Race & Racism

The Wackos at the Anti-Racism Conference

by Rebecca Gordon and Jan Adams

Longtime readers of Lescon may recall the adventures of those loveable Wackos, Camshaft and Barkdust. In years past they’ve explored such feminist and progressive phenomena as the need to choosing a proper feminist name for oneself, and etiquette for mass arrests at the Federal Building.

Recently the Wackos found themselves at the Reclaiming Our Guilt conference. Organizers divided the assembled feminists into several groups. Camshaft and Barkdust met with a small group of other white women. Our heroines were very impressed by the passion and commitment of the other group members. Still, they found themselves a little bemused...

Facilitator: Let’s unfold the chairs that are leaning against that wall and put them in a circle. Our Sisters of Color want to use this room in an hour, so we need to get started.

Lisa: (to Barkdust) How many anti-racism workshops have you been to? This is my 13th. It’s taken a while, but I’m finally really getting in touch with my grief and anger about racism.

Barkdust: Well, I’ve never been to a workshop before, but I’m working on the Campaign to —

Jennifer: (overhearing) This is your first workshop? You’re so lucky! You’re going to love it. I cried for a week after my first one. It was so cleansing.

Facilitator: (to Camshaft) What’s that pile of orange papers you have there?

Camshaft: Oh, I brought some flyers for everyone about Saturday’s meeting to protest police brutality. People are going to be there from all over the city: the Black Community Forum, the Chicano Committee for Action, the Lesbian Political Caucus, the —

Facilitator: Oh dear, didn’t you read your packet? You can’t bring political flyers to the workshop. This is supposed to be a safe space. Some women feel threatened when people tell them they ought to go to an event. Working on racism is hard enough, without extra pressures of “shoulds.”
Camshaft: Packet? Oh, is *that* what those women were collating when I tried to register? Well, I'll just leave these on the table then. Women who want them can take them.

Facilitator: But don't you see that just having to look at a pile of flyers could make some women feel guilty? We're trying to get rid of our guilt here. This is your first workshop, isn't it? I know it's hard to understand in the beginning. I'll be glad to talk with you about your personal issues after the session, if you'd like.

Barkdust: (overhearing) Better not. Camshaft doesn't feel safe in one-on-one situations. (To Camshaft) Don't worry. Maybe we can put them in the bathroom later.

Facilitator: Okay, let's get started. We'll begin by going around the circle and telling how far we've come in our unlearning racism process and why we're here today.

Jennifer: This is my seventh anti-racism workshop. I'm here because I need a safe space to heal from my racism. At my last workshop I got in touch with some pretty heavy feelings. I guess what I want to get out of today's workshop is to learn to really *listen* to women of color when they ask us to deal with our racism, instead of always hearing some other message. I guess that's it for now.

Susan: Well, this is my *eighth* workshop. I really need these safe spaces to talk about my feelings. If it weren't for conferences like this I would never have gotten this far dealing with my racism. Now I never feel scared when I walk down a dark street alone at night. I'm completely over my guilt about getting mugged last year. Who's next?

Barkdust: This is my first workshop and—

Everyone (except Camshaft): Your *first*? Wow!

Lisa: Welcome, sister. It's really hard work, but you'll feel so much better once you've done it.

Barkdust: Well, I guess so. Anyway, I was hoping to get some ideas from other women about what I can do about racism where I work. I'm a secretary at a construction company. My office doesn't have an affirmative action program, and some of us want them to make one. We can probably bully management into writing something nice on a piece of paper, but I don't know how to make them really put it into practice, so—

Nancy: You're new to this process. After a few workshops you'll learn not to intellectualize so much. It's okay. It took me years to realize that by focusing on surface issues, I was avoiding dealing with my deep-rooted racism. You're doing the same thing, see?
Barkdust (doubtfully): I think so.

Facilitator: Let's try not to interrupt each other.

Nancy: But we have to interrupt racism!

Facilitator: Well, that's true. Do you want to go next?

Nancy: Okay. This is my tenth workshop. This has been a tremendous growth process for me. I feel like I'm ready to take the next step in dealing with racism and start facilitating groups myself. I guess that's all for now. How many workshops have you been to?

Camshaft: This is my first workshop. I came because I've been working on this police brutality campaign and—

Lisa, Susan and Jennifer: No intellectualizing! Talk about how it feels.

Lisa: (in tears) I'm just so tired of hearing white women talk and talk about racism, like it was just another subject to discuss—

Barkdust: Yeah, we need to do something about it—

Lisa: Right, like learn to feel it in our guts, not our brains. Really take some risks.

A knock on the door. Someone passes a note to the Facilitator.

Facilitator: The Sisters of Color have decided to hold a rally at City Hall tomorrow to protest race and sex discrimination in the Fire Department. They're asking us to send a speaker. What do women think?

Lisa: I'm really tired of white women speaking for women of color.

Barkdust (whispering to Camshaft): But didn't they ask for a speaker?

Nancy: I don't think I'd feel safe speaking in public. My racism might come out and I might say something that offended people of color by mistake. I know I still have a lot of work to do.

Susan: I agree with Nancy and Lisa. It's time for white women to let

Lesbian Contradiction
women of color speak for themselves. We still have a lot of self-educating to do.

**Camshaft and Barkdust:** But—

General commotion and conversation ensue. The door opens again and Christine, an African American woman, comes in.

**Christine:** Hi, folks. If you're just about done, would you please stack the chairs against this wall? We're going to need this room in about five minutes.

**Camshaft** (to Jennifer): I didn't catch that. What did she say?

**Jennifer:** I think she said she's tired of five hundred years of white women's racism and she wants us to keep working on it!

**Barkdust:** Cam, I'm really hungry. Let's go get a burrito.

*(Note: The authors swear that they have heard some version of each of these exchanges in one feminist conference or another. Only the names have been changed to protect the guilty.)*

Winter 1992 5