

*ALLIANCE AGAINST DISPLACEMENT
CONDITIONS OF STRUGGLE SERIES IV
SERIES IV: SEX/GENDER SYSTEMS*

*Finding New Ways of Being:
Intersectionality and the rupture in feminism*

CLASS 2

CONTENT

- 4 The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1972.
- 15 Suzan Cooke, “‘We Referred To It As Coming Out’: Recollections on Trans Identity, State Violence, and 1960s Radicalism”
- 24 Audre Lorde, 1978. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”

Combahee River Collective Statement

The Combahee River Collective was a collective of black feminists, including many lesbians, critical of white feminism. They were active from 1974 to the 1980's, at the high tide of second wave feminism. They worked on developing a black feminist ideology and exploring the shortcomings of mainstream/white feminism's focus on sex and gender oppression above all other types of discrimination.

We included this statement because it challenges white feminisms separation of race, sex and class oppression, and instead poses them as interacting forces that Black women experience simultaneously. They write, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." – COS

COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. [1] During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

We will discuss four major topics in the paper that follows: (1) the genesis of contemporary Black feminism; (2) what we believe, i.e., the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of our collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.

1. THE GENESIS OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK FEMINISM

Before looking at the recent development of Black feminism we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. In 1973, Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals,

and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black Feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence. As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. As we grew older we became aware of the threat of physical and sexual abuse by men. However, we had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we knew was really happening.

Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression. The fact that racial politics and indeed racism are pervasive factors in our lives did not allow us, and still does not allow most Black women, to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. Our development must also be tied to the contemporary economic and political position of Black people. The post World War II generation of Black youth was the first to be able to minimally partake of certain educational and employment options, previously closed completely to Black people. Although our economic position is still at the very bottom of the American capitalistic economy, a handful of us have been able to gain certain tools as a result of tokenism in education and employment which potentially enable us to more effectively fight our oppression.

A combined anti-racist and anti-sexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism.

2. WHAT WE BELIEVE

Above all else, Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's may because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g. mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, Indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to

have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.

We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions, for example, we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political. We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before. No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males.

We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart" had also been considered "ugly," i.e., "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives. The sanctions in the Black and white communities against Black women thinkers is comparatively much higher than for white women, particularly ones from the educated middle and upper classes.

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of Lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se—i.e., their biological maleness—that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether Lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.

3. PROBLEMS IN ORGANIZING BLACK FEMINISTS

During our years together as a Black feminist collective we have experienced success and defeat, joy and pain, victory and failure. We have found that it is very difficult to organize around Black feminist issues, difficult even to announce in certain contexts that we are Black feminists. We have tried to think about the reasons for our difficulties, particularly since the white women's movement continues to be strong and to grow in many directions. In this section we will discuss some of the general reasons for the organizing problems we face and also talk specifically about the stages in organizing our own collective.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any of these types of privilege have.

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. As an early group member once said, "We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women." We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women. In "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," Michele Wallace arrives at this conclusion:

We exists as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. [2]

Wallace is pessimistic but realistic in her assessment of Black feminists' position, particularly in her allusion to the nearly classic isolation most of us face. We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

Feminism is, nevertheless, very threatening to the majority of Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions about our existence, i.e., that sex should be a determinant of power relationships. Here is the way male and female roles were defined in a Black nationalist pamphlet from the early 1970s:

We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser... After all, it is only reasonable that the man be the head of the house because he is able to defend and protect the development of his home... Women cannot do the same things as men—they are made by nature to function differently. Equality of men and women is something that cannot happen even in the abstract world. Men are not equal to other men, i.e. ability, experience or even under-

standing. The value of men and women can be seen as in the value of gold and silver—they are not equal but both have great value. We must realize that men and women are a complement to each other because there is no house/family without a man and his wife. Both are essential to the development of any life. [3]

The material conditions of most Black women would hardly lead them to upset both economic and sexual arrangements that seem to represent some stability in their lives. Many Black women have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but because of the everyday constrictions of their lives, cannot risk struggling against them both.

The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than Black women by the possibility that Black feminists might organize around our own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hardworking allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement.

Still, hundreds of women have been active at different times during the three-year existence of our group. And every Black woman who came, came out of a strongly- felt need for some level of possibility that did not previously exist in her life.

When we first started meeting early in 1974 after the NBFO first eastern regional conference, we did not have a strategy for organizing, or even a focus. We just wanted to see what we had. After a period of months of not meeting, we began to meet again late in the year and started doing an intense variety of consciousness- raising. The overwhelming feeling that we had is that after years and years we had finally found each other. Although we were not doing political work as a group, individuals continued their involvement in Lesbian politics, sterilization abuse and abortion rights work, Third World Women's International Women's Day activities, and support activity for the trials of Dr. Kenneth Edelin, Joan Little, and Inéz García. During our first summer when membership had dropped off considerably, those of us remaining devoted serious discussion to the possi-

bility of opening a refuge for battered women in a Black community. (There was no refuge in Boston at that time.) We also decided around that time to become an independent collective since we had serious disagreements with NBFO's bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus.

We also were contacted at that time by socialist feminists, with whom we had worked on abortion rights activities, who wanted to encourage us to attend the National Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs. One of our members did attend and despite the narrowness of the ideology that was promoted at that particular conference, we became more aware of the need for us to understand our own economic situation and to make our own economic analysis.

In the fall, when some members returned, we experienced several months of comparative inactivity and internal disagreements which were first conceptualized as a Lesbian-straight split but which were also the result of class and political differences. During the summer those of us who were still meeting had determined the need to do political work and to move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. At the beginning of 1976, when some of the women who had not wanted to do political work and who also had voiced disagreements stopped attending of their own accord, we again looked for a focus. We decided at that time, with the addition of new members, to become a study group. We had always shared our reading with each other, and some of us had written papers on Black feminism for group discussion a few months before this decision was made. We began functioning as a study group and also began discussing the possibility of starting a Black feminist publication. We had a retreat in the late spring which provided a time for both political discussion and working out interpersonal issues. Currently we are planning to gather together a collection of Black feminist writing. We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing, and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.

4. BLACK FEMINIST ISSUES AND PROJECTS

During our time together we have identified and worked on many issues of particular relevance to Black women. The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneous factors in oppression. We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.

Issues and projects that collective members have actually worked on are sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care. We have also done many workshops and educationals on Black feminism on college campuses, at women's conferences, and most recently for high school women.

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the end always justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political goals. As feminists we do not want to mess over people in the name of politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. In her introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful* Robin Morgan writes:

I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white hetero-

sexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest- power.

As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.

NOTES

[1] This statement is dated April 1977.

[2] Wallace, Michele. "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," *The Village Voice*, 28 July 1975, pp. 6-7.

[3] Muminas of Committee for Unified Newark, Mwanamke Mwananchi (*The Nationalist Woman*), Newark, N.J., ©1971, pp. 4-5.

SUZAN COOKE

“We Referred To It As Coming Out’: Recollections on Trans Identity, State Violence, and 1960s Radicalism”

This article is an excerpt from an oral history interview with Suzan Cooke, who the interviewer identifies as “a transwoman who was active in Bay Area radical left, feminist, and gay liberation groups in the 1960s and 70s.” This article is about her experiences in the radical left (and cultural movements) of the time as a trans woman, including encountering anti-trans bigotry in Weather Underground and the anti-war movement, and the ways police violence focused on trans women in particular.

We include this article in the reading series because it places the activist experience of a trans woman at the centre of a challenges to binarized feminist theory. Because it is an oral history, a story, it also gives us a break from the more abstract and difficult theory, and a good reminder that these politics are about people’s lives.

– COS

POLICE TARGETING OF QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE

[In 1967] I got to San Francisco, went directly to the Haight ... and I got arrested the first night I was there for obstructing the sidewalk. I was playing guitar with a bunch of people, and the Tac squad, the famous Tac squad that I was going to get to know a great deal better over the next year that I spent in San Francisco, they were like “You’re new here. You’re going in tonight. We’re going to print you.”[1]

Well this was just sort of standard operating procedure, this check- ing for run-aways. They were picking up and taking in and sending home maybe about 50

runaways a day who were coming into San Francisco, into the Haight ... What they would do at that time, they would have a paddy wagon, and they had like two cars, and a driver and two cops would get out and check everybody's IDs ... mostly [they] patrolled the Haight, parts of the Fillmore, another group of the Tac squad patrolled the Mission and Hunters Point, and then another branch patrolled the Tenderloin and North Beach ... They were like, "Well, we usually don't see your type in the Haight." And later on I sort of figured out what they meant. Because you see I thought I was passing perfectly as this sort of androgynous boy.

There were a lot of people who were dressing all of a sudden very androgynously. And the cops in San Francisco were not very model in those days. They were some of the worst cops in the country. Worse than the cops in New York City. Worse, in my opinion, than the cops in Los Angeles, which has this horrible monster reputation. But San Francisco cops were the worst. Not only were they mean and vicious, but they were corrupt. You got arrested, and you could expect that if you had twenty dollars then only three of it would turn up in property. That kind of thing. They were pretty much — well, they pretty much had their minds blown away by the whole hippie influx. All of a sudden there were girls with jeans that zipped up the front. There were girls wearing black leather jackets. There were guys in beads with long hair and waist-shirts and Victorian-type shirts and bell-bottoms with velvet, and some of those kids who became the Cockettes were already running around doing genderfuck drag — and these cops, well, their minds were just gone at this point, already.

[One night] I was coming back from this place, and I was wearing a black leather jacket, boots, jeans, and a turtleneck t-shirt. Semi-longish hair ... Then the good old Tac squad boys came rolling along. And sometimes they would — well, later they pretty much always would — park a cop car right outside Maud's. [2] Or near Maud's, as a form of intimidation ... They had the cameras out. Because there was still at this time a "let's keep track of the queers" mentality. This was, though, when everything was all stewing up and stirring up and getting ready to boil over. Stonewall did not happen as an incident without lots and lots of development. Anyway, I got stopped, the cops get out of the car, and it's "Hey baby," something like that, you know? ... "Let's see some ID." "OK." "What's this, a draft card? Come on, we know you're coming out of Maud's. Do you really think we're so stupid as to think that you're a boy?" I go, "Well, I am a

boy.” And they say, “All right, that’s it. You’re coming down to the station.” They got me to the station and, under brighter lights, they decided that I probably was a boy. But they still called a matron to search me though I don’t think I really got searched much at all. I think maybe they had the matron just do a pat-down ... And again I got hauled in for moperly with intent to gawk, obstructing the sidewalk, failure to produce ID, the trivial stuff that they would always charge you with to hold you until the next morning when the judge would kick it out. But this time they added impersonation. And the judge said, “This is what you were wearing?” “Well, judge,” I said, “Yes.” And then he says, “Enough is enough. I’ve seen enough of you hippies. I’m just sick of this, and I’m going to order a court order, a bench order that this has to stop.”

Now I didn’t really get 650.5 off the books, but it meant that cops were going to have to be a lot more accurate in applying it ... A lot of the use of 650.5 was just when you were a little too butch or a little too femme. Your clothing was such in 1967 or 68 that you could harass the hippies on it. So you see the counterculture probably in- advertently helped to move 650.5 from being actively enforced.[3]

They had also been picking up women who wore jeans that zipped up the front because before they zipped up the butt. Up until 1967 women did not wear jeans that zipped up the front. They did not wear pea coats ... You were starting to see a lot of stuff in the Haight where the criteria for clothing wasn’t which side the buttons were on but whether it looked cool, fit, and was free.

PROSTITUTION AND THE WELFARE STATE

The major social support for most of the girls in the Tenderloin was prostitution. Or dealing, petty theft, welfare. The programs did help, but as soon as these programs really started helping Nixon was elected in 1968. And one of the first things he did was to start tearing down the war on poverty. He cut out a lot of programs that helped not only trans folks, but a lot of other people at the bottom end of the social spectrum that kept them from, helped them avoid, being criminals. There was just a ripping away of things that had sort of grudgingly been made available not just to trans, but also all sorts of programs ... In those days, if you were a tranny prostitute, you were not a call girl. You were a street-walker.

TRANSITIONING IN THE 60S

While I had been in jail I had made contact with the queens. I got stopped and harassed a few more other times in the process of 1968, and so I had insisted on being thrown into the queen's tank after the rapes, and that's where I started really meeting the queens – who were just transitioning into being trannies, a lot of them, right about this time. I guess the Center for Special Problems had started handing out hormones and the consciousness was there, because in 1966 it had become part of what was going on in America, and wasn't so strange.

Like I said, I had been meeting these queens in the tank, and they were just at that time transitioning from being hair fairies to being trans in the city jail. And all in response to the 1966 announcements.[4] Because prior to that people were content to be hair fairies, they were content to be drag queens, even if it wasn't a very good life ... [By 1969] there was just a lot of street life going on and it was confronting the police, they were losing their grip over the harassment of it all, because people were bringing lawsuits and the like.

TRANS WOMEN AND RADICAL FEMINISM

Well, like I said, here I am, this Berkeley chick, this radical feminist who's coming in getting involved with the gay and lesbian movement, and here they are, saying "If you're transsexual, if you're a real transsexual, then what your goal should be is to get the surgery, if you must work you should work at a traditional woman's job, but that your real goal should be to get married and have a husband, and maybe adopt children, and settle down in suburbia, and never ever tell anybody about you." [5]

I just did not interact too well with those people who were into the stereotypical feminine roles because I was in Berkeley, and I was part of this communal thing, and I was part of the radical movement ... They were essentially cranking out girls that were learning ten-key, and were learning typing, and learning file clerk, and those sorts of things, and were actually getting their very first jobs through the war on poverty. So I was on welfare, and I didn't really connect with this group ... Here I am in Berkeley, with feminism, being flooded with Feminism 101, 110, and courses in Advanced Feminism, and they're trying to break me into total femininity, total womanhood. The roles, and the very stereotypical

ghettoized sorts of employment. I'm surprised they didn't have me going out applying for hair school — which was, by the way, one of the things that got funded for trannies through the EOC.

...

I had sort of gone — there was also this Gay Women's Liberation — and I had gone to a couple of things. I had been told that I really didn't belong there ... On the other hand, while I was told that I didn't belong there by some women who were one part of one group, I was friends with other women who were in the group. So, they said "Here, kid, you're going to need this" — and they handed me Sexual Politics, and they handed me The Second Sex, and they handed me Feminine Mystique, handed me Shulamith Firestone — they handed me all these books and gave me a reading list and said basically read and call us in a year or two.

...

DOB was being inundated with the new lesbians, the lesbian feminists.⁶ If you have read Feinberg's book — at one point Jess goes to a bar, and it's all like these women look all the same, and there's no place for the old time butches, and a femme comes up to her and says "Jess, what's happening? It's all gone."^[7] Well, this is pretty much what was happening. If you were a tranny you got attacked for being too feminine — and if you weren't too feminine you were accused of playing out the male role in the women's community. So you were damned if you did and damned if you didn't ... That was a line of thinking that you simply couldn't defeat. There was no point in debating it, you just couldn't win.

And you know trans theory came into direct conflict with feminist theory at that point. Because trans theory said that we were identified as being feminine, or just as being women, because of something within us, not something that we learned. When feminism took over and started saying that it was all learned behavior, that we should be giving our little boys dolls and our little girls — well, not guns, but trucks, because nobody was supposed to have guns — and they will learn to be more similar. And that only works up to an extent. And if it works too well I bet you'll be raising a lot of tranny kids! Which I was going to hope for at the time, but which proved to be too much to hope for.

GAY LIBERATION

In the fall of 1969 was when they had this first West Coast Gay Liberation Conference in Berkeley, that I had sort of mentioned earlier. It was a real gathering of the tribe. And I had always in my mind made a connection between the trans community and the gay and lesbian community. Not necessarily the same, of course, but queer oppression has always struck me as queer oppression. A lot of times gay people who look really straight and act really straight don't get any of the oppression. It's the too-butch woman or the butch-femme couple, it's the queens and the trannies that suffer the oppression, and they catch shit more for gender than for who they sleep with

...The whole separatism of the gay and lesbian was something that started a little bit later. At first it was all that we were all working together, all queers in the same boat. That was very much a part of the second wave, too.

...

We referred to it as coming out. This was the language of sexual liberation, we didn't use psychspeak — that's what I call it — our language was the language of the queers and queens. One of the first persons to use the newspeak was Virginia Prince.[8] I mean, she wanted people to ... distinguish the heterosexual transvestite from the queen, so she came up with words like “femophilia” and stuff like “cross-dressing” instead of transvestism ... The language at that point [in 1969] was the language of the queens. A lot of “Hey, Mary! Hey, girlfriend! What's the T? What's the beads?” That sort of thing... That's part of why I had trouble seeing any vast separation between trans and queens. I mean, to me, queens were just sisters who didn't get whittled on downstairs. God only knows that most of the queens have their own tits and are on hormones so how the hell do you distinguish, really? They didn't play with sharp objects around their genitalia, that's all.

PURGED

I got purged from the radical left when SDS transitioned into Weather. All of us were thinking we were very Red Guard, and were only just realizing what utter hell the Red Guards were actually making of China. I got called to a meeting and told that I was very bourgeois for being involved in the feminist movement,

and the gay liberation movement, and that anything I was doing as far as being Suzy was a manifestation of bourgeois values, diverting my energies from the revolution. Plus, I was bringing undue attention to myself due to my medical needs, and because I was becoming increasingly unwilling to participate in riots – well, I was simply no longer welcome. The reason I didn't want to participate in riots was basically that I didn't want to get raped, and I was unsure about how I would be treated in jail as a tranny.

I was brought before the cadre ... It was already decided when I was told "Come to the meeting, comrade." It was like that — Come to the meeting. Get in the back of the car. There were people on either side of me. I tell you, I was actually kind of scared. I was scared that I was going to be killed ... The way that this went down was that I just got fucking denounced. And a few months later I had pretty much disappeared.

NOTES

[1] The Tac (or Tactical) Squad was formed as a SWAT-type squadron within the SFPD after the Hunters Point riot of 1967. A small mobile unit, it focused on quelling political demonstrations and riots and surveilling and arresting residents of "high crime" areas.

[2] Maud's was a popular lesbian bar located in Haight-Ashbury.

[3] Ordinance 650.5 criminalized the wearing of "excessive" amounts of "opposite sex" apparel, and was routinely used by the SFPD to arrest gender non-conforming people, in particular trans street prostitutes, but also customers at gay and lesbian bars and clubs.

[4] Probably a reference to Dr. Harry Benjamin's publication in 1966 of *The Transsexual Phenomenon* and formation of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBI/GDA), which advocated for the recognition of transsexuality as a mental health issue by the medical and psychiatric professions.

[5] Clark is referring to a group of trans women who worked with SFPD community relations officer Elliot Blackstone to improve relations between the

police and trans people. Clark is critical of their attitude toward feminism and their embrace of traditional gender roles.

[6] DOB stands for Daughters of Bilitis, often considered the first lesbian rights organization in the United States. Founded in San Francisco in 1955, the group was originally a social club for lesbians. It became more activist-oriented and inflected with feminist politics in the 1960s. Members' views on the inclusion of trans women were divided, and this conflict came to a head when trans member Beth Eliot was ousted in 1969, causing some members to leave the organization.

[7] This is a reference to a scene from Leslie Feinberg's influential novel *Stone Butch Blues*, a story about a working class lesbian from Buffalo, New York who becomes involved in the city's lesbian bar culture and later transitions to living as a man.

[8] Prince was a transgender activist and one of the first people to use the term transgender. She started *Transvestia* magazine and founded the Society for the Second Self, an organization for what she termed "heterosexual crossdressers," in 1976.

AUDRE LORDE, 1972.

*Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power**

Audre Lorde was a foundational theorist, poet, writer, and activist in Black power and feminist movements in the 1970s and 80s. Her article “Uses of the Erotic” is consistent with her method of thinking about power as the expression (or possibility) of counter-power. In this article, Lorde thinks about “the erotic” as a language of women’s power in a patriarchal society and in interpersonal relationships with men in such a society. Lorde demands that we invert dominant interpretations of “the erotic” as subordinate, weak, victimized, or conniving, and instead interpret the erotic as women’s necessary maneuvers through mazes of male dominance and power.

This article is also useful for thinking about different ways of seeing and thinking, which philosophers call “epistemologies.” We included this article to think past patriarchal ways of looking at the world, patriarchal language and ordering of life. We hope that we can carry these challenges to “natural” ways of thinking and understanding throughout our discussions in the COS classes. – COS

THERE ARE MANY kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been

made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence.

It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters.

But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.

It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of

our society is to encourage excellence. But giving in to the fear of feeling and working to capacity is a luxury only the unintentional can afford, and the unintentional are those who do not wish to guide their own destinies.

This internal requirement toward excellence which we learn from the erotic must not be misconstrued as demanding the impossible from ourselves nor from others. Such a demand incapacitates everyone in the process. For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness.

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision — a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered.

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. And the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do. For instance, how often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult?

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need — the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all 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.

There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. “What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunman?” In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic — the sensual — those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, “It feels right to me,” acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a hand-maiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.

That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife.

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it.

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But,

once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women.

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

And yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.

This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.

In order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need. But within the european-american tradi-

tion, this need is satisfied by certain proscribed erotic comings-together. These occasions are almost always characterized by a simultaneous looking away, a pretense of calling them something else, whether a religion, a fit, mob violence, or even playing doctor. And this misnaming of the need and the deed give rise to that distortion which results in pornography and obscenity — the abuse of feeling.

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.

The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before.

But this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively european-american male tradition. I know it was not available to me when I was trying to adapt my consciousness to this mode of living and sensation.

Only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.

For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.

* Paper delivered at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Mount Holyoke College, August 25, 1978. First published as a pamphlet by Out & Out Books. Now published as a pamphlet by Kore Press.

