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White Woman Listen!

Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood

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> I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence.... They burned all the documents.... We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood. (Jones 1975)

The black women's critique of *history* has not only involved us in coming to terms with "absences"; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us. History has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed. We have also been defined in less than human terms (Jordon 1969). Our continuing struggle with History began with its "discovery" of us. However, this chapter will be concerned with herstory rather than *history.* We wish to address questions to the feminist theories that have been developed during the last decade; a decade in which black women have been fighting, in the streets, in the schools, through the courts, inside and outside the wage relation. The significance of these struggles ought to inform the writing of the herstory of women in Britain. It is fundamental to the development of a feminist theory and practice that is meaningful for black women. We cannot hope to reconstitute ourselves in all our absences, or to rectify the ill-conceived presences that invade herstory from *history,* but we do wish to bear witness to our own herstories. The connections between these and the herstories of white women will be made and remade in struggle. Black women have come from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, and we cannot do justice to all their herstories in a single chapter. Neither can we represent the voices of all black women in Britain; our

herstories are too numerous and too varied. What we will do is to offer ways in which the "triple" oppression of gender, race, and class can be understood, in their specificity and also as they determine the lives of black women.

Much contemporary debate has posed the question of the relation between race and gender, in terms that attempt to parallel race and gender divisions. It can be argued that as processes, racism and sexism are similar. Ideologically for example, they both construct common sense through reference to "natural" and "biological" differences. It has also been argued that the categories of race and gender are both socially constructed and that, therefore, they have little internal coherence as concepts. Furthermore, it is possible to parallel racialized and gendered divisions in the sense that the possibilities of amelioration through legislation appear to be equally ineffectual in both cases. Michele Barrett, however, has pointed out that it is not possible to argue for parallels because as soon as historical analysis is made, it becomes obvious that the institutions which have to be analyzed are different, as are the forms of analysis needed. We would agree that the construction of such parallels is fruitless and often proves little more than a mere academic exercise; but there are other reasons for our dismissal of these kinds of debate. The experience of black women does not enter the parameters of parallelism. The fact that black women are subject to the *simultaneous* oppression of patriarchy, class, and "race" is the prime reason for not employing parallels that render their position and experience not only marginal but also invisible.

In arguing that most contemporary feminist theory does not begin to adequately account for the experience of black women, we also have to acknowledge that it is not a simple question of their absence, and consequently the task is not one of rendering their visibility. On the contrary we will have to argue that the process of accounting for their historical and contemporary position does, in itself, challenge the use of some of the central categories and assumptions of recent mainstream feminist thought. We can point to no single source for our oppression. When white feminists emphasize patriarchy alone, we want to redefine the term and make it a more complex concept. Racism ensures that black men do not have the same relations to patriarchal/capitalist hierarchies as white men. In the words of the Combahee River Collective:

> We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.
>
> Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalisation that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexisrn. (Combahee River Collective 1983, 213)

It is only in the writings by black feminists that we can find attempts to theorize the interconnection of class, gender, and race as it occurs in our lives, and it has only been in the autonomous organizations of black women that we have been able to express and act

upon the experiences consequent upon these determinants. Many black women had been alienated by the nonrecognition of their lives, experiences, and herstories in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). Black feminists have been and are still demanding that the existence of racism must be acknowledged as a structuring feature of our relationships with white women. Both white feminist theory and practice have to recognize that white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women. This compromises any feminist theory and practice founded on the notion of simple equality.

Three concepts central to feminist theory become problematic in their application to black women's lives: "the family," "patriarchy," and "reproduction." When used they are placed in a context of the herstory of white (frequently middle-class) women and become contradictory when applied to the lives and experiences of black women. In a recent comprehensive survey of contemporary feminist theory, *Women's Oppression Today,* Michele Barrett sees the contemporary family (effectively the family under capitalism) as the source of oppression of women:

> It is difficult to argue that the present structure of the family-household is anything other than oppressive for women. Feminists have consistently, and rightly, seen the family as a central site of women's oppression in contemporary society. The reasons for this lie both in the material structure of the household, by which women are by and large financially dependent on men, and in the ideology of the family, through which women are confined to a primary concern with domesticity and motherhood. This situation underwrites the disadvantages women experience at work and lies at the root of the exploitation of female sexuality endemic in our society. The concept of "dependence" is, perhaps, the link between the material Organization of the household and the ideology of femininity: an assumption of women's dependence on men structures both of these areas. (Barrett 1980, 214)

The immediate problem for black feminists is whether this framework can be applied at all to analyze our herstory of oppression and struggle. We would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us but we also wish to examine how the black family has functioned as a prime source of resistance to oppression. We need to recognize that during slavery, periods of colonialism, and under the present authoritarian state, the black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism. Furthermore, we cannot easily separate the two forms of oppression because racist theory and practice is frequently gender specific. Ideologies of black female sexuality do not stem primarily from the black family. The way the gender of black women is constructed differs from constructions of white femininity because it is also subject to racism. Black feminists have been explaining this since the last century, when Sojourner Truth pointed to the ways in which "womanhood" was denied the black woman.

> That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, and lifted over ditches, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And aint I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And aint 1 a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And aint I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And aint I a woman? (Loewenberg and Bogin 1978, 235)

In our earlier examination of common sense we indicated the racist nature of ideologies of black female sexuality. Black women are constantly challenging these ideologies in their day-to-day struggles. Asian girls in schools, for example, are fighting back to destroy the racist mythology of their femininity. As Pratibha Parmar has pointed out, careers officers do not offer them the same interviews and job opportunities as white girls. This is because they believe that Asian girls will be forced into marriage immediately after leaving school. The commonsense logic of this racism dictates that a career for Asian girls is thought to be a waste of time. But the struggle in schools is not just against the racism of the careers service:

> "Yes, and then there are some racist students who are always picking on us. Recently, we had a fight in our school between us and some white girls. We really showed them we were not going to stand for their rubbish."
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> Sangeeta and Wahida's statements reflect a growing confidence and awareness amongst young Asian girls about themselves and their situations in a climate of increased racist attacks on black people generally. Many Asian girls strongly resent being stereotyped as weak, passive, quiet girls who would not dare lift a finger in their own defense. They want to challenge the idea people have of them as girls "who do not want to stand out or cause trouble but to tip-toe about hoping nobody will notice them." (Parmar and Mirza 1981)

The use of the concept of "dependency" is also a problem for black feminists. It has been argued that this concept provides the link between the "material organization of the household, and the ideology of femininity." How then can we account for situations in which black women may be heads of households, or where, because of an economic system that structures high black male unemployment, they are not financially dependent upon a black man? This condition exists in both colonial and metropolitan situations. Ideologies of black female domesticity and motherhood have been constructed through their employment (or chattel position) as domestics and surrogate mothers to white families rather than in relation to their own families. West Indian women still migrate to the United States and Canada as domestics and in Britain are seen to be suitable as office cleaners, National Health Service domestics, etc. In colonial situations Asian women have frequently been forced into prostitution to sexually service the white male invaders, whether in the form of armies of occupation or employees and guests of multinational corporations. How then, in view of all this, can it be argued that black male dominance exists in the same forms as white male dominance? Systems of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism have systematically denied positions in the white male hierarchy to black men and have used specific forms of terror to oppress them.

Black family structures have been seen as pathological by the state and are in the process of being constructed as pathological within white feminist theory. Here, ironically, the Western nuclear family structure and related ideologies of "romantic love" formed under capitalism are seen as more "progressive" than black family structures. An unquestioned commonsense racism constructs Asian girls and women as having absolutely no freedom, whereas English girls are thought to be in a more "liberated" society and culture. However, one Asian schoolgirl points out:

> Where is the freedom in going to a disco, frightened in case no boy fancies you, or no one asks you to dance, or your friends are walked home with boys and you have to walk home in the dark alone? (Parmar and Mirza 1981)

The media's "horror stories" about Asian girls and arranged marriages bear very little relation to their experience. The "feminist" version of this ideology presents Asian women as being in need of liberation, not in terms of their own herstory and needs, but *into* the "progressive" social mores and customs of the metropolitan West. The actual , struggles that Asian women are involved in are ignored in favor of applying theories from the point of view of a more "advanced," more "progressive" outside observer. In fact... it is very easy for this ideology to be taken up and used by the state in furthering their racist and sexist practices. The way in which the issue of arranged marriages has been used by the government to legitimate increased restrictions on immigration from the subcontinent is one example of this process.

Too often concepts of historical progress are invoked by the Left and feminists alike, to create a shading scale of "civilized liberties." When barbarous sexual practices are to be described, the "Third World" is placed on display and compared to the "First World," which is seen as more "enlightened" or "progressive." The metropolitan centers of the West define the questions to be asked of other social systems and, at the same time, provide the measure against which all "foreign" practices are gauged. In a peculiar combination of Marxism and feminism, capitalism becomes the vehicle for reforms that allow for progress toward the emancipation of women. The "Third World," on the other hand, is viewed as retaining precapitalist forms expressed at the cultural level by traditions which are more oppressive to women. For example, in an article comparing socialist societies, Maxine Molyneux falls straight into this trap of "Third Worldism" as "backwardness."

> A second major problem facing Third World postrevolutionary states is the weight of conservative ideologies and practices; this is often subsumed in official literature under the categories of "traditionalism" or "feudal residues." The impact and nature of "traditionalism" is subject to considerable variation between countries but where it retains any force it may constitute an obstacle to economic and social development which has to be overcome in the formation of a new society. In some societies customary practices tend to bear especially heavily on women. Institutions such as polygyny, the brideprice, child marriages, seclusion, and forms of mutilation such as footbinding or female "circumcision" are woven into the very fabric of precapitalist societies. They often survive in Third World countries long after they have been made illegal and despite the overall changes that have occurred. (Molyneux 1982, 3)

Maxine Molyneux sees "systems of inheritance and arranged marriages" as being one of the central ways "by which forms of precapitalist property and social relations are maintained."

One immediate problem with this approach is that it is extraordinarily general. The level of generality applied to the "Third World" would be dismissed as too vague to be informative if applied to Western industrialized nations. However, Molyneux implies that since "Third World" women are outside of capitalist relations of production, entering capitalist relations is, necessarily, an emancipating move.

> There can be little doubt that on balance the position of women within imperialist, i.e., advanced capitalist societies is, for all its limitations, more advanced than in the less developed capitalist and noncapitalist societies. In this sense the changes brought by imperialism to Third World societies may, in some circumstances, have been historically progressive, (Molyneux 1981, 4)

This view of imperialism will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter. At this point we wish to indicate that the use of such theories reinforces the view that when black women enter Britain they are moving into a more liberated or enlightened or emancipated society than the one from which they have come. Nancy Foner saw the embodiment of West Indian women's increased freedom and liberation in Britain in the fact that they learned to drive cars! Different herstories, different struggles of black women against systems that oppress them are buried beneath Eurocentric conceptions of their position. Black family structures are seen as being produced by less advanced economic systems and their extended kinship networks are assumed to be more oppressive to women. The model of the white nuclear family, which rarely applies to black women's situation, is the measure by which they are pathologized and stands as a more progressive structure than the one in which they live.

It can be seen from this brief discussion of the use of the concept "the family" that the terms "patriarchy" and "reproduction" also become more complex in their application. It bears repetition that black men have not held the same patriarchal positions of power that the white males have established. Michele Barrett argues that the term "patriarchy" has lost all analytic or explanatory power and has been reduced to a synonym for male dominance. She tries therefore to limit its use to a specific type of male dominance that could be located historically.

> I would not... want to argue that the concept of patriarchy should be jettisoned. I would favor retaining it for use in contexts where male domination is expressed through the power of the father over women and over younger men.... Hence I would argue for a more precise and specific use of the concept of patriarchy, rather than one which expands it to cover all expressions of male domination and thereby attempts to construe a descriptive term as a systematic explanatory theory. (Barrett 1980)

Barrett is not thinking of capitalist social organization. But if we try to apply this more "classic" and limited definition of patriarchy to the slave systems of the Americas and the Caribbean, we find that even this refined use of the concept cannot adequately account for the fact that both slaves and manumitted males did not have this type of patriarchal power. Alternatively, if we take patriarchy and apply it to various colonial situations it is equally unsatisfactory because it is unable to explain why black males have not enjoyed the benefits of white patriarchy. There are very obvious power structures in both colonial and slave social formations and they are predominantly patriarchal. However, the historically specific forms of racism force us to modify or alter the application of the term "patriarchy" to black men. Black women have been dominated "patriarchally" in different ways by men of different "colors."

In questioning the application of the concepts of "the family" and "patriarchy" we also need to problematize the use of the concept of "reproduction." In using this concept in relation to the domestic labor of black women we find that in spite of its apparent simplicity it must be dismantled. What does the concept of reproduction mean in a situation where black women have done domestic labor outside of their own homes in the servicing of white families? In this example they lie outside of the industrial wage relation but in a situation where they are providing for the reproduction of black labor in their own domestic sphere, simultaneously ensuring the reproduction of white labor power in the "white" household. The concept, in fact, is unable to explain exactly what the relations are that need to be revealed. What needs to be understood is,

first, precisely how the black woman's role in a rural, industrial or domestic labor force affects the construction of ideologies of black female sexuality which are different from, and often constructed in opposition to, white female sexuality; and second, how this role relates to the black woman's struggle for control over her own sexuality.

If we examine the recent herstory of women in postwar Britain we can see the ways in which the inclusion of black women creates problems for hasty generalization. In pointing to the contradiction between "homemaking as a career" and the campaign to recruit women into the labor force during postwar reconstruction, Elizabeth Wilson fails to perceive migration of black women to Britain as the solution to these contradictory needs. The Economic Survey for 1947 is cited as an example of the ways in which women were seen to form "the only large reserve of labor left"; yet, as we know, there was a rather large pool of labor in the colonies that had been mobilized previously to fight in World War II. The industries that the survey listed as in dire need of labor included those that were filled by both male and female black workers, though Elizabeth Wilson does not differentiate them.

> The survey gave a list of the industries and services where labor was most urgently required. The boot and shoe industry, clothing, textiles, iron and steel, all required female workers, as did hospitals, domestic service, transport, and the women's land army. There was also a shortage of shorthand typists, and a dire shortage of nurses and midwives. (Wilson 1980, 43-44)

This tells us nothing about why black women were recruited more heavily into some of these areas than others; perhaps we are given a clue when the author goes on to point out that women were welcomed into the labor force in a "circumscribed way," as temporary workers at a period of crisis, as part-time workers, and as not disturbing the traditional division of labor in industry along sex lines. The survey reflected the view which was still dominant, that married women would not naturally wish to work (Wilson 1980, 43-44).

Not all black women were subject to this process: Afro-Caribbean women, for example, were encouraged and chose to come to Britain precisely to work. Ideologically they were seen as "naturally" suitable for the lowest paid, most menial jobs. Elizabeth Wilson goes on to explain that "work and marriage were still understood as alternatives ... two kinds of women ... a wife and a mother or a single career woman." Yet black women bridged this division. They were viewed simultaneously as workers and as wives and mothers. Elizabeth Wilson stresses that the postwar debate over the entry of women into the labor force occurred within the parameters of the question of possible effects on family life. She argues that "wives and mothers were granted entry into paid work only so long as this did not harm the family." Yet women from Britain's reserve army of labor in the colonies were recruited into the labor force far beyond any such considerations. Rather than a concern to protect or preserve the black family in Britain, the state reproduced commonsense notions of its inherent pathology: black women were seen to fail as mothers precisely because of their position as workers.

One important struggle, rooted in these different ideological mechanisms, which determine racially differentiated representations of gender, has been the black woman's battle to gain control over her own sexuality in the face of racist experimentation with the contraceptive Depo-Provera and enforced sterilizations (OWAAD 1979).

It is not just our herstory before we came to Britain that has been ignored by white feminists; our experiences and struggles here have also been ignored. These struggles and experiences, because they have been structured by racism, have been different from those of white women. Black feminists decry the non-recognition of the specificities of black women's sexuality and femininity, both in the ways these are constructed and also as they are addressed through practices which oppress black women in a gender-specific but nonetheless racist way. This nonrecognition is typified by a very interesting article on women in Third World manufacturing by Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson. In analyzing the employment of Third World women in world market factories they quote from an investment brochure designed to attract foreign firms:

> The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by *nature and inheritance* to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl? (Elson and Pearson 1981, 93)

The authors, however, analyze only the naturalization of gender and ignore the specificity signaled by the inclusion of the adjective "oriental," as if it didn't matter. The fact that the sexuality of the "oriental" woman is being differentiated is not commented upon and remains implicit rather than explicit as in the following remarks.

> It is in the context of the subordination of women as a gender that we must analyze the supposed docility, subservience and consequent suitability for tedious, monotonous work of young women in the Third World. (Elson and Pearson 1981, 93)

In concentrating an analysis upon gender only, Elson and Pearson do not see the relation between the situation they are examining in the periphery and the women who have migrated to the metropole. This last description is part of the commonsense racism that we have described as being applied to Asian women in Britain to channel them into "tedious, monotonous work." Elson and Pearson discuss this ascription of docility and passivity and compare it to Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonized people, without putting together the ways in which the women who are their objects of study have been oppressed not by gender subordination alone but also by colonization. The "oriental" sexuality referred to in the advertising brochure is one of many constructions of exotic sexual dexterity promised to Western male tourists to South East Asia. This ideology of "Eastern promise" links the material practice of the move from the bench—making microchips-—to the bed, in which multinational corporate executives are serviced by prostitutes. This transition is described by Elson and Pearson but not understood as a process that illustrates an example of racially demarcated patriarchal power.

> If a woman loses her job in a world market factory after she has reshaped her life on the basis of a wage income, the only way she may have of surviving is by selling her body. There are reports from South Korea, for instance, that many former electronics workers have no alternative but to become prostitutes.... A growing market for such services is provided by the way in which the tourist industry has developed, especially in South East Asia. (Elson and Pearson 1981, 95)

The photographs accompanying the article are of anonymous black women. This anonymity and the tendency to generalize into meaninglessness the oppression of an

amorphous category called "Third World women" are symptomatic of the ways in which the specificity of our experiences and oppression are subsumed under inapplicable concepts and theories. Black feminists in the United States have complained of the ignorance, in the white women's movement, of black women's lives.

> The force that allows white feminist authors to make no reference to racial identity in their books about "women" that are in actuality about white women is the same one that would compel any author writing exclusively on black women to refer explicitly to their racial identity. That force is racism.... It is the dominant race that can make it seem that their experience is representative, (hooks 1981,138)

In Britain too it is as if we don't exist.

There is a growing body of black feminist criticism of white feminist theory and practice, for its incipient racism and lack of relevance to black women's lives. The dialogues that have been attempted have concentrated more upon visible, empirical differences that affect black and white women's lives than upon developing a feminist theoretical approach that would enable a feminist understanding of the basis of these differences. The accusation that racism in the women's movement acted so as to exclude the participation of black women has led to an explosion of debate in the United States.

> ... from a black female perspective, if white women are denying the existence of black women, writing "feminist" scholarship as if black women are not a part of the collective group of American women, or discriminating against black women, then it matters less that North America was colonized by white patriarchal men who institutionalized a racially imperialist social order than that white women who purport to be feminists support and actively perpetuate anti-black racism, (hooks 1981, 123-24)

What little reaction there has been in Britain has been more akin to lighting a damp squib than an explosion. U.S. black feminist criticism has no more been listened to than indigenous black feminist criticism. Yet, bell hooks's powerful critique has considerable relevance to British feminists. White women in the British WLM are extraordinarily reluctant to see themselves in the situations of being oppressors, as they feel that this will be at the expense of concentrating upon being oppressed. Consequently the involvement of British women in imperialism and colonialism is repressed and the benefits that they—as whites—gained from the oppression of black people are ignored. Forms of imperialism are simply identified as aspects of an all-embracing patriarchy rather than as sets of social relations in which white women hold positions of power by virtue of their "race."

> Had feminists chosen to make explicit comparisons between ... the status of black women and white women, it would have been more than obvious that the two groups do not share an identical oppression. It would have been obvious that similarities between the status of women under patriarchy and that of any slave or colonized person do not necessarily exist in a society that is both racially and sexually imperialistic. In such a society, the woman who is seen as inferior because of her sex can also be seen as superior because of her race, even in relationship to men of another race, (hooks 1981,141)

The benefits of a white skin did not just apply to a handful of cotton, tea, or sugar plantation mistresses; all women in Britain benefited—in varying degrees—from the economic exploitation of the colonies. The proimperialist attitudes of many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists and suffragists have yet to be acknowledged for their racist implications. However, apart from this herstorical work, the exploration of contemporary racism within the white feminist movement in Britain has yet to begin.

Feminist theory in Britain is almost wholly Eurocentric and when it is not ignoring the experience of black women "at home," it is trundling "Third World women" onto the stage only to perform as victims of "barbarous," "primitive" practices in "barbarous," "primitive" societies.

It should be noted that much feminist work suffers from the assumption that it is only through the development of a Western-style industrial capitalism and the resultant entry of women into waged labor that the potential for the liberation of women can increase. For example, foot-binding, clitoridectomy, female "circumcision" and other forms of mutilation of the female body have been described as "feudal residues," existing in economically "backward" or "underdeveloped" nations (i.e., not the industrialized West). Arranged marriages, polygamy, and these forms of mutilation are linked in reductionist ways to a lack of technological development.

However, theories of "feudal residues" or of "traditionalism" cannot explain the appearance of female "circumcision" and clitoridectomy in the United States at the same moment as the growth and expansion of industrial capital. Between the establishment of industrial capitalism and the transformation to monopoly capitalism, the United States, under the influence of English biological science, saw the control of medical practice shift from the hands of women into the hands of men. This is normally regarded as a "progressive" technological advance, though this newly established medical science was founded on the control and manipulation of the female body. This was the period in which links were formed between hysteria and hysterectomy in the rationalization of the "psychology of the ovary."

> In the second half of the [nineteenth] century fumbling experiments with the female interior gave way to the more decisive technique of surgery—aimed increasingly at the control of female personality disorders.... The last clitoridectomy we know of in the United States was performed in 1948 on a child of five, as a cure for masturbation.
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> The most common form of surgical intervention in the female personality was ovariotomy, removal of the ovaries—or "female castration." In 1906 a leading gynecological surgeon estimated that there were 150,000 women in the United States who had lost their ovaries under the knife. Some doctors boasted that they had removed from fifteen hundred to two thousand ovaries apiece.... It should not be imagined that poor women were spared the gynecologist's exotic catalog of tortures simply because they couldn't pay. The pioneering -work in gynecological surgery had been performed by Marion Sims on black female slaves he kept for the sole purpose of surgical experimentation. He operated on one of them thirty times in four years. (Ehrenreich and English 1979)

These operations are hardly rituals left over from a precapitalist mode of production. On the contrary, they have to be seen as part of the "technological" advance in what is now commonly regarded as the most "advanced" capitalist economy in the world. Both in the United States and in Britain, black women still have a "role"—as in the use of

Depo-Provera on them—in medical experimentation. Outside the metropoles, black women are at the mercy of the multinational drug companies, whose quest for profit is second only to the cause of "advancing" Western science and medical knowledge.

The herstory of black women is interwoven with that of white women but this does not mean they are the same story. Nor do we need white feminists to write our herstory for us; we can and are doing that for ourselves. However, when they write their herstory and call it the story of women but ignore our lives and deny their relation to us, that is the moment in which they are acting within the relations of racism and writing history.

CONSTRUCTING ALTERNATIVES

It should be an imperative for feminist herstory and theory to avoid reproducing the structural inequalities that exist between the "metropoles" and the "peripheries," and within the "metropoles" between black and white women, in the form of inappropriate polarizations between the "First" and "Third World," developed/underdeveloped, or advanced/backward. We have already argued that the generalizations made about women's lives across societies in the African and Asian continents would be thought intolerable if applied to the lives of white women in Europe or North America. These are some of the reasons why concepts which allow for specificity, while at the same time providing cross-cultural reference points—not based in assumptions of inferiority—are urgently needed in feminist work. The work of Gayle Rubin and her use of discrete "sex/gender systems" appears to provide such a potential, particularly in the possibility of applying the concept within as well as between societies. With regard to the problems with the concept of patriarchy discussed above, she has made the following assessment:

> The term "patriarchy" was introduced to distinguish the forces maintaining sexism from other social forces, such as capitalism. But the use of "patriarchy" obscures other distinctions. (Rubin 1976, 167)

In arguing for an alternative formulation Gayle Rubin stresses the importance of maintaining

> a distinction between the human capacity and necessity to create a sexual world, and the empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organized. Patriarchy subsumes both meanings into the same term. Sex/gender system, on the other hand, is a neutral term which refers to the domain and indicates that oppression is not inevitable in that domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organize it. (Rubin 1976, 168)

This concept of sex/gender systems offers the opportunity to be historically and culturally specific but also points to the position of relative autonomy of the sexual realm. It enables the subordination of women to be seen as a "product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced" (Rubin 1976, 177). Thus, in order to account for the development of specific forms of sex/gender systems, reference must be made not only to the mode of production but also to the complex totality of specific social formations within which each system develops. Gayle Rubin argues that kinship relations are visible, empirical forms of sex/gender systems. Kinship relations here is

not limited to biological relatives but is rather a "system of categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships."

What are commonly referred to as "arranged marriages" can, then, be viewed as the way in which a particular sex/gender system organizes the "exchange of women." Similarly, transformations of sex/gender systems brought about by colonial oppression, and the changes in kinship patterns that result from migration, must be assessed on their own terms, not just in comparative relation to other sex/gender systems. In this way patterns of subordination of women can be understood historically, rather than dismissed as the inevitable product of pathological family structures.

At this point we can begin to make concrete the black feminist plea to white feminists to begin with our different herstories. Contact with white societies has not generally led to a more "progressive" change in African and Asian sex/gender systems. Colonialism attempted to destroy kinship patterns that were not modeled on nuclear family structures, disrupting, in the process, female organizations that were based upon kinship systems that allowed more power and autonomy to women than those of the colonizing nation. Events that occurred in the Calabar and Owerri provinces of Southern Nigeria in the winter months of 1929 bear witness to this disruption and to the consequent weakening of women's position. As Judith Van Allen points out, these events are known in Western social science literature as the Aba Riots, a term which not only marginalizes the struggles themselves but which makes invisible the involvement of Igbo women. "Riots" implies unsystematic and mindless violence and is a perfect example of the constructions of history. The Igbo people on the other hand remember this conflict as Ogu Umuniwanyi (the "Women's War") (Van Allen 1976, 59).

> In November of 1929, thousands of Igbo women . . . converged on the Native Administration centers.... The women chanted, danced, sang songs of ridicule, and demanded the caps of office (the official insignia) of the Warrant Chiefs, the Igbo chosen from each village by the British to sit as members of the Native Court. At a few locations the women broke into prisons and released prisoners. Sixteen Native Courts were attacked, and most of these were broken up or burned. The "disturbed area" covered about 6,000 square miles and contained about two million people. It is not known how many women were involved, but the figure was in tens of thousands. On two occasions, British District Officers called in police and troops, who fired on the women and left a total of more than 50 dead and 50 wounded. No one on the other side was seriously injured. (Van Allen 1976, 60)

Judith Van Allen examines in detail the women's organizations that ensured and regulated women's political, economic, and religious roles in traditional Igbo society. Although their role was not equal to that of men they did have "a series of roles—despite the patrilineal organization of Igbo society" (Van Allen 1976, 59). Two of the associations that Judith Van Allen finds relevant were the *inyemedi,* or wives of a lineage, and the *umuada*—daughters of a lineage. Meetings of the *umuada* would "settle intralineage disputes among their "brothers" as well as disputes between their natal and marital lineages." Since these gatherings were held in rotation among the villages into which members had married, "they formed an important part of the communication network of Igbo women." *Inyemedi,* on the other hand, came together in village-wide gatherings called mikri, gatherings of women who were in common residence rather than from a common place of birth *(ogbo).*

> The mikri appears to have performed the major role in the daily self-rule among women and to have articulated women's interests as opposed to those of men. Mi'itri provided women with a forum in which to develop their political talents and with a means for protecting their interests as traders, farmers, wives and mothers. (Van Allen 1976,69)

Men recognized the legitimacy of the decisions and rules of the *mikri,* which not only settled disputes among women but also imposed rules and sanctions that directly affected men's behavior. The *mikri* could impose fines for violations of their decisions, and if these were ignored, women would "sit on" an offender or go on strike.

> To "sit on" or "make war on" a man involved gathering at his compound at a previously agreed upon time, dancing, singing scurrilous songs detailing the women's grievances against him (and often insulting him along the way by calling his manhood into question), banging on his hut with pestles for pounding yams, and in extreme cases, tearing up his hut (which usually meant pulling the roof off). (Van Allen 1976, 61)

A strike, on the other hand, "might involve refusing to cook, to take care of small children or to have sexual relations with their husbands" (Van Allen 1976, 69).

British colonizers in Nigeria dismissed all traditional forms of social organization that they found as "organized anarchy," and promptly imposed a system of administration that ignored female political structures and denied Igbo women any means of representation, leave alone any decision-making or rule-instituting power. Coming from sex/gender systems of Britain in the 1920s, these colonial males could not conceive of the type of autonomy that Igbo women claimed. When the women demanded that they should serve on the Native Courts, be appointed to positions as District Officers, and further that "all-white men should go to their own country," they were scoffed at by the British who thought they acted under the influence of savage passions. Their demands were viewed as totally irrational. The war waged by Igbo women against the British was a concerted organized mobilization of their political traditions. The fruits of colonialism were the imposition of class and gender relations that resulted in the concentration of national, economic, and political power in the hands of a small, wealthy elite. We have quoted at length this example from the herstory of Igbo women in order to illustrate the ways in which an unquestioning application of liberal doses of Eurocentricity can completely distort and transform herstory into history. Colonialism was not limited to the imposition of economic, political, and religious systems. More subtly, though just as effectively, it sedimented racist and sexist norms into traditional sex/gender systems. Far from introducing more "progressive" or liberating sex/gender social relations, the colonizing powers as

> class societies tend to socialize the work of men and domesticate that of women. This creates the material and organizational foundations for denying that women are adults and allows the ruling classes to define them as wards of men. (Sacks 1975)

Karen Sacks, in her essay "Engels Revisited," examines the ways in which these class societies have domesticated the field of activity for women to the extent that "through their labor men are social adults; women are domestic wards" (Sacks 1975, 231). Although this work agrees with much white feminist theory, which has focused on the

isolation of women within the nuclear family as a prime source of oppression in Western sex/gender systems, it does not necessarily follow that women living in kinship relations organized in different sex/gender systems are not oppressed. What it does mean is that analysis has to be specific and is not to be deduced from European systems. She goes on to explain that in India,

> in untouchable tenant-farming and village-service castes or classes, where women work today for village communities... they "have greater sexual freedom, power of divorce, authority to speak and witness in caste assemblies, authority over children, ability to dispose of their own belongings, rights to indemnity for wrongs done to them, rights to have disputes settled outside the domestic sphere, and representation in public rituals." In short, women who perform social labor have a higher status vis-a-vis men of their own class than do women who labor only in the domestic sphere or do no labor. (Sacks 1975, 233)

Unfortunately feminist research has neglected to examine the basis of its Eurocentric (and often racist) framework. In the words of Achola O. Pala:

> Like the educational systems inherited from the colonial days, the research industry has continued to use the African environment as a testing ground for ideas and hypotheses, the locus of which is to be found in Paris, London, New York or Amsterdam. (Pala 1977)

Throughout much of this work, what is thought to be important is decided on the basis of what happens to be politically significant in the metropoles, not on what is important to the women who are under observation. Thus, from her own experience, Achola Pala relates how the major concerns of women are totally neglected by the researcher.

> I have visited villages where, at a time when the village women are asking for better health facilities and lower infant mortality rates, they are presented with questionnaires on family planning. In some instances, when the women would like to have piped water in the village, they may be at the same time faced with a researcher interested in investigating power and powerlessness in the household. In yet another situation, when women are asking for access to agricultural credit, a researcher on the scene may be conducting a study on female circumcision. (Pala 1977, 10)

The noncomprehension of the struggles and concerns of the African women Pala talks about is indicative of the ways in which much Euro-American feminism has approached the lives of black women. It has attempted to force them into patterns that do not apply and in the process has labeled many of them deviant.

Another problem emerges from the frequently unqualified use of terms such as pre-capitalist" and "feudal" to denote differences between the point of view of the researcher and her object of study. What is being indicated are differences in the modes of production. This distinction is subsequently used to explain observable differences in the position of women. However, the deployment of the concept sex/gender system interrupts this "logical progression" and reveals that the articulation of relations of production to sex/gender systems is much more complex. "Precapitalist" and "feudal" are often redundant and non-explanatory categories that rest on underestimations of

the scope and power of capitalist economic systems. Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, has argued that the sixteenth century saw the creation of

> a world-embracing commerce and a world-embracing market... the emergence of capitalism as the dominant mode of social organization of the economy... the only mode in the sense that, once established, other "modes of production" survived in function of how they fitted into a politico-socio framework deriving from capitalism. (Wallerstein 1974, 77)

Wallerstein continues to dismiss the idea that feudal and capitalist forms of social organization could coexist by stressing that

> The world economy has one form or another. Once it is capitalist, relationships that bear certain formal relationships to feudal relationships are necessarily redefined in terms of the governing principals of a capitalist system. (Wallerstein 1974, 92)

There are ways in which this economic penetration has transformed social organization to the detriment of women in particular. Work on sexual economics by Lisa Leghorn and Katherine Parker demonstrates that the monetary system and heavy taxation that European nations imposed on their colonies directly eroded the status of women.

> In many nations the impact of the sudden need for cash was more devastating than the steep taxes themselves. Only two mechanisms for acquiring cash existed—producing the new export crops and working for wages—both of which were made available only to men. Men were forced to leave their villages and farms to work in mines, plantations or factories, at extremely low wages. Women were often left doing their own as well as the men's work, while most of the men's wages went to taxes and to support themselves at the higher standard of living in urban areas. As men who remained on the farms were taught how to cash crop, most technological aid and education went only to them, and women were left maintaining the subsistence agricultural economy that sustained themselves and their children. In Africa women still do 70 percent of the agricultural work while almost all the agricultural aid has gone to men. (Leghorn and Parker 1981, 44)

We need to counteract the tendency to reduce sex oppression to a mere "reflex of economic forces" (Rubin 1976, 203), while at the same time recognizing that

> sexual systems cannot, in the final analysis, be understood in complete isolation. A full-bodied analysis of women in a single society, or throughout history, must take everything into account: the evolution of commodity forms in women, systems of land tenure, political arrangements, subsistence technology, etc. (Rubin 1976, 209)

We can begin to see how these elements come together to affect the lives of black women under colonial oppression in ways that transform the sex/gender systems in which they live but that are also shaped by the sex/gender system of the colonizers. If we examine changes in land distribution, we can see how capitalist notions of the private ownership of land (a primarily economic division) and ideas of male dominance (from the sex/gender system) work together against the colonized.

> Another problem affecting women's agricultural work is that as land ownership shifts from the collective "land-use rights" of traditional village life, in which women shared in the distribution of land, to the European concept of private ownership, it is usually only the men who have the necessary cash to pay for it fby virtue of their cash-cropping income). In addition, some men traditionally "owned" the land, while women "owned" the crops, as in the Cameroons in West Africa. As land becomes increasingly scarce, men begin to rent and sell "their" land, leaving women with no recourse but to pay for land or stop their agricultural work. (Leghorn and Parker 1981,45)

It is impossible to argue that colonialism left precapitalist or feudal forms of organization untouched. If we look at the West Indies we can see that patterns of migration, for both men and women, have followed the dictates of capital.

When men migrated from the islands for work in plantations or building the Panama Canal, women migrated from rural to urban areas. Both have migrated to labor in the "core" capitalist nations. Domestic, marginal, or temporary service work has sometimes been viewed as a great "opportunity" for West Indian women to transform their lives. But as Shirley-Ann Hussein has shown,

> Take the case of the domestic workers. A development institution should be involved in more than placing these women in domestic jobs as this makes no dent in the society. It merely rearranges the same order. Domestic labor will have to be done away with in any serious attempt at social and economic reorganization. (Hussein 1981, 29)

If, however, imperialism and colonialism have ensured the existence of a world market it still remains necessary to explain how it is in the interests of capitalism to maintain social relations of production that are noncapitallst—that is, forms that could not be described as feudal because that means precapitalist, but which are also not organized around the wage relation. If we return to the example of changes in ownership of land and in agricultural production, outlined above, it can be argued that

> the agricultural division of labor in the periphery—with male semi-proletarians and female agriculturalists—contributes to the maintenance of a low value of labor power for peripheral capital accumulation through the production of subsistence foodstuffs by the noncapitalist mode of production for the reproduction and maintenance of the labor force. (Deere 1979, 143)

In other words, the work that the women do is a force that helps to keep wages low. To relegate "women of color" in the periphery to the position of being the victims of feudal relations is to aid in the masking of colonial relations of oppression. These relations of imperialism should not be denied. Truly feminist herstory should be able to acknowledge that:

> Women's economic participation in the periphery of the world capitalist system, just as within center economies, has been conditioned by the requirements of capital accumulation ... (but) the economic participation of women in the Third World differs significantly from women's economic participation within the center of the world capitalist system. (Deere 1979, 143)

Black women have been at the forefront of rebellions against land seizures and struggle over the rights of access to land in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Adequate herstories of their roles in many of these uprisings remain to be written. The role of West Indian women in the rebellions preceding and during the disturbances in Jamaica in 1938, for example, though known to be significant, has still not been thoroughly described. White feminist herstorians are therefore mistaken when they portray black women as passive recipients of colonial oppression. As Gail Omvedt has shown in her book *We Will Smash This Prison* (Omvedt 1980), women in India have a long and complex herstory of fighting oppression both in and out of the wage relation. It is clear that many women coming from India to Britain have a shared herstory of struggle, whether in rural areas as agricultural laborers or in urban districts as municipal employees. The organized struggles of Asian women in Britain need to be viewed in the light of this herstory. Their industrial battles and struggles against immigration policy and practice articulate the triple oppression of race, gender, and class that have been present since the dawn of imperialist domination.

In concentrating solely upon the isolated position of white women in the Western nuclear family structure, feminist theory has necessarily neglected the very strong female support networks that exist in many black sex/gender systems. These have often been transformed by the march of technological "progress" intended to relieve black women from aspects of their labor.

> Throughout Africa, the digging of village wells has saved women enormous amounts of time which they formerly spent trekking long distances to obtain water. But it has often simultaneously destroyed their only chance to get together and share information and experiences. Technological advances such as household appliances do not free women from domestic drudgery in any society. (Leghorn and Parker 1981, 55)

Leghorn and Parker, in *Women's Worth,* attempt to create new categories to describe, in general terms, the diversity of male power across societies. While they warn against the rigid application of these categories—few countries fit exactly the category applied to them—the work does represent an attempt to move away from Euro-American racist assumptions of superiority, whether political, cultural, or economic. The three classifications they introduce are "minimal," "token," and "negotiating power" societies. Interestingly, from the black women's point of view, the most salient factor in the categorization of a country has

> usually been that of women's networks, because it is the existence, building or dissolution of these networks that determines women's status and potential for change in all areas of their lives. (Leghorn and Parker 1981, 60)

These categories cut through the usual divisions of First/Third World, advanced/dependent, and industrial/nonindustrial in an attempt to find a mechanism that would "free" thinking from these definitions. Space will not allow for a critical assessment of all three categories, but it can be said that their application of "negotiating power" does recognize as important the "traditional" women's organizations to be found in West Africa and described above in relation to the Igbo. Leghorn and Parker are careful to stress that "negotiating power" is limited to the possibilities of negotiating; it is not an absolute category of power that is held *over* men by women. The two examples in their book of societies where women hold this negotiating position are the Ewe, in West Africa, and the Iroquois. Both of course, are also examples where contact with the

whites has been for the worse. Many of the Ewe female institutions disintegrated under colonialism while the institutions that afforded Iroquois women power were destroyed by European intrusion. In contrast to feminist work that focuses upon the lack of technology and household mechanical aids in the lives of these women, Leghorn and Parker concentrate upon the aspects of labor that bring women together. Of the Ewe they note:

> Women often work together in their own fields, or as family members preparing meals together, village women meeting at the stream to do the wash, or family, friends and neighbors walking five to fifteen miles a day to market together, sitting near each other in the market, and setting the day's prices together. They share child care, news, and looking after each other's market stalls. In addition to making the time more pleasant, this shared work enables women to share information and in fact serves as an integral and vital part of the village communications system. Consequently, they have a tremendous sense of solidarity when it comes to working in their collective interest. (Leghorn and Parker 1981, 88)

It is important not to romanticize the existence of such female support networks, but they do provide a startling contrast to the isolated position of women in the Euro-American nuclear family structure.

In Britain, strong female support networks continue in both West Indian and Asian sex/gender systems, though these are ignored by sociological studies of migrant black women. This is not to say that these systems remain unchanged with migration. New circumstances require adaptation and new survival strategies have to be found.

> Even child care in a metropolitan area is a big problem. If you live in a village in an extended family, you know that if your child's outside somewhere, someone will be looking out for her. If your child is out on the street and your neighbor down the road sees your child in some mess, that woman is going to take responsibility of dealing with that child. But in Brooklyn or in London, you're stuck in that apartment. You're there with that kid, you can't expect that child to be out on the street and be taken care of. You know the day care situation is lousy, you're not in that extended family, so you have a big problem on your hands. So when they talk about the reduction of housework, we know by now that that's a lie. (Prescod-Roberts and Steele 1980, 28)

However, the transformations that occur are not merely adaptive, and neither is the black family destroyed in the process of change. Female networks mean that black women are key figures in the development of survival strategies, both in the past through periods of slavery and colonialism, and now, facing a racist and authoritarian state.

> There is considerable evidence that women—and families—do not... simply accept the isolation, loss of status, and cultural devaluation involved in the migration. Networks are reformed, if need be with non-kin or on the basis of an extended definition of kinship, by strong, active, and resourceful women.... Cultures of resistance are not simple adaptive mechanisms; they embody important alternative ways of organizing production and reproduction and value systems critical of the oppressor. Recognition of the special position of families in these cultures and social structures can lead to new forms of struggle, new goals. (Caulfield 1974, 81, 84)

In arguing that feminism must take account of the lives, herstories, and experiences of black women we are not advocating that teams of white feminists should descend upon Brixton, Southall, Bristol, or Liverpool to take black women as objects of study in modes of resistance. We don't need that kind of intrusion on top of all the other information-gathering forces that the state has mobilized in the interest of "race relations." White women have been used against black women in this way before and feminists must learn from history. After the Igbo riots described above, two women anthropologists were sent by the British to "study the causes of the riot and to uncover the organizational base that permitted such spontaneity and solidarity among the women" (Caulfield 1974, 84). The WLM, however, does need to listen to the work of black feminists and to take account of autonomous organizations like OWAAD (Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent) who are helping to articulate the ways in which we are oppressed as black women.

In addition to this, it is very important that white women in the women's movement examine the ways in which racism excludes many black women and prevents them from unconditionally aligning themselves with white women. Instead of taking black women as the objects of their research, white feminist researchers should try to uncover the gender-specific mechanisms of racism among white women. This more than any other factor disrupts the recognition of common interests of sisterhood.

In *Finding a Voice* by Amrit Wilson, Asian women describe many instances of racial oppression at work from white women. Asian women

> are paid how salaries and everything is worse for them, they have to face the insults of supervisors. These supervisors are all English women. The trouble is that in Britain our women are expected to behave like servants and we are not used to behaving like servants and we can't. But if we behave normally ... the supervisors start shouting and harassing us.... They complain about us Indians to the manager. (Wilson 1978, 122)

Black women do not want to be grafted onto "feminism" in a tokenistic manner as colorful diversions to "real" problems. Feminism has to be transformed if it is to address us. Neither do we wish our words to be misused in generalities as if what each one of us utters represents the total experience of all black women. Audre Lorde's address to Mary Daly is perhaps the best conclusion.

> I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women—the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of black women, and how it devalues your own words.... When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murders. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise. This dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us. This block makes it far easier to turn away from you completely than attempt to understand the thinking behind your choices. Should the next step be war between us, or separation? Assimilation within a sole Western-European herstory is not acceptable. (Lorde 1981, 96)

In other words, of white feminists we must ask, what exactly do you mean when you say "we"?