ALL AMERICAN WOMEN

JOHNNETTA B. COLE, EDITOR

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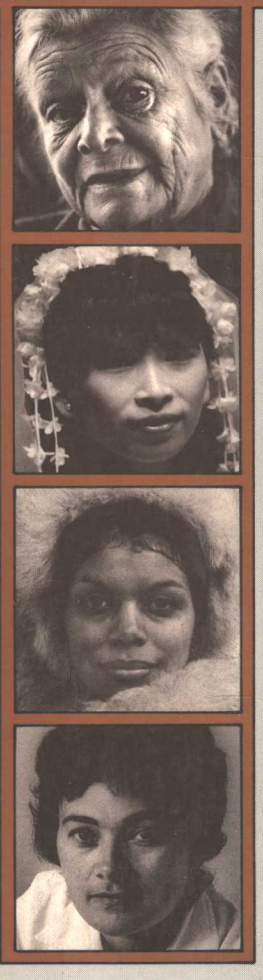

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To the memory of my mother, Mary Frances Lewis Betsch, who would have differed with much that is said in this book, but who, through her example, taught me to respect differences among us.

Preface

Studies about women, studies by women, studies for women have an unprecedented presence today in scholarly circles. This did not occur by accident, nor as the result of publishers' largesse, sudden enlightenment of scholarly journal "referees," or unbiased generosity by funding agencies. The new presence of feminist studies in the United States results from the concerted efforts of those who see such scholarship as necessary for an accurate view not only of women, but of the world. It is a scholarship which involves analyses from across the disciplines of the academy and comes together as the literature of women's studies.

Contemporary women's studies is a direct outgrowth of the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, just as the black power movement of the 1960s spawned an intellectual wing called black studies. The women's movement itself was much influenced by the earlier civil rights and black power actions, and all in turn were influenced by the nineteenth-century women's rights movement in the United States and the abolitionist movement within which the women's rights movement took root. From this interlocking set of influences and conflicts, the twentieth-century women's movement took inspiration, style, slogans, and even tactics.

Many women's studies programs and departments were founded in the mid-1970s, and with varying degrees of success they remain in

place. The objectives of these academic and activist efforts were commonly held. Women's studies would be a corrective scholarship—exposing gender biases in existing academic work. It would also be a pioneering scholarship, cutting through uncharted academic areas. Importantly, it would critique male dominance in the academy itself. Ultimately, the advocates of women's studies sought to place their corrective and innovative scholarship in the service of changing the oppressive conditions of women. (For a summary of the history and objectives of women's studies, see Hunter College Women's Studies Collective 1983: 3–15.)

However, in the act of challenging, and in many instances successfully altering, the male-centered scholarship of the academy, women's studies itself reflected and institutionalized a number of biases. Courses were offered on women's history, women's literature, the sociology of women, women's music—but in reality, these courses addressed, almost exclusively, the particular circumstances of only one group of women. The faculty of women's studies, the overwhelming majority of the students in women's studies, the readings assigned in courses in women's studies, and the speakers and artists brought to campuses under the sponsorship of women's studies tended to voice the experiences of white, middle-class women. (For an excellent critique of racial and other biases in women's studies, see Avakian 1981.)

In women's studies, characteristics assumed to be shared by all women were juxtaposed to what was said to be shared by men. In other words, it was taken for granted that there was something called women's language, women's spirituality, women's history, and women's culture—without modifiers to reflect the influence of race, class, religion, sexuality, language, age, physical ability, ethnicity, geography, and other factors. In academic and popular women's studies literature, we read of female (in contrast to male) modes of thought (Friedan 1984); a female mode of human experience (Gilligan 1982); all women as a class (Daly 1973); a female and a male culture that managers have and practice (Hennig and Jardim 1978); and women's "natural" interest in peace as opposed to men's involvement with war (Tobias 1984).

There were always other voices. Even in those very early days of women's studies, there were voices that spoke of different histories and cultures, of realities that were not addressed in the new feminist scholarship. These were the voices of women of color: Afro-American women, Asian and Pacific Island women, Chicanas, Native American women, Puertorriqueñas, and other women who are often labeled "nonwhite." These were the voices of poor women, lesbian women, older women. These were the voices of working-class women, Jewish women, women with disabilities, and rural women of midwestern and southern Appalachian cultures. Similarly, the women's movement it-

self was criticized by women of diverse backgrounds and ways of life. That criticism was summarized, for example, by references to the movement as the *white* women's movement, a phrase perhaps too neat in its simplicity yet all too accurate in describing so much of the movement.

How can we explain this narrowness in women's studies and the women's movement as they have developed into the 1980s? Much of it is a reflection of deeply entrenched chauvinism, that is to say, an arrogantly held view that one's own way is the only way. Chauvinism in women's studies takes the form of attitudes and behaviors which ignore or dismiss as insignificant differences of class, race, age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and physical ability.

Chauvinism among white women surely influenced much of the direction in which they steered women's studies programs and the women's organizations they have run. Too often even those white feminists who did address "racism" did so almost as a politically correct afterthought, while the substance of their words and actions revolved around the oppression they experienced as white women and ignored the oppression they participated in as white people.

Yet, among white feminists there were and still are important voices raised to challenge white racism. Adrienne Rich has been a powerful white feminist voice struggling "with the meanings of white identity in a racist society, and how an unexamined white perspective leads to dangerous ignorance, heart-numbing indifference and complacency" (1983: 3). Anne Braden, a white Southern woman whose work in antiracist struggles spans four decades, exemplifies her belief that:

> No white woman reared in the South—or perhaps anywhere in this racist country—can find freedom as a woman until she deals in her own consciousness with the question of race. We grow up little girls—absorbing a hundred stereotypes about ourselves and our role in life, our secondary position, our destiny to be a helpmate to a man or men. But we also grow up white—absorbing the stereotypes of race, the picture of ourselves as somehow privileged because of the color of our skin. The two mythologies become intertwined, and there is no way to free ourselves from one without dealing with the other. (1972)

Another white feminist, Bettina Aptheker, observes after exploring the history of the nineteenth-century women's rights movement, from its origins among black and white women in the antislavery movement to its near demise once white women won the vote, that "in the context of American politics, the neglect of or acquiescence in racism would inevitably force the women into a more and more conservative and politically ineffectual world" (1982: 50). Aptheker's study of women's legacy from the past century leads her to state, of the present

women's movement, that the "experiences of women of color must assume a cocentral focus in the shaping of feminist thought and action. Without this the liberation of women cannot be either envisioned or realized" (1982: 5). And Minnie Bruce Pratt, another white Southern feminist active in antiracist work, offers a concrete application of Aptheker's warning:

> Today the economic foundation of this country is resting on the backs of women of color here, and in Third World countries: they are harvesting the eggplants and lettuce for Safeway, they are typing secretarial work sent by New York firms to the West Indies by satellite. The real gain in our material security as white women would come most surely if we did not limit our economic struggle to salaries of equal or comparable worth to white men in the U.S., but if we expanded this struggle to a restructuring of this country's economy so that we do not live off the lives and work of Third World women. (1984: 54–55)

My own experiences as an Afro-American woman and my knowledge as an anthropologist lead me to question the homogenizing of women's diverse cultures, languages, sexualities, classes, and ethnicities in the interest of paying homage to a mythical uniformity called sisterhood.

In the spring of 1984, I took these issues into an anthropology and women's studies course entitled—pun intended—"All American Women." A very engaged group of students of diverse backgrounds joined me in seeking ways to describe and analyze cultural and individual differences among women without denying similarities of circumstances and interests. Readings for the course were chosen to reflect the many ways of life of women in the United States, and each student carried out a semester-long series of interviews with an "American" woman. This anthology is an outgrowth of that rich experience in teaching and learning. It rests on the conviction that acknowledging and respecting our differences substantially strengthens feminist theory and action.

The volume is about US women—the great diversity among women who live in the United States (U.S.) and the commonalities that exist among *us*. This duality is explored in the introductory essay, "Commonalities and Differences." The succeeding five sections are more detailed explorations of similarities and differences within various spheres of women's lives: work, family, sexuality and reproduction, religion, and politics. These are not the only spheres of activity within which US women, indeed all women, live our lives, but they are certainly major ones. The volume would be a more complete and richer one if it included chapters on expressive culture (music, art, dance, folklore) and language as shared and used by different women. But

here, as in all such anthologies, certain concessions were made in the interest of space.

Each of the five sections is introduced by a brief essay in which the central issues associated with a particular sphere of activity are explored and related to the major points addressed in each of the articles.

In selecting articles for this volume, the primary consideration was to reflect the range of attitudes, realities, and hopes of women in the United States. In fact, this anthology encompasses more of the diversity of US women than any existing published volume. Several of the articles capture the experiences of women whose lives, like the lives of each of us, fall within more than one "category." There are articles on Afro-American, Asian American, Chicana, Native American, and Puerto Rican women, as well as women of several Euro-American ethnic groups. There are discussions of the conditions of upper-class, middle-class, working-class, and poor women. The volume also includes the experiences and perspectives of lesbian women, women living in rural areas, women living in cities, women with disabilities, and older women.

In selecting articles, priority was given to those in which women "speak for themselves." Thus, in most of the articles, women describe their own realities. Honoring the criteria of diversity and an experiential focus, the articles as a whole portray oppression and resistance, subservience and independence, resignation and creativity. The selection of articles is not perfect, but the weaknesses signal the kinds of work that must be done in women's studies.

The articles included here are about women in the United States today. This focus on our current realities means, of course, that some of the dynamics of change will not be addressed. Yet, in the course of analyzing the current conditions of US women, many of the articles highlight patterns which have developed over time or contrast what appear to be new phenomena with earlier ones. Each of the section introductions also offers some considerations of the histories of the diverse groups represented among US women.

A word about the title of this volume. *All American Women* was originally chosen to capture two meanings. The first is a sense of the inclusiveness which is appropriate when referring to the variety of women in the United States. The second meaning is the suggestion of strength associated with the expression "all-American." For at the same time that women in the United States are subjected to varying degrees of oppression, each group of us also has a tradition and an everyday pool of strength on which to draw.

Yet "American," used to refer exclusively to citizens of the United States, is itself a chauvinistic term. Some of the indigenous peoples of

this continent know it as "Big Turtle Island," whereas the white men of Europe named it "America" after one of their kind who arrived here at the beginning of the centuries of conquest. The name was then applied to the entire hemisphere by the white men who expanded their colonial settlement and control across the lands of Indian, Mexican, Innuit, and Hawaiian peoples to carve the United States of North America into its present configuration.

Those of us who live in the United States are Americans, but so, too, are the women who live in Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. In recognition of this reality of many American women, the term used most often in this volume is "US women." Here again there is an intentional double meaning. "US women" refers to those of us who live in the United States (U.S.), but it is also used to connote a sense of the commonalities of experience among "us."

The anthology is designed for courses in which instructors and students are prepared to join the struggle to make women's studies truly the study of *all* women. It is also hoped that the different voices that speak out in this volume will be heard by women and men outside of the classrooms of our colleges and universities. To the extent that a minimal condition for the ultimate liberation of US women is an understanding of the lines that divide as well as the ties that bind us, it is time that we all listen.

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Acknowledgments

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I cannot conclude these acknowledgments without saying thank you to my colleagues who generously shared their ideas, those whose work is reprinted here, and the students who were the inspiration for this book.

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