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Author(s): Barbara Smith

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Racism and Women's Studies

Barbara Smith

Although my proposed topic is black women's studies, I have decided to focus my remarks in a different way. Given that this is a gathering of predominantly white women and given what has occurred during this conference, it makes much more sense to discuss the issue of racism: racism in women's studies and racism in the women's movement generally.

"Oh no," I can hear some of you groaning inwardly. "Not that again. That's all we've talked about since we got here." This of course is not true. If it had been all we had all talked about since we got here, we might be at a point of radical transformation on the last day of this Conference that we clearly are not. For those of you who are tired of hearing about racism, imagine how much more tired we are of constantly experiencing it, second by literal second, how much more exhausted we are to see it constantly in your eyes. The degree to which it is hard or uncomfortable for you to have the issue raised is the degree to which you know inside of yourselves that you aren't dealing with the issue, the degree to which you are hiding from the oppression that undermines Third World women's lives. I want to say right here that this is not a "guilt trip." It's a fact trip. The assessment of what's actually going on.

Why is racism being viewed and taken up as a pressing feminist issue at this time and why is it being talked about in the context of women's studies? As usual the impetus comes from the grassroots, activist women's movement. In my six years of being an avowed black feminist I have seen much change in how white women take responsibility for their racism, particularly within

the last year. The formation of C.R. groups to deal solely with this issue, study groups, community meetings and workshops, articles in our publications, letters in newspapers, and the beginning of real and equal coalitions between Third World and white women are all phenomena that have begun to really happen and I feel confident that there will be no turning back.

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.

Let me make it quite clear at this point before going any further something you must understand: white women don't work on racism to do a favor for someone else, to solely benefit Third World women. You have got to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women, that racism affects your chances for survival too and that it is very definitely your issue. Until you understand this no fundamental change will come about.

Racism is being talked about in the context of women's studies because of it being raised in the women's movement generally, but also because women's studies is a context in which white and Third World women actually come together, a context that should be about studying and learning about all of our lives. I feel at this

Barbara Smith is a black feminist writer and activist who lives in Roxbury, Massachusetts. She has been a member of the Combahee River Collective, a Boston black feminist organization, since 1974. The Collective began doing workshops on racism in the women's movement in 1977 which she feels provided the experience necessary to conceptualize this talk. Smith recently co-edited "The Black Women's Issue" of Conditions, a magazine of writing by women with an emphasis on writing by lesbians. She currently teaches for the Women's Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

This paper was given as one of the closing Sessions at the NWSA Conference.

point it's not only about getting Third World women's materials into the curriculum, although this must be done. This has been happening and it's clear that racism still thrives, just as the inclusion of women's materials in a college curriculum does not prevent sexism from thriving. The stage we're at now is having to decide to change fundamental attitudes and behavior, the way people treat each other. In other words, we're at a stage of having to take some frightening risks.

I'm sure that many women here are telling themselves they aren't racist because they are capable of being civil to black women, having been raised by their parents to be anything but. It's not about merely being polite: "I'm not racist because I do not snarl and snap at black people." It's much more subtle than that. It is not white women's fault that they have been raised for the most part not knowing how to talk to black women, not knowing how to look us in the eye and laugh *with* us. Racism and racist behavior is our white patriarchal legacy. What is your fault is making no serious effort to change old patterns of contempt. To look at how you still believe yourselves to be superior to Third World women and how you communicate these attitudes in blatant and subtle ways.

A major roadblock for women involved in women's studies to changing their individual racism and challenging it institutionally is the pernicious ideology of professionalism. That word "professionalism" covers such a multitude of sins. I always cringe when I hear *anyone* describe themselves as "professional," because what usually follows is an excuse for inaction, an excuse for ethical irresponsibility. It's a word and concept we don't need because it is ultimately a way of dividing ourselves from others and escaping from reality. I think the way to be "successful" is to do work with integrity and work that is good. Not to play cut-throat tricks and insist on being called "Doctor." When I got involved in women's studies six years ago and particularly during my three and a half years as the first Third World woman on the Modern Language Association Commission on the Status of Women, I quickly began to recognize what I call women's studies or academic feminists. Women who teach, research, and publish about women, but who are not involved in any way in making radical social and political change, women who are not involved in making the lives of living breathing women more viable. The grass-roots/community women's movement has given women's studies its life. How do we relate to it? How do we bring our gifts and our educational privilege back to it? Do we realize also how very much there is to learn in doing this essential work? Ask yourself what the women's movement is working on in your town or city. Are you a part of it? Ask yourself what women are living in

the worst conditions in your town and how does your work positively affect and directly touch their lives? If it doesn't, why not?

The question has been raised here whether this should be an activist association or an academic one. In many ways this is an immoral question, an immoral and false dichotomy. The answer lies in which emphasis and what kinds of work will lift oppression off of not only women, but all oppressed people: poor and working class people, people of color in this country and in the colonized Third World. If lifting this oppression is not a priority to you then it's problematic whether you are a part of the actual feminist movement.

There are two other roadblocks to our making feminism real which I'll mention briefly. First, there is Third World women's anti-feminism which I sometimes sense often gets mixed up with opposition to white women's racism and is fueled by a history of justified distrust. To me racist white women cannot be said to be actually feminist, at least not in the way I think and feel about the word. Feminism in and of itself would be fine. The problems arise with the mortals who practice it. As Third World women we must define a responsible and radical feminism for ourselves and not assume that bourgeois female self-aggrandizement is all that feminism is and therefore attack feminism wholesale.

The other roadblock is homophobia, that is anti-lesbianism, an issue that both white and Third World women still have to deal with. Need I explicate in 1979 how enforced heterosexuality is the extreme manifestation of male domination and patriarchal rule and that women must not collude in the oppression of women who have chosen each other, that is, lesbians. I also wish I had time here to speak about the connections between the lesbian-feminist movement, being woman identified and the effective anti-racist work that is being done by many, though not all lesbians.

In conclusion, I'll say that I don't consider my talk today to be in anyway conclusive or exhaustive. It has merely scratched the surface. I don't know exactly what's going on in your schools or in your lives. I can only talk about those qualities and skills that will help you to bring about change: integrity, awareness, courage, and redefining your own success.

I also feel that the women's movement will deal with racism in a way that it has not been dealt with before in any other movement—fundamentally, organically, and nonrhetorically. White women have a materially different relationship to the system of racism than white men. They get less out of it and often function as its pawns whether they recognize this or not. It is something that living under white male rule has imposed on us and overthrowing racism is the inherent work of feminism and by extension feminist studies.