

Developing Unity Among Women of Color: Crossing the Barriers of Internalized Racism and Cross-Racial Hostility

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The struggle against racism and sexism should be a unifying force among women of color. The additional struggle against heterosexism and homophobia should make a strong base for unity among lesbians of color. But unity has generally eluded heterosexual women of color and lesbians of color. Clearly, shared oppression by itself does not override the forces that keep us apart.

We are African American and Filipino lesbians. As individuals, we have worked with women of color for the past ten years. In the last few years, our efforts have focused on lesbians of color. In 1987, we created a consultation service focused on developing unity among women of color. The purpose of this paper is to present some of our observations of the racially based conflicts among women of color, to discuss underlying causes and to begin a long-needed dialogue on these issues among ourselves.

Women of color coming together in our common struggle against racism and sexism is seen as the epitome of unity. Indeed, the struggle against these twin oppressions is a powerful unifying foundation. Yet, unity within the women of color community is often short-lived. Few coalitions survive past the project or issue which brought us together. When the "honeymoon" ends, we find ourselves tormented by in-fighting and unaddressed conflicts. Internalized racism, cross-racial hostility, internalized sexism, homophobia and heterosexism are the particular dynamics which keep us from resolving these antagonisms and forming lasting coalitions and relationships. These conflicts are part of interactions between women of the same racial group, between women of different racial groups and between heterosexual women of color and lesbians of color.

I

Racism is all around us. We eat, sleep, speak and breathe it. We see it everywhere. We feel it inside us. We are discouraged by it more often than not—discouraged because fewer and fewer perpetrators of racism are even conscious of their racist behavior—or perhaps they don't care. Their behaviors, which insure that racism remains a part of our lives, are efforts to instill in our minds—deeply and permanently—ideas, attitudes and motivations regarding [racial] purity and pollution.¹

A small corporation. Of approximately 700 employees there are ten to fifteen mostly white, mostly late twenties and early thirties, out lesbians. That they declare themselves lesbians in a hostile corporate environment is commendable. This is especially true since there is a higher number of closeted lesbians in the company.

One of the out, white lesbians was told she would be promoted from her clerical job to a technical one. She had been doing technical work in addition to her clerical job, so, clearly, she was qualified. The manager who told her this was, simultaneously, giving two heterosexual women of color a difficult time—trying to get one fired and sexually harassing the other. He had previously been instrumental in terminating a lesbian of color. His sexism, racism and homophobia were discussed by the three women constantly. When the white lesbian was told of her proposed promotion, her behavior toward the women of color changed. She became the manager's ally and withheld information from the women of color which laid out his plans against them.

After five weeks of doing the new job, papers still had not been processed for her promotion. When asked why, the manager told her she had not been promoted, but had been given a lateral transfer, made a trainee and would not get a raise. She went to the women of color for understanding, for sympathy and support.

Racism seeps into our systems like poison, kills off pieces of our selves as we build a tolerance for it. We have learned to survive with our insides, our essential selves, rotting away. We build protective walls to ward off the poison and the "protection" becomes a prison. The prison limits our choices to be and we live only as others have determined. The poison of oppression becomes our food, food that nourishes the prison but not the self. Just like our bodies build up a tolerance for additives and chemicals and may seem to thrive on them, our psyches build a tolerance for the pain inflicted by oppression.

A Sunday afternoon in May, 1989. I have the television set on. "Who Dunnit?" the voice says, louder than the voices had been on the program. An "Old Spice" commercial. "What boxer held the heavyweight title of the world for the longest period of time?" (Cut to the usual "Old Spice" man so the viewer has time to think.) Clips of Joe Louis' fights flash by. In each clip Joe Louis, Heavyweight

Champion of the World for twelve consecutive years, was being beaten up by a white contender. Joe Louis was Black.

The racism in the commercial stayed with me. By the end of that day, I wondered if I had really seen what I saw.

My anger and bewilderment turned into self-doubt: the feeling that I had somehow misinterpreted what I saw. Self-doubt is the soul of internalized racism; self-hatred is its substance. The self-doubt and self-hatred that result from internalized racism determine how we react to just about every situation we encounter. "As children we absorbed that hatred [for our color, for our sex, for our effrontery in daring to presume we had any right to live], passed it through ourselves, and for the most part, we still live our lives outside of the recognition of what that hatred really is and how it functions."²

What does it mean to internalize, to ingest, the poison of oppression? It means deep down we believe the basis of the oppression: dark is inferior and evil; woman is inferior, evil and must be controlled sexually. It means we must prove we do not fit the stereotypes born out of these beliefs: Asian women are quiet and inscrutable; Black women are angry and aggressive; Latin women are emotional and sexy; Native women are strong and earthy. In our desire to prove we do not fit a stereotype, we often mirror the behavior of the dominant society. "How the English colonists would have been pleased that they had fathered such mimics of themselves!"³

We try to live up to standards set by white, dominant society, standards and definitions which often compete with the values of our individual cultures. America, the "melting pot," steals from everyone's culture and denigrates those parts it cannot duplicate. For example, until whites called it rock and roll, the original rhythm and blues was relegated to black radio stations late at night and was considered unfit for listening. Yet Elvis Presley became famous singing Big Mama Thorton's "Hound Dog." And Pat Boone made more money singing Fats Domino's music than Fats ever did. To this day, there are separate categories for rock and roll and rhythm and blues in the Top Forty. Is it a surprise that the 1989 American Music Award for rhythm and blues went to a white, English performer?

Our legitimate cultures can offer us a great source of strength, but we often find ourselves fighting against that very source. It is a real struggle to see our cultures without the white overlay. It is a struggle to own the characteristics from our cultures which the dominant culture has turned into vilifying caricatures. We try to deny and avoid those stereotypes by assimilation. We adopt the basic tenet that we must be "better than" to have real worth. "Nothing is more difficult than identifying emotionally

with a cultural alterity,* with the Other."⁵ Striving to be "better than" another; one language is "better than" another; one color is "better than" another; one size is "better than" another; one type of hair is "better than" another, ad nauseam. We find ways to legitimize the "privileges" this hierarchy provides us while being victims of it.

Racism treats women of different racial backgrounds differently, but racism is still a common oppression of women of color. Our experiences may be different, but we all internalize racism ("struggle to become something we're not while denying who we are") and feel the powerlessness which results from that internalization. The racial hierarchy is calculated and has definite purpose. One purpose is to produce the antagonisms we experience in groups of supposedly similar women. We are unable to talk to each other. We are unable to accept differences. We are unable to see and admit the stereotypes and predispositions we have about ourselves and other women. We are unable to get situations resolved.

In order to feel powerful and to hold on to our "privilege," we have developed sophisticated coping mechanisms. Tense and charged situations generally put us on the defensive. Being on the defensive makes us feel under attack. Being under attack makes us feel our survival is threatened. Coping mechanisms which may have protected us when our survival was threatened are now patterns of behavior which get in the way of our working together. If in tense or charged situations each of us resorts to behavior designed to make us feel "powerful," or in "control," or designed for us to "win," it is no wonder our interactions are crammed with animosity and frustration.

The dominant culture has taught us well that any behavior or value not ascribed to getting ahead, achieving or acquiring is not worth having. Cooperation is for those who cannot cut it on their own, or to be used in certain circumstances when others are needed for our individual glorification, acquisition and achievement. If we cannot convince those with whom we are interacting to come over to our point of view, our frustration increases. If they are as fortified for battle as we are, the feelings of powerlessness and loss of privilege, which we are trying not to feel, intensify. The battle escalates as each tries to "win." Feelings of frustration and powerlessness breed hostility. Something must be done, because whatever the consequences, it is better than the gnawing emptiness of impotence.

The two of us shared with each other what coping mechanisms we most often use to get through situations which evoke feelings of powerlessness. One image was an armed tank charging across the battlefield. The other

* alter'i-ty, n. the state or quality of being different: oppositeness. ¹

image was tunneling—to go around, to go under, to avoid. Attack and avoidance—two very different coping mechanisms which come directly out of our legitimate cultures and out of our internalized racism. These different coping mechanisms can scuttle any attempt at working together if we are not conscious of our retreat into fighting for “survival,” fighting to “win.” One or both of us will do something to feel less frustrated—more powerful. What we do will probably be destructive.

An organization formed to provide women of color support around their jobs. After a year, almost all the women of one ethnic group had left in disagreement on the organization's direction. A meeting was scheduled to deal with this issue. Group A came to the meeting with a plan and presented it in a direct, straightforward way. Group B disagreed, but did not openly state their disagreement. One or two women of Group B took up most of the meeting time and focused on past antagonisms with members of the “opposing” group. After much argument, both groups agreed on Group A's plan. Later, women from Group B met secretly to discuss how all the problems were the de facto leader of Group A. “If she were gone, then...”

The antagonism was racialized but everyone called it “a personality conflict.” Groups A and B were predominantly different races. Frustration at their inability to agree drove deeper wedges between them. The predispositions each had about the “other” group were “proven” correct—once again. All the women went their separate ways, angry, disillusioned and believing the “other” at fault.

How many times have you left organizations of women supposedly like you or like other women of color, disappointed, angry and frustrated? How many times have you gotten so angry with another woman of color that you refuse to work with her again—refuse to *speak* to her again? How many times have you wondered why women of color are harder to deal with than white women? How many times have you felt that women of color are the enemy? Too many times for comfort.

II

We know racism from whites. When someone like us or another woman of color exhibits the same racist behavior we experience from whites, it feels the same, tastes the same, but because it is coming from another person of color the impact is orders of magnitude greater. We do not

have a tolerance for this dose of poison. Our “protection” no longer works. We react with a different emotion and hostility than we do to racism from a white person. The rage and hostility implodes.

Third day of the new semester, new school, new city, new people. I happened across a group of Asian students, and a Filipina, like myself, was among them. We all greeted each other and exchanged a few introductory remarks. “Are you here on EOP (Economic Opportunity Program)?” the Filipina asked me. “No,” I responded. “Then you’re a preppy,” she declared. I was angry and confounded at the same time. Hot air spun circles in my head. If a white person tried to put me down, I immediately shot back a counter. Instead, I was silent. I asked myself, “Is something wrong with me?” The Filipina and I never became friends. I avoided her. Whenever I saw her during our time together in school or since, our original confrontation was the first thing that came to mind. I have never spoken of this incident until now.

To call another woman of color “racist” or to say she’s “trying to act white” may describe the behavior but it does not clarify the whys of the behavior. The phenomenon is not racism even though the actions and reactions are the same as those we experience from racism.

To many, it looks like women of color hate and oppress each other as much as whites hate and oppress people of color. Is it a different “kind” of racism? Horizontal racism? This term does not take into account the racial hierarchy set up by racism. In the U.S. different women of color have similar but very different experiences of racism. We use the term cross-racial hostility to differentiate what goes on between and among women of color from racism. Racism is prejudice *plus* power—control of others’ lives, power over. Cross-racial hostility is prejudice *plus* trying to *feel* powerful. Very different!

“We colored women have memories like elephants. The slightest hurt is recorded deep within.”⁷ Women of color have the power to hurt each other. Some of us may individually have the power to affect another woman’s economic stability. It is important to understand, though, that we do not have the power to determine quality of life, backed by law and institution, over groups of people or even over a single woman.

Cross-racial hostility is complex. Case in point:

A woman of color writing group. Trinity read a piece in our writing group about her mother coming to the United States after World War II with the survivors of the death march from a place spelled B-a-t-a-n. Trinity said

Ba-ta-an. I "corrected" her, giving the American pronunciation, Ba-tan. I was appalled at, but immediately defended, my behavior. When I stopped, listened to what had happened, I saw I had trivialized Trinity. I had not intended to. I had no conscious intent, it all happened too fast. When the movie *Bataan*, starring Robert Taylor, was made after the war, I identified totally with the American, alone in his foxhole, waiting for death, firing his machine gun at the charging "yellow hoards."

A large, important fund-raising event for a multiracial organization. The steering committee was made up of two black women, a white woman and the coordinator, also a woman of color. Well before the event was to take place, the black women and the white woman call the coordinator's attention to projects not getting done. The coordinator (not black) went to white women outside the steering committee with stories about the black women. The black women were a problem, impossible to work with. After the event (which appeared successful but did not raise any money), the committee disbanded, with the women of color not speaking to each other.

Internalized patterns of behavior are acted out unconsciously and make cross-racial hostility both pervasive and difficult to confront. But no matter how much women of color hate, harm and exploit one another, white power and privilege remain intact.

The American nation was founded on racism. Compare the rapid emergence and eventual world dominance of the U.S. with the centuries-long process of national formation in Europe. This dominance was *not* the result of "Yankee ingenuity" and would not have been accomplished without the resources and wealth first created by stolen Native American land and enslaved black labor.

America created a simple system of privilege for whites based on the exploitation and oppression of people of color. This social division along the color line crossed class, nationality, language and religious barriers. The simple fact of "whiteness"²³ meant the overall life, fortune and destiny of white people and their white children were qualitatively better than those of people of color. White people were exempt from slavery, land grab and genocide—the first forms of white privilege. Whites enjoyed a wide latitude of opportunities, personal freedom and democratic rights protected by the State. Even though poor American-born and immigrant whites were viciously exploited by rich white people, they were not on the bottom. The bottom was reserved for Indians, blacks and other people of color.

All people of color face the oppression of racism. The commonality could serve as a powerful unifying bond of solidarity between us. But instead of unifying, we fight one another to stay "one step up" from the bottom of the racial hierarchy. However, we do not *choose* our place in the racial pecking order. We are *placed* in it.

Cross-racial hostility is the stepchild of racism. The dynamics of cross-racial hostility are created by the imbalances in treatment between racially oppressed people based on exaggerated differences among us. Each group has its own unique history of discrimination, racial violence and institutionalized prejudice. Historically, each group "served" a particular role in meeting the socio-economic needs of white America. For example, during western expansion in the 1800s, while the debate over free versus slave state raged, thousands of Chinese men were brought in to work the mines and railroads. The Chinese were not slaves but they were not free. The Chinese were also subject to lynching and other forms of violence from whites because of their race. They did not have the legal legacy of slavery and its subsequent Jim Crow laws to overcome. However, they faced severe legal and social restrictions—racist violence, anti-alien hysteria, as well as anti-miscegenation, school segregation and employment exclusion laws. After working the mines and railroads, Chinese were barred from the trades and all but domestic employment. For the most part, they were left to support their own through family-owned stores, laundries and restaurants in Chinatown ghettos. The same, yet not the same. Different, yet not different.

Where differences among white people tend to be evened out by white privilege, differences among people of color are blown out of proportion with personal jealousies and betrayal, encouraged by whites. The difference between the house nigger and the field nigger is a classic example of how differential/preferential treatment split and divided us. Both were slaves for life, but one was treated conspicuously better than the other. For example, "the light-skinned blacks, usually the offspring of white men and black women, were typically given the preferred [sic] work inside the master's home, while darker-skinned blacks were relegated to [grueling] field work."²⁴ There was no guarantee this exemption would continue from one day to the next. The house nigger's situation was always precarious. Their "privileges" and "status" could be taken away for any or no reason. In the daily, ruthless life and death struggle, the desire for preferential treatment often overshadowed feelings of hatred for the master and replaced it with jealous hatred for each other.

Slaves were also used to hunt down and punish runaway slaves. Worse yet, some slaves were promised freedom if they betrayed their runaway brothers and sisters. Freedom was an individual privilege whose benefits defy comparison, even though the black person could be sold back into slavery with no legal recourse. If the "benefits" of betrayal did not persuade them, defiant slaves were beaten until the information was

forced from them. They were tortured, maimed and/or killed as examples to all others who might resist.

These practices created deep emotional, spiritual and ideological chasms among black people. The chasms grew wider and became a way of life for many. The legacy? Colorism. In 1790 free mulattoes in Charleston, South Carolina formed the Brown Fellowship Society, which restricted membership to the light-skinned. In retaliation, free dark-skinned blacks formed the Free Dark Men of Color, permitting only the darkest to belong. These two groups maintained segregated burial plots for their members in an already segregated cemetery.¹⁰ The legacy continues—color is the basis of a discrimination lawsuit filed by a lighter-skinned black woman against her darker-skinned supervisor, also a black woman. The *New York Times* ran the story on the front page.¹¹

This lawsuit comes from hundreds of years of intra-racial conflict and internal strife. We were/are consciously and constantly used against each other. American history offers countless examples. Indian scouts helped the U.S. Cavalry in campaigns against rival Indian tribes. Black soldiers have been part of the ground troops in all the U.S. racist conquests—the Indian wars, the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Vietnam War, the 1985 invasion of Grenada. Legal versus illegal immigrant status continually divides the Latino community. The ongoing struggle at Big Mountain pits Indian against Indian in a bitter dispute over land, resources and sovereignty.

Recent changes in U.S. immigration laws have altered social and economic progress for peoples of color and put us solidly on a collision course. In the 1960s, the government and big business realized a need to invest in the scientific and technical training of a work force to meet the growing demands of a high-tech society.* This education could have affected large numbers of people of color in America who were unskilled, i.e., low-paid garment workers, domestics and farm workers. Instead, government and big business looked overseas for cheap *skilled* labor.

In 1965, new legislation gave preference to professional and technically skilled immigrants from countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. (Ironically, this law was signed two years after the historic March on Washington.) Asian and Latin American immigrants have filled the quotas, most coming from countries tied to U.S. foreign debt and

*The neglect of U.S. science education is now under sharp criticism. The National Assessment of Educational Progress states: "Alarming numbers of young Americans...emerge from the nation's elementary and secondary schools with an inadequate grounding in mathematics, science and technology. ...At age 17, students' science achievement remains well below that of 1969. ...[While] the average proficiency of 13 to 17 year old black and Hispanic students remains at least 4 years behind that of their white peers."¹²

U.S.-dominated multinational corporations. U.S.-born unskilled workers are unable to compete with the more highly skilled and educated immigrants. Within the Asian community, third and fourth generation Asian Americans, often the first in their families to receive a college education, find themselves competing with immigrants from their home countries for the same few positions. In the meantime, the recent arrivals experience discrimination from Americans based on language, culture, foreign education and citizenship status. They work for cheap wages, unable to get jobs in their chosen professions or at salaries commensurate to their education, experience or training.

The classrooms are being filled with Asian children due to the large influx of Asians in California. (Between 1980 and 1995, the Asian population in California will increase from 1.6 million to 3.8 million, or 140 % in 15 years.¹³) At prestigious U.C. Berkeley, the large population of Asian students triggered a reactionary backlash among white students fearful of losing dominance in science, engineering and computer technology. The administration threatens to close affirmative action opportunities to all Asians while proclaiming Asians the "model minority," pitting Asians against other people of color.¹⁴

Prejudice toward immigrants is not the exclusive property of whites. People of color have joined the chorus of growing American national chauvinism. In 1986, Proposition 63—to uphold "English as the official language"—and thus eliminate the legal basis for bilingual education and ballots—was supported in California by a margin of three to one. The measure surprisingly won support in cities where people of color were in the majority. In Oakland, where the population is 63% "minority,"¹⁵ the measure was passed by 51%.¹⁶ Most notably, the nationally publicized campaign was led by S. I. Hayakawa,¹⁷ a Japanese Canadian (and naturalized U.S. citizen) who first gained notoriety in 1968 for his fight *against* Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University.

In day-to-day terms, Asians compete against blacks and others for jobs, while their accomplishments are used to threaten affirmative action opportunities for Asian Americans. Racial antagonism, competition and hostility characterize the social interactions between these groups in the workplace, neighborhood and schools. Yet, none are aware of the greater socio-economic and political forces orchestrating this conflict.

III

[Racism] has consistently dehumanized peoples of color, especially those who questioned or refused normative socialization. It has fostered privileges to the privileged; it has solidified a normative white culture, and it continues to make unjust social institutions and oppressive relations seem legitimate. ...Racism is only one of the

several bases of social differentiation; nevertheless, it is probably the strongest, and it is fueled by class and gender-related "isms." Racial differentiation continues to interact with class and gender distinctions which keep the majority of Black folks on the "outside" while the society extends color, class, and gender privileges to the socially acceptable "insiders," even for "Negro" insiders as long as they use the "master's" tools.¹⁸

Over a long, insidious and brutal process of being conquered, peoples of color have been instilled with the same racist, chauvinist and supremacist values and attitudes which have oppressed us. Is it then a mystery that we find unity so elusive? While people, and especially women, of color are, in broad, general terms, commonly oppressed by racism, we are exploited differently by racism. Depending on one's class, racial group, gender, nationality, cultural background, education, English fluency, citizenship status, sexual preference, physical appearance and ability, and history in or with this country, we are "given" our place in the racial hierarchy. It is arbitrary and subject to the socio-political needs of the U.S. economy and for the benefit and maintenance of white privilege.

Unity is not automatically bequeathed to people of color. Racism translates the differences among us into *relatively* preferential treatment for some at the expense of others, promoting internalized racism and cross-racial hostility. Disunity among people of color due to the exploitation of differences is an inherent part of the system of racism. The *potential* for unity is there and the *power* is tremendous—witness the recent Civil Rights Movement. For unity to develop and continue to exist, the distrust and discord ever-present among us must be replaced. How?

In the groups we conduct with women of color, we begin by acknowledging and sharing our own internalized racism. The face of racism inside each of us is an ugly one, but we find that confronting the stereotypes and predispositions we have about ourselves leads to understanding others. In group process, it becomes clear that our definitions of unity mean sameness—same feelings, thoughts, ideas and behaviors. This mentality commonly develops a tenuous agreement to co-exist as long as differences—not just political and organizational, but personal differences as well—are denied and disregarded. Our *sameness* brings us together, our *differences* drive us apart. We stay together as long as we do not confront the issues. Witness how the struggle against sexism in the Civil Rights Movement was put on hold because racism was the "unifying" issue and sexism "divided" us.

We live in a time when the assault on women of color is increasing. Laws that were marginally enforced are now being rolled back—legalized

abortion for one. Recruitment in the Ku Klux Klan is the highest it has ever been. Colored children are being drugged to death—if they survive their first year. So why spend time on internalized racism and cross-racial hostility when racism is still so rampant? We have spent years fighting racism and other oppressions through legislation. No legislation, however, can give a person self-esteem. Slogans like "Black Is Beautiful" did not eliminate self-hatred. Internalized racism cannot be legalized or constitutionalized or sloganized away.

Women of color must challenge our racist attitudes and internalized racism with the same vigor we challenge racism. We must honestly admit and confront the stereotypes and predispositions we have about ourselves and others. We must think and act equitably in a society that honors the hierarchical. We must learn and know our existence cannot be at the expense of another person.

Individually, we cannot eliminate the institution of racism. But we *can change* how we individually interact with each other and internalize racism—internalize oppression. The conflict and hostility between and among women of color can only be resolved by women of color. This is a long, painful process. Internalized racism and cross-racial hostility have been around as long as institutionalized racism. This is *our* work and we have to do it if we want *real* freedom.

"Now that we've begun to break the silence and begun to break through the diabolically erected barriers and can hear each other and see each other, we can sit down with trust and break bread together."¹⁹

Notes

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Making Face, Making Soul

H A C I E N D O C A R A S

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