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# Some Ideas for White Feminists Moving from Unease to Action

by Jan Adams

**THE DAY THE SENATE VOTED TO CONFIRM CLARENCE** Thomas as a Supreme Court Justice, I congratulated a Latina acquaintance on the work she was doing as president of San Francisco N.O.W. to keep women's concerns at the top of the media agenda. These "mainstream" (that is, mostly straight, mostly middle class, overwhelmingly white) feminists had kept up the local dimension of the struggle throughout the Thomas hearings with rallies, protests and press conferences. My friend smiled at the compliment from a far-out weirdo (me, the radical lesbian) and commented "Yes, but it has been hard to get any of the white women to speak out." I was fascinated, thought a moment and commented "I guess that is a step forward, we are paying some attention to other people's sensitivities, but I guess we white women will have to learn to take the next step if we are ever to get anywhere."

This article consists of some musings on how white women can take some next steps. Years of work in the women's movement have created a group of white women who are aware that racism pervades the history and fabric of our society, that it can't be swept under the rug in the name of sisterhood, and that we should think carefully before we speak when race and gender concerns intersect. But too often, that awareness doesn't translate into any discernible action against racism. Perhaps because as women we've been socialized to "make nice," to smooth over conflict, we prefer to focus on our internal feelings, usually of guilt, rather than try to do something about the racist structures of society. (Or we focus whatever actions we do take about racism *within* the lesbian community while all important arenas of power are still outside that community.) Perhaps we are just scared to act. Actually it doesn't matter much why we don't act in the world: as the Clarence Thomas situation so vividly illustrated, the messy intersection of race and gender issues will continue to offer opportunities which the enemies of both people of color and all women will exploit until we all learn to negotiate these shoals better.

What follow are some concrete suggestions to white women on how to move from self-examination to action on race issues. Hopefully none of them are theoretical or abstract: they are all things I have learned that I can do or that I have seen white friends of mine do.

1. Depending on where you do it, talk can be a form of action. Start talking about race in your everyday life. White progressives have by and large ceded discussion of how racism works in the U.S. to the racists. It is easy to find white people who will tell you that "the blacks just have too many children and live on welfare." It is hard to find the white person who will say to her co-workers (of whatever race): "That woman from Hong Kong they interviewed for the clerk job talks with an accent and has a different background from ours, but that doesn't mean she couldn't do the job. We don't know that." Or who will say: "You know, I can understand why Native Americans might not want to be mascots for the Atlanta baseball team. Their history isn't about a game. After all, most of their ancestors got killed off when the settlers took over the land." Simple statements like that are what we have to get into everyone's consciousness — that difference doesn't necessarily imply inferiority or unfitness or a threat, it just means difference. Once you start talking about the operation of racism in your own orbit, you may be surprised to discover that you find it harder to stop than it was to start, as the instances which deserve mention overwhelm you.

White women can also make a practice of talking to and with people of color about racism. Of course lots of times people of color won't take you up on your remarks about racism — after all racism means their lives start out harder than yours and they have no particular reason to believe you understand or give a damn about that. On the other hand, when a person of color is willing to talk with you about racism, you have to realize you are getting to hear from someone who is an involuntary expert on something you can only know from outside. Naturally this does not mean that her particular perspective is shared by all people of color or necessarily "right," but it is certain to come from a place you need to know the existence of.

2. Listen to people of color's own voices as they address one another. Readers may be surprised that I didn't list this item first — shouldn't we listen before we talk? Perhaps, but this is an article

Lesbian Contradiction

about action and the last thing I want to do is encourage more of the kind of study which seems to lead to wallowing in guilt and nothing much useful. Besides I am not talking about the kind of learning white people can do from books and pictures essentially made for us, such as women's studies and progressive history texts. (Some of these are excellent by the way: I can't think of anyone who wouldn't benefit from internalizing the story of U.S. history as told in *Race, Gender and Work*, by Teresa L. Amott and Julie A. Matthaei, South End Press, 1991, paperback, 434 pages, \$16.00). Rather I am talking about the kind of media that white people won't find unless we take the trouble to go a little out of our accustomed paths.

For example, how many white readers know about the picture of African history being developed by Afro-Centric scholars like Ivan van Sertima? We need to — re-examination of the African past is giving hope and direction to millions of African-Americans whose communities are literally being destroyed by denial of health care, crime, drugs, and miseducation in the wake of fifteen years of Reagan-Bush war on the poor.

We can also become readers of the newspapers directed to particular racial and ethnic communities. Most large American cities have at least one African-American and one (predominantly) Spanish language community paper — some have multiple monthlies and weeklies directed at various groups. White women can learn a lot by getting in the habit of finding these publications and reading them. Finding them may require going into small businesses in unfamiliar neighborhoods, but that is an experience which wouldn't hurt most of us as well.)

There is a good chance that white lesbian and feminist readers won't much like what we find. The community media of people of color are often pretty hostile to us, viewing us as a) in competition for the same crumbs offered by the remnants of affirmative action and b) a threat to the family, which often seems the only bulwark against a hostile white-dominated society. It takes a fairly thick skin to read things like: "sexual harassment, like pro-abortion and homosexual rights, come out of the White feminist movement that has been gaining political ground over the last 20 years. . . . The major perpetrators of sexual harassment in the work place have always been White males. . . . but White feminists were not about to put the men they birthed before national television as sex perverts. Instead they gave high honor to the likes of Senator Edward Kennedy who had the nerve to judge a Black man, and says the hearing on Judge Thomas

was not racist. . . . Professor Anita M. Hill seemed at ease testifying before the nation about how Judge Thomas allegedly sexually harassed her 10 years ago. While she testified it was apparent that a new kind of Black woman was on the scene; one that placed no importance on the Black community, nor how it may feel or react to such charges. . . . She had adopted the values of the White feminist movement, and not the values of a Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker or for that matter, the values of Black women as a whole, in America." (Theodore Kirkland, *The Challenger*, Buffalo, New York, October 16, 1991).

So why do I think that white women should be reading media that routinely carry such masculinist special pleading? For one thing, such voices (some of them female by the way) are not all there is: the next

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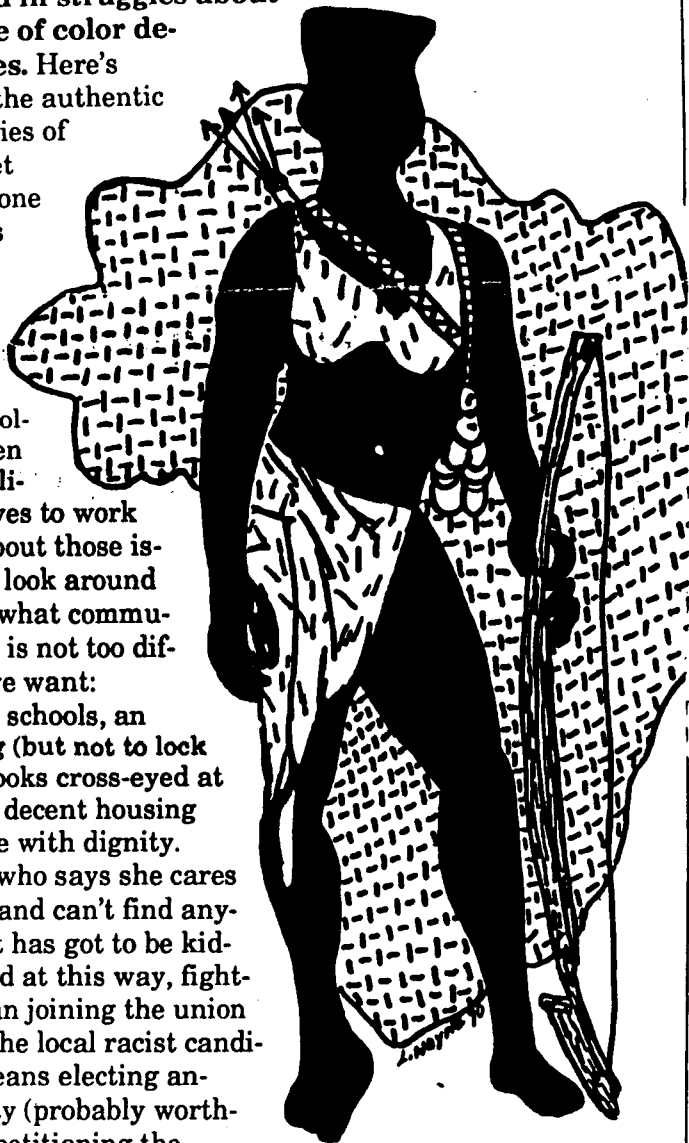
## Race & Racism

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week's issue of *The Challenger* contains a celebratory account of a local reading by Ntozake Shange in which she affirmed her support for Anita Hill. For another, white people may disagree with the direction the rage of people of color takes, but we must listen to its depth and urgency however much we may not like it. And even when we don't like it, we need to recognize the partial truths embedded in it: because sexual harassment is a crime of the powerful against the less powerful, it is certainly true that most harassers are white men — and some white women's organizations have equivocated in their attitude to the likes of liberals such as Ted Kennedy, accepting their support while ignoring their real record with women. Moreover, if we are serious about being in sisterhood with women of color, we need to be reading this sort of thing to know what they are up against on the homefront.

(Some *LesCon* readers may wonder about my advocating that white women read the media of various ethnic groups in a publication which itself is a kind of ethnic media and which asks that men not subscribe. I find no contradiction in this. We say that *LesCon* is "by and for women" not because we believe we can prevent men from reading it, or even want to expend any energy doing so, but because we want it to be a discussion in which women address women. Likewise, I think white women can read the media of the various ethnic groups respectfully so long as we understand we are, in a sense, eavesdropping and have no right to expect to be participants in the conversation.)

3. Get involved in struggles about issues that people of color define as their issues. Here's where listening to the authentic media of communities of color can help us set our agenda. Every one of us who is serious about trying to advance women's rights should be able to name the issues of importance to people of color, especially women of color, in our localities and get ourselves to work doing something about those issues. Usually if we look around we'll discover that what communities of color want is not too different from what we want: health care, decent schools, an end to drug dealing (but not to lock up every kid who looks cross-eyed at a cop), decent jobs, decent housing and a chance to live with dignity. Any white woman who says she cares about that agenda and can't find anywhere to work on it has got to be kidding herself. Looked at this way, fighting racism can mean joining the union at work, opposing the local racist candidate even if this means electing another garden variety (probably worthless) Democrat, or petitioning the school board for more latch key programs for kids whose mothers work for wages.



**WOMYN WARRIOR**  
by Laura Irene Wayne

The problem often comes in that white lesbians fear they have to be less than all of themselves, be in the closet or close to the closet, to be welcome in "mainstream" political coalitions or in groups where churches are important forces. This is where we have to be a little tougher with ourselves. The fact is that conditions in the poorer sectors of the non-white communities in this country are so bad that folks will put up with a lot if we are perceived as actually doing something useful. And if we use our creativity we often have real skills and materials to offer.

Of course we have to be careful when we have something to offer that we not assume that means we should take over. Sometimes this is as simple as remembering to practice common courtesy — if others have been working on a campaign or a project for a long time, it is only polite to hold off on offering our brilliant ideas until we understand

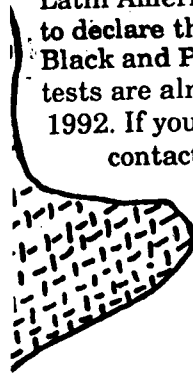
why things are done the way they are and until we have proved our willingness to do actual work on the terms of those who were there first. Also, white people in coalitions need to understand that sometimes it is more important that new people learn to fill certain functions, like writing leaflets or talking to the press, than that the people who can do these things fastest always do them. (These people often turn out to be the ones who are the best educated and most middle class).

One thing that is useful to remember is that it is often easier for people who are very different from each other to work together on defensive projects than on offensive ones. To do defense, we merely have to agree on what we don't like; offense requires the much harder task of agreeing on where we are going. For example, it has been very hard for the communities of people of color and feminist civil rights groups to agree on new definitions of family which would benefit just about everyone. Though neither group predominantly lives in or benefits from the right wing's sacred nuclear family, defining new legal forms (whether recognizing unmarried domestic partnerships or extended family structures) has been hard to come together about. On the other hand, one defensive struggle which has served in a number of places to bring gays, lesbians and people of color together has been efforts to stop police brutality. I believe that if we can't begin to learn to appreciate our differences in these kinds of relatively supportive contexts, the mutual enemy — the white male power structure and its hangers-on — will continue to be able to keep us squabbling with each other instead of overthrowing them.

**Moving from Unease to Action**  
continued from previous page

#### 4. Get involved in the Five Hundred Years of Resistance.

This year white feminist anti-racists have a special opportunity to join with people of color in raising consciousness of racism in the context of the U.S. "celebration" of the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in this hemisphere. While all the mainstream media are busy celebrating the "discovery of America," all of us who need change have an unusual opportunity to raise questions about what there is to celebrate — and what and who is America. Latin American and Native American groups have been planning to raise these questions since 1987. Over "Columbus Day" this fall, Native, African-American and Latin American representatives met in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, to declare the "Continental Campaign for 500 Years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance." Many educational events and protests are already planned for all areas of the United States during 1992. If you don't know how to get involved in your local community, contact some of these resources:



*Akwesasne Notes*, a journal of Native American affairs, published six times a year, \$15 in the U.S., write Mohawk Nation, P O Box 196, Rooseveltown, NY 13683-0196.

Alliance for Cultural Democracy, publishers of *Cultural Democracy* and *huracán* journals and of the "How to 1992" comic. P.O. Box 7591, Minneapolis, MN 55407.

Campaña Continental, 500 Años de Resistencia Indígena, Afro-Americana y Popular, Secretaría Operativa, Apartado Postal 7-B, Sucursal El Treból, 01903 Ciudad Guatemala, Guatemala, C.A. Leading organizers of communications about the hemisphere-wide campaign.

Clergy and Laity Concerned, publisher of Columbus education packet (\$8), 340 Mead Rd., Decatur, GA 30030.

Indigenous Women's Network, publishes *Indigenous Women* (\$4 per issue), P.O. Box 174, Lake Elmo, MN 55402.

International Indian Treaty Council, the political arm of the American Indian Movement, with non-governmental status at the United Nations. Organizers for counter-Columbus day activities in the U.S. in 1992. 710 Clayton Street, #1, San Francisco, CA 94117. (415) 566-0251

1992 Alliance, c/o Morning Star Foundation, 403 10th St. SE, Washington, DC 20003 An indigenous peoples' response to the Columbus anniversary.

Rethinking Schools, publishers of *Rethinking Columbus*, \$4, as well as a regular quarterly magazine devoted to educational issues, \$10, 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212.

SAIIC (South and Meso-American Indian Information Center), provides liason between North, Central and South American people, publish a newsletter updating counter-Quincentennial activities around the world. P. O. Box 28703, Oakland, CA 94604. (510) 834-4263. ♦

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