

COMMENT

"THE SPEAKING PROFITS US"

"I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect."

— Audre Lorde¹

During the 1984-85 program year, *WORKING TOGETHER* will focus on violence in the lives of women of color. Writers who are Black, Latina, Native American, and Asian will discuss, in the *Comment* and *Book Review* sections, the private and systemic violence in our lives. This series is both a year-long expression of gratitude to the women of color who have spoken out publicly about private violence (and risked being ignored by white people and ostracized by their own) and an attempt to raise the level of consciousness and increase the literacy of white people about the ways that racism affects reactions and responses to violence in the lives of "outsider" women.

I do not recall in what document I first read the expression "hydra-headed oppression" used in reference to the life experiences of women of color. The statement that women of color have been abused because of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and, frequently sexual orientation has become a cliché that is, nevertheless, a fact. I recently read a collection of essays entitled, *OUR WOMEN KEEP OUR SKIES FROM FALLING*²; the essays were written by a Black male feminist. I was struck by the irony of this title. Few would deny the essential nature of the contributions women of color make to our communities. Unfortunately, holding up the sky is an all-consuming activity which leaves little time and energy for self-advocacy.

The title of this *Comment* is a paraphrase of a portion of the Audre Lorde quote above. I chose to quote Lorde for two reasons: First, women of letters who are of color have not only contributed to the life of the mind but have been the contemporary prophets, proclaiming in parable the truth about our life experiences and preparing the way for political and social activists such as myself. Second, the phrase, "even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood," expresses the nagging fear that women of color have about sharing "in-house" information with members of the dominant culture.

Within the dominant culture there appears to be a genuine lust for information which will reinforce racist stereotypes of men of color as violent and immoral and women of color as emasculators. We feel protective

with good reason. When people of color share information about community ills we give a gift which should be cherished. Too often, however, this information is received as a weapon to be used against our communities.

This series is offered with several goals in mind: First, the development of an analysis of the causes of gender based violence in communities of color; second, a discussion of the connection between racism and violence in the lives of women of color; third, a critique of the historical role of indigenous religious institutions in the lives of women of color (including a challenge to those institutions); fourth, a critique of the historical role of predominantly white religious institutions in the lives of women of color vis-a-vis violence; and fifth, prevention and treatment strategies. The series is intended for whites and people of color.

A Sociological Framework

In every culture there are permissible and impermissible forms of violence. In the dominant culture the most impermissible violence is that done to white men. Next in order of impermissibility is the violence done to white women by men of color with whom they are not in relationship. The violence against white women which is permissible is that done to them by white men and by men of color with whom white women are in relationship. Violence done to people of color is permissible, the most permissible form being violence done to women of color.

In communities of color there are permissible and impermissible forms of violence. The most impermissible form is that done by white men to men of color. Second in order of impermissibility is that done by white men to women of color with whom they are not in relationship. The most permissible form of violence is that done to women of color by men of color or white men with whom the women of color are in relationship.

The abuse of women of color has been well hidden. White men, white women, and men of color have yet to accept the equality of women of color. We are invisible to white men. And, as author Alice Walker has written, white women — both feminist and non-feminist — have claimed the title "woman" for themselves. Men of color are reluctant to even discuss sexism and share the oppression spotlight.

Our abuse has been hidden behind oppressive stereotypes. The women of each group have been saddled with a "whore" stereotype intended to justify the sexual license white men have always taken with us.

The late Afro-American playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, has written that regardless of her age, appearance, or behavior the assumption about every Black woman is that if she's outside she's selling. The predominant stereotype of the Latina is the hip-swinging, tequila-guzzling bar fly of border towns. This chile pepper with the volatile temperament is not at all adverse to a cat fight in the dirt with another bar fly over the favorite white cowboy.

Thanks in part to the motion picture industry, the Asian/Pacific Island woman is stereotyped as immoral and amoral. She is either a "suzie wong" character, sexy and unscrupulous, or a bare-breasted native exuberantly greeting a shipload of randy white sailors as they dock.

Indian women are either young "squaws" (thigh-high fringed skirt carried off by or carrying off a white soldier) or old squaws (musty blanket, wrinkled, asexual, unloving, unlovable). As if this were not sufficient, other stereotypes particular to each group complete the well orchestrated denigration of women of color.

Black women are stereotyped as strong and resilient. Our humorists portray us as the physical equal of any male. When we are threatened, we are told, we fight back and may defeat our male opponent! This myth runs counter to the experience of Black domestic violence professionals working with Black victims. An acquaintance of mine who leads a support group for Black women who have been in abusive relationships has said that the women come to her group "wearing a mask of bravado and swagger to camouflage the genuine terror they feel." The abuse of Black women has been hidden behind the claim that we have always been liberated (meaning there has always been work for us) and that gender based oppression is not a reality in our lives. Yet, statistics indicate that Black women are more likely to be sexually assaulted than white women.

Asians are portrayed as the ideal minority group and Asian/Pacific Island women as lotus blossom perfect, "moon beam lovely," docile, small, shy, always deferential to men, behaving much like plants, wonderfully decorative. They are the favorites of men seeking brides by mail; their relationships with members of the American military have been romanticized beyond belief (one hopes). Horror stories abound about the extent of the abuse of Asian military wives and the increasing problem of the abuse of Indochinese immigrant women.

The abuse of the Latina is hidden behind the oppressive teachings of religious institutions regarding virginity. According to some interpreters of religious dogma, virginity equals the absence of genital penetration rather than the presence of innocence and purity of heart and motives. If we accept this explanation, a female victim of child sexual abuse (and remember, many victims are still in diapers) is no longer a virgin because her vagina was penetrated when she was raped. According to this interpretation, a female who is

not a virgin, i.e., whose vagina has been penetrated, is unfit for marriage. Imagine the paralyzing guilt the Latina female rape victim must experience given the power of religious institutions in her life and the importance of marriage in her culture.

Recently, this country's intolerance of undocumented workers has provided a vulnerable group of women for abusers. In states which have concentrated populations of undocumented workers, the women have been targeted for sexual assault by rapists who understand the special dangers they will incur if they seek assistance.

The abuse of Indian women has been hidden behind pronouncements, by the men of the tribe, of what the tribe's issue is. It is true that the sacredness of the land is a major issue for Native Americans. But, one wonders if, for the Indian woman, the issue of safety on the land of her ancestors is not of greater importance.

We recently heard a horror story about how the stereotyping of all Indians as alcohol abusers has made the women of one Indian community more vulnerable than usual. An ingenuous abuser went from house to house raping the Indian female residents then dousing them with liquor. He assumed that authorities would reject the claim of rape made by an Indian smelling of alcohol; they would assume instead, that the women had simply exchanged sex for a drink.

Tough Questions

We understand that the information we will share during the coming months will be especially painful for our readers to consider. But the religious community has kept silent for too long about the abuse of women of color and this silence has created a climate of tolerance for that abuse. Any discussion of violence in our lives raises two critical questions:

(1) What do you do with men of color who menace women of color in a world where people of color are oppressed?

(2) How have white people benefited from the silence about our abuse?

We will raise these questions repeatedly and challenge you to struggle with them.

— Maryviolet Cornelia Burns

NOTES:

¹Lorde, Audre. *SISTER OUTSIDER*. The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, New York, 1984. Reprinted by permission of The Crossing Press.

²ya Salaam, Kalamu. *OUR WOMEN KEEP OUR SKIES FROM FALLING*. Published by the author, 1980.

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