

On Never Quite Being Good Enough: Legal Institutional Racism, Sexism and Elitism

Yvonne A. Flowers

© 1979

*For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
for all of us
this instant and this triumph
we were never meant to survive*

—Audre Lorde, “#40 Litany for Survival”

As the curtain of economic scarcity drops over our daily lives, Black and other Third World women are running smack into the brick wall of legal institutional racism and sexism. We are being told, “You do not qualify to do the jobs you want to do. You do not meet the criteria for what is good enough.” After the sixties and the women’s movement, tokenism and fair employment legislation, we are still being squeezed out of making money, making decisions and having control over our lives. White folks are still telling us that we don’t measure up.

In high school during the forties, I was told by my advisor that I was a C student and would always be, so I shouldn’t even bother to go to college. Coming from the big white lady who is supposed to know about these things, on some level, I believed her. There were no role models, Black women or men or other Third World people teaching there to make me think otherwise. I was well into my thirties before I began to get out from under the impact of those words from the authorities: “you’re not good enough.”

Well, I went to college twice. Once to undergraduate school for a B.A. and again to graduate school to become an occupational therapist. No role models there to assuage my doubts about any Black women being good enough. And now I teach in college and often think, “See, Mrs. Murphy didn’t know what she was talking about in 1947”...until the issue of my tenure put me right back in touch with the question of “never quite being good enough.”

Today, legal institutional racism and sexism continue to operate. Sometimes it is blatant, at other times more subtle, but rarely do we hear it publicly challenged these days. And if so, the old cries “racist and sexist” are usually dead news by the next day. Discrimination in institutions does not necessarily occur by conscious intent or personal prejudice against a group. But racism, ethnic and language group discrimination, sexual prejudice and discrimination as to gender and sexual orientation, and elitism as to educational or economic class are a part of every institution in America. Ageism and all the other “isms” are practiced there too. We are told to believe it has gone away.

In most institutions, racism is fostered and nurtured by middle-aged white men who have the inclination and the power to hire and retain those persons who are exactly like themselves, i.e., “middle-aged white men,” and exclude all others. This is especially true where critical decisions are made, and future directions and strategies are planned. You may be included if you can prove that you can think and act exactly like a middle-aged white man. (Among Black folks we call them “Oreo” cookies—black on the outside and white on the inside.)

Some women are a kind of “Oreo” too. That is, male-identified women. Women on the outside and men on the inside where their value system has incorporated all the sexist attitudes of men. These women may or may not look like men. They may or may not be lesbian women; more than likely they are not. The phenomenon of identification with the aggressor, or the oppressor as Paulo Freire defines it, does not end

there. We find it among all the "isms," "closeted" homosexuals who are really homophobic, older persons who are on the top and will not hire their peers or their seniors, etc. Many of these people make it to middle management positions, assisting the boss, overseers, keeping the "niggers" in line with even more ferociousness than the boss himself. We frequently see through their appearance because they feel like "the man."

The message to us is always "you're not good enough" and "you don't measure up to the job." But you can't measure up, because who designed the very ruler by which you are being measured? Certainly it wasn't no little Black girls. White men have set all the criteria for who and what is good enough. Women, African-Americans and other Third World people, the young, the elderly and the handicapped have had no input into those criteria that measure them, and have had little, if any, chance to meet them. For have they had the very same opportunities that are offered by money, skin color privilege, education, self-esteem, etc., that white men have had?

And if one happens to meet the criteria, that is also no insurance for facts can be distorted, criteria ignored, behind the scene manipulations can occur and technicalities are often raised; all done to ensure those with the power protection from the "others" and to stamp the "others" as not quite good enough.

So we don't get to make the rulers. If so, we might make it an 11-inch "foot" ruler or a 13-inch "foot" ruler and middle-aged white men might not fit. They might not meet the new criteria. They might be short on or lacking in spirit or humility, be overconfident and/or poor managers. Look around our world. What a mess they have made. Look at the output of middle-aged white men in charge of government, energy, health, inflation, etc., and one can see they are certainly very short on problem-solving skills.

When you step back and take a good look at who is making money off of whom, these middle-aged white men and their agents look like pimps. In ever-increasing numbers, at least in the urban areas, Third World people and women are consuming the services of the health and education industries. One might say these men are pimping off us. This seems especially true in the so-called alternative institutions and programs that were created from the aftermath of the "revolution," "riots," demands and court actions of the sixties. These same institutions quietly slipped back into subtle racist and sexist politics in the guise of a need for financial and economic feasibility. And those who did make it into the inner sanctum go the way of "the last hired and the first fired."

Well, we must consider what to do about it. One thing, we must begin to get our focus clear. We don't have to feel bad when they say we don't fit. We are not incompetent and must get beyond feeling like a "fraud" in their (our) work spaces or feeling guilty about our supposed failures. Remember, their attitudes say more about them than they say about us. They are the ones with the problem.

Well, what about the endless process of "qualifying" to meet their standards? Well, we can keep on qualifying until we get sick of it. Getting the necessary credentials is costly and time-consuming and never a guarantee. But while doing so, we ought to be careful that we do not become male-identified or "whitened" as Sylvia Vitale says. Take measures to counteract that phenomenon. Take strong doses of the antidote like Black and Third World Studies, women's studies, and humanistic studies so that you know who you are.

We can set our own criteria and standards. When working alone and together we discover our own values and our own styles and know they are no less valid than those of the European patriarchy. We can be proud of our own when they feel "right." Yes we can get angry with the man and tell 'bout himself. Rage is an appropriate and necessary reaction to oppression which blocks our need for safety, mastery and self-actualization. It's about living not just surviving. And laugh at him too, with the silly business of covering up his inadequacies with face-saving arrogance. And above all don't forget the revolution has just begun. Get ready to struggle, you do qualify for that.



Zora Neale Hurston. 1901-1960. Novelist, folklorist and anthropologist who had more books published than any other Black American woman and epitomizes the African American woman's struggle "to be good enough." Photo credit: Carl Van Vetchen, 1935.