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Minority Women in America: Very Different People with Very Different Strategies

Women have long called into question the notion of a fundamentally common female experience being the prerequisite for our solidarity and political unity, recognizing the variety of influences on our identity and thus the diversity of experience. Added bell hooks, “while feminists have increasingly given ‘lip service’ to the idea of diversity, we have not developed strategies of communication and inclusion that allow for the successful enactment of this feminist vision” (hooks 24). Certainly this can be seen in the incorporation of the voices of women of other races in the “feminist vision” Black women in America and women of cultures from the developing world have both had their different experiences excluded from the mainstream feminist movement in history, and the recent increase in both their presence and their voice in the movement is certainly a breath of fresh air. Nonetheless, while the feminist movement has over time acknowledged the different views and the various shades that exist in the female identity, the two groups have unfortunately often been lumped into one category of the other, the women of color and her experience. This over-simplification reduces the possibilities of transformation for the feminist consciousness, as each group has very real differences in experience, perspective.

Before moving forward, I wish to make some clarifications. I first want to clarify what I mean when I say the developing world. Certainly, every part of the world is continuing its development. What I refer to are those countries which are not yet at the stage of economic advancement as the US, Canada, Japan, and Western Europe. Also referred to as the third world, I am referring in particular to those countries whose people and culture are often socially looked down upon by those in the West. I sincerely dislike oversimplification, as even within this developing world, there are differences among cultures and experiences, and I do so only for the sake of comparing the voices of the two groups of women of color that have also so often been

differences, but rather aim to create a community within which differences constitute rather than undermine collective identity, as does every female with a different experience. While both women of color, they attempt to create this collective identity of “woman” in very different ways, due to the differing nature of their experience. While black women in America have certainly been marginalized by the white community, they have still been considered as part of the majority group in terms of nationality and, as previously mentioned, overall way of thought. I do not mean to simplify the entire narrative of being black in a majority white group to simply a difference in the color of skin. Certainly, there are also differences in culture, language, and overall experience between white and black women. Nonetheless, the two often group together in the face of the voices of those from the developing world, whether on the global scale or within America. Esmerelda Santiago writes of her experience being marginalized by black Americans after she had first immigrated to the United States. “They too lived in their own neighborhoods, frequented their own restaurants, and didn’t like Puerto Ricans. ‘How come?’ I wondered, since in Puerto Rico, all of the people I’d ever met were either black or had a black relative somewhere in their family. I would have thought *morenos* would like us, since so many of us looked like them. ‘They think we’re taking their jobs’ [said my mother]” (Santiago 225). While it would be nice to think that marginalized groups will not in turn marginalize others, it unfortunately has not been the case, as we can clearly see in the marginalization of minority women’s voices in the feminist movement in the first place. This hierarchy in the politics of domination shows how the experiences of the two groups of women of color are quite different, and thus the solutions they propose reflect those differences. Those thinkers addressing the different experiences of black females in America focus on the importance of politicization of

Despite their different emphases, both groups employ consciousness-raising in order to overcome the different obstacles they face. Traditionally, we have sought truth through a so-called objective scientific process. The norm has been that in order to perceive reality accurately, one must be distant from what he/she is looking at and view it from no place and at no time in particular, and hence from all places and at all times at once. With this method, the idea is that one can obtain a truth of the highest value, one that is not situated in time or place. The problem with this approach in feminist thinking, as Catherine MacKinnon points out is that it is simply ineffective when analyzing inequalities in society. This traditional approach does not show that present inequalities are “unnecessary or changeable, except speculatively, because what is not there is not considered real... Viewed as object reality, the more inequality is pervasive, the more it is simply ‘there.’ And the more real it looks, the more it looks like the truth”

(MacKinnon 101). Moreover, the distinction scientific objectivity makes between the internal and external effectively operates as “a legitimating ideology of what women should think and be” by individualizing them and their experiences as irrelevant to the truth of reality (MacKinnon 100). Undoubtedly, this poses a problem for any woman seeking to combat her inequality, but even more so for women who have been marginalized from the mainstream feminist movement, having other women tell them how they should think, be, and ultimately seek to transform society as a woman. Maria Lugones comments on the approach to the idea of woman outside of time and space in her essay “Have We Got a Theory For You!”, noting the silence that it has created among many women.

“Feminist theory has not for the most part arisen out of a medley of women’s voices; instead, the theory has arisen out of the voices, the experiences, of a fairly small handful of women, and if other women’s voices do not sing in harmony with the theory, they



which they make is common to us all. I will not understand what is in common without hearing the differences which reveal it to me” (MacKinnon 86). It is this idea of commonality through differences and the change in the reference point for truth that both black feminists and first-generation feminists have seized upon in telling their own narratives and proposing their own strategies in approaching the question of equal rights. The only difference between the two groups is how they use consciousness-raising. While those addressing black feminism offer strategies of politicization in their consciousness-raising, those who identify with cultures from the developing world leave it to others to recognize the commonalities.

Bell hooks, a revolutionary black feminist writer, uses this consciousness-raising to emphasize the importance of taking into account history when dealing with any structure of domination, including within the feminist movement. While acknowledging the importance of the personal, hooks argues that much of feminist thought has unfortunately stopped here, claiming that there is a “crisis of political commitment and engagement engendered by relentless focus on identity” (hooks 107). As she explains, this focus on personal experience is not automatically the equivalent of a commitment to any transformation or change of that experience. Rather it has unfortunately often led to the construction of a notion of feminist movement that is separatist, individualistic, and inward-looking (bell hooks 107). Hooks proposes that a politicization of the personal and the self is needed, in which confession and memory are used as a way to theorize overall experience, in order to challenge the politics of domination in society that lead to structural inequalities. Knowing the personal is no longer enough.

“To challenge identity politics we must offer strategies of politicization that enlarge our conception of who we are, that intensify our sense of intersubjectivity, our relation to a collective reality. We do this by reemphasizing how history, political science,

dominant group as “that terrible and inexcusable ignorance of racism which denies history and reality,” an inexcusable ignorance which she herself had before her own reeducation (Lazarre xv). Describing the current environment of race in America through personal narrative, she claims that the often unjust treatment of blacks is born out of a refusal of whites to take the responsibility of learning about the other, rather than a mere lack of understanding. She writes of this lack of responsibility:

“It is being oblivious, out of ignorance or callousness or bigotry or fear, to the history and legacy of American slavery; to the generations of racial oppression continuing; to the repeated indignities experienced by Black Americans every single day; to the African cultural heritage which influences every single American, long here and newly arrived; to the highly radicalized society that this country remains. It is denying this fundamental national reality by insisting on Black culpability and pointing to Black superstars; by comparisons to other nonwhite Americans with profoundly different histories; by looking away from one’s own skin color privilege and in bell hooks’ words ‘the way in which whiteness acts to terrorize;’ by being too timid to face the role whites and whiteness have played and continue to play in the world” (Lazarre 50).

Lazarre thus politicizes her narrative, using it to hold others accountable for the injustices they have contributed to in her life as well as to offer a broader strategy of transformation of American society. This politicization is evident throughout her memoir. One such example is her description of her visits to Yad Vashem, a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, and to an exhibit on slavery in America in part of a museum. It so affected her that in addition to describing her own feelings, she also questions the broader society, wondering how there can be a “morally active remembering of one genocide” and “the half-blind refusal to adequately

personal truth with political vision, as the individual is directly connected to and responsible for the narrative of society as a whole.

In great contrast to the strategy promoted by writers of black feminism, women of other minority cultures focus more on the personal without the political. In regards to those that identify in part with a culture from the developing world, often times many facets of their lives are simplified to the difference in their culture, as Uma Narayan discusses in her consciousness-raising explanation of dowry burning in India. This happens not only among ordinary people, but even in academia, and it is such that the strategy of reeducation proposed by writers of black feminism is perhaps not the best strategy for other minority women. As Narayan describes through a critical look at Elizabeth Bumiller's *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Across India*, haphazard cultural and religious explanations are used when they are not applicable and emphasized even when acknowledging the role of more mundane material concerns. Despite its conflation of fire in sati and fire in dowry-burning, and its emphasis on Hindu tradition and examples from Sikh dowry-burning, the text is still found in college bookstores and footnotes of papers, now serving as an academic text. This "victimization of culture" that Narayan describes is perhaps one of the best descriptions of the framework from which feminist writers who identify in part with a culture from the developing in world operate, as well as those feminist writers in the developing world themselves (Narayan 112). In her writing, Narayan takes a different perspective from many of the more autobiographical narratives that have made up the history of feminist philosophy. While she does not write about her personal relationship to or experience with domestic violence in the US or dowry burning in India, her explanation of culture in the two countries is undoubtedly personal. She writes,



domestic violence in the US just as culture is designated as the reason for dowry burning in India, thus opening the reader's eyes to the naive simplicity of his/her past characterization of others. By doing so, she narrows the gap between those in the West, who view themselves as the subject, and those in the third world, who they view as the alien other. She smartly points out that "phenomena that seem 'Different,' 'Alien,' and 'Other' cross... borders with considerably more frequency than problems that seem 'similar' to those that affect mainstream Western women," such as female infanticide in China and clitorodectomy and infibulation's iconic status for Africa (Narayan 100). "What is 'understood' ...[is] their status as 'things that happen elsewhere,' which in turn suggests that they are unlike 'things that happen here'" (Narayan 101). With this viewpoint, differences are continuously emphasized, including in academia where problematic "cultural explanations" of culturally alien phenomena are encouraged by decontextualization, as in Bumiller's book and the overall discussion of dowry-burning in India (Narayan 86). While dealing with solidarity among women on a more global scale, these same points can be used to address the relationship of immigrants from the developing world and the dominant group in America. In such a framework, it becomes of utmost importance for the immigrant woman identifying with a culture from the developing world to remove the idea of herself as other and alien. Thus, rather than focusing on politicization, of holding others accountable, or emphasizing the importance of history, immigrant women in the US focus on the personal alone in their narratives. They do not make sweeping generalizations of how to transform society, as those addressing black feminism do, but rather see this focus on the personal as a strategy of overcoming domination in and of itself.

One example of this emphasis on the personal as an end in and of itself is Esmerelda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, a personal narrative of her life in Puerto Rico and how her



that people from a variety of countries can quite easily relate to. Even today in the US, there is still some reservation about telling men to “go jump in the harbor” if they say something rude, out of concern that that would only be encouraging their behavior, and there is certainly a difference between men looking at a women, which is considered more normal than women looking at men, which is considered more straight-forward. Throughout her memoir, these small instances which she describes as occurring within her life in Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican culture help to break down cultural barriers, as the similarities become increasingly evident. On the subject of first recognizing her father’s cheating, Santiago writes:

“And I thought about how many nights Mami had left food warming on the ashes of the *fogon*, how often she’d sat on her rocking chair, nursing a baby, telling us to be still, that Papi would be coming any minute, but in the morning he wasn’t there and hadn’t been. I thought about how she washed and pressed his clothes until they were new-looking and fresh, how he didn’t have to ask where anything was because nothing he ever wore stayed dirty longer than it took Mami to scrub it against the metal ripples of the washboard, to let it dry in the sun so that it smelled like air. I wondered if Mami felt the way I was feeling at this moment on those night when she slept on their bed alone, the springs creaking as she wrestled with some nightmare, or whether the soft moans I heard coming from their side of the room were stifled sobs, like the ones that now pressed against my throat, so that I had to bury my face in the pillow and cry until my head hurt” (Santiago 100).

Again, while particular to Santiago’s life in Puerto Rico, and specifically her own story, the reader can find herself relating to the story, regardless of where she is from. While the particulars of cheating and having an unfaithful parent vary from case to case, the emotions that Santiago

“woman” nor are the intricacies of their lives and actions simplified to resulting from culture alone. In her paper “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling and Loving Perception,” Lugones further emphasizes the importance of a personal approach to breaking cultural barriers, what she terms as travelling across worlds. She leaves the definition of what she calls a “world,” as quite vague, evading any fixity in-definition and thus in identity. Travelling to these other worlds allows us to identify with the inhabitants of that world, writes Lugones, as “we can understand what it is to be them and it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have travelled to each other’s worlds are we fully subjects to each other” (Lugones 401). This is not a revolutionary claim to make, and Narayan, Santiago, and Cisneros all helped the reader travel across worlds in their works. Knowing another’s personal narrative helps us recognize their subjecthood, regardless of whether or not we identify with them. World travelling is perhaps most helpful in understanding women in America who identify with a culture from the developing world, as their world is often considered to be so different in its otherness.

“The personal is the political,” writes Catherine MacKinnon of consciousness-raising, the method used by most, if not all, feminist writers in their attempts to challenge inequalities. In the US, both black women and those identifying with a culture from the developing world recognize the importance of this statement in having their voices and strategies heard more loudly within the feminist movement. Nonetheless, they differ widely in their emphases of the political or the personal, respective of their different positions in American society. Those addressing black feminism seem to argue that understanding and world-travelling are not enough in overcoming societal inequalities, and that an active politicization of the personal must take place, such that a next step for transformation can take place. In contrast, Lugones’s theory of individual world-travelling seems to characterize the efforts of American immigrant women from a country in the

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