

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN GENDER AND SOCIETY

Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads

Intersectional Women's Studies for
Transracial Alliance

Edited by

Marie Vaz and

Mary L. Lemons

图书馆

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Gary L. Lemons**

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Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads

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I dedicate this book to the contributors who came when we called. They helped us commemorate the moment in which the Department of Women's Studies was under threat of erasure. What the speakers gave and left us with is this repository of their voices, their solidarity, and their political love. I also dedicate this book most importantly to my "Brother" Gary Lemons. The melody carried by The Blind Boys of Alabama, as they sing, "when my legs no longer carry and the warm wind chills my bones," captured my experience through this turbulent period. Composed by Ben Harper, this spiritual of hope's central message is through our connection to others and to the divine, *we will not walk alone*. On many a day the lyrics of this song reverberated through me, but because of his political love, "~~when I was tired and~~ weary," I reached for Brother Gary, and ~~I did not walk alone~~. . . .

Kim Marie Vaz

For Fanni, our thirty years of *womanist* union has made me a better, wiser—father, husband, teacher, and uncompromising *pro-feminist* man.

Gary L. Lemons

Foreword

Disloyalty to Whiteness— Practicing What We Preach

Beverly Guy-Sheftall

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) difference lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

In an amazingly cogent and self-disclosing essay titled “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism and Gynephobia,” which appeared in an issue of the now defunct *Chrysalis* (No. 7, 1979), Adrienne Rich breaks the silence about the racism of too many white feminists.¹ She also alludes to Lillian Smith’s words, “disloyal to civilization (she means patriarchal, white civilization) to describe a long history of anti-racism among white women in the US going back to slavery.”² Rich tells us that what motivated her to write the essay were the writings of Barbara Smith and Toni Cade’s anthology *The Black Woman* (1970); this pioneering but still underutilized anthology included an essay by Pat Robinson and others, “A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women in the Cities,” which Rich calls a “generative piece of feminist thinking.” Acknowledging the compelling work of black feminists, many of whom were not attached to the academy, and the racial insights of a Southern white woman writer, Rich diagnoses what she believes keeps white women loyal to patriarchy or what she names passive collusion: “snow blindness, white solipsism: to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world.” She is particularly insightful about the failures of a particular group of white women:

The concept of racism itself is often intellectualized by white feminists. For some, a conscientious, obligatory mention of ‘racism and classism’ allows it to be assumed that deep qualitative differences of female experience have been taken into account—where in fact intellectual analysis has been trusted to do the work of emotional apprehension, which it cannot do. It is possible to make obeisance to the abstract existence of racism, even to work politically on issues of immediate concern to

black and Third World women out of an intellectual right-mindedness . . . I have more than once felt anger at abstractly 'correct' language wielded by self-described political feminists: a language which sprang from learned analysis rather than from that synthesis of reflection and feeling, personal struggle and critical thinking which is at the core of feminist process. (22)

She then includes herself as part of the problem: "I, also, have done this: pronounced the word 'racism' while withholding my body and soul from the reality that word could evoke, if I would let it." Thirty years later, I would add that white feminist academics have become even more adept at speaking the language of anti-racism, and there is much we can still learn from Rich's insights about "female racism," which she confesses she has partly internalized and helped to perpetuate. As Professors Vaz and Lemons' compelling and timely anthology, *Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads*, underscores, the issue of race within feminist contexts continues to haunt us. The question many authors probe here is why we continue, in Rich's words, to practice allegiance to white racist culture. Here is her answer three decades ago: "I believe that white feminists today, raised white in a racist society, are often ridden with white solipsism—not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel vision which simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant." This white solipsism is also manifest in what Rich calls "mythic perceptions about black women and other women of color" and the paralysis of guilt, which is a preoccupation with one's own feelings that prevents you from ever connecting with the experience of others.

At the 2002 annual meeting of the National Women's Studies Organization (NWSA) in Las Vegas, I joined a panel, "Women of All Colors Building an Inclusive Organization Together," during which I shared in greater detail the essential points I decided to publish for the first time here. It was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of NWSA and seven years before I would assume the presidency of the organization. I began by acknowledging the work of the Women of Color Caucus and the Anti-White Supremacy Task Force who had courageously conceived of the plenary panel as a space during which we might "begin an honest dialogue about past and present practices that have held the organization captive to the reconstruction of systems of oppression." I indicated that I would not be revisiting in a concrete manner the explosive face-to-face confrontations over race that occurred from time to time at the annual meetings of NWSA and resulted in a major crisis at the 1990 conference when a highly charged personnel issue (with serious racial overtones) precipitated a walkout by the Women of Color Caucus, the eventual resignation of the national staff, and the cancellation of the 1991 meeting.

I did reflect upon my own involvement with NWSA, which began at that historic meeting in 1981 in Storrs, Connecticut, whose focus was

racism. bell hooks was also in attendance, attempting to promote her soon to be published first book, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981); it was during an all night conversation in my dorm room that my still deep friendship with her began. It would have been impossible for us to have imagined over the next several days that her feminist theory books would help to transform the field of women's studies. It was also in Storrs that we met Gloria Joseph and heard Audre Lorde speak for the first time. I recall a spellbound audience, mostly white, listening to her riveting, prophetic, angry talk on "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," which is reprinted in *Sister Outsider* (1984)—now a canonical text in women's studies. Lorde's anger was borne of "exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal and co-optation."³ Rather than speaking theoretically, she names specific behaviors of white women that have caused her to be angry.

Somewhat motivated by anger because of the persistent erasure of women of color from narratives about the evolution of Women's Studies, I wrote an essay, "Other Mothers of Women's Studies," which appeared in Florence Howe's *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers*. I want to remember at this juncture what propelled me to the field at the age of twenty-two and what has kept me there for over forty years. This is my thirty-first year directing a women's studies program at the only historically black college with an undergraduate women's studies major. As a graduate student in the ILA at Emory University in the late 1970s, I was among a small group of students who took its first graduate courses in women's studies before the establishment of its formal doctoral program. Eventually I wrote a women's studies dissertation and published the first anthology on black women's literature with my colleague in the English department at Spelman College, Roseann P. Bell. So my journey to women's studies was an intellectual one, the precise details of which I have written about in some detail in three published essays.

I have been at the same time one of the most vocal advocates of women's studies and one of its loudest critics, and have borne witness since the early 1970s in many, different contexts to its struggles with itself to practice what it preaches and to live up to its perhaps impossible ideals of inclusion.

Critiques by women of color, many of whom appear in this anthology, called attention to the field's too narrow focus on gender, what legal race theorist Angela Harris describes as "gender essentialism," the idea that there is a monolithic women's experience. This critique, the particulars of which have been chronicled by scholars in many disciplines, also marked the field's relative exclusion of other markers of difference and its US-centric biases. Calls for intersectional analyses, which make visible the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality, in particular, converge in particular ways in the lives of all women, would be the overriding theoretical framework around which these critiques clustered. Professors Vaz

and Lemons' introduction captures this rich herstory of the evolution of feminist theory.

Rachel Lee's essay "Notes from the (Non) Field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color," which appeared in the premier issue of *Meridians* (August 2000), is a meditation on the women's studies core curriculum at UCLA, and describes how women's studies as a field imagines itself as having corrected most of its vexing problems around inclusion, at least in the design of its curricula. Lee alludes to this phenomenon as the "progress narratives" women's studies wishes to create for itself; practitioners assert that women of color are now included in women's studies scholarship but are even dominant, including in women's studies programs themselves! Within these "progress narratives," there is a kind of "exhaustion with race," a been there, done that mindset that is reflected in Wendy Brown's essay on "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," which appeared in a special issue of *difference* (1997), and continues to generate contentious dialogues within the field.

A persistent issue, for which *Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads* has no peer, involves our commitments to forging cross-racial coalitions among white women's studies faculty and faculty of color in various spaces in the academy. Perhaps *the* most difficult conversation for us to have is what I see as individual, pedagogical, and institutional practices by feminist faculty of all colors that lead me to assert that there is tremendous distance, still, between our belief systems and values around inclusion and our actual practices and behaviors. What we teach in our classrooms about race and difference may be different from how we behave. While some of this behavior is perhaps unintentional—difficult to see, more difficult to name—some if it is conscious, willful, and consistent with our desire to maintain power and control. We are sometimes complicit with hegemonic structures within the academy, especially "racial contracts," which we claim to abhor and intended to dismantle, but which we in fact help to sustain. Philosopher Alison Bailey, in her essay "Despising an Identity They Taught Me to Claim," makes use of Marilyn Frye's term "whiteness," which is the racial equivalent of "masculinity."⁴ Frye asserts that being "whitely," like being masculine, is a deeply ingrained way of being in the world. Bailey finds it helpful to think of Frye's analysis of these whitely "ways of being" (performed attitudes and behaviors) as "scripts."⁵ In other words, "just as gender roles reinforce patriarchy, so might whitely performances, or scripts, reinforce systems that value white experiences and achievements over the experiences and achievements of peoples of color." The performances of these racial scripts "sustain dominant group privileges." For Bailey, the question is "how can I stop animating whitely scripts," by which she means how can I engage in an examination of my behavior and attitudes and eliminate the ones that promote white supremacy and reinforce racial hierarchies? My question is this: why do certain practices exist, what Bailey names the performance of whitely scripts, given all we believe we understand about

race, racism, and ethnocentrism, and given the eloquence and cogency of our theorizing about the problematic of difference?

Writing self-consciously as a white lesbian feminist, Adrienne Rich reminded us several decades ago that white feminists are not going to transcend the past through the inclusion of one or more women of color in their projects and imaginings. For her the crucial and still unanswered question is how might women of color and white women create justice between us? Professors Vaz and Lemons have certainly heeded the call in their fierce *and* loving articulation of the urgent need for transracial alliances in this pioneering anthology. We also need to carefully examine what we've learned from exclusionary practices in our histories of undergraduate women's studies programs in a variety of institutional contexts. I'm referring to those deep, structural fault lines, and the everyday smaller practices that can be just as debilitating over time. We also need to engage in ethnographies of best practices in selected women's studies programs that surely have something to teach us about how to deal more effectively with a range of complex issues around difference. We need to continue gathering, as well, personal, cross-generational narratives of students and faculty of color, coming-out stories, if you will, from those of us who've been involved with women's studies over time and are willing to speak candidly and constructively about our experiences. We need more narratives from white feminists who are willing to reflect publicly about their observations and experiences around race within the academy.

Having been at the women's studies table from the beginning, I want to thank Professors Vaz and Lemons who asked all of us, "If I call you, will you come?" I want to bear witness to the profound difference it makes when we narrow the gap between our rhetoric and our practice, when we do more than give lip service to our commitments around anti-racism and other oppressive structures, especially white supremacy. I remain hopeful about the ability of women's studies to continue transforming itself around difference, especially if we continue to engage in difficult dialogues—the theme of both the 2009 and 2010 NWSA conferences. I am also mindful of the treacherous terrain we will need to negotiate on this long and winding journey.

NOTES

1. Rich's essay is reprinted in her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979). Feminist philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff's "What Should White People Do?" *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (2001): 6–26, is an excellent analysis of the "debate within feminism over white women's relation to whiteness." Useful in this regard are Margaret A. Simons, "Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 384–401; Gloria Joseph, "The Incompatible Menage a trois: Marxism, Feminism, and Racism," in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White*

Women, Racism and History (London: Verso, 1992); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Mab Segrest, *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (Boston: South End Press, 1995). The emergence in the academy of critical whiteness scholarship is also useful.

2. Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949).
3. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 124.
4. Alison Bailey, "Despising an Identity They Taught Me to Claim," in *Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Reflections*, ed. Chris J. Cuomo and Kim Q. Hall (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999); see also her "On Intersectionality and the Whiteness of Feminist Philosophy," in *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).
5. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983), 150–151; see also her "White Woman Feminist," in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1992).

Acknowledgments

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