

Off White

Readings on Race, Power, and Society

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The White Girl in Me, the Colored Girl in You, and the Lesbian in Us: Crossing Boundaries

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Writing this chapter is a political act. It is a dialogue between two women, one Black and one White. It is a deeply personal account of both our thoughts and feelings about race, gender, and sexuality as well as a description of the processes involved in exploring them, within ourselves and with each other. This dialogue is stimulated by the hope that if we can work with some of the differences between us as women then there is hope that we can collaborate in addressing the “isms” that are damaging to us all: racism, sexism, and heterosexism.

In our attempt to embrace the complexity involved in crossing boundaries, we turn to a Group Relations model because its theoretical roots in psychoanalytic and social systems theories allow for an understanding of both the irrational and unconscious forces as well as the group processes involved in creating a denigrated “other.”

A Group Relations perspective maintains that differences such as race, gender, and sexual orientation of “others” are often used as receptacles for the unwanted aspects of oneself. The use of the other as a container for undesirable aspects of the self is accomplished in large part through splitting and projective identification, which are largely unconscious processes. Aspects of the self or the group that are disowned or rejected are projected onto others, so that desirable characteristics are contained entirely within the self or one’s own group, and their undesirable counterparts are contained entirely in the “other.” At the group level, this process is an important basis for stereotypes. Thus, projections and stereotypes are among the building blocks from which self-concepts and group identities are constructed. The “not me” and the “not us” are used to define “me” and “us.”

It is with these ideas in mind that the process of a Black woman claiming her internal White girl, a White woman claiming her internal colored girl, and both of us as heterosexuals claiming our internal lesbian allows each of us to work across external group boundaries. As long as neither of us have to disown our “not me’s” and use the “other” as a container, then we are free to work across real differences and see projection for just that—projection.

The reader should note that there has been no attempt to homogenize our voices in this dialogue. As a result, the reader may have a more difficult time integrating our voices because of the absence of connective tissue. Yet connective tissue may blur the boundary and make complex transactions appear simple and effortless. In order to preserve the complexity of our dialogue, we ask the reader to hold our different styles as well as take note of our individual and joint realities. We have found that these are prerequisites for collaborating across difference.

MEDRIA'S VOICE

The process of working on this collaborative project with Debra has been challenging for us both. It evoked, between us, reactions and responses which we hoped we could confront in a more detached, unaffecting way. The rather provocative title was my idea. It grew out of conversations that Debra and I had about the need to find parts of the "other" in oneself. As a Black, heterosexual woman, I thought it was time to speak openly about the white girl and the lesbian in me. At various times during my adulthood I have been accused of acting like a white girl, or being into things that white girls are into, so I thought I might as well just address the issue directly instead of getting defensive about it. Dealing with the lesbian in me presented a deeper challenge. I had to address my homophobia. But having a daughter whom I love deeply and feel very proud of and who is lesbian helped me begin this personal exploration.

As a White, heterosexual woman, Debra was already in the process of taking up more fully her "colored" parts. She had been confronted by too many light-skinned Black women who were wondering why she was busy identifying as a white girl when she is as dark-skinned as they are. So she knew it was time to do that work. And she was already in touch with her homoerotic energy, so she didn't have to work as hard as I did to free up her lesbian parts.

This is how our dialogue began.

As the implications of what we would be trying to discuss started to sink in, however, my enthusiasm began to fade and my anxiety began to rise. Initially, I carried the fear and anxiety. I worried that if I tried to talk about the white girl and the lesbian in me, it would generate contempt from Black women and men, and disbelief from lesbians. But it was hard for me to hold onto my fear and anxiety when Debra began to express similar feelings.

At first, Debra was also very enthusiastic about this work. But as the deadline for submitting the proposal approached, she became more anxious and ambivalent about doing it. Debra expressed fears similar to mine. She worried that if she tried to talk about the colored girl in her, it would generate contempt from Black women and White women. And, talking about the lesbian in her felt like she was "coming out." In addition, Debra was convinced that everyone would love what I had to say, and hate what she had to say. What initially felt like an exciting opportunity for her seemed to be rapidly degenerating into a win/lose situation in which I would be the winner and she would be the loser.

As we talked about our work, it became increasingly evident that Debra was getting loaded with vulnerability in the form of fear and anxiety. I was getting loaded with more powerful, idealized attributes, which of course runs quite contrary to the reality of my experience as a Black woman where I feel devalued in relation to White women, not idealized. So, what was going on here?

As we continued to talk about this, we thought that a projective identification dynamic was occurring between us, one which mirrors a dynamic that often occurs between Black women and White women. Debra was projecting her competence onto me which tended to inflate me, feed my narcissism, and provided me with a defense against my own feelings of vulnerability. In doing

so, she was stuck carrying the vulnerability that I was not owning, as I was identifying with the more desirable aspects of courageous leadership.

Projective identification is a defense mechanism. For us it served as a defense against the more ambivalently held aspects of ourselves, my vulnerability, her fear of envy regarding her competence.

These defenses were mobilized in the service of protecting ourselves from a larger more painful dynamic, one that interferes with the collaboration of women across difference, the judgment and contempt that we often feel for each other. Of course, contempt for other women, those who look like us and those who don't, is often a defense against facing that which we are critical about in ourselves. But to get to that deeper experience of self, which is often unconscious, we must first deal with the conscious feelings of contempt and hatred for one another.

My reasons for hating White women are multidetermined. The most salient one is racism. White women are as racist as White men, if not more so. Being oppressed as women, White women have a lot of pent-up hatred of their own to carry which unfortunately finds an expression in racism. And when White women direct racial hatred at me because I am Black, I reflect racial hatred back at them because they are White.

Another important issue involves competition and envy. In American culture, White women represent the standard of beauty against which I cannot measure up as a Black woman. In this arena, I can compete with White women, but I can never win. Of course this beauty competition is in the service of attracting the attention of men, or women, depending on one's sexual orientation. But it is a competition that I will inevitably lose. I hate that!

White women also enjoy white skin privilege and access to power through their affiliation with White men. As a Black woman I am envious of this, but my envy turns to rage when White women refuse to acknowledge or try to deny their privilege and connection to power through their fathers, sons, and husbands.

I also hate what I refer to as the "weakness" of White women. My stereotype of White women is that they seem to whine all the time, stay scared and needy, and always seem to expect everyone to protect them and take care of them, including Black women. Envy is operating here too, because Black women in this country have never had the privilege of being protected and taken care of. Slavery taught us that we were equal to Black men (Black women worked as hard as Black men and were subjected to the same abuse); the legacy of slavery has taught us that we must take care of ourselves.

When I talk about hating White women, I am speaking in a general sense. In reality, I don't hate all White women. But I do approach White women with skepticism until I get to know them as individuals and we work through our historical relationship. If there is no opportunity to work through our troubled, collective past, there is no hope for a real, personal relationship in the present.

Denigration of the "other" to elevate oneself or one's reference group is a common psychological defense. It's a form of projective identification. But Black women pay a price for hating White women. That hatred spills over into our relationships with other Black women. Audre Lorde, a Black feminist and lesbian, spoke about our hatred in her essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger":

Racism and sexism are grown-up words. Black children in America cannot avoid these distortions in their living and, too often, do not have the words for naming them. But both are correctly perceived as hatred. Growing up, metabolizing hatred like daily bread. Because I am Black, because I am woman, because I am not Black enough, [because I am too Black], because I am not some particular fantasy of a woman, because I AM. On such a consistent diet,

one can eventually come to value the hatred of one's enemies more than one values the love of friends, for that hatred becomes the source of anger, and anger is a powerful fuel. (p. 152)

Another important point is the fact that underneath all this hatred is a great deal of anger, and under that anger is hurt. As a Black woman I protect my hurt parts with my anger and my hatred. But this is double edged because while it allows me to have a voice, it also makes it hard to stay in touch with my more tender parts, which are needed to express love. Or as Audre Lorde states: "In order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone, and now we bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest" (p. 160).

Internalized racism and sexism are felt most profoundly in the contempt that Black women feel for each other. Sisterhood works conceptually, but does not begin to touch how angry, judgmental, and vicious we can be with each other.

It was this understanding about Black women that generated so much anxiety in me as I thought about writing this paper with Debra. I knew that, in part, I would have to speak from a place of woundedness and this revelation would make me appear weak and subject to the same contempt that I have for White women who seem weak.

My woundedness, however, is more a function of my relationships with Black women than with White women. I can manage the racism of White women. It makes me angry, but it doesn't touch my core. But I am vulnerable to Black women. What they think about me matters.

When I was a young girl, I was often taunted by other Black girls who threatened to "kick my ass" because they said I thought I was cute because I have long, straight hair (a vestige of my Native American heritage). I didn't think I was cute and their threats made me extremely self-conscious about my hair. As an adult I recognize this threatening behavior as envy. As a child, however, it felt like hatred. To this day I worry about drawing a negative reaction from Black women because of my hair.

As an adult, competition and envy from Black women comes in more subtle ways. It is less about physical appearance and more about competence and accomplishments. This is certainly true for me as well. I am most in touch with my feelings of competition and envy when I am around smart, high-achieving, successful Black women.

I had a dream which captures the essence of this struggle.

I enter a basement lounge at Teachers College, Columbia University, with my husband who is White. (In reality, this is where I completed my doctoral work.) He goes upstairs to do something with administration while I look for a quiet spot in the lounge, which is empty, except for three Black people, a man, a woman, and her child. I move to the back of the lounge, but as I do I realize that they are preparing to eat back there. To get out of their way, I try to move to the front of the lounge, but they have already taken their seats and I have to walk past them. The Black woman who is overweight, dressed in a uniform, and clearly works there, looks at me with contempt as I walk by. Quickly I try to assess what is generating the contempt—as if by naming or identifying the source of the contempt I can somehow protect myself from its impact. I run down a list in my mind: Is it because I'm with a White man? Is it because my hair is straight? Is it because I'm pretty? Is it because I'm well dressed? Is it because I have a role different than hers at Teachers College?

The dream describes the tension between Black women in general, and with me specifically. But, since I come from a working-class background, it also describes the tension between the me that has developed as an accomplished, professional Black woman and the working-class part of me left behind or differentiated from in the service of that development.

The price of my success is to be distanced by from those I feel bonded to, who see me as a race traitor, “a wanna be white girl.” But there is some truth to this perception. While I am firmly rooted in my Black racial identity and do not identify with the race traitor label, graduate school did help me perfect my “white girl” behavior, while simultaneously increasing my range of knowledge. In fact, I am convinced that knowing how to act like a white girl contributed to my smooth passage through my graduate program.

As I understand it, white girl behavior can take various forms. It involves talking proper, that is, using standard English instead of Black dialect or patois. It involves presenting one’s self with a neutral affect, instead of an impassioned or angry affect. It involves engaging through personal connections instead of being reserved and respectful of the sovereignty of the other. It involves acting as if one really needs the support of others, instead of acting in a self-sufficient and self-contained manner. It involves the avoidance of any discussion regarding race or racism, and lots of discussion about sexism.

Activating the white girl in me is a conscious process. She is particularly useful to me in situations where I am the only Black person present and I don’t know the White people. Unfortunately, this is often the case in professional settings. When I’m feeling marginal around White people, the white girl facilitates my entry, helps me to connect, and allows me to be at least partially taken in by them. She also allows me to move comfortably in the company of White people. The white girl in me puts White people at ease. She knows how to make them comfortable. In my role as a therapist, the white girl in me allows me to genuinely and empathically connect with White and biracial clients.

The white girl in me broadens my social repertoire. She allows me to move across a wider range of cultural experiences. In this regard, I consider myself bicultural. There are times when it requires no effort to activate her. At other times it takes a substantial effort to mobilize her, and I feel resentful about having to work so hard. There are also times when I decline social engagements with White people (who are not good friends) because I don’t feel like taking her out. There are even times when she gets on my nerves in the same way that White women get on my nerves. But in general I am grateful to the white girl in me. She really is a part of who I am.

The challenge for me is to integrate the successful, White-identified parts while remaining connected to my Black self. For only in this way can I maintain a sense of wholeness and not feel dismembered by the splitting dynamics present in American society, which values the white girl in me more than the colored girl.

Writing about the lesbian in me turned out to be a more difficult process than writing about the white girl in me. The word *lesbian* is so emotionally charged, implying something sexual and deviant. Within the Black community, lesbians are either ignored or attacked. Black people also devalue the significance of being a lesbian by construing it as a “white thang” or a phase that Black lesbians are going through. Most heterosexual Black women deal with lesbianism by being as rigid and closed about it as possible. Even Black lesbians who have no difficulty celebrating their lesbianism are often reluctant to declare themselves as lesbians (See Tate’s article, p. 38). This is understandable since Black lesbians are already coping with racism and sexism. What good would it do to homophobia to the list?

The word *lesbian* is intensely charged for White heterosexual women and White lesbians too. In her essay “It is the Lesbian in Us” Adrienne Rich explains:

the word *lesbian* has many resonances. Some of us would destroy the word altogether. Others would transform it, still others eagerly claim and speak it after years of being unable to utter it. Feminists have been made to fear that they will be discredited if perceived as les-

bians; some lesbians have withdrawn or been forced into nonfeminist enclaves (such as the “gay” movement) which reject and denigrate “straight” women. The word itself is frequently used by others loosely and pejoratively to imply that our politics and self-definition proceed first out of hatred and rejection. (p. 202)

It is not surprising that the distorted images associated with the word *lesbian* and the fear of homophobic attack prevents women from speaking about the powerful intellectual, emotional, psychic, and spiritual connection that is found in our same-sex pairing.

The voice of the lesbian in me is found in my relationships with women. This seems so simple. Yet the difficulty I had coming to this realization underscores the power of what I believe is the critical issue here. There is something dangerous and forbidden about the public pairing of women. And pairing across racial lines further heightens this tension. Of course private pairing among women occurs all the time. But the public pairing of women, especially Black and White women, is a political act and represents a disruption of the pattern of unequal power relations between women and men, and between Black people and White people.

I define the lesbian in me as the woman-centered part of myself. I realize that I am using the word *lesbian* in its broadest sense. In doing so, it is not my intention to minimize the lesbian culture, with all its joys, struggles, and complexities, but rather to emphasize a place of joining. Nor is it my intention to co-opt the term “the lesbian in me” and make it into a figure of speech. That would be yet another way of rendering the lesbian culture invisible. Finally, it would be disingenuous and contrary to the purpose of this paper to use “the lesbian in me” literally, while having access to heterosexual privilege. Conceptualizing the lesbian in me as woman-centered is my way of embracing the feminine and acknowledging the life-giving force found in powerful connections between women.

Since the voice of the lesbian is found in my relationships with women, it seems appropriate to describe how it operates in my friendship and co-authorship with Debra. I first met Debra when we were graduate students at Teachers College. But our relationship did not begin to flourish until she got more involved in Group Relations work within the A. K. Rice Institute and joined the faculty at Teachers College. Both occurred at about the same time. The beauty of the intimacy and affection we share is that it developed through our work together. We are open and honest with each other, including my “colored girl” and her “white girl” parts. It is deeply gratifying to connect with a woman who feels as passionately about these issues as I do.

Debra stimulates me both intellectually and erotically. She is smart, and smart women who are also authentic have always turned me on. And she is beautiful and sensual, which gets my erotic juices flowing. When I speak of the erotic, I am not just speaking of my homoerotic fantasies, I am also referring to Audre Lorde’s definition of the erotic. In her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” (p. 55) Audre Lorde explains:

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all of its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

It is this stimulation and trust in our capacity to collaborate that allows me to explore this sociopolitical territory with Debra.

Medria's rendition of our joining together in this enterprise accurately describes my experience. In the remarks that follow, I discuss my experience as having external trappings that allow me to identify as a White, heterosexual woman (albeit on the boundary between being White and being "of color" because of the shade of my skin) and having internal identifications as a colored girl and as a lesbian. These internal and external identifications alternately serve as "me" and "not me" containers, depending in part on the context in which I am operating. I am well aware of the privilege this boundary position affords me and will expound on the ways in which both White and heterosexual privilege have influenced me.

Both the external and the internal, the outside and the inside, have a relationship to me personally and are also related to the sociopolitical climate in which I and we exist. It would be a disservice to ourselves, to feminist thought, and to the tradition of Group Relations work to separate the individual from the contextual. One of the underlying premises of this work is that an individual's internal world is affected greatly by external reality. Moreover, who takes up what issue, when, and in what context has not only psychological but political relevance as well.

For example, in a Group Relations conference on diversity, it is the widely held assumption that race will be spoken about by people of color, that gender will be spoken about by women, and that sexual orientation will be spoken about by gays and lesbians. While I am well aware that there are Whites in the GR tradition who do work on race, men who do work on gender and heterosexuals who do work on sexual orientation, this is unusual. In the world at large, there are not a lot of Whites who address race, men who address gender, and heterosexuals who address sexual orientation. In fact, while writing this chapter, Medria and I have often been inhibited by what we imagined others might think of us for talking about our "inner parts" that are not represented in our "outer parts."

It is considered a given in group and organizational life that issues are taken up by whatever group is most affected by them; however, often that group is then accused of taking up only these issues for reasons of self-interest rather than for the benefit of the whole. The bind, however, is that if they do not bring them up, no one else in the group or organization will, and the status quo remains in effect. For the purpose of this work, the status quo refers here to the dynamic interplay of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia, persons of color, women, and gays and lesbians in the role of "other" and isolate them in the experience of oppression.

Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, amplifies the concept of "othering." Morrison describes the ways in which African Americans have been used throughout American history to contain disowned aspects of dominant White society, a process she refers to as Africanism. Morrison states:

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (p. 52)

Morrison's central thesis is that for White Americans, the ideals and experiences of freedom, individualism, manhood, and innocence have depended on the existence of a Black population that is manifestly unfree, and which serves Whites as the embodiment of their own fears and disowned desires. Women (White women especially) have been used in a similar way to contain projections of being weak, passive, and powerless, as well as being seductive, manipulative, devouring, and

castrating. Gays and lesbians have carried disowned projections of sexual nonconformity based on the fear that unbridled expression of sexual impulses will lead to the collapse of the institutions of family and society. Of course, it is *one's own* fears, desires, and sexual impulses, not those of others, that are the real source of terror (Reed and Noumair, in press).

In order to illustrate this point, I return to my experience of joining with Medria to write this chapter, since what we went through in order to coauthor is exactly the work that is involved in crossing group boundaries. My experience of Medria is that she is bright, wonderfully articulate and able to have access to her brain and her heart at the same time. And while I know there is reality to all of what I have just described, what I do with Medria is that I say it is the "colored girl" in her that allows her to be so out there. It is "the having fought for survival" that gave her permission to have voice. Maybe you, the reader, can guess that I put my competence regarding this work into Medria, and that by placing all that I admire in her colored girl and by disowning the colored girl in me, I am left vulnerable to silence. Until I can claim fully the colored girl in myself, I risk interacting with Medria as a container for my "not me." I ask her to be bold and courageous for me, in effect, to carry the provocateur in me and I miss out on the opportunity for an authentic exchange across our differences.

Perhaps, you the reader have also seen beyond this idealization of Medria and into a root of racism. By asking Medria to carry the provocateur in me, I am essentially asking her to carry my anger and for a White woman to ask a Black woman to carry her anger is to collude with the maintenance of parochial race and gender stereotypes whereby we construct "angry Black women" and "powerless White women." Moreover, by making Medria "other" I see her only as the "colored girl" and I lose the opportunity to take in the complexity of who Medria is and what she brings to our relationship. This loss, experienced acutely in our interpersonal relationship, is emblematic of the price we all pay for being unable to find the "other" in ourselves.

Disowning the "other," in this case the colored girl in me, involves a set of complex, interdependent maneuvers caused by racism. My racial/ethnic heritage is one half Italian and one half Lebanese, and while I have the looks of my father's family, my Lebanese heritage, I have always identified as White because of my connection to my mother's family and her Italian-European background. Thus, my internalized racism is based on my identification with my mother's values and the split in my family.

I can trace this to the moment of my birth. Upon seeing me as a newborn, my mother's father exclaimed "she looks like an Indian." This was not good news, I can assure you, because whenever the story is told, it always includes my mother's profound sense of injury. From that moment forward, the "dark" color of my skin was not a source of joy but rather an aspect of my body to be coped with, compensated for, and managed. My family's reaction to the color of my skin was an expression of racism and an expression of hatred for my father, the "denigrated other," who was held as "bad" in order for my mother to be the "idealized other" and held as "good." Thus, my inner life was characterized by my hatred of the "me" that was like my father, my dark skin and eyes, as well as my dark, curly hair. These parts became "not me," that is, identifying as White and not understanding why anyone would question my racial identity was an act of denial, an act of denigration, in effect, an expression of racism.

One consequence of my parent's divorce and the identification of my father as the bad object is that I held my Lebanese parts ambivalently. Until a few years ago, I always thought of myself as a "white girl" in spite of ongoing feedback to the contrary. Some people often thought I was anything but White. Folks would speak to me in foreign languages on the street. When seen with my mother, I was viewed as not belonging to her. My brother would tease me about being adopted, and I believed him. And since adolescence Black men have found me attractive.

Of all these occurrences, it was Black men's attraction for me that was most problematic because it influenced directly my relationships with Black women. I can vividly recall being chased down the street by Black girls in grammar school because of the attention I received from "their men." At the time I felt both fear and shame, fear that they would beat me up and shame that I could not protect myself or fight back. This behavior in grammar school shows a white girl who is timid, powerless, and in need of protection. It is exactly what Medria is referring to when she talks about her hatred toward White women. I understand her hatred because of my own contempt for that white girl in me. These attributes have not contributed to a healthy sense of self-esteem nor have they enhanced my relationships with others. Knowing that the price of Black men's desire for me was Black women's rage at me has had the deepest impact on my racial identity and on the relation between the white girl and the colored girl in me.

It was not until I actively engaged in Group Relations work that my sense of identity began to shift to allow more of my colored girl to emerge. First, there was an African-American woman senior to me who would ask angrily, "how could you identify as White, you don't look White, I can't take you in as White." Then I heard that the Black folks in the A. K. Rice Institute would inquire, "What's up with Debra, why does she identify herself as White?" And finally I worked with a senior African-American man whose challenge was, could I take him in? Could I find not just the colored girl in me but could I find the brother in me? In other words, could I find and embrace my father, the "not me" parts of myself? By no means is this process complete, however, I do experience my colored parts more readily, with more freedom, and with more pride than ever before.

In some ways, I wish the process of claiming all of my parts were that simple. On the contrary, finding the "other" in oneself goes against defensive projective processes, invites more complexity, and disturbs one's comfort and the exercise of various kinds of privilege. The internal tensions are as challenging as the ones found on the outside. Often what results in group life is that one identity is acknowledged while another is silenced. In fact, the presence of hatred between groups tends to erase aspects of oneself individually and to silence the voice of one group or the other, externally. For example, does it have to be that in order to authorize the colored girl in me, I must silence the white girl in me? What would it look like if they coexisted? How would they dialogue with one another? If White women were to stop having women of color carry their rage, their passion, in other words, their life force, what effect would this have on women of colors' identity? If I stop asking Medria to be my provocateur, what happens to her, to me, to our relationship, and to our individual representations of Black and White women? Would it lead to another bout of competition between Black and White women in service of preserving sexism and ultimately, racism?

The preservation of heterosexism and homophobia are also maintained through fueling the hatred rather than the erotic connections between women. Locating the lesbian in each of us can be a starting point for crossing various boundaries between women. As I will discuss, the complexity involved in negotiating a relationship between the colored girl and the white girl in me is reflected in my relationship with Medria and represents the third aspect of this chapter—the lesbian in us.

I engage in a similar set of maneuvers with the lesbian in me as I do with the colored girl in me, similar to Morrison's discussion of Africanism: lesbianism is the vehicle by which my heterosexual self knows itself as enslaved and not free, as object, not subject, and most profoundly as oppressed and quieted rather than as erotic and powerful.

The idea that the lesbian is where courage and power lie for me is not only related to my intrapsychic life but again to the issues of context and currency. This point is best illustrated by discussing my relationship with Medria. I first fell in love with Medria when I was a graduate student. I was pursuing my masters degree in counseling psychology and Medria was pursuing her Ph.D. in clinical psychology. We both did clinical work in the same clinic and attended case con-

ferences together. On this particular day, Medria was presenting a case of a man she had been working with for some time. As I have come to know the norm for Medria, she was intellectually brilliant and emotionally available and she said things in public that, at the time, I would not have said in private. I was awed and mesmerized, and to this day, I can still remember the moment at which she stole my heart. It was when she spoke openly about her hatred for her patient in a way that I had never heard anyone speak. She was forthright, honest, and revealing. Her hatred seemed loving—it was compelling and *she* was compelling. Obviously, this experience is very consistent with my inner geography and the location of my colored girl and my white girl. However, tracing the path of falling in love with Medria also allows me to find the voice of the lesbian in me.

As I write this, I am aware that one could say that I am equating the idealization of someone of the same sex with homoerotic love. Earlier in this chapter, my idealization of Medria was a maneuver to “other” her, to encourage and admire her “colored girl” and to silence and hide my own, to ask her to carry my rage so that I can remain afraid of such passion. In this iteration, however, my love for Medria functions similarly to how Audre Lorde describes the erotic. What Medria and I share makes me feel powerful and what we do not share is less of a threat because of each of our understanding of the “other” in ourselves, such as her Blackness and my Whiteness.

It is true, however, that what I have just described is more about our interpersonal connection and less about what it means for us as White and Black women to give voice to the lesbian in us. This political struggle is best described by Adrienne Rich in *It's the Lesbian in Us*:

I go on believing in the power of literature, and also of the politics of literature. The experience of the black woman as woman, of the white and black woman cast as antagonists in the patriarchal drama, and of black and white women as lesbians has been kept invisible for good reason. Our hidden, yet omnipresent lives have served some purpose by remaining hidden: not only in the white patriarchal world but within both the black and feminist communities, on the part of black male critics, scholars, and editors, and of institutions like the Feminist Press. Both Black studies and women's studies have shied away from this core of our experience, thus reinforcing the very silence out of which they had to assert themselves. But it is subjects, the conversations, the facts we shy away from, which claim us in the form of writer's block, as mere rhetoric, as hysteria, insomnia, and constriction of the throat. (p. 201)

Adrienne Rich saved Medria and me from what she refers to as “collaborating with silence” (p. 202). At various points in writing this chapter, we almost caved in to what I now understand as our fear of pulling the cover on patriarchy. The difficulty we encountered in locating the lesbian in us, in part, was our susceptibility to being rendered speechless by irrational forces that would prefer that we maintain our hatred for the “other” and never claim the erotic connection between us. Fueling hostility between Black and White women insures that women as a group remain splintered and therefore powerless to challenge the social order.

In order for Black women to trust White women and to cross what have been experienced historically as treacherous group boundaries, White women have to renounce their access to white male privilege, not only in word but in action. Symbolically, claiming the lesbian in me and my homoerotic feelings for Medria, shifts my relation to White male power and my access to white, heterosexual privilege. This is a catastrophic event, not only for me personally, but because White women have been used as a prophylactic against interrupting patriarchy. It is, however, this access to White, male, heterosexual privilege that allows me, as well as White women as a group, to

permit this kind of use (and abuse). These arrangements are unlikely to change unless Black and White women can negotiate a different kind of relationship with each other. In *Ain't I A Woman*, bell hooks states:

Women's liberationists, white and black, will always be at odds with one another as long as our idea of liberation is based on having the power white men have. For that power denies unity, denies common connections, and is inherently divisive. It is woman's acceptance of divisiveness as a natural order that has caused black and white women to cling religiously to the belief that bonding across racial boundaries is impossible. (pp. 156–157)

My experience in writing this chapter matches what bell hooks so eloquently describes. It has taught me that hatred, rather than erotic energy, between Black and White women, is nurtured in order to prevent finding the "other" in oneself.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Projecting and stereotyping are insidious processes that do violence to all involved. These processes allow others to be used as "not me" containers, oppressed and powerless, so that "me" containers can be dominant and powerful. A solution lies in each of us claiming back our "not me's" so that we can have a fuller sense of integration and less use for "not me" containers. While it is clear that our external identifications organize much of our conscious lives, our internal identifications as a white girl, colored girl, and lesbian are where important aspects of ourselves live. The challenge remains to have the white girl, the colored girl, and the lesbian in dialogue with each other. Otherwise, we risk limiting ourselves as well as "others," and more importantly, we actively participate in perpetuating the institutions of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia.

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