



THE VERY INSIDE

An Anthology of Writing by

Asian and Pacific Islander

Lesbian and Bisexual Women

EDITED BY

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Cross-Racial Hostility and Inter-Racial Conflict: Stories to Tell, Lessons to Learn

In 1990, Virginia R. Harris and I published an article¹ on developing unity among women of color. It was a beginning articulation of an often-overlooked and underestimated problem: conflict and disunity among people of color. Since then, I have experienced many situations where inter-racial conflicts have arisen. Practice is always harder than theory. All of them were difficult and many ended poorly. Here are two stories² that did not.

COMMONLY-SHARED IDENTITIES AND OPPRESSIONS do not automatically bequeath lasting unity. In fact, it has generally eluded heterosexual women of color and lesbians of color. In 1983, one of the first Lesbians of Color conferences was held in Malibu, California. Attended by some 250 women, the conference began with euphoria but ended with confusion, frustration and accusations breaking down along color lines between and within groups of women of color.

When women of color first meet, it often feels wonderful. But later after the "honeymoon" is over, we find ourselves pained by insensitivity towards each other, in-fighting, and unaddressed conflicts. This is true of group dynamics across class, gender and sexual orientation lines within the same racial and ethnic groups and between different communities of color. People of color have not acknowledged the unique racial dynamics of cross-racial hostility between and among us, problems which have no ready answer. Short of slogans, "united we stand, divided we fall," there is little to draw upon when conflict emerges. For decades, we have devoted time and energy to the "race question between whites and blacks." Yet Pacific Islander, Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern and Native American peoples are

usually left out of the discussion and the "race problem among people of color" is never broached. Too often, coalitions of people of color have been organized with the assumption of unity and inadequate time to build trust and lasting relationships beyond the event. Women of color are no exception. Yet, I had my hopes up when I went to Boston.

In Our Own Way

Boston, MA — In October 1991 I attended the "I Am Your Sister" Celeconference to honor the work and contributions of Black lesbian poet and leader, Audre Lorde. It was an inspiring event attended by a thousand people, mostly women from all over the U.S. and the world. To the organizers' credit, a good part of the conference's success was their politically astute policy that half the participants were women of color and impoverished women.

Given the widespread popularity of Audre Lorde's work and who can usually afford to attend national meetings, the race and class ratios would have easily gone askew if participation were determined on the traditional "first-come-first-serve" paid registration process. All participants alike were therefore subject to an application process in which one's anti-racist and pro-feminist work was the primary selection criterion for applicants. Then, equal numbers of white people and people of color who met the criterion were registered. Scholarships were also available to those qualified applicants also in need. In my estimation, establishing a political criterion to the conference composition and the more equitable race and class balance it provided undercut tendencies towards tokenism and alienation which oftentimes accompany national gatherings.

Tensions were there, though it did not break out in ugly floor fights. From the beginning, there was very little Asian and Pacific Islander visibility³ in the conference program. Throughout the three-day weekend, there were only three Asian and no Pacific Islander women presenters out of at least 50 stage presenters. There was no featured Pacific Islander or Asian woman speaker. African-American women's voice and perspective overwhelmed the program from beginning to end. I tried not to notice, but it was too obvious after a while. At first I thought to myself, "Well, Audre

Lorde is an African-American woman and I guess it's only right..." [*that we get left out like this, as my feelings completed the sentence*]. By the second day, however, I walked out of the auditorium when continued disappointment and confusion brought hot tears to my eyes.

Within the Asian and Pacific Islander women's caucus, we also had our own problems. When the first caucus meeting ended, we could not agree on what to call ourselves: Asian, Asian/Pacific, Asian and Pacific Islander, Asian-American, Asian Pacific American, etc. However, the discussion was open and democratic, and it felt good to be together as the fifty of us crowded into the little room. In our discussion, these questions arose: "Is the quiet, submissive Asian woman 'fact' or 'fiction'? Why can't we express our feelings, especially angry feelings, which Black women do so easily? Is there something 'wrong' with us?" Clearly, comparing stereotypes of Asian women to stereotypes of African-American women was at work among us.

It was also at work in the conference, too. The next day in the auditorium as caucus reports were being given, our two representatives waited their turn patiently. Somehow, other speakers from the floor were called on out of order and recognized instead. The precious time ticked away and for a while, it looked as if we might not get to speak. Then one young Filipino woman fearlessly jumped to her feet and got the chair's attention. Once she got the microphone, our caucus report soon followed and all the Asian and Pacific Islander women in the audience were asked to stand for acknowledgment. A sense of pride and relief rippled across our rows. Seconds before, I could tangibly feel tensions mount among our caucus members as we waited "so" patiently to be called upon. Did anyone else share our fear that we might be left out again?

The caucus met throughout the weekend over these issues of self-assertion, expression and invisibility. Ultimately, we decided not to directly confront the organizers or upset the planned program. Instead, we created a space to speak for ourselves. On the last day of the conference in front of the whole auditorium, a representative group of twelve caucus women⁴ presented a performance piece. We wrote it the night before. Several women had never written poetry or performed before. We were the first to speak during the open-mike session.

We entered the stage single file from both sides, formed a single line and opened our presentation with this collective choral refrain:

I have to write, in order to say.

I have to speak, in order to be heard.

I have to be heard, in order to be seen.

See me now, see all of me.

I am part of you, just as you are part of me.

Then stepping forward, one after the other, each woman told a part of her story.⁵ In 20 minutes, the audience collectively experienced a unique, creative combination of individuality and diversity. We were no longer a group that "looked the same," blended into some kind of hodgepodge of racialized stereotypical sameness. The audience saw that we did not look alike; they heard our names and other words spoken properly in our native Korean, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Hindi and Hawaiian languages. They learned that we were immigrant, refugee, American-born, adopted and mixed heritage women; they met lesbian and straight women. They felt our anger and saw our hurt. After the last woman spoke, we ended with this closing choral refrain:

I have written, I have spoken.

I am here, we are here.

Now can you hear us? Now can you see us?

Just as you are part of us, we now, are part of you.

Of the 12 women, seven of us were lesbians. A mere coincidence? I think not. Being a lesbian or bisexual woman in a bi/homophobic society is being a lifelong contrarian. So we have learned to struggle against homophobia, bi-phobia, heterosexism, racism and intra-racial/cross-racial hostilities wherever we are, whenever we can and however we must. We brought that experience with us and shared it that weekend in Boston.

Getting Called Out

Santa Cruz, CA — The Santa Cruz redwoods was the site of the most recent gathering of Asian and Pacific Islander lesbian and bisexual women in the U.S. Held on the weekend of October 22-24, 1993, it was primarily a regional mobilization that brought together over 150 women

from San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, and Vancouver, with some participants from as far away as Honolulu, Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York. The Second West Coast Retreat was organized by a Bay Area group of the "Asian/Pacific Lesbian and Bisexual Network (APLBN)" who had spent over a year planning and fundraising for the effort.

On Saturday, two *Kanaka Maoli*⁶ women helped to open the Retreat with an Hawaiian ceremonial chant and an invocation to the Native American people upon whose land we now stood. One of them joined the morning plenary to address the question, "Moving Beyond Visibility." Later that afternoon, they rejoined to lead the workshop, "Specific Islanders: Inclusion vs. Appropriation, Coalition and Hawaiian Sovereignty." As usual, we were already running behind schedule, so I came to the workshop a little late. They had not started, hoping that more people would show up. We started anyway, but with less people. Lisa and Kehaulani, the workshop leaders, came prepared with a lot of informational material including a powerful 10-minute video, "Spirit of Fire."⁷ After an hour-long presentation on Hawaiian sovereignty and the land rights issue, we saw the video. The Hawaiian people's history of land grab and genocide by the U.S. government and big business, was juxtaposed against today's Native Hawaiians whose "life in paradise" is one of homelessness, joblessness, incarceration, and poor health and education. When the lights came back on ten minutes later, the room was hushed and everyone silent, except for the sniffles from a few tears. We were all touched so deeply, so emotionally, that none of us could speak. Soon everyone was misty-eyed.

Then the hurts, disappointments and anger began to surface. Among the questions asked were: In 1993, the United Nations Year of the Indigenous Peoples and the 100th Anniversary of the Illegal Overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, why are so few people in this workshop? Where is everybody else? Why wasn't this a plenary presentation? How did this happen? Why are there so few Pacific Islander women here at this retreat? Is the "P" in APLBN real or token?

Lisa and Kehaulani talked about repeated blatant instances of insensitivity by other Asian lesbians and bisexual women. In fact, Lisa, when invited as a plenary speaker, made the condition of her participation the

inclusion of this very workshop. Otherwise, she said, "this workshop would not be here and neither would I." Kehaulani, reflecting on their opening prayer, asked: "Why do people want Hawaiians for song and prayer, but then are not here to learn about our problems and take some responsibility?" Upset and self-critical, two workshop members and part of the Retreat Planning Committee also revealed they had suggested several ways the Retreat could acknowledge the 100th Anniversary, "but nothing came of them."

Immersed in guilt, anger, confusion, and compassion, we wrestled with these issues. The discussion revealed the many and deep problems of an Asian-dominated discourse that has repeatedly tokenized Pacific Islander peoples and their distinct identities, communities and struggles. The general practice of Asians, Asian lesbians and bisexual women not excepted, has been to marginalize Pacific Islander peoples within a monolithic (supposedly more "unifying") identity as "Asian Pacific." Therefore, sameness and power over, instead of difference and coalition with, have mistakenly become the operational framework for our politics.

While noting this is a pervasive problem in the broader Asian community, however, the Asian women in the workshop decided to take responsibility to change this practice among ourselves. We spent the rest of the workshop time on how to address the problems in a straight-forward, non-blaming way. The next day following the morning plenary panel, we took over the Retreat. With the cooperation of the Retreat organizers, we told the assembled group of nearly a hundred women the events of the preceding day. Then educational materials were distributed and the video was shown again. Soon, a powerful, emotional silence gripped the audience as the truth of the historic and continued oppression of Native Hawaiian people, and our own collusion by ignorance, came crashing home. Doreena, one of the main organizers of the Retreat, took the microphone only to be choked up in tears and unable to speak. We all cried with her.

That afternoon's "guerrilla workshop" was the first open struggle within the APLBN against this kind of tokenism by Asian lesbians and bisexual women and the beginning process of reconciliation with our Pacific Islander sisters. This story is but one contribution.

1 "Developing Unity Among Women of Color: Crossing the Barriers of Internalized Racism and Cross-Racial Hostility," Virginia R. Harris and Trinitiy A. Ordona, *Making Face, Making Soul = Haciendo Caras: Creative and Political Perspectives by Women of Color*, 1990, pp. 304-316.

2 It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive report on the two events discussed here, but rather to focus on some of the underlying problems and tell how they were handled by the women involved.

3 Other groups also felt seriously underrepresented and the stage was not wheelchair accessible. During the open-mike session before the end of the conference, the Latina, Native American, and disabled women's groups voiced these same criticisms.

4 Sensitive to our own tendencies to be divisive, we were conscious to be broadly representative in the performing group. The group was composed of: a Filipino-American from California, a Chinese-Canadian woman from Vancouver, a Vietnamese "boat" refugee and now student at an East Coast College, a Korean-American woman from Massachusetts, a part Japanese-white American woman from the East Coast, a Japanese-Canadian niece, working class dyke, a part Hawaiian-Okinawan-white American from Hawaii, a Korean woman adopted as a child and raised in New England by white parents, a 4th-generation Indian woman from Trinidad, a Chinese foreign student from Taiwan, and an Indian woman who immigrated to the U.S. as a young girl.

5 See "Who Am I" by Peou Lakhana, pg. 40 and "Who Am I" by Anu, pg. 19 for some of the poems that were read that afternoon.

6 *Kānaka Maoli* (pronounced ka-a-na-ka mau-ii), Hawaiian for Hawaiian people or Native Hawaiian.

7 "Spirit of Fire," produced by Jeffrey Hirota and distributed by Nā Maka O Ka 'Aina, 3020 Kahaloa Dr., Honolulu, HI 96822.

8 While seven *Kānaka Maoli* women attended the 1993 APLBN Retreat, the overall participation and leadership of Pacific Islander women had declined since the APLN was formed. Kū'umea'aloa Gomes, a leading Hawaiian Sovereignty activist from Honolulu, was one of the founding members of the APLN in 1988. Reflecting her leadership and influence, the first National APLN Retreat in 1989 had broader and more active participation in the workshops, caucuses, plenaries and cultural programs by Native Hawaiian and Guamanian women as well as Asian women from Hawaii. Kū'umea'aloa has since returned to Honolulu where she devotes her energies to Hawaiian peoples' struggles. In light of the popular resurgence of the Native Hawaiian sovereignty movement and the controversy surrounding the same-sex marriage lawsuit in the state of Hawaii, Kū'umea'aloa helped form a new organization of *Kānaka Maoli* gay men and lesbians, Nā Mamo Manoa, and is active in both movements.