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NOTES ON FEMINISM, RACISM AND SISTERHOOD

An anthology like this one is a welcomed opportunity to think about how various feminisms inform our experience as Black women in Canada, and how Black women in Canada can inform various feminisms. In this context, however, we believe we cannot discuss our situation as if it is separate from the experience of women with other racial designations. The multiculturalism agenda in Canada has shaped Canadian racial identities along divisions of those that are “visible” and those that are not. This language is contentious and not particularly valid in its descriptions of the population. It does, however, emphasize how deeply entrenched racial assignments are in Canadian ideology, policies, and practices. These assignments can be a constraint to large-scale advancement of a Black feminist agenda, even assuming we could appropriately define who would be involved in articulating it. On a more positive note, these assignments may also present an opportunity. They designate a common status and state to groups of Canadians who might not otherwise have the critical mass to advocate for increased equity. Our feminist thinking is the product of learning, conversations, and experiences with women from multiple locations, often women of Colour, but also White women. With these personal experiences in mind, we chose to contribute to this anthology by working together to write a piece on sisterhood.

As Meredith Ralston (2000) reminisces, the phrase “sisterhood is powerful” has called many women to the cause of female emancipation. Feminist ideology based on the idea that sisterhood is powerful and supersedes traditional boundaries (Morgan 1970; Morgan 1984) has created visions of women, arm in arm, changing the world. It has taken time to admit that the benefits of this sisterhood have been largely reserved for White, Euro-American, middle- and upper-class women. Many racial minority¹ feminists have written about the painful and alienating experience of struggling to find a way to make western feminism relevant to them (Bannerji 1995; hooks 1981). Disenchanted and frustrated by repeated, unsuccessful attempts to make our struggles part of their struggles, some advocate for separate sisterhoods, based on racial alliances (e.g., Black Feminism). Is there any hope the sisterhood we were promised can contribute to social change that includes us, as racialized women? We address

this question first by exploring our relationships with White women, and then our relationships with each other. Through this process, we hope to identify the opportunities, and the risks, embedded for us within sisterhood.

SISTERHOOD WITH WHITE WOMEN

Many have written about the failed attempts to find sisterhood in mainstream feminism. The history of shattered partnerships we have had with White women is highly relevant to Black Feminism. Multiple strands of feminism exist in response to each other. They are defined both by what they propose are their essential components, and by their distance from what they see as problematic components in other critical social theories. Hence, the processes that have led to the necessity of a Black Feminism need to be understood.

Modern North American feminism was developed by borrowing ideas and strategies from the anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements of the 1960s (Black 1993). As it gained momentum, the feminist movement reached out to Black women, urging them to partner with them in fighting patriarchy. This was an attractive opportunity for women who found themselves fighting sexism with racism. They had hopes for solidarity and social change with women who were separated by racial privilege, but shared a gender perspective. These issues are equally relevant today. Women of Colour and other marginalized groups have demanded that feminist organizations dominated by White women integrate their perspectives into the movement. Partnership with these privileged women, based on common grievances, has been a viable strategy. These women could share their privilege to increase access to opportunities for themselves and other women. We have things to offer each other. The joining of racial minority women and White women in a common movement builds a critical mass that can advocate effectively for change in multiple venues. Sisterhood could indeed be powerful. It could also be joyful. The search for sisterhood is motivated by a desire for more influence, but it is also motivated by the desire to fill a void that has been created by our separation. So many of us have emerged from a history of social, legal, and political enforcement of boundaries between us and the White women on the other side of the race line. For example, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) writes of the African American experience as being defined in terms of racial segregation that prohibited having White women as neighbours and friends. Aside from the importance of having these women as our allies, many of us may also desire them as our friends. Our separation from each other has left a void. Anne Anlin Cheng (2001) asserts that racial separation has resulted in a melancholia that is threaded through the individual and collective psyches of those on both sides of the racial divide. Feminism may seem to be the ground upon which we can all heal the wounds that racial domination has created. Therefore, for both political and personal reasons, we reach out to each other for sisterhood.

Perhaps the unresolved grief that Cheng describes is the root of the intense

conflict that can emerge when we try to join forces. The task as defined—coming together as women—leaves an important task undefined. How can we join together as women when racial hierarchies are still used to separate us? There is an expectation that we will segment our ideas about oppression so that we can be good feminists (Bannerji 1995). The answer to Sheila Radford Hill's (1986) question about what Black women gain when they join the feminist movement is that they gain the opportunity to splinter themselves, deal with their gender in one place, and find somewhere else to deal with their race. This is equally true for women of other racial minority groups. Certainly, there is recognition of differences that arise from the different locations that race dictates for us, but this is not useful if it does not translate into a transformed feminism that is identifiable as different because it is no longer aligned with White supremacy. Organizations that welcome diversity to promote inclusiveness have only addressed part of the problem. They also need to examine the structure of domination that makes some women more powerful than others. In addition, this agenda cannot be postponed until there are large numbers of racial minority women present in these organizations to engage in action. One of the great weaknesses of front-line feminism is its obliviousness to the fact that the predominance of mostly-White feminist organizations is an outcome of racial alliances and systemic racism (Zajicek 2002). Accordingly, White women and predominantly White organizations must undertake work to dismantle the privilege attached to race-based power. In the absence of such changes, what expectations can women of Colour have of benefiting from an alliance with the feminist movement?

Many feminists are able to articulate a power analysis that encompasses the examination of power and privilege beyond gender relations, but this is easily converted to a less self-challenging discourse through its dilution into ideas about diversity, difference, or postmodern multiple identities. This circumvention of issues surrounding racial domination is perhaps necessary for them to disengage themselves from their complicity in it. For example, how many of them have been freed from the bondage of the home by hiring racial minority women to do their domestic work? How many others quietly benefit from the work of racial minority women who report to them in subservient positions, as they advance in this nation's institutions? They may not see themselves as racists, but they are implicated through their passive acceptance of racial minority women insulating them from occupying the lowest rungs of the ladder. The closer we get to becoming equal, the more we are all forced to address these power arrangements. The historical dominance of White women in feminist organizations is a power base from which they can align to exclude us, undermine us, isolate us, and ensure that we are dependent on their beneficence to advance or even survive. Race-based alliances ensure our dependence, as advancement increasingly positions us in environments where we are isolated from other women of Colour, left with only White women as potential allies. This assumes its most insidious form when these women present themselves as

our advocates and endeavour to represent our interests to the power establishment. There may be times when it is true that their privilege allows them to advocate in places where we cannot, but the mistake is that so many of them do not see this as a partnership and a transitional arrangement. They believe that we will always need them to speak for us. They will remain experts on “the woman question,” while we speak to secondary “diversity issues.” When their entitlement to this leadership is challenged, they are outraged to perceive themselves as under attack by the very women they believe they extended themselves to assist (hooks 2000). There is also an element of fear involved in these reactions. Even women who embrace a progressive agenda will admit to concern that they will be marginalized if racial minority women become empowered. For example, in Ellen Scott’s (1998) examination of two feminist organizations, White respondents spoke of feeling guilt, paralysis, and anxiety in the context of interchanges with women of Colour about racism. Their inability to address the role of race in their lives precluded finding a productive way to translate critical consciousness into anti-racist action. Under these frustrating circumstances, anti-racism is difficult, unpopular work. Not surprisingly, many White women may make the choice to distance themselves. Passive acceptance of the status quo is a path of lesser resistance.

There are also frustrations for women of Colour. This is expressed by Lee Maracle (1996) who wrote:

There are some white women who truly wish to struggle with the effect that racism has had on their consciousness. That puts them at my doorstep, around my kitchen table. It does not inspire me to enter the master’s wife’s home, thank you very much. I do not have to urge white women to deal with their racism. The emancipation of non-white women of the world is taking care of that (138).

We can be fatigued by the task of trying to educate White women so that we can work with them effectively. It has been suggested that the expectation that we do so is a strategy to divide our energies, so that we are engaged with our dominators instead of dissembling their domination (Lorde 1981). This issue often arises in social services because White people are infuriated when they discover that there are certain service settings where they are not welcome. They cry “reverse discrimination” and demand to know why they can be excluded from an afrocentric or other ethnospecific service when they would be prevented from claiming an all-White space. (Our observation is that many such spaces exist.) They want to know how they are supposed to learn to work with “diverse” people if they are barred from these settings. At the root of these objections is the same sense of entitlement that makes White women believe that they should be allowed unlimited access to setting the feminist agenda. There is a fundamental failure to acknowledge or recognize that their outrage emerges from an expectation that these places,

and all places, should be reserved for them. There is also a failure to see that they are suggesting that serving their need to participate should take precedence over social justice for marginalized communities and groups. This is not necessarily an essential dynamic within White women, but it does seem to be a consistent dynamic within the operation of power. While we all may speak disparagingly of the way in which patriarchy operates, the behaviour of many White women since their elevation to power positions is evidence that we have not yet been able to operationalize alternatives beyond power over hierarchical arrangements.

It is too easy to place all the blame for this failed sisterhood on White feminists. We must acknowledge that while we may desire that these women work with us, it is a mistake to expect them to effect social change that we must do ourselves (Hill 1986). Our needs and desires for change are different. Writing from the African perspective, Marie Pauline Eboh (2000) urges us to remember that the battles that White western feminists fight are not irrelevant because they are not our battles. We become frustrated because, as they rally against the “glass ceiling,” we feel contained within opaque boundaries through which we can barely visualize the possibilities of a life without race and gender-based boundaries. These differences may mean that, sometimes, we need to advance the cause of women on different fronts. There may be times when we can work together to further each other’s causes, but we need to think carefully about the conditions under which we can join together based on equitable participation and shared goals.

SISTERHOOD WITH OTHER WOMEN OF COLOUR

We now turn to the question of what sisterhood between women of Colour offers. This is a surprisingly under-discussed topic. We are so often positioned against White women, as though they are our opponents in a zero-sum game that includes no one else. There is less theoretical engagement with what it means to develop sisterhood among those who have been racialized. Within the group that is currently labeled as “women of Colour,” there is often hope and an expectation that sisterhood will emerge based on shared histories of slavery and colonization, as well as shared realities of contemporary racial oppression and discrimination. Yet, the path to sisterhood is no less challenging.

There are some specific Canadian contributions to a disengagement between women of Colour that frustrates the establishment of a sisterhood. Canada is a country that has furthered its social development through immigration. The changes to the immigration policy since the 1960s ensures that new Canadians are highly skilled, well educated, and, more often than before, come from so-called developing countries (Arat-Koc 1999). Once they arrive, however, immigrants are streamed into different sectors of the labour market, creating ethnic stratification that affects social position upon arrival, and the

generations that follow (Isajiw 1999). This stratification operates similarly with native-born people who are racial minorities. They have been streamed into lower echelons of the labour market through long-established barriers to better paid, higher status occupations (Porter 1965). The ways in which the structure has assigned different locations for Black women, Asian women, Southern European women, Aboriginal women, and others, are a source of tension that is difficult to discuss openly. In our attempts at sisterhood, we can encounter unspoken resentment arising from the knowledge that some are more able than others to benefit from the reservoir of privilege existing for those who can more closely approximate the dominant. Proximity to an ideal of Whiteness (in appearance, language, culture, etc.) becomes a type of social capital that increases opportunities for some, and decreases opportunities for others (Hunter 2002). This is a concealed link between our shared legacy of colonization and contemporary racism. Conflict arises among women of Colour because we work within, and reproduce, subordination that is based on hierarchies of class and race (Das Gupta 1999). We are not encouraged to work together to fight these hierarchies. Canada's history of race-specific legal and social persecution (Backhouse 1999) is an ideal background against which to foster a belief that it is advisable to disengage from other racial groups in order to receive more favour from the White power structure. We are manipulated into competing with each other by controlling discourses that stereotype some ethnic groups as "model minorities" (Lew 2004) who prove systemic racism is no longer a barrier to upward mobility and social success. Perhaps most dangerous to our collective advancement, we do not articulate these tensions and expose them as tools by which we collaborate with White racial domination (Scott 1998). Some are so grateful to be benefiting from some privilege that they overlook the domination of one group that is interlocked with the oppression of us all.

Debates about differential privilege within and across racial groups bring us to the unpopular notion of a "hierarchy of oppression." Should the hierarchy be interrogated or discarded? The desire to discard it originates from a hope that if we are able to view ourselves as equally affected by oppression, we can be equally engaged with dismantling it. Yet we must find some way to address the severity of oppression for certain people. If we shift our attention to the consequences of oppression for specific groups in specific circumstances, we are faced with serious implications. In different situations, domination can threaten multiple life areas, including physical survival, security, social status, self-development, happiness, and well-being. Focusing on the threat that oppression poses to a hierarchy of needs is ultimately more productive than attempting to arrange ourselves according to a static hierarchy of oppression.² It allows us to focus on which consequences of oppression take priority, rather than which recipients of oppression should take priority. The competition to claim the most pressing injustice thwarts a productive dialogue about how racism and sexism are interlocked to maintain the dominance of the power

elite (Fellows and Razack 1998). As feminists engaged with anti-racism, we need to be able to discuss how we participate in, and are affected by, systems of domination. Acknowledging that race-based hierarchies affect our feminist activities must go together with acknowledging that race-based hierarchies affect our anti-racist activities. For example, Anne Anlin Cheng (2001) writes that Asian Americans have been targeted and racialized by American policies, but as the least “coloured” group in racial debates, they have had a less conspicuous position. At times, this low profile has made them less likely to provoke resistance and more able to claim privilege denied to African Americans. The Canadian context has similarly produced circumstances under which dissociation from an identified “problem” group is a strategy for survival and self-promotion. Recent high-profile scapegoating, through discourses about dangerous Black youth, Asian organized crime, Aboriginal underachievement, and other race-based accusations, has not evoked responses from multiracial coalitions. Instead, self-appointed community representatives are consulted, as if no one outside the group has anything to contribute. Typically, no one outside the group steps forward to challenge that assumption. We need to find ways to act as a collective, with the recognition that there are ways to share the advantages attached to our differing levels of power and privilege (Ralston 2000).

The conflict that arises when women of Colour attempt to build a sisterhood has less to do with *who* will lead than *how* they lead. It seems that institution-based, anti-racist activities are too often led by women (and men) who are ultra-conservative in their articulation of the agenda. Once they are granted the resources to fight racism, they begin to make excuses about the vulnerability of their positions and the impossibility of radical change. Many of us are dismayed and angered as we watch anti-racism buried under the more comfortable discourse of multiculturalism or diversity. Even more dismaying is seeing anti-racism undermined by racial minority men and women who present themselves as spokespeople for conservative efforts to dissemble equity. We cannot construct a sisterhood when we are worried about betrayal by those among us. If we are to fight sexism and racism together, we need to ensure that our leadership is able to articulate and act on both of these agendas. In addition, our energies need to be directed towards challenging the multiple forces that promote disengagement from anti-racist feminist practice.

This brief review of the issues surrounding sisterhood among women of Colour provides some sense of why it is a topic that has not been discussed at length. At the heart of this failed sisterhood are painful realities about how internalized racism affects the way we interact as women of Colour (Ralston 2000). When we confine the discourse to White women and how they have wronged us, we gather ourselves together in a “race to innocence” (Fellows and Razack 1998) that protects us from talking about the anxieties and resentments that separate us from each other.

SISTERHOOD: A CONCEPT THAT HAS LOST ITS USEFULNESS?

Writing this piece has been a strange journey. Although prepared to articulate the challenges to constructing a sisterhood, we were unprepared to find ourselves with no reason to endorse it as a realistic goal. Every way that we examine how alliances could be formed among women, and across racial lines, pointed us toward a negative conclusion. Sisterhood with White women seems to be a set-up for betrayal and disillusionment. Sisterhood with women of Colour has its own unique risks. A review of the issues forces us to abandon binary oppositions that would position us against them, and to start asking questions about how all of us are implicated in the reinforcement of race-based hierarchies in feminism. The ongoing influence of racism within a context of purported inclusion is disenchanting. Living with this type of cognitive dissonance—an essential disconnect between what you know should be happening, and what is actually happening—creates a tension that makes many women disengage from feminist and anti-racist work altogether. Therefore, the most important risk that arises from our clumsy attempts at sisterhood is that we lose the very people we need to make the world a more equitable place for all women. This is a very tangible reason to grieve the loss of sisterhood.

Perhaps we can learn something from the Black movement in the UK. As Charlotte Williams (1999) describes, racial minority women have been able to forge a movement based on common denominators of oppression and the oppressor. Similarly, we could forge a sisterhood focused on social change, which has in common the desire to disassemble White privilege as it is exercised by both men and women. This does not eliminate the need to challenge historically-structured power relations that create inequalities among women of Colour, but it creates a space within which we can recognize our need to come together when we share a common ideology, common goals, and a desire to use a common methodology. We can also learn by dissecting the process by which hierarchical relations have been established, so that we can understand how to restructure the relationships between us (Vincent 1995). Himani Bannerji (1995) is quite right that our associations with women of Colour can be what keep us sane in an insane, racist world. There is an opportunity for us to make sisterhood something that defines and supports our experience as we advance into territory that was formerly reserved for others.

Yet we have learned nothing if we construct an exclusionary movement. A truly anti-racist feminist movement could be led by women of Colour, but it cannot exclude White women based on a newly constituted hierarchy. To do so would demonstrate that we have learned nothing from being on the receiving end of racial domination; we would be using power as it has always been used against us. We can take our cues from Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) affirmation that Black Feminism needs to centre the heterogeneous experiences and consciousness of Black women without being separatist. Similarly, a feminism transformed by anti-racism needs to centre the heterogeneous experiences and

consciousness of *racism* as it is experienced and perpetuated by all women. The construction of silos of Black Feminism, Asian Feminism, and third-world-based womanism provides some respite and empowerment, but can never be a long-term strategy. If we create separatist movements within feminism, we will be repeating the mistakes that were made before us.

Sisterhood may be a notion that has outgrown its usefulness. Sisters do not choose each other, but are thrown together by accidents of birth. Although sexism and racism are systemic processes, the gender divisions and racial divisions that force us to share their experience are no less accidental. Social change cannot be engineered by a group of people who have been thrown together by accidents of birth and the coincidence of marginalization. We must be united by purpose. We need to stop looking for sisters and start looking for collaborators. These would be people who share our political vision and are willing to participate in collective political action. Privileging political commitment over identity equivalence opens up new possibilities. We could have collaborators in places that were previously placed off-limits by dichotomies that reinforced insider/outsider status and empowered/disempowered hierarchies. A shared commitment to disrupt the steady influence of the power elite creates room for people from various locations to make strategic use of available privilege to engage in reciprocal collaborations that benefit everyone. This may be an idealized vision, but it may also be a way in which sisterhood can evolve into something more honest and productive.

The challenge before us is to locate these collaborators. As co-authors we have reflected on the isolation we felt before we knew there were others we could talk to about the spirit-eroding experiences of racism and sexism. At the time, there was little in the way of venues that declared themselves open for discussing equity issues beyond those taken up by mainstream Feminism. Thankfully, we see such progressive spaces opening now, where people can boldly declare that racism, homophobia, class oppression and other injustices are on the agenda. These venues are needed to bring together collaborators against oppression, but we also need to boldly go where progressive thought is absent. Containing our activities to designated safe spaces belies the steady influence that racism and sexism have in other places. In environments that are strongholds of the dominant, our potential collaborators are isolated and endangered. They need, more than anyone, for women of Colour and other collaborators to reach out and guide them toward spaces where oppression is being interrogated and challenged. Through these connections, we can begin to break down the dominance that racism and sexism have in all of our lives.

¹We recognize that terms like “minority” and “woman of colour” are conceptually problematic, but use them due to their ongoing relevance in the Canadian context. See Bannerji (2000) for a thoughtful discussion of this issue.

²We wish to credit and thank a social work student, Tanya Chute, for presenting this idea in a class assignment.

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