

SOME PERSONAL NOTES ON RACISM AMONG THE WOMEN

BY DONNA ALLEGRA

In some circuits, Black women have become valuable commodities on the social scale. As feminism has become respectable and Black women criticize white women on their racism, a lot of whites want to prove it's just not so. They invite us to submit articles, perform, read, or speak on panels. This has brought about a relatively new situation in my life—whites coming to me, asking for input.

Once I welcomed being in this position; often I went for it. I consciously figured on getting across as a token. That position would be my point of entry to places where white racism would ordinarily have left me out of the program. Now, with a Black women's community to live and work in, white structures are not so appealing. I look back with bitterness at whites whose dealings with me were not based on who I am, but on what I look like: a Black woman to fit into their program.

It was a real disservice when white women looked at me, saw the Black, and greeted me with eagerness because of a hidden agenda. It took a while before I realized it wasn't my charm and personal magnetism that was operating—I've got a big ego and I'm a slow learner. How bitterly I remember the white women who took me in as a token and how bitterly I remember myself going for the bait—hook, line, and sinker. I want to be treated as an individual, not seen with awe and fear as someone's dream nightmare. I want to be seen as a person who wants to do a job for reasons not unlike their own: a person subject to pride, fear, greed, anger, ambition, high ideals, willingness, trust, and love, like themselves. Instead, many see me as a "Third World" woman to be used to make a project look good if I act right.

I feel a personal shame for having been willing to be that statistic or chocolate chip in the sea of white cookie. From that token's position, I tried to take myself somewhere, but doubted underneath that I could have gotten in on my own merit, not being sure of my place in the structure. That's the legacy I inherited from the perverted relationship where some whites looked good practicing tokenism and I was willing to let them get over through me. I was left not knowing where I really stood with them, trying to figure out what they thought I was, and then trying to be that so I could do what I wanted to do in service of who I really was.

Once I looked with trust to the feminist option. It was the minority viewpoint I would read and

hunger after and identify with. I appreciate that there is a women's community with networks and publications, and that we do share a general point of view. With feminism established as a part of the current order, some things are easier for me, but elements of the old ways do continue to take on new forms. Now that a feminist angle is being targeted into cigarette commercials, I feel ripped off all over again. In a like manner, Black is "hip"—well, not so hip anymore. More accurately, now white women are supremely sensitive to being accused of racism and try to avoid the word like the plague; it makes their shit turn to water if anyone even thinks the word in their direction. Now that they are conscious of Black women who come out with such very hip analysis and delivery, many of them want to hold onto us.

I resent feeling that they want us around for the power of our image: picture a handsome, angry Black woman on the cover of many a magazine that ever so rarely deals with a Black viewpoint. So many women who are talking about racism are more concerned about public relations than they are with gut-level sisterhood. They want us so that they don't have to feel uncomfortable should any Blacks call them on the question, or should any other whites get into the game of reminding their sisters that there are no women of color in evidence. Real reconstruction is bypassed. It's easier to opt for the cosmetic treatment. This is like being a nice girl. You smile at anyone who smiles at you and you don't dislike anyone because that's the way you've been brought up. But the truth of it all is that only by trading honest viewpoints can people negotiate and work out frank differences.

White women deny that they seek out women of color because pressure has been put on them. These white women are almost trained to respond with a politically correct manner when they're questioned. If some of them would acknowledge resentment or that they are bewildered that they can't seem to do anything right by Black women anymore, some truth could emerge that'd free us on all sides. But so many are afraid to come from anything other than masks of good behavior.

Yet I know now when whites are running from me, trying to deflect any confrontations they fear I will want to bring into play. I can tell by their aggression on the subjects of race and racism—as though it were outside of them somehow, or as if by giving an appropriate nod to guilt, blame, and responsibility in a politically correct stance, they'll be safe from the anger they seem to expect from me. They are ill at ease and run from a feeling of discomfort that they project onto me. When whites beat their breasts and talk

about what's being done to the poor darkies, they are still taking the missionary position and fucking Black people.

I have yet to hear white women talk about Black women as people, as individuals they like or dislike. In the conversations I have heard, we are either "heroic," "surviving," or "triple oppressed." They'll urge sympathy on us for Black men's purported sexism or condemn white men as a class group, but never voice a criticism of Black women. It makes me wonder. When a white woman assumes I'd be interested in something just because I'm a Black person, I withdraw one giant step inside. I'm dismayed when I see women at concerts or poetry readings knowing how to clap in all the right places and saying a nervous "yeah"—as if by verbal affirmation of Black women's performance their guilt can be discharged and penance done so blame is deflected from them.

Today, white women see a lot of Black women who want to give their energy solely to Black women rather than deal with whites. I imagine white women often don't know what to do and feel perplexed. A good number of Black women don't want to be bothered teaching or working with them because whites aren't as innocent in their racism as they put out. Others get mad at whites for trying to include Black people. It seems like you're damned if you do and damned if you don't—so what's a poor little white girl to do?

This thinking is, of course, not leading to the real truth. I think the answer to the seeming paradox is for the white women to do their own consciousness-raising and examine what they come up with among themselves. The working out of racist attitudes is process work for white women to do for themselves, with one another. Once they can see themselves through the rough stuff, they will actually be freer and truer to themselves. I appreciate that kind of honesty in an individual more than a correct line. Honesty is something I sense, can open up to and trust. Race differences are real, but they're not everything. We work out our real differences from honesty.

But after they've done their own CR, I hope these whites don't come to me for a stamp of approval. I'm having a hard enough time dealing with my own stuff and hoping my women will give me the pats on the back I crave. I don't think many Black women are going to credit whites for doing their own homework. Whites seem to want this at some level and when it doesn't come, they feel pissed and neglected. Well, that's not enough for Black women who have other concerns and don't want to play nanny in any mode. I've been brought up to feel I should be grateful for every little bit of progress, but I frankly do get angry at white women who are actively trying to deal with their racism and the new trips they lay on me in their growth process. Those white women who aren't so anxious and eager to clean up their acts and attitudes around race are the ones I can have friendships with. It's a tricky balance to find, but I think the important personal quality I respond to is honesty.

What is going on with all our concerns about racism is, indeed, change. There is a willingness among some white women to do some work, but the transformation isn't complete yet. Racist attitudes linger because the job isn't all the way done. People who haven't seen that change is possible can't wholeheartedly believe in it. If they haven't lived it in their personal lives, it's hard to see change in political terms. It won't all come together in one fell swoop. After the major reconstruction, there will be corners to straighten out and the maintenance work will be a day-to-day job. But this is Life Work. Any attempt to make it better can only come to good.

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The piece on the facing page is by Janet Henry, an artist living, breathing, and ruminating in NY.

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