

well anyway when i go for my appointment i am gonna ask billie about it cuz i wanna hear what she says. plus i wanna see if she will explain how she did it. did the juju women give her some kind of special herbal potions to purify her throat and vocal chords and lungs and what not. did the wise women teach her an ancient way of breathing enunciating. did she have a certain type of dream the night before the recording session during which the goddesses appeared and gave her a sign and said go ahead on in that studio tomorrow sister and turn that shit around on then bigtime blank t blanks so we can get them off our backs and move forward to a brighter day.

i wanna ask billie about it. and i wanna see if she would teach some of us how to do it too. do you think she would? when i go see her i am gonna ask her if she could give some of us weekly lessons cuz i know some other sisters that want to learn how to use their voices the same way billie did on this record.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but things are different now. we are more sophisticated now and we have learned some more sophisticated methods. like subliminal seduction. you know those tapes with that weird nonmusic and those hidden voices playing in the supermarkets and other stores that numb our minds and then plant suggestions in our minds that trick us into spending all our money on a buncha stuff that we dont need? and those tapes they play in restaurants and elevators and on the phone when they put you on hold? yeah thats subliminal seduction. people could ride bicycles or delivery trucks with hidden high frequency killer diller tape cassettes through certain neighborhoods at certain hours.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but we have developed some other methods.

yeah billie lives.

shes probably got that house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen, ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

i wanna go see her and ask her if she will teach some of us how to use our voices like she used hers on that old 78 record i am listening to now on this tape so we can learn how to have these moderntime bigtime so & sos jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves in droves so we can raise up offa our knees and move on to a brighter day.

saturday august 23 1980.

Across the Kitchen Table

A Sister - to - Sister Dialogue

Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith

In June 1980, we sent Beverly and Barbara a number of questions regarding their experiences as Black feminist in the Women's Movement. The following is a transcript of their responses.

The Editors

Feminism: More than a "Click" and a Clique

The Editors: What do you see as the effects of the pervasiveness of white middle class women in the feminist movement? In your experience how do class and race issues intersect in the movement?

Beverly: ...on Saturday night, what happened is that she was flossing her teeth after the meal. I was just so impressed with the fact that she would take such good care of her teeth. And so she said that the reason was that when she was a child her mother had saved up money for her to go and visit her grandmother or something down South. And she had been looking forward to it all year. I think that she usually went. But what happened is that this particular year she went to the dentist right before, and she had 7 cavities. And that wiped out her vacation. Because it was a matter of either/or. But of course, that's not the poorest you can get either. "My God" I said "I bet there's hardly a white woman that we come into contact with that would have any perception of what that meant." And yet it sounded so familiar to me.

Barbara: Exactly. What we want to describe in this dialogue are the class differences we experience on this kind of basic level which "high-level" analysis and rhetoric don't get to.

An example I can think of and which drives me crazy is the arrogance some white women display about "choosing" not to finish school, you know, "downward mobility". But the thing is they don't have to worry about being asked "Do you have a degree," and then being completely cut out of a whole range of jobs and opportunity if they don't. Race is a concept of having

to be twice as qualified, twice as good to go half as far. And I feel like at this point, in these economic times, it's like being three times as good to go half as far. No way in Hell would I give up getting a degree or some piece of paper that would give me more economic leverage in this "boy's" system. That's not necessarily a perception that white women have. In fact, I know a lot of white women who never finished college, yet are functioning in ways that if they had been Black women would be completely unavailable to them.

This ties in with another thing we had talked about in the past, which is the difference between women's politics, who come to a realization that oppression exists say at 22, 25 or even 18, versus Black women's and other women of color's perspective which is that your oppression is a lifelong thing. There is a political savviness, I don't know what words to use, caniness — some difference in attitude I think between Black and white feminists. I think what it is, is like the surprise factor. There is virtually no Black person in this country who is surprised about oppression. Virtually not one. Because the thing is we have had it meted out to us from infancy on. And I think that when we are dealing with white women in coalitions, or whatever, that often we're at very different places about how you deal with a problem, how you think about a problem, how you react to a problem. Because they are coming from a perspective like, "Oh! I didn't know. I didn't know. I never knew until... I never knew until..." There is a difference when you come in to your politics because you're Black and oppressed on that level.

Bev: What I would really want to talk about is why the women's movement is basically a middle class movement. What does it mean? At least middle class in tone. I am not saying everyone in the women's movement is middle class but the thing is that I think that it is middle class women who dominate in terms of numbers and in terms of what actually gets done, and just how things get done. What gets made the priorities and what have you.

What really are the similarities and differences between women's oppression and class and racial oppression? My perception about racial oppression and class oppression is that it's something that starts from Day One.

Bar: You're born into it and it's grinding.

Bev: It's grinding. And it continues. My sense about the oppression of women is that it's something that people come to often times, but not always, in a more intellectual manner. It's something that's pointed out to them. It's something that they read about and say "Oh, yeah!" I mean even the concept of the "click", you know, that you can read about in *Ms.* magazine.

Bar: They still have "clicks!"

Bev: Right. They still talk about when you have an experience that makes you realize your oppression as a woman, makes you realize other women's oppression, you know, some revealing incident in your life as a woman. That is a "click." Well I mean, I guess there are "clicks" among racial lines, but the thing is they're so far back in terms of class that they're almost imperceptible. It just feels to me like it's a different kind of thing.

Bar: Another thing when you talk about experiencing racial oppression and class oppression from the very beginning, if indeed you are a recipient of those oppressions what is happening to you is from moderately bad to horrible. In other words, being Black in this country there is very little about it that is mild. The oppression is extreme. Probably the only Black people where oppression is somewhat mitigated are those who have class privileges and that is certainly not the majority of Black people here. Likewise if you are a recipient of class oppression, that means that you are poor, you are working class and therefore day to day survival is almost the only thing you can focus on. The thing that's different about women's oppression is that you can be white and middle class and female and live a so-called "nice" life up until a certain point, then you begin to notice these "clicks," but I think the quality of life for the upper or middle class white woman is so far ahead of the quality of life for the Black person, the Black child, the working class child or the poor child.

Bev: I want to attempt to make comparison between different types of oppression. When I think of poverty, I think of constant physical and material oppression. You know, you aren't poor one day and well-to-do the next. If you're poor it's a constant thing, everyday, everyday. In some ways it's almost more constant than race because, say you're middle class and you're a Black person who is of course subject to racism, you don't necessarily experience it every single day in the same intensity,

or to the same degree. Whereas, poverty is just something you experience constantly. So what I was trying to come up with is – Is there any oppression that women experience that is that total, in other words literally affects their physical well-being on a day to day basis?

Bar: Can I make a joke, Bev?

Bev: What?

Bar: Heterosexuality. Well, moving right along...

Bev: Yes, they *are* suffering... Well, battering is maybe something, but not necessarily, only in some extreme incidences.

Bar: Well, I think in a way we're almost comparing apples and pears. We don't have a language yet or a framework as to what is the true nature of women's oppression, given where it takes place and who it comes from and how. Maybe the battered woman is not beaten every day, but she has to wait on her husband every day and her children. She's either bored out of her mind or worrying and scraping, trying to make ends meet, both in the context of the nuclear family. Women's oppression is so organic or circular or something. One place on the circle is battering, one place is cat calls, another is rape, another place is the fact that no one takes you seriously even while you worked to put your husband through college. There's a whole range of stuff, that's why it's so hard to pin something down.

Bev: I think for purposes of analysis what we try to do is to break things down and try to separate and compare but in reality, the way women live their lives, those separations just don't work. Women don't live their lives like, "Well this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women's identities," so it's confusing.

Bar: And Black women and women of color in particular don't do that. I think maybe what we have defined as an important component of Black feminism is that maybe, for the short run at least, that's all right. We don't have to rank or separate out. What we have to do is define the nature of the whole, of all the systems impinging on us.

Bev: Given these differences between us, that women are of different races and classes, how can a white middle class movement actually deal with *all* women's oppression, as it purports to do, particularly if most women are not present to

represent their own interests? I think this is one of the most essential questions the movement has to face.

Bar: What we've got to look at is what is the nature of those issues that get multi-oppressed women involved in movement work. What are those issues and how might those issues be incorporated into the women's movements? I am thinking here of all the Black women who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Fannie Lou Hamer is a name we know, but there were countless thousands of other women whose names we don't know whose material conditions would not indicate that they would have the wherewithal to struggle politically but then they did. Even more recently, poor women have been involved in issues like tenants rights or welfare organizing, etc.

Bev: Sometimes I think maybe twenty-five to fifty years from now we might really understand what the origins of the women's movement were, much more so even than we know today. We may lose some of the proximity, but we'll gain some of the hindsight and the perspective. One of the things we might discover is that the origins of the feminist movement were basically middle class, but there are reasons for that. Already there is analysis about that from people who are somewhat anti-feminist, Marxists and leftists that have the perception that the women's movement is just an indication that we're in an advanced stage of capitalism. They say that the fact that the women's movement developed in this country at the time it did had to do with how capitalism had developed, in other words, a high enough rate of profit or surplus. I don't know what the terminology is, exactly, but this material surplus made it possible for women to have the "leisure" to demand certain rights.

As I see it, the welfare rights movement comes out of the needs expressed and experienced by the women receiving welfare. In the same way, there is a path the women's movement has followed that originated out of the needs of middle class women.

Bar: Yes, I think that is quite verifiable... There is just so much class conflict in this society that it is hard for people who are economically and/or racially oppressed to believe that there are some people who may experience their oppression differently. I think that this is where the laughability of the women's movement comes in. The women I teach a class with told me

how she has a friend who was teaching John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, to a class who had a decent number of Black students in it and the Black students refused to believe that it was about white people. *Refused* to believe, you know? John Steinbeck, Great White Novelist! That's just incredible! What it shows is the class conflict, the class division, that is totally enforced in this society to keep people unaware of each other's situations, commonalities, etc.

The Whitewash of Cultural Identity

Eds: *By virtue of your education, what class assumptions are made about you by white feminists? How do you experience white women trying to "whitewash" you?*

Bar: This is very complicated. There is a sociologist, a Black woman who's here in Boston, she said something very astute about this whole issue of class. She was talking about how sociologists often confuse class with lifestyle. They will throw out all their knowledge about income level, and assume people are of a different class. So they'll see a Black family who makes \$6000 a year, but the thing is they have books and they are stable and blah blah blah and all this crap, you know, they're trying to send their kids to college and they do and the sociologists say, "Well, then, they must be middle class." As she said so succinctly, "\$6000 dollars worth of money buys \$6000 worth of goods." (That would make them poor today. Twenty years ago, working class). It just depends on what you decide to spend it on. There is a difference between class in that narrow sense of values, you know? Because I think we come from that kind of home...

Bev: Sure. Sure.

Bar: Where there were priorities put on things that poor working class Black people weren't supposed to be thinking about.

Bev: Yeah, it's very confusing. The fact that education was something that was always valued in our family, not just in our generation, but for generations back. I think that's where a lot of white feminists get confused about us. Because of the fact of the education we had and the emphasis on cultural development and on intellectual development that has been in our family at least for three generations, makes people think, well, we must have come from a middle class background.

Bar: Oh yeah! Sure!

Bev: It's true, we never starved. But I just get so frustrated because I feel people don't understand where we came from. When I look at the photographs in our scrapbook I just think if they looked at the house, would they understand what our class background actually was? Because of where we were living, the size of the rooms...

Bar: The fact that there was no automatic washing machine.

Bev: The fact that when you got a chest of drawers, a dresser, and a bed in one of the bedrooms, literally there was no floor space. I think that a lot of where we came from had to do with, as you said, values and managing. One of the values is that you handled money in such a way that you made it stretch as far as you possibly could.

Bar: Don't I remember! (laughing) It was a real value that you live as decently as possible on the money you do make.

Bev: Exactly.

Bar: There was a lot of emphasis on trying.

Bev: Sometimes I do wish people could just see us in the context we grew up in, who our people are.

Bar: In order for people to understand what our background was, in order to place us, they need to have a lot of comprehension about what Black life is all about in this country, period. There is a cookbook, called *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* by these two Darden sisters. The reason why I mention it is because they have family history in there. This was a successful Black family, and yet these people worked like hell! They were people who were ex-slaves. Almost anybody in their family who wanted to go to a Black college could have, but that's not nearly the same thing as a family who sent all of their sons to Harvard, all of their daughters to Smith, or whatever. There's just a different social context. Even though this is a successful Black family, there is poverty, struggle, oppression, violence in the history of that family that is totally unrecognizable to outsiders...

Bev: Just like within ours. You know one of the things that I've felt for a long time being involved in the women's movement, is that there is so much about Black identity that doesn't get called into practice.

Bar: Indeed! Indeed!

Bev: And that's very upsetting to me. It really makes me think about the choices I have made, either implicitly and less consciously or very consciously. It makes me think about how I live my life because there are so many parts of our Black identity that we no longer get a chance to exercise. And that's just something that is very appalling to me.

Bar: It's just too true. It's too true.

Too appalling! I would just like to mention July 4th which happened a few days ago and watching the Black family who lives in the house behind mine as I have for the last four years and just having this feeling of longing like, you know, I'll never be in that situation. A few days later, I was talking to this white woman I know about that and she said, "Well do you really want to be sitting out there with those men?" and I said, No. But the thing is that it's the whole thing. The whole damn thing! I realized, too, it was my regret for the past, for those July 4ths that were essentially just like the one I was watching right outside my window and for the fact that it will never be that way again. Well...

I don't think we can ever give it to each other as peers because there is a kind of family bonding across generations that is very Black that doesn't happen.

Bev: One of the things I was getting at is that there are ways we act when Black people are together that white women will never see in a largely white context. So I think that's one of the reasons that again, to use to phrase that was asked to us, they are able to "whitewash" us. Now, I don't think this is about acting white in a white context. It's about one, a lack of inspiration. Because the way you act with Black people is because they inspire the behavior. And I *do* mean inspire. And the other thing is that when you are in a white context, you think, "Well why bother? Why waste your time?" If what you're trying to do is get things across and communicate and what-have-you, *you talk in your second language*.

Bar: This is so different from being in a Black context. For example, it just occurred to me this experience I had visiting an old friend of mine that I have known for a number of years. She was staying in this house with this regular old Black nuclear

family. And the woman of the house was clearly the person who kept the whole thing together. They had food layed back! (laughing) and the thing is it was really a lot of fun for me to see that, "pervert" that I am – that's in quotes – dyke that I am, I could sit down at a table with these middle-aged Black women who were playing pokeeno and be able to hang, you know? And it was very nice. I had a good time.

Bev: Only one question, Barbara, did you play? (laughing)

Bar: Yeah, I played for a little while. Throughout the day, there must been twenty people in and out of the house. And it was no particular occasion, just twenty people in and out of the house. At one point, we were talking about television and the woman said, "Oh Barbara doesn't watch T.V. She's an intellectual." It was a joke and I felt good enough in that context with people I hardly knew to understand that they said that with a great deal of affection. I realized they were complimenting me and being supportive for something I had accomplished. I'm sure they felt proud of the fact that Alice, the doctor, and Barbara, who teaches at U. Mass, were sitting around on a Sunday evening. And the thing is that it was not the kind of hostility that I have sometimes experienced from my so called peers of Black women about those very same struggles and accomplishments. And it certainly is not the misunderstanding that I have gotten from white women about the meaning of that. Because of course, these people are trying to send their children to school too.

Bev: I wonder is this the trade-off, is this what everyone who has our identity has to sacrifice? One of my constant questions is how do other lesbians of color live their lives? The other question I have is – "Is this 'fly in the buttermilk' existence a function of our feminism more than our lesbianism?" To ask the question more explicitly – Do black lesbians, who do not identify as feminists and base their lives in the Black community, feel this struggle? I think the answer is that they don't all the time. It's hard to figure out.

Bar: I think the isolation is probably a result much more of being a feminist. I think this has some class factors in it. This almost takes us back to where we began because in order to be involved in this women's movement, as it stands today, you have to be able to deal with "middle-classness." And the Black

women who can take it are often the ones with educational privilege.

Lesbian Separatism

Eds: *Is a lesbian separatist position inherently racist? Is this position a viable political position to take?*

Bar: As we said in our collective statement (Combahee) I think we have real questions because separatism seems like such a narrow kind of politics and also because it seems to be only viably practiced by women who have certain kinds of privilege: white-skinned privilege, class privilege. Women who don't have those kinds of privilege have to deal with this society and with the institutions of this society. They can't go to a harbor of many acres of land, and farm, and invite the goddess. Women of color are very aware that racism is not gender specific and that it affects all people of color. We have experiences that have nothing to do with being female, but are nonetheless experiences of deep oppression...and even violence.

Bev: Maybe the reason that white women got into lesbian separatism was because in being separatist they were separating themselves from white men, given how there is so much oppression in this world currently that white men have visited on people. In some ways they felt that they had to separate themselves from white men to even have a fighting chance.

Bar: So seldom is separatism involved in making real political change, affecting the institutions in the society in any direct way. If you define certain movement issues as straight women's issues, for example reproductive rights and sterilization abuse, then these identifiable sexual/political issues are ones you are not going to bother with.

We have noticed how separatists in our area, instead of doing political organizing often do zap acts. For example they might come to a meeting or series of meetings then move on their way. It is not clear what they're actually trying to change. We sometimes think of separatism as politics without a practice.

Bev: One of the problems of separatism is that I can't see it as a philosophy that explains and analyzes the roots of all oppression and is going to go towards solving it. I think it has some validity

in a more limited sphere. To begin to talk about being separate from men is viable. It has some worthwhile aspects.

Bar: Many lesbians are separatist in that sense. You are very aware of the choice — that in being a lesbian you understand that you really don't need men to define your identity, your sexuality, to make your life meaningful or simply to have a good time. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have no comprehension of the oppressions that you share with men. And you see white women with class privilege don't share oppression with white men. They're in a critical and antagonistic position whereas Black women and other women of color definitely share oppressed situations with men of their race.

What white lesbians have against lesbians of color is that they accuse us of being "male identified" because we are concerned with issues that affect our whole race. They express anger at us for not seeing the light. That is another aspect of how they carry on their racism. They are so narrow and adamant about that that they dismiss lesbians of color and women of color who aren't lesbians because we have some concern about what happens to the men of our race. And it's not like we like their sexism or even want to sleep with them. You can certainly be concerned as we are living here this summer in Boston when one Black man after another ends up dead.¹

Bev: It's not only being concerned, it is observing what happens — who does racist acts and who are the targets for racism. It would be incredibly dishonest to say that racism is a thing just experienced by Black women.

Bar: And also politically inexpedient. I think that people who define themselves as Black feminists certainly have decided that the bulk of their political work is in concert with other Black women. That doesn't mean that you're totally oblivious to the reality of racism. I feel that the one thing about racism is that it doesn't play favorites. Look at the history of lynching in this country. And also look at how Black women have experienced violence that is definitely racial. When you read about Black women being lynched, they aren't thinking of us as females. The horrors that we have experienced have absolutely everything to do with them *not even viewing us as women.*

Because if we are women some false chivalry would enter in and maybe certain things wouldn't happen. I've never read an account of a lynching of a white woman, or one who was pregnant. I think there's a difference between the old usual rape-murder that happens to all women and the lynching that happens specifically to Black women. A contemporary example of that is how Black women who are battered and who physically defend themselves are treated differently than white women by the courts. It's seen differently by the courts when a white middle class woman murders her husband. Then it's so-called self defense. I was just reading a case involving a Black woman in Michigan where the Black woman was sold down the river obviously because she was Black. A negative image of Black men and women got her fate delivered.

Bev: One of the most dangerous & erroneous concepts that separatists have put forward is that other oppressions, in addition to sexism, are attributed to men only. Some separatists believe that although women are racist, when men disappear and no longer rule, racism will not be a problem. It's very analogous to people who are Marxists who say, "Well, when class oppression and racism end, definitely the oppression of women and lesbians will end." What lesbian separatists are saying is that when we get rid of men, sexism and racism will end, too. I think that this is one of the most racist aspects of it because it does not recognize the racism that women, including lesbians, have.

There is also a dishonesty that I have come across in some lesbians who although they do not regard themselves as separatists, they also do not acknowledge the separatism in their own lifestyles. Many lesbians who don't consider themselves separatists would never live with a man and would not go very far to befriend a man (although they may have a few token men in their lives), but they don't go any further than to disavow their separatism.

Bar: I disagree with that. The so-called disavowal is, from my perspective, the lack of need to deify or glorify those very kinds of choices. Separatists get angry at the fact that I don't make much of the fact that I don't see a man socially from one end of the week to the other. I feel they are trying to collapse political positions that I do not consider in any way trivial. Who you have

parties with, as far as I am concerned, is not the bottom line of defining your political commitment.

I also want to say that I don't think that white lesbian separatists are more racist than any other white women in the women's movement that we deal with. I just think it takes different forms. White lesbian separatism has almost a studied obliviousness to instances of oppression whereas another group of feminists, for example socialists, are even sectarian. The way their racism would manifest itself – they would know that racism was an important issue but they wouldn't be dealing with it in any way except as a theoretical radical issue. Their discomfort in dealing around women of color would be just as palpable; that attitude would be just as apparent. All white people in this country are victims of the disease of racism.

There is no such thing as a non-racist. Sometimes it's as simple as who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose face you can touch. There are bunches of white women for whom these things that I've mentioned are unknown experiences with women of color.

Bar: Beverly is fixing this little teddybear. She's been doing surgery on it for the last couple of hours. The bear shows remarkable stamina, like no human being. You could say that we are having a series of operations in our lives.

Bev: If it weren't for Barbara and her relationship with this person who is not myself, I wouldn't be dealing with it.

Bar: I don't see that as being relevant to this conversation.

Bev: It is relevant. I'm talking about how I got involved in this surgery.

Homophobia in the Black Community

Eds: *Describe your experience in dealing with homophobic Black sisters.*

Bar: There's nothing to compare with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own... I think the reason that Black women are so homophobic is that attraction-repulsion thing. They have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women. They make great cases for how fucked up it all is, and therefore cover their asses admirably. *Is homophobia more entrenched in the Black community than in the white community?*

Bev: You can argue about that until Jesus comes, really.

Bar: I really must say historically, politically there are more reasons for the Black community to be homophobic, one of them being that the women's movement has made fewer inroads into the Black community, as well as gay rights. We can assume that a community that has been subjected to the ideas of the movement is going to have more consciousness. And given how up until the last couple of years the feminist movement has not touched Third World communities, we can expect their attitudes to be much as they have been in the past.

One of the reasons that I have thought for homophobic attitudes among Black women is the whole sexual stereotyping used against all Black people anyway, but especially women in relation to homosexuality – you know, the “Black bulldagger” image. Lesbianism is definitely about something sexual, a so-called deviant sexuality. So the way most Black women deal with it is to be just rigid and closed about it as possible. White people don't have a sexual image that another oppressor community has put on them.

Bev: This country is so racist that it is possible to take many, many things and concepts that have nothing to do with race and talk about them in racial terms. Because people are so dichotomized into either black or white, it defines a continuum. This is so strict and so overwhelming in this country, you can take things that have nothing to do with race and refer to them racially.

Therefore, Black people have the option of taking things – sexuality behavior, conflicts, whatever they don't like – and saying, “That's white.” Lesbianism is not the only thing seen as a white thing. A real good example is suicide. Black people say, “Yeah, suicide is a white thing.”

Bar: Oh yeah, we used to believe that. And of course one felt all the worse for having considered it. I'm thinking of Ntozake Shange's play “for colored girls who have considered suicide.” It's very brave. I mean, she's dealing with a lot of myths, by saying that we have even considered it, if it's supposed to be a white thing.

Bev: Any behavior Black people say is despicable, they can disregard by saying this doesn't belong to the Black community.

There's hardly a thing in this world in our experience that is not referred to being either Black or white, from animals on – people talking about white dogs. They weren't talking about dogs that were white in color, they were talking about dogs that belonged to white people.

Bar: So often lesbianism and male homosexuality are talked about as a white disease within the Black community. It is just so negating of our lives. Very upsetting.

Eds: *Are Black women more vulnerable to homophobic attack?*

Bar: Yes, Black women are more vulnerable to homophobic attack because we don't have white skin privilege, or class privilege to fall back on if somebody wants to start a smear campaign against us. As I said in my essay, “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” it's (heterosexual privilege) always the last to go. We don't have any of the other privileges. It really is jumping off the edge in a very fundamental way. Somebody who is already dealing with multiple oppression is more vulnerable to another kind of attack upon her identity.

Bev: I also feel that Black women are more vulnerable to physical attack as lesbians because they're Black. The stories you hear over the years of Black lesbians being attacked for being lesbian, usually by white men!

Eds: *What is the relationship between Black women's resistance to identifying as feminists, and lesbianism?*

Bar: It's real connected. Feminists have been portrayed as nothing but “lesbians” to the Black community as well. There was a considerable effort in the early seventies to turn the Black community off to feminism. You can look at publications, particularly Black publications making pronouncements about what the feminist movement was and who it reached that would trivialize it, that would say no Black women were involved, that did everything possible to prevent those coalitions between Black and white women from happening because there was a great deal of fear. Black men did not want to lose Black women as allies. And the white power structure did not want to see all women bond across racial lines because they knew that would be an unbeatable unstoppable combination. They did a very good job. You can just document those happenings during that period.

So, yes, most Black women think that to be a feminist you have to be a lesbian. And if not that, then at least you have to deal with being around lesbians. And you see, that is true. It's very hard to be in the women's movement and not be around lesbians. And if you're so homophobic that you can't deal with the thought of lesbianism then you probably won't be involved. I think these things are changing. More and more Black women are becoming sensitive or sympathetic to the women's movement.

Third World Women: Tokenism or Leadership

Eds: *How, as women of color, can we prevent ourselves from being tokenized by white feminists? How do you see Third World women forming the leadership in the feminist movement?*

Bev: One looks at the question about tokenism and just throws up her hands. There are so many possibilities of tokenization. One of the most tokenized situations that Barbara and I find ourselves in is when we are asked to speak at a certain place. You can be certain to be the only Black person there. You're going to be put in the position of speaking for the race, for all Black feminists. One of the things that helps is to get paid and to put it on that level so you don't feel so exploited.

Bar: I think that the service Gloria thought of having and calling it "Dial a Token" – I mean that's a good thing. For one thing it puts it out there. It's saying, "Hey, I know what you're doing and I want to get paid for it."

Another thing, try not to be the only Third World person there. I was thinking of the meeting that Cherríe went to when she was here with us. And even though there were several Third World women we were still tokenized (laughing). I guess that I am really talking about support as opposed to defusing tokenization.

Bev: Given the state of things between Black and white women, we're going to be tokenized quite a bit. It's so hard to get around that.

Bar: A solution to tokenism is *not* racial separatism. There are definitely separatist aspects emerging among Black and Third World feminist community and that is fine. But, ultimately, any kind of separatism is a dead end. It's good for forging identity

and gathering strength, but I do feel that the strongest politics are coalition politics that cover a broad base of issues. There is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don't necessarily have to like or love the people you're in coalition with.

This brings me back to the issue of lesbian separatism. I read in a women's newspaper an article by a woman speaking on behalf of lesbian separatists. She claimed that separatists are more radical than other feminists. What *I* really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think *that* is really radical because it has never been done before. And it really pisses me off that they think of themselves as radical. *I think there is a difference between being extreme and being radical.*

This is why Third World women are forming the leadership in the feminist movement because we are not one-dimensional, one-issued in our political understanding. Just by virtue of our identities we certainly define race and usually define class as being fundamental issues that we have to address. The more wide-ranged your politics, the more potentially profound and transformative they are.

Bev: The way I see it, the function that Third World women play in the movement is that we're the people who throw the ball a certain distance and then the white women run to that point to pick it up. I feel we are constantly challenging white women, usually on the issues of racism but not always. We are always challenging women to go further, to be more realistic. I so often think of the speech that Sojourner Truth made not because of the contents so much but more because of the function. She says, "Now children, let's get this together. Let me explain what's going on here. Let me lay it out for you." I must admit that the reason I think of it so often is that I have thought of myself in that situation. "Let me explain this to you one more time, let me take you by the hand, etc." I find myself playing that role. But there's a way though that I feel that Third World women are not in actual leadership *positions* in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But *position* in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But we certainly have the vision.

We are in the position to challenge the feminist movement as it stands to date and, not out of any theoretical commitment. Our analysis of race and class oppression and our commitment to really dealing with those issues, including homophobia, is something we know we have to struggle with to insure our survival. It is organic to our very existence.

Bar: Thank you, sweetheart. Teddybear just gave me a kiss.

Bye Girls.

Notes

1. An even more striking example of the connection between a Lesbian separatist stance and the disavowal of racism as a central feminist concern can be seen in the incredibly negative responses to Elly Bulkin's fine article "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics" coming primarily from separatists.

Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance

Cheryl Clarke

For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance. (A resistance that should be championed throughout the world by all the forces struggling for liberation from the same slave master.) No matter how a woman lives out her lesbianism – in the closet, in the state legislature, in the bedroom – she has rebelled against becoming the slave master's concubine, viz. the male-dependent female, the female heterosexual. This rebellion is dangerous business in patriarchy. Men at all levels of privilege, of all classes and colors have the potential to act out legalistically, moralistically, and violently when they cannot colonize women, when they cannot circumscribe our sexual, productive, reproductive, creative prerogatives and energies. And the lesbian – that woman who, as Judy Grahn says, "has taken a woman lover"¹ – has succeeded in resisting the slave master's imperialism in that one sphere of her life. The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship – roles notwithstanding.

Historically, this culture has come to identify lesbians as women, who over time, engage in a range and variety of sexual-emotional relationships with women. I, for one, identify a woman as a lesbian who says she is. Lesbianism is a recognition, an awakening, a reawakening of our passion for each (woman) other (woman) and for same (woman). This passion will ultimately reverse the heterosexual imperialism of male culture. Women, through the ages, have fought and died rather than deny that passion. In her essay, "The Meaning of Our Love for Women Is What We Have Constantly to Expand" Adrienne Rich states:

...Before any kind of feminist movement existed, or could exist, lesbians existed: women who loved women, who refused to comply with behavior demanded of women, who refused to define themselves in relation to men. Those women, our fore Sisters, millions whose names we do not know, were tortured and burned as witches, slandered in religious and later in