in its dissolution; (3) *radical
feminism*, which locates the source of women's
oppression not in any particular economic sys-
tem, but in the nature and implications of gen-
der (perhaps even sex) itself; and (4) *socialist
feminism*, an amalgam of the last two, which
holds both economic and gender/sex factors
equally responsible.
even small changes in society beget profound alterations in our lives.

The differences between radicals and moderates are based in their general philosophical orientation, ethical priorities, interpretation of causes, cultural vision, and even temperament. Compare, for example, the sharp differences in the tone, attitudes, explanatory constructs, strategies, and goals of the following documents.

Radical feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as an inferior class based upon their sex. It is the aim of radical feminism to organize politically to destroy this sex class system. . . .

A political power institution is set up for a purpose. We believe that the purpose of male chauvinism is primarily to obtain psychological ego satisfaction, and that only secondarily does this manifest itself in economic relationships. For this reason we do not believe that capitalism, or any other economic system, is the cause of female oppression, nor do we believe that female oppression will disappear as a result of a purely economic revolution. The political oppression of women has its own class dynamic; and that dynamic must be understood in terms previously called "nonpolitical"—namely the politics of the ego.¹

—Ann Koedt, "Politics of the Ego"²

We realize that women's problems are linked to many broader questions of social justice; their solution will require concerted action by many groups. Therefore, convinced that human rights for all are indivisible, we expect to give active support to the common cause of equal rights for all those who suffer discrimination and deprivation, and we call upon other organizations committed to such goals to support our efforts toward equality for women.

—National Organization for Women, Statement of Purpose, 1966

INTO THE FUTURE: THE NEXT WAVE

Feminists must decide many issues for the future. We are feeling the full brunt of an anti-feminist, antiwoman backlash, not only in the United States but all over the world. A strong wave of political and economic conservatism has reversed many of the hard-won victories of the past: Affirmative action, comparable worth, and professional upward-mobility programs lie almost in tatters. The religious right has sworn absolute enmity to women's reproductive liberty, and they are making progress. Increasing numbers of women and their children are poor, homeless, and hungry. The earth we have vowed to protect is being devoured for its resources. All over the world, war, famine, and political repression hit women worst.

Fewer young women today are actively involved in politics or social activism. Indeed, they seem less aware, less concerned, than they were 20 years ago.

Yet some observers of society see the possibilities of the worm turning. Consider the renewed discussion of civil rights for all in the federal government, renewed awareness of social discrimination on American campuses, renewed vigor of pro-choice activities in response to the relentless attacks upon our personal freedom. It is possible to see seeds of rebirth in the present that will flourish in the next century, just as the worst repressions of the
1950s gave birth to the energy of the 1960s. This is already visible. The “women’s vote” was considered a major factor in the last presidential election, as were the issues of reproductive and sexual freedom, and educational and work opportunities for the next generation.

We are the ones who can decide how the energy of the new millennium will be employed. What shall we do? Where shall we put our greatest efforts? What should be our priorities? How can we revitalize the energy, optimism, and power of women’s movement, and where shall we take it?

In 1977 Barbara Jordan, legislator and political leader, gave the keynote speech at the First National Women’s Conference in Houston. She said:

If Americans were asked to differentiate or distinguish between what characterized other countries and what characterizes us, we would say our high regard for the individual. That’s the thing which makes us different.

We endorse personal and political freedom as a national right of human pride. Human rights are more than abstractions, particularly when they are limited or non-existent.

Women are human. We know our rights are limited. We know our rights are violated. We need a domestic human rights program.

At a time when this country is drifting, if it is not shifting to the right, civil rights and affirmative action efforts are lagging.

Not making a difference is a cost we cannot afford.

The cause of equal and human rights will reap what is sown November 18th through November 21st, 1977.

What will you reap?
What will you sow?

Nearly 20 years have passed since Jordan’s words were spoken, and, extraordinarily, the country is still drifting, if not shifting to the right; civil and human rights are still lagging; and not making a difference is still a cost we cannot afford. Indeed, the only thing that we must change about Jordan’s comments is this: the cause of equality will reap what is sown today and tomorrow and thereafter—by all of us and each of us.

What will you sow?

NOTES


2. ego: We are using the classical definition rather than the Freudian—that is, the sense of individual self as distinct from others. [Footnote in original source.]

3. “Politics of the Ego” was adopted as the manifesto of the New York Radical Feminists at its founding meeting in December 1969.


Throughout the more than twenty years that I have spent writing feminist theory, I have consistently worked to make a clear distinction between revolutionary feminist politics and the more widely accepted version of feminism that has as its primary agenda achieving for white women of privileged classes social and economic equality with men of their class. In my first book, Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism, I suggested that the movement of masses of white women, particularly those from privileged-class backgrounds, into the workforce was not sanctioned simply by feminist thinking but by the very white supremacist capitalist patriarchal economic system that movement claimed to want to dismantle. Coming in the wake of civil rights struggle, of black power movements which were demanding cultural revolution, a sharing of the nation's material resources as well as an end to white supremacy, contemporary white women's liberation movement was easily co-opted to serve the interests of white patriarchy by reconsolidating white power, by keeping resources all in the family.

It should have come as no surprise to any of us that those white women who were mainly concerned with gaining equal access to domains of white male privilege quickly ceased to espouse a radical political agenda which included the dismantling of patriarchy as well as an anti-racist, anti-classist agenda. No doubt white patriarchal men must have found it amusing and affirming that many of the white women who had so vehemently and fiercely denounced domination were quite happy to assume the role of oppressor and/or exploiter if it meant that they could wield power equally with white men. Nor should it have surprised us that those individual white women who remained true to the radical and/or revolutionary vision of feminist politics, who had been among the vanguard of the struggle, were soon marginalized as feminist politics entered the mainstream. For example, many of the radical white women who struggled to establish women's studies in colleges and universities throughout the United States did not have doctoral degrees and were soon let go as patriarchal academic legitimacy became more important than sisterhood and solidarity. Often to stay within this system individual white women were compelled to complete further graduate study, a process which was usually depoliticizing, which rewarded abandoning of radical feminist practice.

No critical intervention renewed the spirit of radical feminism that had been sorely diminished by patriarchal co-optation more than the insistence on the part of black women and other women of color that white women interrogate their racial identity and racial privilege. Ironically, many white women appropriated the discourse of race to advance their careers, drawing from the scholarship and critical thinking of black women even as they then bashed us for insisting that any meaningful feminist movement would necessarily have an anti-racist agenda. This bashing is most vehemently expressed in the work of self-proclaimed "white power-feminists" who would have everyone believe that there is no undermining of feminist politics when the central goal of the movement is to allow individual white women access to ruling-class wealth and power. It is this opportunistic appropriation of feminist thinking that consistently corrupts feminist politics, sending the clear message to disenfranchised poor and
working-class women and men of all races that feminist movement is not for them. Given this message and the white supremacist agenda that is perpetuated by white power-feminism, it is not surprising that people of color who do not understand the history of the movement, who may not have access to revolutionary feminist thought and praxis, usually see feminism as a threat and do not see the uses these opportunist white women have made of it. If people of color naively allow our understanding of feminist politics to be shaped by mass media which focus only on white power-feminism, then we become complicit, denying ourselves and our diverse communities access to a resistance struggle that would provide strategies for challenging sexist exploitation and oppression in our lives.

To many black folks feminism continues to be seen as synonymous with bourgeois white women. As a consequence any black woman who uses the term risks being seen as a race traitor. The dismissal of black female voices that advocate feminist politics has intensified with the resurgence of narrow nationalist thinking that either invests in supporting the maintenance of patriarchal gender roles or insists that embracing an Afrocentric worldview will necessarily return black females and males to an idyllic location where gender hierarchies do not exist. Again and again in my work I have had to reiterate that the racism of white women should be militantly challenged but that it should not act as a barrier preventing black women and men from engaging feminist politics. Even though Karl Marx was clearly racist in his thinking, this has never stopped black folks who seek to radicalize their consciousness around the issue of class from engaging Marxism. Surely it is patriarchal condescension that leads black folks, particularly sexist black men, to assume that black females are incapable of embracing revolutionary feminism in ways that would enhance rather than diminish black liberation, despite the continued overt racism and racist agendas of those groups of white women who can most easily lay claim to the term “feminism” and project their conservative and reactionary agendas. Often this condescension merely masks allegiance to sexism and patriarchal thinking in black life. Certainly, the labeling of black women who engage feminist thinking as race traitors is meant to prevent us from embracing feminist politics as surely as white power-feminism acts to exclude our voices and silence our critiques. In this case, both groups are acting to protect and maintain the privileges, however relative, that they receive in the existing social structure.

It is usually materially privileged white women who identify as feminists, and who have gained greater social equality and power with white men in the existing social structure, who resist most vehemently the revolutionary feminist insistence that an anti-racist agenda must be at the core of our movement if there is ever to be solidarity between women and effective coalitions that cross racial boundaries and unite us in common struggle. These are the women who are determined to leave the issue of race behind. Recently white women producers of an ABC news story on feminist movement went in search of radical/revolutionary feminists to appear on their show. I was called, then dismissed as inappropriate because I would raise the issue of race and racism, thereby — according to them — changing the subject. Similar silencing occurs in predominantly black public settings when race is the topic and black females approach these discussions from a feminist standpoint. We are seen as derailing or shifting the focus, not adding to the depth and complexity of our understanding. In such settings we are usually bashed into silence. Given these contexts it is no wonder that there are few black women who choose to publicly advocate revolutionary feminist politics. Indeed, the black female who engages issues of gender, even perhaps challenges sexism, can gain a hearing as long as she does not encourage black folks to embrace revolutionary feminism. Individual radical black women feminists who gain a public hearing usually do so by turning their backs on black constituen-
cies, focusing their attention on white audiences. Often anti-feminist backlash is the excuse they give for not struggling to promote feminist politics in diverse black communities. Yet usually when one examines the history of their engagement, there is no record of any meaningful attempt to educate black communities for critical consciousness when it comes to the issue of feminism. Unfortunately the individual black women who do address gender issues in black settings tend to espouse liberal or conservative politics. They present the same old reformist social-equality white women’s liberation agenda in blackface. Like their white female counterparts, these opportunistic black women are primarily concerned with gaining access to privilege within the existing structure.

Revolutionary feminist thinkers must consistently challenge white power-feminism so that our radical agendas are not completely erased by those white women who continue to support racism and white supremacy. Increasingly, more and more individual white revolutionary feminist activists are critiquing the racism of their white peers with the same militancy as their women-of-color peers. Let’s be clear. It was individual black women and women of color who were and remain at the forefront of the struggle to maintain an anti-racist revolutionary feminist agenda. It is a meaningful and powerful expression of solidarity and sisterhood that individual radical white women are daring to challenge courageously the racism of their peers. The essays in the collection The Coming of Black Genocide, a reprinting of articles from Bottomfish Blues, is a fine example. Described in the introduction as an underground Amazon publication, it has two main themes: to “radically challenge white women’s complicity in both the on-going Black Genocide and the patriarchy’s war against women.” Reiterating the analysis first given by black women thinkers, myself included (who are never acknowledged or cited in this text), the anonymous authors courageously make connections between white supremacist perpetuation of black genocide and the women’s movement for white equality. Their analysis is worth quoting at length:

If the just-starting women’s liberation movement had survived it would have divided white society, and would have seriously endangered the plans for Black Genocide. Born out of the sparks from Black liberation, with its own revolutionary pulse, women’s liberation would have been guerilla movement behind enemy lines. It might have sabotaged the machinery of genocide. Just as the student antivir movement did to the invasion of Vietnam. . . . The power structure neutralized women’s liberation by smothering it under the “neutra-sweet” women’s movement for white equality. And then pretended that they were both the same thing.

It is unfortunate that the revolutionary feminist thinkers who wrote these essays do not identify the work of those black women who write about race in ways that mask the debt they owe to black women and women-of-color thinkers often do so because they are working within structures that affirm competition, that encourage folks to make it appear that their ideas always come from some space of original thought. The ethic of competition does not place value on collaboration or dialectical exchange. It does not create an atmosphere where individuals who have white privilege and authority in relation to the discourse of race and racism can link their work to anti-racist struggle by repudiating the need to erase, render invisible, and/or devalue the work of non-white peers.

Honoring the engagement with black peers that enhanced her capacity to break with white supremacist thinking and fully commit to anti-racist struggle Segrest shares:

Lenny taught me that fascism was about isolation, about political movements deliberately breaking down the human bonds between people so that they give blind allegiance to a leader or an ideology. Reverend Lee showed me how to go after the lost, to defy the isolation imposed by denial, terror and ideologies of hate. But I was lost myself, and I found myself, in part
at least, in the acts of searching out others. It made me a different person—but not a better person—than either of my parents. To differentiate myself, I have had to accept the gifts they gave me, which paradoxically, I could not do until I was sure I am my own person. “When people have to choose, they go with their own race,” my mother had said, but she was wrong. It is not a matter of choosing one race or family and betraying one another. The choice is for justice! community! humanity! the glimpse that we are all one organism....

It is this understanding of revolutionary interdependency that must be shared if we are to reclaim a vision of feminist sisterhood that proudly acknowledges feminist commitment to anti-racist struggle. Advocates of revolutionary feminist movement are among that group of women and men who do not despair about the capacity of white folks to divest of white supremacy because we have engaged in resistance and seen the reality of solidarity emerge in the context of mutual commitment and struggle. These stories must be told to counter the mounting despair, to counter the claims of white power-feminism. There will be no feminist revolution without an end to racism and white supremacy. When all women and men engaged in feminist struggle understand the interlocking nature of systems of domination, of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, feminist movement will regain its revolutionary progressive momentum.

**Reading 5**

**Beyond Bean Counting**

*JeeYoon Lee*

I came out as a woman, an Asian American and a bisexual within a relatively short span of time, and ever since then I have been guilty of the crime of bean counting, as Bill Clinton oh-so-eloquently phrased it. Every time I am in a room of people gathered for any reason, I automatically count those whom I can identify as women, men, people of color, Asian Americans, mixed-race people, whites, gays and lesbians, bisexuals, heterosexuals, people with disabilities. So when I received the call for submissions for this anthology, I imagined opening up the finished book to the table of contents and counting beans; I then sent the call for submissions to as many queer Asian/Pacific American women writers as I knew.

Such is the nature of feminism in the 1990s: an uneasy balancing act between the imperatives of outreach and inclusion on the one hand, and the risk of tokenism and further marginalization on the other. This dynamic has indelibly shaped my personal experiences with feminism, starting from my very first encounter with organized feminism. This encounter happened to be, literally, Feminist Studies 101 at the university I attended. The content of the class was divided into topics such as family, work, sexuality and so forth, and for each topic we studied what various feminist paradigms said about it: “liberal feminism,” “social feminism,” “radical feminism” and “feminism and women of color.”

Taking this class was an exhilarating, empowering and very uneasy experience. For the first time I found people who articulated those murky half-formed feelings that I could previously only express incoherently as “But that's not fair!” People who agreed, sympathized, related their own experiences, theorized, helped me form what I had always known. In seventh grade, a teacher made us do a mock debate, and I ended up arguing with Neil Coleman about...
Toward a New Vision
Race, Class, and Gender as Categories
of Analysis and Connection

Patricia Hill Collins

The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.

—Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider, 123

Audre Lorde's statement raises a troublesome issue for scholars and activists working for social change. While many of us have little difficulty assessing our own victimization within some major system of oppression, whether it be by race, social class, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or gender, we typically fail to see how our thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination. Thus, white feminists routinely point with confidence to their oppression as women but resist seeing how much their white skin privileges them. African-Americans who possess eloquent analyses of racism often persist in viewing poor White women as symbols of white power. The radical left fares little better. "If only people of color and women could see their true class interests," they argue, "class solidarity would eliminate racism and sexism." In essence, each group identifies the type of oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all other types as being of lesser importance.

Oppression is full of such contradictions. Errors in political judgment that we make concerning how we teach our courses, what we tell our children, and which organizations are worthy of our time, talents and financial support flow smoothly from errors in theoretical analysis about the nature of oppression and activism. Once we realize that there are few pure victims or oppressors, and that each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression that frame our lives, then we will be in a position to see the need for new ways of thought and action.

...[This discussion] addresses this need for new patterns of thought and action. I focus on two basic questions. First, how can we reconceptualize race, class and gender as categories of analysis? Second, how can we transcend the barriers created by our experiences with race, class and gender oppression in order to build the types of coalitions essential for social exchange? To address these question[s] I contend that we must acquire both new theories of how race, class and gender have shaped the experiences not just of women of color, but of all groups. Moreover, we must see the connections between these categories of analysis and the personal issues in our everyday lives, particularly our scholarship, our teaching and our relationships with our colleagues and students. As Audre Lorde points out, change starts with self, and relationships that we have with those around us must always be the primary site for social change.

How Can We Reconceptualize Race, Class and Gender as Categories of Analysis?

To me, we must shift our discourse away from additive analyses of oppression (Spelman 1982; Collins 1989). Such approaches are typically based on two key premises. First, they depend on either/or, dichotomous thinking. Persons,
things and ideas are conceptualized in terms of their opposites. For example, Black/White, man/woman, thought/feeling, and fact/opinion are defined in oppositional terms. Thought and feeling are not seen as two different and interconnected ways of approaching truth that can coexist in scholarship and teaching. Instead, feeling is defined as antithetical to reason, as its opposite. In spite of the fact that we all have “both/and” identities, (I am both a college professor and a mother—I don’t stop being a mother when I drop my child off at school, or forget everything I learned while scrubbing the toilet), we persist in trying to classify each other in either/or categories. I live each day as an African-American woman—a race/gender specific experience. And I am not alone. Everyone has a race/gender/class specific identity. Either/or, dichotomous thinking is especially troublesome when applied to theories of oppression because every individual must be classified as being either oppressed or not oppressed. The both/and position of simultaneously being oppressed and oppressor becomes conceptually impossible.

A second premise of additive analyses of oppression is that these dichotomous differences must be ranked. One side of the dichotomy is typically labeled dominant and the other subordinate. Thus, Whites rule Blacks, men are deemed superior to women, and reason is seen as being preferable to emotion. Applying this premise to discussions of oppression leads to the assumption that oppression can be quantified, and that some groups are oppressed more than others. I am frequently asked, “Which has been most oppressive to you, your status as a Black person or your status as a woman?” What I am really being asked to do is divide myself into little boxes and rank my various statuses. If I experience oppression as a both/and phenomenon, why should I analyze it any differently?

Additive analyses of oppression rest squarely on the twin pillars of either/or thinking and the necessity to quantify and rank all relationships in order to know where one stands. Such approaches typically see African-American women as being more oppressed than everyone else because the majority of Black women experience the negative effects of race, class and gender oppression simultaneously. In essence, if you add together separate oppressions, you are left with a grand oppression greater than the sum of its parts.

I am not denying that specific groups experience oppression more harshly than others—lynching is certainly objectively worse than being held up as a sex object. But we must be careful not to confuse this issue of the saliency of one type of oppression in people’s lives with a theoretical stance postulating the interlocking nature of oppression. Race, class and gender may all structure a situation but may not be equally visible and/or important in people’s self definitions. In certain contexts, such as the antebellum American South and contemporary South America, racial oppression is more visibly salient. While in other contexts, such as Haiti, El Salvador and Nicaragua, social class oppression may be more apparent. For middle class White women, gender may assume experiential primacy unavailable to poor Hispanic women struggling with the ongoing issues of low paid jobs and the frustrations of the welfare bureaucracy. This recognition that one category may have salience over another for a given time and place does not minimize the theoretical importance of assuming that race, class and gender as categories of analysis structure all relationships.

In order to move toward new visions of what oppression is, I think that we need to ask new questions. How are relationships of domination and subordination structured and maintained in the American political economy? How do race, class and gender function as parallel and interlocking systems that shape this basic relationship of domination and subordination? Questions such as these promise to move us away from futile theoretical struggles concerned with ranking oppressions and towards analyses that assume race, class and gender are all present in any given setting, even if one appears. Our task is to conceptualize connect categories.
pears more visible and salient than the others. Our task becomes redefined as one of reconceptualizing oppression by uncovering the connections among race, class and gender as categories of analysis.

1. INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION
OF OPPRESSION

Sandra Harding's contention that gender oppression is structured along three main dimensions—the institutional, the symbolic, and the individual—offers a useful model for a more comprehensive analysis encompassing race, class and gender oppression (Harding 1986). Systemic relationships of domination and subordination structured through social institutions such as schools, businesses, hospitals, the work place, and government agencies represent the institutional dimension of oppression. Racism, sexism and elitism all have concrete institutional locations. Even though the workings of the institutional dimension of oppression are often obscured with ideologies claiming equality of opportunity, in actuality, race, class and gender place Asian-American women, Native American men, White men, African-American women, and other groups in distinct institutional niches with varying degrees of penalty and privilege.

Even though I realize that many ... would not share this assumption, let us assume that the institutions of American society discriminate, whether by design or by accident. While many of us are familiar with how race, gender and class operate separately to structure inequality, I want to focus on how these three systems interlock in structuring the institutional dimension of oppression. To get at the interlocking nature of race, class and gender, I want you to think about the antebellum plantation as a guiding metaphor for a variety of American social institutions. Even though slavery is typically analyzed as a racist institution, and occasionally as a class institution, I suggest that slavery was a race, class, gender specific insti-

... A brief analysis of key American social institutions most controlled by elite White men should convince us of the interlocking nature of race, class and gender in structuring the institutional dimension of oppression. For example, if you are from an American college or university, is your campus a modern plantation? Who controls your university's political economy? Are elite White men over represented among the upper administrators and trustees controlling your university's finances and policies? Are elite White men being joined by growing numbers of elite White women helpmates? What kinds of people are in your classrooms grooming the next generation who will occupy these and other decision-making positions? Who are the support staff that produce the mass mailings, order the supplies, fix the leaky pipes? Do African-Americans, Hispanics or other people of color form the majority of the invisible workers who feed you, wash your dishes, and clean up your offices and libraries after everyone else has gone home?

If your college is anything like mine, you know the answers to these questions. You may be affiliated with an institution that has Hispanic women as vice-presidents for finance, or substantial numbers of Black men among the faculty. If so, you are fortunate. Much more typical are colleges where a modified version of the plantation as a metaphor for the institutional dimension of oppression survives.

2. THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION
OF OPPRESSION

Widespread, societally-sanctioned ideologies used to justify relations of domination and subordination comprise the symbolic dimension of oppression. Central to this process is the use of stereotypical or controlling images of diverse
race, class and gender groups. In order to assess the power of this dimension of oppression, I want you to make a list, either on paper or in your head, of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics. If your list is anything like that compiled by most people, it reflects some variation of the following:

**Masculine** | **Feminine**
--- | ---
aggressive | passive
leader | follower
rational | emotional
strong | weak
intellectual | physical

Not only does this list reflect either/or dichotomous thinking and the need to rank both sides of the dichotomy, but ask yourself exactly which men and women you had in mind when compiling these characteristics. This list applies almost exclusively to middle class White men and women. The allegedly "masculine" qualities that you probably listed are only acceptable when exhibited by elite White men, or when used by Black and Hispanic men against each other or against women of color. Aggressive Black and Hispanic men are seen as dangerous, not powerful, and are often penalized when they exhibit any of the allegedly "masculine" characteristics. Working class and poor White men fare slightly better and are also denied the allegedly "masculine" symbols of leadership, intellectual competence, and human rationality. Women of color and working class and poor White women are also not represented on this list, for they have never had the luxury of being "ladies." What appear to be universal categories representing all men and women instead are unmasked as being applicable to only a small group.

It is important to see how the symbolic images applied to different race, class and gender groups interact in maintaining systems of domination and subordination. If I were to ask you to repeat the same assignment, only this time, by making separate lists for Black men, Black women, Hispanic women and Hispanic men, I suspect that your gender symbolism would be quite different. In comparing all of the lists, you might begin to see the interdependence of symbols applied to all groups. For example, the elevated images of White womanhood need devalued images of Black womanhood in order to maintain credibility.

... Assuming that everyone is affected differently by the same interlocking set of symbolic images allows us to move forward toward new analyses. Women of color and White women have different relationships to White male authority and this difference explains the distinct gender symbolism applied to both groups. Black women encounter controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, the mule and the whore, that encourage others to reject us as fully human people. Ironically, the negative nature of these images simultaneously encourages us to reject them. In contrast, White women are offered seductive images, those that promise to reward them for supporting the status quo. And yet seductive images can be equally controlling. Consider, for example, the views of Nancy White, a 73-year old Black woman, concerning images of rejection and seduction:

My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gon' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person. (Gwartney, 148)

Both sets of images stimulate particular political stances. By broadening the analysis beyond the confines of race, we can see the varying levels of rejection and seduction available to each of us due to our race, class and gender identity. Each of us lives with an allotted portion of institutional privilege and penalty, and with varying levels of rejection and seduction.
inherent in the symbolic images applied to us. This is the context in which we make our choices. Taken together, the institutional and symbolic dimensions of oppression create a structural backdrop against which all of us live our lives.

3. THE INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION OF OPPRESSION

Whether we benefit or not, we all live within institutions that reproduce race, class and gender oppression. Even if we never have any contact with members of other race, class and gender groups, we all encounter images of these groups and are exposed to the symbolic meanings attached to those images. On this dimension of oppression, our individual biographies vary tremendously. As a result of our institutional and symbolic statuses, all of our choices become political acts.

Each of us must come to terms with the multiple ways in which race, class and gender as categories of analysis frame our individual biographies. I have lived my entire life as an African-American woman from a working class family and this basic fact has had a profound impact on my personal biography. Imagine how different your life might be if you had been born Black, or White, or poor, or of a different race/class/gender group than the one with which you are most familiar. The institutional treatment you would have received and the symbolic meanings attached to your very existence might differ dramatically from what you now consider to be natural, normal and part of everyday life. You might be the same, but your personal biography might have been quite different.

I believe that each of us carries around the cumulative effect of our lives within multiple structures of oppression. If you want to see how much you have been affected by this whole thing, I ask you one simple question—who are your close friends? Who are the people with whom you can share your hopes, dreams, vulnerabilities, fears and victories? Do they look like you? If they are all the same, circumstance may be the cause. For the first seven years of my life I saw only low income Black people. My friends from those years reflected the composition of my community. But now that I am an adult, can the defense of circumstance explain the patterns of people that I trust as my friends and colleagues? When given other alternatives, if my friends and colleagues reflect the homogeneity of one race, class and gender group, then these categories of analysis have indeed become barriers to connection.

I am not suggesting that people are doomed to follow the paths laid out for them by race, class and gender as categories of analysis. While these three structures certainly frame my opportunity structure, I as an individual always have the choice of accepting things as they are, or trying to change them. As Nikki Giovanni points out, “we’ve got to live in the real world. If we don’t like the world we’re living in, change it. And if we can’t change it, we change ourselves. We can do something” (Tate 1983, 68). While a piece of the oppressor may be planted deep within each of us, we each have the choice of accepting that piece or challenging it as part of the “true focus of revolutionary change.”

How Can We Transcend the Barriers Created by Our Experiences with Race, Class and Gender Oppression in Order to Build the Types of Coalitions Essential for Social Change?

Reconceptualizing oppression and seeing the barriers created by race, class and gender as interlocking categories of analysis is a vital first step. But we must transcend these barriers by moving toward race, class and gender as categories of connection, by building relationships and coalitions that will bring about social change. What are some of the issues involved in doing this?
1. DIFFERENCES IN POWER AND PRIVILEGE

First, we must recognize that our differing experiences with oppression create problems in the relationships among us. Each of us lives within a system that vests us with varying levels of power and privilege. These differences in power, whether structured along axes of race, class, gender, age or sexual orientation, frame our relationships. African-American writer June Jordan describes her discomfort on a Caribbean vacation with Olive, the Black woman who cleaned her room:

... even though both "Olive" and "I" live inside a conflict neither one of us created, and even though both of us therefore hurt inside that conflict, I may be one of the monsters she needs to eliminate from her universe and, in a sense, she may be one of the monsters in mine (1985, 47).

Differences in power constrain our ability to connect with one another even when we think we are engaged in dialogue across differences. . . .

In extreme cases, members of privileged groups can erase the very presence of the less privileged. When I first moved to Cincinnati, my family and I went on a picnic at a local park. Picnicking next to us was a family of White Appalachians. When I went to push my daughter on the swings, several of the children came over. They had missing, yellowed and broken teeth, they wore old clothing and their poverty was evident. I was shocked. Growing up in a large eastern city, I had never seen such awful poverty among Whites. The segregated neighborhoods in which I grew up made White poverty all but invisible. More importantly, the privileges attached to my newly acquired social class position allowed me to ignore and minimize the poverty among Whites that I did encounter. My reactions to those children made me realize how confining phrases such as "well, at least they're not Black," had become for me. In learning to grant human subjectivity to the Black victims of poverty, I had simultaneously learned to demand White victims of poverty. By applying categories of race to the objective conditions confronting me, I was quantifying and ranking oppressions and missing the very real suffering which, in fact, is the real issue.

One common pattern of relationships across differences in power is one that I label "voyeurism." From the perspective of the privileged, the lives of people of color, of the poor, and of women are interesting for their entertainment value. The privileged become voyeurs, passive onlookers who do not relate to the less powerful, but who are interested in seeing how the "different" live. Over the years, I have heard numerous African-American students complain about professors who never call on them except when a so-called Black issue is being discussed. The students' interest in discussing race or qualifications for doing so appear unimportant to the professor's efforts to use Black students' experiences as stories to make the material come alive for the White student audience. Asking Black students to perform on cue and provide a Black experience for their White classmates can be seen as voyeurism at its worst.

Members of subordinate groups do not willingly participate in such exchanges but often do so because members of dominant groups control the institutional and symbolic apparatuses of oppression. Racial/ethnic groups, women, and the poor have never had the luxury of being voyeurs of the lives of the privileged. Our ability to survive in hostile settings has hinged on our ability to learn intricate details about the behavior and world view of the powerful and adjust our behavior accordingly. I need only point to the difference in perception of those men and women in abusive relationships. Where men can view their girlfriends and wives as sex objects, helpmates and a collection of stereotypes categories of voyeurism—women must be attuned to every nuance
of their partners' behavior. Are women "naturally" better in relating to people with more power than themselves, or have circumstances mandated that men and women develop different skills? . . .

Coming from a tradition where most relationships across difference are squarely rooted in relations of domination and subordination, we have much less experience relating to people as different but equal. The classroom is potentially one powerful and safe space where dialogues among individuals of unequal power relationships can occur. . . .

2. COALITIONS AROUND COMMON CAUSES

A second issue in building relationships and coalitions essential for social change concerns knowing the real reasons for coalition. Just what brings people together? One powerful catalyst fostering group solidarity is the presence of a common enemy. African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, and women's studies all share the common intellectual heritage of challenging what passes for certified knowledge in the academy. But politically expedient relationships and coalitions like these are fragile because, as June Jordan points out:

It occurs to me that much organizational grief could be avoided if people understood that partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership for change: When we get the monsters off our backs all of us may want to run in very different directions (1985, 47).

Sharing a common cause assists individuals and groups in maintaining relationships that transcend their differences. Building effective coalitions involves struggling to hear one another and developing empathy for each other's points of view. The coalitions that I have been involved in that lasted and that worked have been those where commitment to a specific issue mandated collaboration as the best strategy for addressing the issue at hand.

. . . None of us alone has a comprehensive vision of how race, class and gender operate as categories of analysis or how they might be used as categories of connection. Our personal biographies offer us partial views. Few of us can manage to study race, class and gender simultaneously. Instead, we each know more about some dimensions of this larger story and less about others. . . . Just as the members of the school had special skills to offer to the task of building the school, we have areas of specialization and expertise, whether scholarly, theoretical, pedagogical or within areas of race, class or gender. We do not all have to do the same thing in the same way. Instead, we must support each other's efforts, realizing that they are all part of the larger enterprise of bringing about social change.

3. BUILDING EMPATHY

A third issue involved in building the types of relationships and coalitions essential for social change concerns the issue of individual accountability. Race, class and gender oppression form the structural backdrop against which we frame our relationship—these are the forces that encourage us to substitute voyeurism . . . for fully human relationships. But while we may not have created this situation, we are each responsible for making individual, personal choices concerning which elements of race, class and gender oppression we will accept and which we will work to change.

One essential component of this accountability involves developing empathy for the experiences of individuals and groups different than ourselves. Empathy begins with taking an interest in the facts of other people[s] lives, both as individuals and as groups. If you care about me, you should want to know not only the details of my personal biography but a sense of how race, class and gender as categories of analysis created the institutional and symbolic
backdrop for my personal biography. How can you hope to assess my character without knowing the details of the circumstances I face?

Moreover, by taking a theoretical stance that we have all been affected by race, class and gender as categories of analysis that have structured our treatment, we open up possibilities for using those same constructs as categories of connection in building empathy. For example, I have a good White woman friend with whom I share common interests and beliefs. But we know that our racial differences have provided us with different experiences. So we talk about them. We do not assume that because I am Black, race has only affected me and not her or that because I am a Black woman, race neutralizes the effect of gender in my life while accentuating it in hers. We take those same categories of analysis that have created cleavages in our lives, in this case, categories of race and gender, and use them as categories of connection in building empathy for each other's experiences.

Finding common causes and building empathy is difficult, no matter which side of privilege we inhabit. Building empathy from the dominant side of privilege is difficult, simply because individuals from privileged backgrounds are not encouraged to do so. For example, in order for those of you who are White to develop empathy for the experiences of people of color, you must grapple with how your white skin has privileged you. This is difficult to do, because it not only entails the intellectual process of seeing how whiteness is elevated in institutions and symbols, but it also involves the often painful process of seeing how your whiteness has shaped your personal biography. Intellectual stances against the institutional and symbolic dimensions of racism are generally easier to maintain than sustained self-reflection about how racism has shaped all of our individual biographies. Were and are your fathers, uncles, and grandfathers really more capable than mine, or can their accomplishments be explained in part by the racism members of my family experienced? Did your mothers stand silently by and watch all this happen? More importantly, how have they passed on the benefits of their whiteness to you?

These are difficult questions, and I have tremendous respect for my colleagues and students who are trying to answer them. Since there is no compelling reason to examine the source and meaning of one's own privilege, I know that those who do so have freely chosen this stance. They are making conscious efforts to root out the piece of the oppressor planted within them. To me, they are entitled to the support of people of color in their efforts. Men who declare themselves feminists, members of the middle class who ally themselves with anti-poverty struggles, heterosexuals who support gays and lesbians, are all trying to grow, and their efforts place them far ahead of the majority who never think of engaging in such important struggles.

Building empathy from the subordinate side of privilege is also difficult, but for different reasons. Members of subordinate groups are understandably reluctant to abandon a basic mistrust of members of powerful groups because this basic mistrust has traditionally been central to their survival. As a Black woman, it would be foolish for me to assume that White women, or Black men, or White men or any other group with a history of exploiting African-American women have my best interests at heart. These groups enjoy varying amounts of privilege over me and therefore I must carefully watch them and be prepared for a relation of domination and subordination.

Like the privileged, members of subordinate groups must also work toward replacing judgments by category with new ways of thinking and acting. Refusing to do so stifles prospects for effective coalition and social change. Let me use another example from my own experiences. When I was an undergraduate, I had little time or patience for the theorizing of the privileged. My initial years at a private, elite institution were difficult, not because the coursework was challenging (it was, but that wasn't
what distracted me) or because I had to work while my classmates lived on family allowances (I was used to work). The adjustment was difficult because I was surrounded by so many people who took their privilege for granted. Most of them felt entitled to their wealth. That astounded me.

I remember one incident of watching a White woman down the hall in my dormitory try to pick out which sweater to wear. The sweaters were piled up on her bed in all the colors of the rainbow, sweater after sweater. She asked my advice in a way that let me know that choosing a sweater was one of the most important decisions she had to make on a daily basis. Standing knee-deep in her sweaters, I realized how different our lives were. She did not have to worry about maintaining a solid academic average so that she could receive financial aid. Because she was in the majority, she was not treated as a representative of her race. She did not have to consider how her classroom comments or basic existence on campus contributed to the treatment her group would receive. Her allowance protected her from having to work, so she was free to spend her time studying, partying, or in her case, worrying about which sweater to wear. The degree of inequality in our lives and her unquestioned sense of entitlement concerning that inequality offended me. For a while, I categorized all affluent White women as being superficial, arrogant, overly concerned with material possessions, and part of my problem. But had I continued to classify people in this way, I would have missed out on making some very good friends whose discomfort with their inherited or acquired social class privileges pushed them to examine their position.

Since I opened with the words of Audre Lorde, it seems appropriate to close with another of her ideas.

Each of us is called upon to take a stand. So in these days ahead, as we examine ourselves and each other, our works, our fears, our differences, our sisterhood and survivals, I urge you to tackle what is most difficult for us all, self-scrutiny of our complacencies, the idea that since each of us believes she is on the side of right, she need not examine her position (1985).

I urge you to examine your position.

REFERENCES