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DISAPPEARING DYNAMICS OF WOMEN OF COLOR

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This paper looks at the relationships of white women and women of Color to white patriarchy and how these relationships have affected feminists from both groups. The conflicts and tensions between white feminists and feminists of Color are viewed too frequently as lying solely in woman-to-woman relationships. These relationships, however, are affected in both obvious and subtle ways by how each of these two groups of women relate to white patriarchy. The paper explores how women of Color and white women relate to white patriarchy, the ways in which women of Color and white women are racialized, forms of resisting the seduction of white patriarchy, and the implications for theorizing women's subordination to political mobilization.

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Let me begin with a short vignette from my book *The Color of Privilege*.

> *It was the fall of 1983. I'd just been hired as an assistant professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz, the pseudoresort town on the edge of the Pacific, with its radical political roots, had just been declared by Ms. magazine as one of the country's foremost feminist havens. I was sitting at a dinner party with four other women colleagues from various departments. We were discussing sexism in our respective areas when one of them burst into tears over her salad and began, between sobs, to describe how inferior she felt and how she often thought she was crazy because nobody in her department saw the flaws in the discipline as she did. I was startled but bent over and put my arm around her. The other women stared at their plates and sat quietly, trying to give our distressed colleague time to compose herself. She eventually did, and the first thing she said when she stopped crying was, "I just want somebody in my field to say that most of what gets published in mainstream journals is bullshit." And I replied without hesitation, "Everything that gets published in mainstream journals is bullshit." And she burst out laughing. The rest of the women also joined in with uncomfortable laughter, and we continued our discussion and our dinner.*

> *I went away that evening deeply perplexed. Here were these extremely attractive, highly educated women (all of them trained in the top five Ph.D. programs in the country in their respective fields), mostly in their late twenties–early thirties, with the top academic jobs in the country, middle class (some would say upper middle class), white, living in the Ms.-anointed feminist haven in the country, with deep sadness that at times resulted in crippling depression. In fact, two were already on antidepressant medication. Here I was with the same current socioeconomic characteristics, except I was brown, the daughter of farmworkers, and nowhere near as talented as they were in academic skills. I wasn't particularly happy to be living in Santa Cruz (feminist or not), mostly because I missed my Chicano community and there was nowhere to get a decent Mexican breakfast on the weekend, but I thought I had died and won the lottery to be able to teach what I wanted and to write as I pleased. Why were they so sad when, whichever way it was analyzed, structurally, they had more power and control than 99.99% of all women in the world? I did not know, and yet I did not doubt, what they felt. My job, I thought that night, was to figure out why they were so sad and I was not (at least not all the time) and what we could do, as women, to help one another.*

> *It seemed to me that the answer to why these women were so much like me and yet so different did not lie in personality characteristics or individual temperaments. Instead, I struggled to understand how structural factors may be impinging on us differently that would result in such different reactions to our newly acquired status as assistant professors* (Hurtado, 1996, 1-2).

It was in trying to understand this problematic that the following argument was born.

> Each oppressed group in the United States is positioned in a particular and distinct relationship to white patriarchy, and each form of subordination is shaped by this relational position. All men, regardless of race and ethnicity, maintain power over

women, particularly within their respective ethnic and racial groups. Gender[1] alone, however, does not determine either a superordinate or subordinate position. In a highly industrialized society run by a complex hierarchical bureaucracy and based on individualistic competition, many socially constructed markers of group membership are used to allocate power (Apfelbaum, 1979). Class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality are but a few. As we develop a discourse for discussing our group memberships, as our consciousness about the mechanisms of subordination evolves, and as previously silenced groups speak, we can begin to form a picture of contemporary forms of subordination and their psychological effects (Connell, 1985, 264).

I focus on the relationships of white women and women of Color to white patriarchy and how these relationships have affected feminists from both groups.[2] The conflicts and tensions between white feminists and feminists of Color are viewed too frequently as lying solely in woman-to-woman relationships. These relationships, however, are affected in both obvious and subtle ways by how each of these two groups of women relate to white patriarchy through linkages that Nancy Henley calls "the everyday social relationships that glue together the social superstructure" (1986, 21). (Hurtado, 1996, 2-3).[3]

II. THE ENFORCEMENT OF WHITE PATRIARCHAL POWER: REJECTION VERSUS SEDUCTION

White middle-class women are groomed from birth to be the lovers, mothers, and partners (however unequal) of white men because of the economic and social benefits attached to these roles (de Beauvoir, 1952, xxiv; Lorde, 1984, 118-19). Upper- and middle-class white women are supposed to be the biological bearers of those members of the next generation who will inherit positions of power in society. Women of Color, in contrast, are groomed from birth to be primarily the lovers, mothers, and partners (however unequal) of men of Color, who are also oppressed by white men.[4] The avenues of advancement through marriage that are open to white women who conform to prescribed standards of middle-class femininity are not even a theoretical possibility for most women of Color (Ostrander, 1984).[5] Ramón Gutiérrez (1991, xviii) rightly indicates that marriage provides a "window into the social, political, and economic arrangements of a society," and that it is through marriage that people "create social alliances, establish a new social unit, change residence, exchange property, and gain rights to sexual service." It is the most intimate linkage, besides biological ties, that two individuals may engage in—therefore, it is not surprising that like tend to marry like because it is through the ritual of marriage that the local contours of class and status are defined. Equally important is the gendered nature of the institution of marriage—it requires a male and a female and "how this marital relationship between two gendered individuals is culturally defined often becomes a gender representation of relations of domination and subordination in other realms" (xviii). Therefore, it is not surprising that in 1993, only 2.2% of U.S. marriages were interracial. More to the point, even a smaller number, .4%, were Black-white unions. In actual numbers, there were 246,000 Black-white marriages out of a total of 1,200,000 interracial married couples and a total of 54,000,000 married couples in the United States (Graham, 1995, 33). Moreover, 71% of all Black-white couples in the U.S. involve a Black man and the Census Bureau figures in 1992 indicate that Black women are "half as likely to marry outside the race than black men" (ibid., 40, 58). This is not to say that women of Color are more oppressed than white women but, rather, that white patriarchy is enforced differently on white women and on women of Color.[6] As a consequence, these groups of women have different political responses and skills, and at times these differences cause the two groups to clash.[7]

Women of Color came to the United States either through slavery (e.g., Blacks), conquest of their homeland (e.g., Chicanas, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, Filipinas), or through forced and semiforced labor migration (e.g., Japanese, Chinese). Unlike European immigrants who become culturally and linguistically assimilated within two generations (Neidert and Farley, 1985), these groups of women constitute racially and ethnically distinct groups (Hurtado, 1997). Thus, even if a Black career woman were to marry a white professional man, her offspring would *not* inherit the power positions accorded to white sons and daughters of the same class.[8] If, however, a working-class white woman were to marry a white professional man, her offspring would automatically acquire the privileged position of the father. In certain circles a white woman's humble beginnings are a source of pride because they reaffirm the dominant hegemonic belief in the availability of equal opportunity (Pettigrew and Martin, 1987; Haney and Hurtado, 1994). In contrast, race privilege is not assured even to offspring of a white father and Black mother. Indeed, some argue that being half-Black is a greater stigma than having remained within the

subordinate group's boundaries, because these individuals are ostracized by both whites and Blacks (Du Bois, 1973; Malcolm X, 1973; Root, 1992, 5).

A similar type of stigma is attached to offspring of white men and non-Black women of Color. Often the offspring of these unions are referred to as "half-breeds" and not fully accepted socially, especially if phenotypically they resemble their nonwhite mothers (Pérez, 1991, 184). For Latinos, this "pigmentocracy"—that is, privilege based solely on skin color—has its historical precedence in colonial Spanish rule because "honor, status, and prestige were judged by skin color and phenotype" (Gutiérrez, 1991, 198-99). Granted, legally, offspring of mixed unions may inherit the white father's race privilege because the one-drop rule only applies to Blacks; however, structurally, biological assimilation into the dominant group is very much dependent on complete obliteration of any visual vestige that may identify the individual as part of the nonwhite group.[9] For all practical purposes, then, nonstigmatized intermarriage is only possible when it does not appear to be an intermarriage at all and when the offspring of such unions do not identify with nor look like the nonwhite group. Under such conditions the effect of intermarriage on dismantling white privilege is very limited, and to a large extent, structurally, it almost has no effect at all. What will become relevant for feminist theory in the near future will be when the growing numbers of offspring of intermarriage who can potentially pass as white *refuse* their inherited white privilege and join subordinate groups to sabotage existing power arrangements (ibid., 184; also see chap. 4 for a more extensive discussion of these issues).

White patriarchy needs white women in a way that they do not need women of Color because women of Color cannot fulfill white patriarchy's need for racially pure offspring. This fact creates differences in the relational position of the groups—distance from and access to the source of privilege, white men. Thus, white women, as a group, are subordinated through seduction; women of Color, as a group, through rejection. Class position, of course, affects the probability of obtaining the rewards of seduction and the sanctions of rejection. Working-class white women are socialized to believe in the advantages of marrying somebody economically successful, but the probability of obtaining that goal is lower for them than for middle- or upper-class white women (Ostrander, 1984). Class position affects women of Color as well. Although rejected by most white men as candidates to reproduce offspring, middle-class women of Color may be accepted into some white middle-class social circles in the well-documented role of token (Apfelbaum, 1979, 199; Pettigrew and Martin, 1987). Class privilege functions to one degree or another regardless of race, and white privilege functions to one degree or another regardless of class (Higginbotham, 1985).

III. THE RACIALIZED CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITIES

This was one of the supreme ironies of slavery: in order to approach its strategic goal—to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of slaves—the black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity. . . . In order to function as slaves, the black woman had to be annulled as woman.

A. Y. Davis 1971, 7

When Sojourner Truth, baring her muscular arm at a public gathering, asked "Ain't I a woman?" the reply might not have been obvious, even though she had borne thirteen children. The answer to her question involves defining *woman*. The white women present at the meeting did not have to plough the fields, side by side with Black men, and see their offspring sold into slavery, yet they were clearly women. Sojourner Truth had worked the fields, and she had borne children but she was not a woman in the sense of having the same experiences as the white women present. The questioning of Sojourner Truth's gender was further underscored by the white ministers' insistence that she bare her breasts to prove that she was not an impostor and, "indeed, that she was a woman at all" (Caraway, 1991, 76). Truth militantly obliged and appropriated the moment by indicating that her black breasts had suckled many a white man (White, 1985, 162).[10]

The definition of *woman* is constructed differently for white women and for women of Color, though sexuality is the marking mechanism through which the subordination of each is maintained.[11] The construction of white womanhood also eroticizes potency (as male) and victimization/frailty (as female). As Catherine MacKinnon surmises:

Women who resist or fail, including those who never did fit—(for example, black and lower-class women who cannot survive if they are soft and weak and incompetent, assertively self-respecting women, women with ambitions of male dimensions—are considered less female, lesser women. Women who comply or succeed are elevated as models, tokenized by success on male terms or portrayed as consenting to their natural place and dismissed as having participated if they complain. (1982, 530)

White women are persuaded to become the partners of white men and are seduced into accepting a subservient role that meets the material needs of white men. As Audre Lorde describes it:

White women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power. This possibility does not exist in the same way for women of color. The tokenism that is sometimes extended to us is not an invitation to join power: our racial "otherness" is a visible reality that makes it quite clear. For white women there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools. (1984, 118-19)

The patriarchal invitation to power is only a pretended choice for white women because, as in all cases of tokens, their inclusion is dependent on complete and constant submission. As John Stuart Mill observed: "It was not sufficient for [white] women to be slaves. They must be willing slaves, for the maintenance of patriarchal order depends upon the consensus of women. It depends upon women playing their part....voluntarily suppressing the evidence that exposes the

false and arbitrary nature of man-made categories and the reality which is built on those categories" (quoted in Spender, 1980, 101-2).

The genesis of the construction of "woman" for Black women in the United States is in slavery.[12] During slavery, Black women were required to be as masculine as men in the performance of work and were as harshly punished as men, but they were also raped (A. Y. Davis, 1981, 5). Many Black women were broken and destroyed, but the majority who survived "acquired qualities considered taboo by the nineteenth-century ideology of womanhood." As Angela Davis puts it: "[Black women's] awareness of their endless capacity for hard work may have imparted to them a confidence in their ability to struggle for themselves, their families, and their people" (1981, 11).[13]

White patriarchy needs women of Color primarily as workers (Castillo, 1991, 27) and as objects of sexual power and aggression.[14] The sexual objectification of women of Color allows white patriarchy to express power and aggression sexually, without the emotional entanglements of, and the rituals that are required in, relationships with white women (Rich, 1979, 291-95; hooks, 1981, 58; Palmer, 1983, 156). In many ways the dual conception of women's sexuality based on race—"white goddess/black she-devil, chaste virgin/nigger whore, the blond blue-eyed doll/the exotic 'mulatto' object of sexual craving"—has freed women of Color from the distraction of the rewards of seduction (Rich, 1979, 291). Women of Color "do not receive the respect and treatment—mollycoddling and condescending as it sometimes is—afforded to white women" (Joseph, 1981, 27).

IV. LESBIANISM AS RESISTANCE TO SEDUCTION

Sex, on heterosexual terms, is then mere manifestation of our unconscious assertion that the world is arranged in a hierarchical order by nature.

Hernández 1991, 39

One way that white women have resisted the rewards of seduction is through homosexuality.[15] Lesbianism may or may not be a conscious or political choice, but the consequences are *always* political.[16] Lesbianism is subversive because it undermines the unconquerable biological divide of patriarchal inheritance laws through biological ties. How can race (and to a certain extent class) privilege be maintained if there are no "pure" biological offspring? Furthermore, the seat of patriarchal subordination is in the intimacy of the domestic sphere—how can lesbians be kept in check if the patriarch is only present in the public sphere? MacKinnon asserts that women's subordination, moreover, is not a result of patriarchy (which is an outcome) but, rather, of sexuality (1982, 529). Women are inferior because they are nothing more than their sex. Their value, if any, is measured by who they can please sexually. Therefore, if lesbians are sex objects only for other women, they are of no value whatsoever for men. In MacKinnon's words, "Lesbians so violate the sexuality implicit in female gender stereotypes as not be considered women at all" (530).

White feminists have struggled with these profound questions, and some have advocated complete abstention from men, restricting them to only the social sphere or living with them outside the legal sanctions of marriage. Lesbians, however, in having distance from white patriarchy, are more likely to have the psychological, social, and physical space to invent themselves outside the confines of gender seduction.

For lesbians of Color their rejection of men as sexual partners alienates them from their communities of origin (Barrera, 1991, 118; Hernández, 1991, 139). As Carla Trujillo indicates:

> *Our culture seeks to diminish us by placing us in a context of an Anglo construction, a supposed vendida [sell-out] to the race. More realistically, it is probably due to the fact that we do not align ourselves with the controlling forces of compulsory heterosexuality. Further, as Chicanas, we grow up defined, and subsequently confined, in a male context: daddy's girl, some guy's sister, girlfriend, wife, or mother. By being lesbians, we refuse to need a man to form our own identities as women. This constitutes a "rebellion" many Chicanas/os cannot handle.* (1991, ix)

Many lesbians of Color are not only thought of as traitors to their ethnic and racial communities but also are often accused of catching "white women's disease" (Sternback, 1989) and are openly ostracized by many members of their ethnic and racial communities. Many times the only peaceful coexistence between lesbians of Color and their communities of origin comes from their remaining closeted and not living their choices openly. The stress of either having to move away from family and community or to remain closeted adds an enormous burden in these women's lives (Barrera, 1991).

The distance white lesbians have from white men and the distance from their ethnic and racial communities that many lesbians of Color are forced into creates a bond across ethnic and racial

lines. Many lesbian communities, especially in academic environments, tend to be much more ethnically and racially mixed than society at large. Furthermore, lesbian communities are more likely to transgress the usual rules of coupling, with a greater number of cross-ethnic and racial relationships, more cross-generational relationships, and more cross-class relationships than in society generally. Part of this transgression also includes challenging the hegemonic standards of beauty for a more diverse and inclusive view of desirable aesthetics (Castillo, 1991, 39). This intimate contact among lesbians of different ethnic and racial groups, although not unproblematic, lends itself to developing common political goals that go beyond issues of sexuality because of the intimate knowledge that daily interaction brings about class and ethnic and race differences.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORIZING WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION AND THE RELATIONSHIP TO POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Clearly, whether women are subordinated by white patriarchy through seduction or rejection, the results are detrimental to women's humanity. Advantages gained by women of Color because of their distance from white patriarchy amount to nothing more than the "deformed equality of equal oppression [to that of men of Color]'' (A. Y. Davis, 1971, 8). The privileges that white women acquire because of their closeness to white patriarchy give them only empty choices. As a seventy-three-year-old Black woman observes: "My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gonna' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person" (quoted in Collins, 1986, 17). Seen as obstinate mules or as obedient dogs, both groups are objectified. Neither is seen as fully human; both are eligible for race-, class-, and gender-specific modes of domination (ibid., 18). In a patriarchal society all women are oppressed, and ultimately that is what unites them.

Neither a valid analysis of women's subordination nor an ethnically and racially diverse feminist movement is likely to emerge if white middle-class feminists do not integrate their own privilege from association with white patriarchy into their analysis of gender subordination (Hurtado and Stewart, 1996). This requires an awareness that their subordination, based on seduction, has separated them from other women who are subordinated by rejection. This separation can be bridged, but first white women must develop a new kind of consciousness and renounce the privilege that comes from their relationship to white men.

If women of Color are to embrace a feminist movement, then they, too, must expand their consciousness of gender oppression. They, too, must understand differences in the dynamics of seduction and rejection and, in particular, that seduction is no less oppressive than rejection. Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana scholar, advocates a consciousness that simultaneously rejects and embraces, so as not to exclude, what it critically assesses. It is a mestiza consciousness that can perceive multiple realities at once:

> *It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture's views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant....But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once, and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes....The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.* (Anzaldúa, 1987, 78-79)

The experiences of women of Color in the United States expose other aspects of patriarchal society that are only beginning to emerge in feminist theory and feminist political action. It is only through feminist theory's integration of a critique of the different forms of oppression experienced by women that a progressive political women's movement can grow, thrive, and last. But what are some of the principles that this "cross-over feminism" must put forth (Caraway, 1991, chap.

6)? Moreover, a feminist paradigm does not separate political mobilization from theorizing, so it necessarily follows that the way we think about women's subordination will also be influenced by the advocacy of political praxis.

Collins suggests an example of the distinction between knowledge with and without wisdom:

> *In Collins' discussion of the final criteria for an Afrocentric feminist epistemology, the ethic of personal accountability, she presents the most rigorous test of adequacy for feminist theory. Not only must individuals develop knowledge claims in a democratic, accessible, dialogic manner and present them with a core of empathy—"urging one another on"—but also the theorist must, as Collins says, be accountable.* (Caraway, 1991, 49-50)

Accountability is related to the expectation of personal responsibility to the ethnic and racial community by each individual member as they become successful. That is, individuals of Color are considered an integral part of a well-defined community that holds them accountable for their political choices.[17] In Kurt Lewin's (1948) terms, accountability is the outcome of a common fate as the basis for group formation. Each individual member's behavior reflects on the community as a whole, and therefore community members have a right to scrutinize that behavior. More to the point, however, is that most feminists of Color internalize accountability, and it is an integral part of their theorizing.

Accountability is the political aspect of reflexivity now being advocated in cultural studies discourse. As Caraway points out, "Reflexivity is the keyword here, inscribing our feminist theories with the constant imperative to keep looking back over our shoulders to see what and whom we have left out of the identities we present to the world" (1991, 193). While reflexivity implies an individual self-assessment of one's perspective in the course of theorizing, accountability is a collective process of a similarly defined group with politically agreed-upon goals to make an individual aware of their perspective. Accountability implies that we are incapable of assessing our own blind spots and that a group is essential in helping us "see" the political implications of our perspective for our group. Oddly enough, there has been a tremendous confusion in both accountability and reflexivity about individual freedom.

In fact, it was the implementation of both of these processes among progressive communities that led to the often misunderstood movement of political correctness—an almost constant reflexivity that makes social interaction extremely cumbersome.[18] The goal of political correctness is actually the opposite of curtailing individual freedom (MacKinnon, 1993; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993). The goal is to increase the potential for freedom for individuals who are normally excluded from our collective conception of freedom—the physically challenged, the overweight, the unattractive, the racially and ethnically different. The resulting cumbersomeness is a result of how our man-made language is based on hierarchy and domination (Spender, 1980). In fact, the worst application of reflexivity is when all social interaction is nothing more than reflexive analysis without being able to communicate fully political intent. The political correctness movement has been distorted not only by conservative forces but also by many of its own practitioners. The constant surveillance of language, which was supposed to free speakers from their biases, ends up being experienced as repression—the exact thing it is supposed to be fighting. The circularity of this social process is the result of change in language without an accompanying discussion of the underlying political issues involved in the advocacy for

change. In fact, the political correctness movement at its core is supposed to be an educational movement in which there is collective enlightenment about our unconscious biases—in other words, accountability. Instead, it becomes a battle of words that defeats the purpose of the war. Accountability, on the other hand, is a political assessment in reference to the group memberships the individual identifies with, to whose members, therefore, she or he has implicitly agreed to listen. In many ways accountability has nothing to do with personal lifestyle but only with those actions that are political in nature and that affect the group directly.[19]

There are some feminists of Color (and politically progressive men of Color) who have refused the process of accountability and have disengaged from the group. Examples are scholars such as Shelby Steele (1990; 1998) and Richard Rodriguez (1982). They ignore how their public stands negatively affect their respective ethnic and racial groups politically. Unlike other scholars of Color who belong to academic communities of Color and who use their colleagues as sounding boards for the political implications of their work, Rodriguez and Steele refuse such networks and perceive them as curtailing their individual freedom. I might point out that their personal lifestyles, which we know very little about, are not the basis for scholars of Color's critique of their work. Rather, it is their lack of accountability to the communities they are harming, by their negative assertions about the communities they are identified with. These individuals may or may not act politically on behalf of their ethnic and racial and gender group, but, clearly, they no longer participate in the feedback loop many feminists of Color advocate in their writings, a feedback loop provided by same-status members as well as by the general ethnic and racial community outside the confines of the academic environment (Boynton, 1995). That is, many of these scholars of Color who speak against their communities in such forums as congressional hearings (for example, Richard Rodriguez speaking against bilingual education) do not participate in any ethnic organizations, work in ethnic communities, or associate with ethnic studies activities. Their ideological positions are not influenced by everyday interactions or by close scholarly contact with individuals whose work is to defend and promote the advancement of ethnic and racial groups.

Boynton reviews the emergence of a new group of public intellectuals, African American writers and thinkers who explore in the public arena the consequences of race in the United States for themselves and for their communities of origin, most of which are working-class, segregated communities. Caraway quotes Patricia Hill Collins about this process:

> First black feminist thought must be validated by ordinary African-American women who grow to womanhood "in a world where the saner you are, the madder you are made to appear." To be credible in the eyes of the group, scholars must be personal advocates for their material, be accountable for the consequences of their work, have lived or experienced their material in some fashion, and be willing to engage in dialogues about their findings with ordinary, everyday people (1991, 51).

Caraway argues that accountability is the cornerstone of collectivism and an essential part of a crossover (or multicultural) feminism. Yet she recognizes astutely that, "in a culture of white privilege, this condition imposes a greater burden on white feminists to take the first step toward making things right" (179).

Accountability, for the most part, works well within ethnic and racial struggles and could offer mainstream white feminism a new level of development in interethnic and interracial coalition

building. Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton has written that oppressed peoples are "natural hermeneuticists, skilled by hard schooling in the necessity of interpreting their oppressors' language. They are spontaneous semioticians, forced for sheer survival to decipher the sign systems of the enemy and adept at deploying their own opaque idioms against them" (1984, section 1, 45). The real question, however, is how to implement accountability without reversing hierarchies and reproducing systems of power, because, as Caraway points out, in commenting on Eagleton's quote: "This understanding speaks to those truths and is vital to a progressive politics. But it is not in itself theoretically adequate to prevent the erection of equally repressive 'other' hierarchies" (1991, 181). That is, I believe, the uncharted terrain that a multicultural feminism should address. While some white feminists argue that the only road to a multicultural feminism is to reverse the existing racial and ethnic and class hierarchies and position women of Color on top (Spelman, 1988), others argue that reversal is nothing more than substituting one oppression by another (Caraway, 1991, 181).[20]

This dichotomous approach to power reversals is based on two fallacies. First, that having power will result in its abuse and that those who have been dominated will learn nothing by being in power. This position inadvertently assumes the fundamental "sameness" based on gender. Women in subordinate or dominant structural positions will not act the same as other women if their structural positions are temporarily reversed (Castillo, 1991, 32). Privilege as well as subordination takes a lifetime to socialize and are such ingrained patterns that it takes conscious action to change them. I contend that having experienced oppression does result in making an individual much more sensitive to its effects. This is one of the arguments for promoting women into positions of authority—that they will act differently than men who have traditionally held these positions. Furthermore, power reversals among white feminist and feminists of Color can only happen in very restricted arenas because, obviously, a feminist politics is not likely to be implemented in society at large. These reversals are likely to happen in classrooms, conferences, and feminist organizing. All of these arenas build in accountability and restrictions. Power reversals do not mean that one group punishes another in any form but, rather, that authority is shifted so that previously silenced groups become the centerpiece of the social interaction.

The second fallacy is that the reversals are only for the benefit of the previously dominant; that only they will learn from being decentered. I would argue that both the positive and negative aspects of being in the center will be learned by temporary, constrained reversals.[21] I take an existential approach to power. Power entails both privilege and responsibility; it entails both freedom and restriction. That is why reversals are an essential part of redefining power; both dominant and subordinate have to learn the other side of the mirror in order to build consciously a new social arrangement that is more democratic in nature than what we have experienced so far. Not only will white feminists learn from experiencing what it is like to be even further down the social hierarchy, but women of Color may learn the seductive aspects of power at the same time that they are conscious of them—a reversal that does not at all have the same social psychological dynamics as when power is "naturally" conferred and therefore not conscious. I believe that reversal is a necessary prerequisite to healthy and authentic coalitions, however uncomfortable it may be for all parties involved.

Why are reversals so necessary for coalition politics? What is being accomplished through temporary, context-restrained reversals is the knowledge of what it is to be treated according to group membership either for privilege or for oppression. Many white feminists handle gender

accountability well, and some embrace it as an essential part of a radical feminist politics. This is not the case with race accountability. That is, many white feminists find it difficult even to see their white privilege and how the history of such privilege creates a divide between themselves and feminists of Color (Caraway, 1991). Caraway provides a magnificent analysis of how first-wave feminism was torn apart by white feminists' and abolitionists' inability to fully integrate their white privilege into account in their political mobilization efforts with African American feminists.[22] Also, most white feminists carry their communities in their heads, living as they do dispersed among white men and nonfeminists. Most communities of Color are still extremely geographically isolated, which makes "checking out" accountability pragmatically much easier; there are well-defined constituencies that can voice their political goals as a group that feminists of Color can listen to. In fact, white feminist theory is still struggling with fully developing a paradigm that sees gender subordination primarily as a structural mechanism in which individual, or personal, characteristics are for the most part irrelevant. One of the reasons for this is that a feminist paradigm tries to avert the masculinist pitfall that is so mechanistic in nature that it does not leave room for individual experience or for feelings. In averting such a danger, at times a feminist paradigm can fall into personalism[23] —the exaltation of personal experience over any other kind of evidence—or into a relativism of oppression that can only be understood through context-specific interaction, which leaves us without a comprehensive theory for understanding the very real structural oppression that exists based on the simultaneity of gender, race, and class *group membership.*

Many white feminists' discussions of differences between feminists of Color and themselves fall into personalism; they dredge up personally damaging things that feminists of Color say and write about white women in general and white feminists in particular. Take, for example, Caraway's account, which she readily admits is a selection of quotes that is entirely arbitrary and out of context, of the negative things that have been written by women of Color about white women:

> *[White women] were like clear, dead water . . . they were frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity. Occasionally one would rise to the level of bitchery.* (Walker, 1976, 103-4)

> *I couldn't stand the idea of a white person touching me. Eventually I realized that it wasn't the white skin I hated, but it was their culture of deceit, greed, racism, and violence. . . . Their manner of living appeared devoid of life and bordered on hostility even for one another. . . . The white people always seemed so loud, obnoxious, and vulgar. . . . After spending a day around white people, I was always happy to go back to the reservation where people followed a relaxed yet respectful code of relating with each other . . . a welcome relief after a day with the plastic faces.* (Cameron, 1981, 46)

Caraway cites these and several other quotes by Black women that denigrate white women (1991, 189); although she admits that she may have taken things out of context, I do not think the question is whether these negative perceptions exist or how widespread they are. The fact of the matter is that they do exist, and even a cursory review of women of Color's writings will show that they are not the exception. The real question, and one whose answer will yield more possibilities of alliance, is, why do they exist, and what do they tell us about the intergroup relations between women of Color and white women?

Personalism leads us to evaluate these quotes as being unkind, and Caraway goes so far as seeing them on the verge of representing reverse racism. I think the answer lies in the notion that Caraway explores in linking postmodernist thought and Black feminist theory[24]—"that all knowledge can be *located*, as a point of view, as perspectival. . . . It mandates that our theories be self-critical and self-referential about where (and on whom) we stand in communities and cultures" (53). I would add that not only is this done at the individual level for people of Color, but, equally important, it is done at the group level as well. Like many white feminists, Caraway is making an *individually* based reflexive judgment about the quotes; she concludes that there is not much "goodness" in them, which is a personality characteristic, and equates this quality with women of Color's capacity also to oppress white women *politically*, which is a structural characteristic. Significantly, it does not matter how good you are, as a person, if the political structures provide privilege to you individually based on the group oppression of others; in fact, individuals belonging to dominant groups can be infinitely good because they never are required to be personally bad. That is the irony of structural privilege: the more you have, the less you have to fight for it. Conversely, it does not matter how "good" you are as a subordinate; your actions are almost entirely independent of your individual character, and social judgments about you are based on your group membership (Haney and Hurtado, 1994).[25] That is what many white feminists do not understand. Their structural privilege is independent of their individual actions, and therefore accountability feels like a burden to them, because there is not a one-to-one correspondence between behavior, attitudes, values, and merit. Regardless of a white individual's actions, many times she will still be judged as a racist because, as a white person, she benefits from a system of privilege that functions beyond people as individuals (Harris, 1990).[26] Peggy McIntosh is one of the few white feminist writers who openly acknowledges that "In my class and place, I did not see myself as racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring racial dominance on my group from birth" (1992, 81). That is what dominance and liberation are about; they are not about individuals. In a structural system of oppression, there is hardly any room for individual will—that is why liberatory politics are necessary.

Some day we will be able to judge one another as individuals, and we will either like one another or detest one another on the basis of individual merit not based on the group memberships that confer privilege or domination on us. Until then clashes are inevitable, and also unfair, because the structures we are fighting are arbitrary, man-made, and have little if anything to do with individuals' character, personality, or behavior—that is the tragedy of racism, classicism, heterosexism, and sexism. Yet with more power comes more responsibility. The truth of the matter is that judgments about the individual character of women of Color, such as that they are "nasty" or "backstabbing," are difficult to make because so much of their character, their personalities, in this country are made in relation to oppression. The quotes Caraway (1991) provides may indeed accurately reflect feminists of Color's intergroup perceptions but not necessarily be true in individual interactions. Sandoval (1991) calls the ability of many women of Color to shift between group versus individual perceptions a *differential consciousness*. The ability to shift is what allows many women of Color to have intimate friends, colleagues, and even husbands who are white without blunting their perceptions of the group's damage to people of Color as a group. Similarly, for white women it is hard to say, for example, how "nice" or how "strong" they are when they have been shaped in relation to white patriarchy. MacKinnon (1982) takes the radical position that in fact we do not know what or who woman is because the concept has not existed outside of what men desire women to be. If woman is constructed as men's

projection of their desires and we are trained to make ourselves that desire, what are we independent of that projection? That is the project of a radical, multicultural feminist theory and politics.

The categories used for subordination—class, race, and gender/sexuality—are not equal; they have different historical bases and consequences, which are an integral part of how they are used to dominate. The challenge to feminist theory is to document those differences rather than mesh them into an existing hierarchical system of oppression or into a "whole" system that supersedes these histories (Zavella, 1988, 126, 130). Worse yet is a domination framework that is relativist in nature and can only be played out through "social interaction" —that is, the notion that we can only understand group memberships such as race, class, and gender within the specific social context in which they are enacted. Donna Haraway astutely observes that:

> Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The "equality" of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical inquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well. Relativism and totalization are both "god tricks" promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully, common myths in rhetorics surrounding Science. (1988, 584)

From contextually-based relativism, any attempt to document social structure falls into "essentialist" thinking and is therefore invalid. If race, class, and gender do not exist outside of social interaction because these categories do not exist outside of specific social contexts, it leaves us in a quandary as to how to explain the mechanisms by which social structure uses these categories of individuals to oppress at a group level. There is no doubt that there are individual variations in how they express these group memberships, but there is also no doubt that regardless of individual variations, oppression is enforced at a group level. That is, regardless of how individuals express their ethnicity and race, there is no doubt that being of Color has definite structural consequences as reflected in differences in income, education, health, and other quality-of-life outcomes. The attempts of social interactionists to explain the simultaneity of oppression from various derogated categories only subverts the political project of dismantling power for the purpose of a more equitable distribution. It privileges social science "understanding" for the radical feminist praxis of political activism. It also feeds into a liberal paradigm that at its core is elitist and "standard" driven rather than committed to a radical restructuring of existing power arrangements.

If it is only in the *doing* of social interaction that we can understand inequality, then, obviously, we only need to *not do* social inequality and it will not exist. The fact of the matter is that it is only through the redistribution of material wealth that social inequality will cease. More than likely, social interaction will follow, and, if it does not, what does it matter if white people do not like people of Color so long as everybody has equal access to health care, education, and decent employment? The challenge to feminism, to reiterate Anna Cooper's point, is not to stop the struggle, not till all of humanity is granted life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Not till then will woman's cause be won—"not the white woman's, not the black woman's, not the red woman's, but the causes of every man and every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong" (Hutchinson, 1982, 87-88).

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[1] I concur with Catherine MacKinnon's theoretical assertion that "feminism fundamentally identifies sexuality as the primary social sphere of male power….Gender socialization is the process through which women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings that exist for men. It is that process through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality as their identity *as* women….Sex as gender and sex as sexuality are thus defined in terms of each other, but it is sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around" (1982, 529-531). Therefore, like MacKinnon, I too use *gender* and *sexuality* interchangeably. See Littleton (1989) for a thorough discussion of the implications of MacKinnon's assertions for feminist theory.

[2] By *women of Color* I mean nonwhite women, especially Blacks, Latinas (e.g., Chicanas, Puerto Ricans), Native Americans, and Asian Americans (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, Filipina, Vietnamese). I do not include Jewish women because their historical and cultural experience is different from the women of Color I describe. Jewish women merit a separate analysis, perhaps within the context of the discussion of the heterogeneity among white feminists. Women worldwide share commonalties; however, there are very important cultural and economic differences that should not be ignored. I focus on women in the United States in order to understand the differences between white women and women of Color in this country. What the implications of my analysis are for women elsewhere is for them to decide.

I also do not explore the implications of my argument for men of Color and white men because that would require explicating an entirely different set of relations, which includes the use of repressive force like prisons, blocked economic opportunity, homicide, and drug use. A progressive men's movement and studies will benefit us enormously in discussing these differences between different ethnic and racial men in our society.

[3] In discussing these linkages, my language emphasizes differences—those among women but also the different relationships between various groups of women and white men. I do not mean to imply that these groups are thought of as undifferentiated categories. I take Angela Harris's suggestion to "make our categories explicitly tentative, relational, and unstable" (1990, 239). I also acknowledge diversity within them as I examine, for purposes of this study, the more important problem of the differences in relationship that white women and women of Color have to white men. Readers from the social sciences will recognize this problem in analysis of variance terms in which internal diversity must be considered in order to know if two (or more) groups differ from each other. Although differences within groups are intrinsic to the statistical decision about differences between groups, we social scientists can be faulted for using language at times that implies that merely statistically different categories are unitary and universal. This tendency fosters essentialist thinking about social categories when in fact members of categories always vary in the extent to which they possess prototypic features of the category. See Rosch, 1973, for a discussion of psychological research on categories, and Scott, 1986, for a discussion of the need for feminists to find a way of analyzing constructions of meaning and relationships of power that call "unitary, universal categories into question" (Scott, 1988, 33).

[4] Limitations of space preclude a discussion of the relationship between women of Color and men of Color. Women of Color have started to portray eloquently the solidarity as well as conflict between women and men of Color. For an especially insightful analysis on Chicanas, see Pesquera, 1985; Segura, 1986; and Zavella, 1987. Suffice it to say that men of Color are also influenced by the different conceptions of gender that depict women of Color as less feminine and less desirable than

white women (see Joseph, 1981; and hooks, 1984). This problematic is one that I believe has been belabored in the last twenty years. It must ultimately be resolved by men of Color rather than by women (see Memmi, 1965 and Cleaver, 1968).

5	In Ostrander's (1984) study of (white) women of the upper class, her respondents felt that one of their main functions was to maintain the "lineage" of their families, and therefore their decision to marry a particular man (and vice versa) was based not so much on their material assets (those were taken for granted to a large extent) but, rather, on how much they could contribute to maintaining a way of life by their club memberships, the social circles they could open up for their husbands, and what associations they belonged to—all of the assets that a woman of Color would not contribute to a marriage.

6	MacKinnon rightly points out, in quoting Cade (1970, 168), that "the pain, isolation, and thingification of women who have been pampered and pacified into nonpersonhood—women 'grown ugly and dangerous from being nobody for so long'—is difficult for the materially deprived to see as a form of oppression, particularly for women whom no man has ever put on a pedestal" (1982, 520).

7	An integral part of most white women's socialization is to serve as reflective mirrors to their mates so that their accomplishments take on a larger-than-life proportion. Ostrander documents this in her ethnography of upper-class white women, in which the women see their function as affirming and stroking their husbands to allow them to feel powerful outside the home. She states: "The upper class [white] women I spoke with centered their lives around their husbands and their husband's work and adapted themselves to the men's needs, performing what Jessie Bernard has called the 'stroking' function. The stroking function, according to Bernard, consists of showing solidarity, giving help, rewarding, agreeing, understanding and passively accepting" (1984, 39). It is, then, very difficult for most white women to turn against most white men, whom they have been socialized to respect and uplift as an integral part of their sense of self (MacKinnon, 1983, 645).

8	Classical writings in Marxism and feminism recognize that women's class position in the United States, with their concomitant privileges and restrictions, is derived from their relationship to men (MacKinnon, 1982, 521). This analysis, however, fails to take into account the hypodescent rule in the United States, in which the offspring of a race-dominant parent and a race-subordinate parent is assigned the race-subordinate designation (Davis, 1991, 5). So, for example, the son of a white man and a Black woman would be *legally* Black, with all the restrictions that implies, regardless of class. In these circumstances, if a Black women, regardless of class, marries a prominent white man, her class and that of her children would not necessarily be completely related to her legal connection with her husband, but, rather, it would be superseded by her legal designation as Black (Harris, 1993, 1738-41).

9	Numerous studies show that phenotype characteristics such as skin color and facial characteristics are related to structural advancement. The lighter skin more European-looking individuals have higher incomes and higher educational attainment than darker skin and more ethnic looking African Americans and Latinos (Arce, Murguía and Frisbie, 1987; Codina and Montalvo, 1994; Domhoff, and Zweighenhaft, 1998; Hall, 1994; Montalvo, 1991; Relethford, Stern, Gaskill, and Hazuda, 1983; Rodriguez, 1992; Telles, and Murguía, 1990; Telles and Murguía, 1996).

10	White (1985, 162) concludes from this exchange that it is a metaphor for how Black women were completely unprotected and how only Black women had their womanhood so totally denied. From my

perspective it shows how the lack of protection gave Black women the opportunity to develop strengths denied to the white women in the same meeting and the potential to challenge men's power. Angela Davis (1981, 11) makes this same point.

[11]   Catherine MacKinnon argues that it is women's sexuality that is the marking mechanism for their domination, while gender is the outcome of their subordinated sexuality: "sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality" (1982, 533).

[12]   Afrocentric scholarship is beginning to document how gender and all aspects of social life were conceptualized prior to slavery. These labors will educate all of us on the distortion that slavery imposed on the lives of its victims.

[13]   As the United States expanded to the west by colonizing native people and importing labor, other women of Color experienced similar treatment. Marta Cotera documents that among the martyrs and victims of social injustice were such women as Juanita of Downieville, California, who was lynched in 1851; Chipita Rodriguez, who was the only woman to be executed in Texas; and countless other Chicanas who were killed by Texas Rangers during their raids on Chicano communities (1977, 24).

[14]   In 1933 Black feminist educator Mary McLeod Bethune gave the following address:
One hundred years ago [the black woman] was the most pathetic figure on the American continent. She was not a person, in the opinion of many, but a thing, a thing whose personality had no claim to the respect of mankind. She was a house-hold drudge—a means for getting distasteful work done; she was an animated agricultural implement to augment the service of mules and plows in cultivating and harvesting the cotton crop. Then she was an automatic incubator, a producer of human live stock, beneath whose heart and lungs more potential laborers could be bred and nurtured and brought to the light of toilsome day. (Lerner, 1973, 579-80)

[15]   Another way is through spinsterhood, although spinsterhood does not necessarily lead to the rejection and banishment from the nuclear family that often follows the disclosure of homosexuality.

[16]   Primarily because, as MacKinnon points out, "As the organized expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class—workers—the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman. Heterosexuality is its structure, gender and family its congealed forms, sex roles its qualities generalized to social persona, reproduction a consequence, and control its issue" (1982, 516).

[17]   Personal choices are also scrutinized when they have political implications—for example, the issue of interracial and interethnic couplings.

[18]   The conservative press has had a field day mocking the outcome of modifying speech to dismantle hierarchies based on group membership. Rather than address the goals of making language more egalitarian, the focus has been on pointing to ridiculous examples of its implementation. It has been a particularly effective strategy to ridicule egalitarian speech to avert the discussion of why we need to modify our language in the first place (for examples of this conservative media see Beard, 1992; Beckwith and Bauman 1993).

[19]   Some may argue that everything is political. Many feminists of Color, however, are reluctant to invade the only recently acquired right to have a private sphere. Also, many people of Color who only

recently have had access to material goods find it oppressive to have their personal lifestyles scrutinized—material acquisitions and comforts have a different meaning if, historically, you have never had access to them. Caraway (1991) discusses this point when she addresses the issue of African-American women's "vanity," which, she notes, is really the reacquisition of self after their looks have been derogated for so long and the beauty standard has been set by white women. "Vanity" or keeping up one's appearance, has a very different meaning for women of Color; as hooks (1988) points out, the "demeaning" activity of pressing one's hair was turned on it head, so to speak, by the community-building aspects of getting together with other women to talk in the kitchen while they performed this weekly ritual.

[20] White feminists, too, have circles of accountability, but they are much more circumscribed because there is such internal diversity, as Alison Jaggar (1983) points out in her book *Feminists Politics and Human Nature.*

[21] The Men's Movement is a perfect example of not understanding the existential and therefore dialectical nature of power. Their project has been to voice the downside of power, the responsibilities, the burdens, and constant competition, which entail the denial of emotion, constant belligerence, and rugged individualism. Unfortunately, they do not incorporate into their critique the enormous satisfaction and material privilege that their masculine (and sometimes race) privilege brings them. Consequently, much of the writing in the Men's movement does not lead to a liberatory politics.

[22] Caraway 1991, in particular see chap. 5, "'Now I Am Here': Black Women and the First Wave of Feminism."

[23] In fact, radical feminists do not see this collusion of the personal/experiential as undesirable but, rather, as what *should* be cultivated in a feminist community (Jaggar, 1983).

[24] I do not wish to engage the modernist underpinnings of much of the writings of women of Color and compare it and contrast it to the postmodernist critique. Caraway (1991) does an excellent analysis of how both theoretical positions can benefit from each other. I'm more interested in what feminists of Color can offer in our understanding of subordination and its implications for political mobilization—political mobilization on behalf of what there is for all of us, collectively, to find out.

[25] See Haney and Hurtado, 1994, for how merit is racially constructed and to a large extent male.

[26] Angela Harris makes this point in analyzing Catherine MacKinnon's and Robin West's work on feminist jurisprudence: "First, my argument should not be read to accuse either MacKinnon or West of 'racism' in the sense of personal antipathy to black people. Both writers are steadfastly anti-racist, which in a sense is my point. Just as law itself, in trying to speak for all persons, ends up silencing those without power, feminist legal theory is in danger of silencing those who have traditionally been kept from speaking, or who have been ignored when they spoke, including black women" (1990, 238).