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Difference and Domination

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The experiences of women of color have challenged feminist scholarship to rethink the relationship between race and gender for everyone. Since the 1980s, women's studies scholars have increasingly acknowledged that differences among women arise from inequalities of power and privilege. For African American women, Latinas, Asian American women, and Native American women, gender is part of a larger pattern of unequal social relations; how gender is experienced depends on how it intersects with other inequalities.

While women's studies scholars are now seeking to emphasize the importance of diversity to understanding women's lives, acknowledging diversity is not enough. Today we face the new task of going beyond the mere recognition and inclusion of differences, to permitting them to reshape the basic concepts and theories of the discipline. We must avoid the current fashion in mass culture, where "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992:21).

The growing diversity movement in gender studies is occurring just as the United States is undergoing a demographic shift from a predominantly White/European or Anglo population rooted in Western culture to one characterized by increased racial and cultural diversity. The combination of population changes with efforts to rethink and revise social and cultural ideology has generated a backlash—fear that the United States may become a mostly non-White and non-Western society. Intellectual attacks labeling multiculturalism as divisive, political exploitation of people's fears of difference, and increases in racially directed violence are examples of this backlash.

Women of Color in U.S. Society seeks to offer alternative interpreta-

tions of the social world. Not only are the subjects of the essays racial-ethnic*women but the authors are predominantly African American, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women whose analyses of this topic are shaped by their unique perspectives as outsiders within, marginal intellectuals whose social location provides them a special perspective on self and society (Collins 1986).

The Constraining Walls of Social Location

People of color, both men and women, have encountered severe economic and social dislocations from the time of their arrival in the United States until the present. In colonial America, American Indians faced war, disease, and a deliberate program of extermination. Africans died in large numbers in the "middle passage," the journey that brought them from their native continent to enslavement in the United States. Mexicans were incorporated into the United States as the result of a war and, along with Asian workers who were forced to live and work in "bachelor" communities far from their homes and families, died in large numbers working to build the mines and railroads. Up through the present, these groups have experienced periods of severe animosity marked by lynchings, race riots, and other forms of public violence.

Today, women of color on average receive the lowest wages, hold the worst jobs, and are more likely to be unemployed. They have the highest rates of infant mortality and births out of wedlock. They are also more likely to live in poverty and to be single mothers than their White counterparts.

Women of color are subordinated in this way because patterns of hierarchy, domination, and oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are built into the structure of our society. Inequality, in other words, is structural or socially patterned. Too often explanations of these inequalities suggest that biology or culture is key. We argue, however, that biological traits, such as race and gender, are relevant only because they are socially ranked and rewarded. It is the *social* response to these biological characteristics that results in inequality. Though we do not discount the importance of culture, the problem with cultural differences as the primary explanation of inequality is the tendency to marginalize each cultural group, to view it as unique, and to imply that each differs from some presumed standard. This often leads to blaming a people's cultural values and practices for their subordination.

An image that helps convey how social structure limits opportunity and represents the relationship between structure and culture is

found in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place.* The characters in this story live on a dead-end street that has been closed off by a brick wall. The wall separates Brewster Place from the rest of the community. It shuts out light to apartments, it creates a dark and unprotected area where destructive activities occur, and its presence suggests that there is only one way out. The wall on Brewster Place is a powerful symbol of the ways racial oppression, sexual exploitation, and class domination constrain the life chances and choices of the women who live there. For women of color, the social structures that are identified and discussed in this book are similar to the wall; they create barriers, limit opportunities, and constrain choices.

We begin this book with the recognition that race, class, and gender stratification affects the experiences of all, not just those who are most victimized (Andersen and Collins 1992). At the same time that the structures of race, class, and gender create disadvantages for women of color, they provide unacknowledged benefits for those who are at the top of these hierarchies—Whites, members of the upper classes, and males. The privileges of those at the top of the hierarchy are dependent on the exploitation of those at the bottom.

For women of color, this has meant that their work often involves providing services to more privileged people; that their families and communities have access to fewer resources and are more likely to become dependent on the "social largess" of more privileged people; and that their sexuality is more likely to be used and abused by more privileged people.

Part II of this book explores distinct social conditions constraining women's lives. Although these authors examine different groups of women, they uncover consistent patterns of subordination, restricted participation in social institutions, and structured placement in roles with limited opportunities. This social location is constructed through particular historical struggles and denies African American, Latina, Asian, and American Indian women access to resources and power.

Labor arrangements are at the core of race and gender inequalities. Social location in the labor market means that opportunities are influenced by *who* people are—by their being male or female; White, Black, Latina, American Indian, or Asian; rich or poor—rather than what their skills and abilities are. Denise Segura uncovers structural conditions in the labor market that operate as barriers to decent jobs for Chicanas and Mexican immigrant women. She shows how these features combine with social relations in the workplace to limit occupational mobility. Karen Hossfeld's essay exposes the racial and cultural stereotypes in the microelectronics industry today and demonstrates

how racially defined hiring expectations become discriminatory hiring practices.

Although labor arrangements are fundamental determinants of social inequality, all social institutions are "conduits for oppression" (Andersen and Collins 1992:172). Ruth Zambrana traces Puerto Rican women's problems to discrimination in education, employment, housing, and health care. Educational institutions, though a primary avenue of social mobility for women of color, have also contributed to the process of social placement. Despite the rhetoric of equal opportunity, schools are key institutional sites where race, class, and gender inequalities are reproduced. Linda Grant's study of Black female students in elementary school classrooms describes a sorting process based on race and gender. Elizabeth Higginbotham confronts the societal legend that upward social mobility is the "happy ending" for African American women who have achieved professional stature and the economic buying power of the middle class. She illustrates that African American and White professional women, though both concentrated in traditionally female occupations, face different barriers due to race. Her data show the high concentration of professional Black women in public sector employment (Whites are more likely to be employed in the private sector), where salaries are lower.

Social Agency: Confronting the "Walls"

Women of color, however, are not merely acted upon by oppressive social relations but are also shapers of their own lives. Our analysis stresses the primacy of external forces in making women's lives unequal, yet it views the lives of women of color as an outgrowth of the interaction between structured inequalities and the agency of the women who are coping and resisting.

Race, class, and gender create a matrix of domination that women of color "experience (and resist) on three levels, namely the level of personal biography, the group level of the cultural context created by race, class and gender, and the systemic level of social institutions" (Collins 1986:364–65). Part III of the book provides an analysis of the ways women cope and survive in the face of these structures. Though we have separated structure from culture and biography for the purposes of organizing this volume, the relationship between them is an interactive one.

At the conclusion of *The Women of Brewster Place,* the wall at the end of the street becomes the focus of collective social action. In a final act of rage and defiance, the residents of the street tear the wall down. The

wall and the responses and reaction of the residents to it provide a useful device for illustrating the relationship of social structure to human choice and action. Within the "walls" constructed by race, class, and gender oppression, women of color create lives for themselves, their families, and their communities. Their lives are an active outgrowth of the continuous interplay between their cultural backgrounds, their personal abilities, and their struggles with the constraints of social structure.

In addition to the formal limits of social structure, women of color have also been subjected to cultural assaults (Caulfield 1974). Cultural assaults are systematic attacks on the institutions and forms of social organization that are fundamental to the maintenance and flourishing of a group's culture. They are a way dominant groups control and manage subordinate groups of people. They range from legal prohibitions against the use of drums among African slaves, and against the immigration of the wives of Chinese men, to informal practices that denigrate the cultural patterns of these groups while elevating the values and practices of the dominant groups.

In spite of these obstacles, women of color have shaped their lives and those of their families through acts of quiet dignity and steadfast determination. Their actions have included revolt and rebellion, creative conflict and social change, adaptation and accommodation.

The involvement of women in slave rebellions, American Indian wars, labor revolts in the fields and mines of the West and Southwest, and contemporary urban uprisings is well documented. As the primary laborers in families, kinship networks, and communities, women have also been engaged in more subtle forms of resistance. In their families and communities, many worked to create new institutions and to help their children maintain an autonomous cultural identity—a vision of self in society based on their own distinctive culture, separate from the ideals and images that the dominant culture sought to impose upon them.

The essay by Bonnie Thomton Dill opening Part III of the book identifies this process historically and contrasts the support provided European Americans for family life and women's roles within families with the policies of deliberate destruction or benign neglect directed toward African slaves, Chinese sojourners, and colonized Mexicans. It argues that families of color sustained cultural assaults as a direct result of the organization of the labor systems in which this group participated. On the other hand, the chapters by Jennie Joe and Dorothy Lonewolf Miller and by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes show how community can be a tool in resisting cultural assaults. Joe and Miller point out

that the assimilation of American Indians was brutally enforced by U.S. government policies and that American Indian cultural autonomy today is threatened by wide-scale urbanization of Native American populations. Their study of American Indian women from the Tohono Oodham and Yaqui tribes in Tucson, Arizona, provides examples of the ways mothers promote cultural heritage as a way to help them and their children cope with racism, poverty, and discrimination.

Gilkes's essay illustrates the ways contemporary Black women's community work was designed to "combat racism and empower communities for growth and survival." She suggests that women's community work is a characteristic strategy not only for survival but also for change and empowerment among all people of color. Women, she argues, are "particularly rebellious" because they are oppressed as women; experience the oppressions of the "menfolk" in very personalized ways as lovers, wives, daughters or sisters; and are the primary caretakers of children.

Resistance does not always lead to socially desirable results. Some women have been defeated by the triple burdens of race, class, and gender, and have victimized themselves and others as a result of their anger and/or alienation and lack of choices. "Passing" is one strategy that people of color have used to escape the burden of race. Crime, drugs, and dangerous alternative lifestyles are other responses to lack of opportunity. Regina Arnold's discussion of how young African American women become criminals suggests that the process begins with the rebellious acts of victims of destructive family patterns, an alienating educational system, and poverty. Seeing no alternatives other than running away, they become part of a street culture, which leads to a life of crime, drug abuse, prostitution, and ultimately incarceration.

Constructing their responses to social structural constraints, women of color draw upon resources from their culture, family, kin, and community. These realms, however, are contested sites. They provide the resources the women have used to resist oppression and exploitation. Yet, because of their potential as a source of resistance, the dominant society has actively sought to control them. In addition, as the essay by Esther Ngan-Ling Chow demonstrates, the contrast between their own cultural norms and those of the dominant society may create circumstances that are especially problematic for women of color. Chow points out that for Asian American women, the stereotypes of obedience, docility, and submissiveness seem to suggest a perfect "fit" with the needs of U.S. bureaucracies. In fact, they, like other minorities, may feel out of place in such work environments.

A further paradox is that within racial-ethnic communities women

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have often had to oppose traditional customs and values to obtain the freedom to develop their full potential. Nazli Kibria's article on Vietnamese American women argues that the ethnic community is a source both of solidarity and of oppression for women. It facilitates adaptation to a new society and provides support in facing discrimination from outside the group, but its traditional and patriarchal patterns oppress women within the group. Kibria's contention is that the ethnic community is also an arena of struggle between men and women.

Rethinking Gender

Social location is a complex (and often contradictory) determinant of women's distinctive experiences. For example, Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990:150), argues that "a self-defined, articulated Black feminist standpoint" exists and that it has been the source of Black women's ability to resist the controlling images of the dominant society, which depicted them as mammies, matriarchs, whores, welfare recipients, and unwed mothers. This standpoint provided alternative images that encouraged them to fight to change the world in which they and their children lived. Leith Mullings explores this issue in depth in her article in Part IV of this volume. She argues that images and ideologies about women of color are used not only to control them but also to rationalize their subordinate position in the society.

Grounding gender studies in women's differences can reveal relations that remain obscure from other vantage points. Starting with women of color can lead, for example, to what Collins (1990) calls the "matrix of domination," an analysis that raises questions about the primacy of gender as an analytic category. Carol Stack's essay examines moral reasoning in a context that combines gender, race, class, and culture. Although conventional wisdom within women's studies treats moral reasoning as a gendered process, Stack's findings challenge the dichotomous portrayal of moral reasoning. Problematizing gender allows Stack to develop a more complex understanding of gender relations. By looking at social context along the way, we discover that within a social order that is racially formed and class based, the categories "women" and "men" do not exist as broad universals, although there are women and men in particular historically located relations. "There are no gender relations per se, but only gender relations as constructed by and between classes, races, and cultures" (Harding 1991:179). Many women of color are oppressed not only by race, class, and gender but by systems that privilege heterosexuality. The discriminations that lesbians of color face occur within this matrix of domination.

The study of women of color makes women's studies less partial and less distorted. More important, it transcends the reductionism of explaining the complexity of women's experiences with only "the analytic category of gender" (Zavella 1989:28). Focusing on women's varied locations, we do more than simply understand women better. Through our examination of the multiple conditions shaping women's lives, we begin to identify those interlocking systems of power which render some women more privileged and some more oppressed. Beyond simply asserting that gender is socially constructed, we can begin to account for the multiple connections shaping all women's experiences.

Diversity, in other words, reveals how genders are constructed out of interlocking systems of inequality. The lives of women of color are not a variation of a more general model of American womanhood. Instead, their experiences are formed by many of the same forces that shape the lives of others. In given historical moments, those forces combine to create differences among women.

However, women's experiences are not merely different, they are *relational*. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn explains, each is made up of categories (e.g., male/female, Anglo/Latino) that are positioned and therefore gain meaning in relation to each other. To represent race and gender as relationally constructed is to assert that the experiences of White women and women of color are not just different, but connected in systematic ways (Glenn 1992:34).

The insight that genders are relational challenges us to rethink every conceptualization of gender based solely on the experiences of Anglo middle-class women. Hence, Maxine Baca Zinn's essay pushes for a feminist reconstruction of the family through incorporating race as a dimension of social structure rather than merely an expression of cultural differences. She argues that race places families in different social locations, giving some greater access to resources and rewards, and denying or limiting access to these same items for others. Privileged family forms rest on the exploited labor of women and men in subordinated race and class locations.

The chapters in this book refute some of the conventional wisdom about women of color and women in general. In this way they challenge some of our basic assumptions about how society coheres and why people behave in certain ways. Ultimately, they force us to look at our most studied population, White males, in new ways—not as the actors who set the standards by which all social action is measured, but as part of a social order in which their privilege as a group is dependent on the subordination of others. We must then look at all of these populations together and ask questions that focus on the

interconnectedness rather than the separateness of social phenomena. The crucial question that emerges is, How do the existences and experiences of all people, women and men, different racial-ethnic groups, and different classes, shape each other?

Once we acknowledge that all women are affected by the racial order of society, we gain "new starting points for feminist thought and action" (Andersen 1993:349). Emergent in this collection of essays is the framework of a body of theory and practice we label "multiracial feminism." Growing primarily out of the experiences of racial-ethnic women, which are themselves varied, multiracial feminism does not offer a singular or unified feminism but a body of knowledge situating women and men in multiple systems of domination. Nevertheless, it treats racial inequality as a vital shaper of women's and men's lives and advances a coherent and powerful premise—that racial ancestry, ethnic heritage, and economic status are as important as gender for analyzing the social construction of women and men.

The insights of the authors in this book lead to a reformulation of the feminist agenda by asking a basic sociological question of each reform strategy: Who benefits? In the book *Backlash,* journalist Susan Faludi (1991:xx) provides an example:

> In the last decade, some women did make substantial advances before the backlash hit, but millions of others were left behind, stranded. Some women now enjoy the right to legal abortions— but not the **44** million women from the indigent *to* the military work force, who depend on the federal government for their medical care. Some women can now walk into high paying professional careers—but not the more than **19** million still in the typing pool or behind the department store sales counter.

Multiracial feminism is a potential antidote to this aspect of the backlash. It charges us to look beyond those women who supposedly "have it all" to those who "have none of it." It provides the motives that compel us to make our teaching as well as our programs and policies address the varied circumstances and needs of all women.

Note

1. The term *racial-ethnic* refers to groups that are socially and legally subordinated and remain culturally distinct within U.S. society. It is meant to include (1) the systematic discrimination of socially constructed racial groups and (**2**) their distinctive cultural arrangements. Historically, the

categories of African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American were constructed as both racially and culturally distinct. Each group has a distinctive culture, shares a common heritage, and has developed a common identity within a larger society that subordinates them. The racial characteristics of these groups have become meaningful within a society that continues to change.

Terms of reference are also changing. For example, Blacks increasingly use the term *African Americans* and Hispanics often refer to themselves as *Latinos.* All the groups included sometimes use the term *people of color.* In this book we use such terms interchangeably because they are currently used in both popular and scholarly discourse.

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