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## **RESPONSE TO RACISM: THE RACIAL JUSTICE CAMPAIGN OF THE WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR PEACE AND FREEDOM**

by Melinda Plastas\*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past twenty-two years, leadership by woman of color has helped focus and expand feminist discourse on the history of racism in the women's movement.<sup>1</sup> This discourse has not moved easily from theory to applied anti-racist practice. One organization earnestly confronting racism is the U.S. section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which undertook a two-year Racial Justice campaign from 1988-1990.<sup>2</sup> WILPF's unique work is presented here with a view toward making its model available for study and action.

In the first section I explore the writings of Anne Braden, bell hooks, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, which discuss racism in progressive organizations and focus on the barriers to change. Next, I provide background information on the WILPF Anti-Racism campaign, including the conditions which led to it, the form it took, and the changes which resulted in WILPF's organizational policies and practices. Throughout, I consider the questions WILPF's work raises about distinctions between attempting to create a multi-cultural organization and an anti-racist one.

The information about WILPF was collected from interviews with sixteen WILPF staff, board, and branch members as well as archival documents on biennial proceedings, program reports, and newsletters. Of the women interviewed, nine are white, five are African American, and one is Asian American. They range in age from twenty-eight to eighty-five. Their years of service in WILPF range from one to fifty-five, and they represent WILPF branches located in three states and the national office. At this point in history, when the concept of multi-culturalism seems to have replaced anti-racism in feminist work, the WILPF campaign lends insight into this shift.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: Signet Classics, 1970), 90-100. For other early discussions see, Brenda Eichelberger, "Voices on Black Feminism," *Quest* 3 (Spring 1977), 16-28; Margaret A. Simons, "A Schism in the Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Summer 1979), 384-401; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1981); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 106-107, 370-372.

<sup>2</sup> WILPF was founded in 1915 when women from warring and neutral nations gathered in the Hague to demand an end to World War I. Many of its original members were suffragettes and social reformers. Today they are roughly 13,000 members in the United States in 100 local branches and 131 international sections. For the history of WILPF see: Catherine Foster, *Women of All Seasons: The Story of The Women's International League of Peace and Freedom*, (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1989); Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1915-1965* Reprint. (Oxford: Alden Press, 1980); and Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 243-260.

<sup>3</sup> See Gloria Anzaldua's introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldua (San Francisco: An Aunt Lute Foundation Book, 1990). She argues

## FEMINIST THOUGHT ON RACISM: BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Racism has existed in the United States women's movement since its birth during the struggle for women's suffrage.<sup>4</sup> A growing body of writing offers a multi-faceted critique of founding feminist theories and practices by exploring the role racism played in their development. These writings help place the naivete, exclusivity, and blatant acts of racism that were present during the first wave of organized feminism into an historical context, while identifying similar behavior that still continues today.

Recent feminist scholarship explores how "SISTERHOOD," as the initial rallying cry for the second wave of the women's movement, employs a monistic analysis of women's oppression. For women of color, a theoretical analysis which focuses solely on the force of gender as shaping women's social status, asks them to either abandon struggles for racial equality or to compartmentalize their lives.<sup>5</sup> Given these choices, most women of color have chosen not to join the contemporary women's movement. While current black feminist thought and activism is flourishing, membership by women of color in traditional feminist organizations has not markedly expanded. Longstanding white feminist organizations have been unsuccessful in embracing or integrating the priorities and strategies of black feminists.<sup>6</sup>

WILPF, which began as a predominantly white organization, has been affected by the feminist discourse on race. Two recent works were particularly influential in WILPF's decision to undertake its campaign against racism: Anne Braden's "Lessons for the Peace Movement" and bell hooks' "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women."<sup>7</sup> Both authors describe the limitations of white dominated groups and identify key barriers to change. Among these barriers are the reluctance to take leadership from people of color, the unwillingness to enact deep seated organizational change, and the one-dimensional consciousness raising approach to "undoing racism."

Anne Braden, a white woman who is a member of WILPF, has a long history of involvement in national and regional racial justice organizations. As an anti-racist peace activist, she has been a model for WILPF members and a central resource for WILPF's racial justice campaign. In her critiques of the peace movement, Braden reminds us that racism affects almost all progressive movements, not just the women's movement.

Braden claims that peace and justice institutions are some of the most segregated institutions in our society. She asserts that peace work conceived through white eyes is limited because our whiteness acts as ". . . blinders that give us a narrow view of reality, . . . we often miss the most important point in a simple situation."<sup>8</sup> Braden states that the limited world view of white groups ultimately prevents the development of keenly transformative politics. She

that the feminist dialogue surrounding multi-culturalism and diversity covers up the need to engage actively in fighting racism, at xxii.

<sup>4</sup> See Angela Davis, Women, Race, and Class (New York: Random House, 1981); Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); bell hooks, Ain't I A Woman?: Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Women's Movement, 1880-1920," in The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1978), 17-27.

<sup>5</sup> See Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," Signs 14 (Autumn 1988), 42-72, for a critique of monistic theories.

<sup>6</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, (New York: Routledge, 1990), for an extensive treatment of the origins and principles of black feminist thought.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Braden, "Lessons for the Peace Movement," Peace and Freedom (July/Aug 1988), 12-13, and bell hooks, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women" in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 43-65.

<sup>8</sup> Braden, 12.

cautions that changing an organization's membership is not an easy task. Braden writes, "[w]e cannot wave a magic wand and change our all-white groups to multi-racial groups."<sup>9</sup> One experience of successful change that inspired Braden occurred when the white executive board of the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression took drastic steps by resigning and electing a new board, resulting in the emergence of African American leadership.

Radical steps like the ones taken by the Kentucky Alliance are rare. Since most organizations will be unable to replicate the Kentucky Alliance experience, Braden recommends that white peace groups undertake internal educational programs on combatting racism, including instruction on racism in U.S. foreign policy. She also urges white peace groups to work in multi-racial coalitions, thereby repositioning themselves as a part of the peace movement rather than as its leaders. Finally, Braden stresses that racial justice work needs to become an integral aspect of all peace work. Her hope is that by placing issues of racism prominently on the political agenda, "[e]very peace rally [will be] an anti-racist rally."<sup>10</sup>

bell hooks' writing about the feminist movement resonates with Braden's work on the peace movement. In "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women," hooks exposes the limitations of one-dimensional efforts by feminists to diversify their organizations. She concurs with Braden that the white centeredness of organizations is a critical problem. And she stresses that white women's unexamined racism is the central barrier to achieving the type of personal and organizational transformation necessary to developing multi-racial/cultural organizations and alliances. In her article, hooks directs us to the dangers of unexamined racism. She urges us to remain vigilantly aware that it is noticed and felt by women of color.

Efforts to become involved in women's organizations by women of color have been blocked by the maintenance of a white centered politic and established organizational structures. According to hooks, an historical analysis of the roots of our racism along with a serious reconsideration of the components of solidarity work is minimally required. Further, hooks says that white women must reconcile themselves with the fact that the history of race exploitation has been meted out by white women as well as by white men. She writes:

The ideology of sisterhood . . . indicated no acknowledgement that the racist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of multi-ethnic women by white women had made it impossible for the two groups to feel they shared common interests or political concerns.<sup>11</sup>

While acknowledging the attempts of feminists to confront racism, hooks stresses that the sole reliance of many feminists on consciousness raising by attending "unlearning racism" workshops has been inadequate, since personal awareness alone does not disarm racism. hooks argues that awareness is effective in combatting racism only when it is part of a larger, more comprehensive plan of political action aimed at changing the direction of the feminist movement. Ultimately, hooks wants to witness commitment and action from white women.

Bernice Johnson Reagon agrees with Braden and hooks' critiques of the practices of white-dominated progressive organizations. However, Reagon's work shifts the focus from restructuring white organizations, to insisting that white groups work in coalition with others. Although her article, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,"<sup>12</sup> probably has not been widely read by WILPF members, coalition work was a key component of WILPF's Racial Justice programs.

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<sup>9</sup> Braden, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Braden, 23.

<sup>11</sup> hooks, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century", in Home Girls--A Black Feminist Anthology ed., Barbara Smith, (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 356-368.

Reagon asserts that coalition work, which forges political alliances between internally homogenous groups, is not only good politics but also paramount and inevitable because women of color will no longer allow white women to monopolize the feminist political agenda. Although homogenous feminist groups, what Reagon calls "barred rooms," may provide comfort to their members, she says they will not work.

You must be sure you understand that you ain't gonna be able to have an "our" that don't include Bernice Johnson Reagon because I don't plan to go anywhere!<sup>13</sup>

Further, Reagon states that we cannot afford to maintain the exclusionary practices within the women's movement. She postulates that only by working through and with our differences can we enter the 21st century with some hope of affecting deep seated change. Finally, she warns that working in alliance with others will not be easy.

Coalition work is not done in your home. Coalition work is done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort.<sup>14</sup>

The works of Anne Braden, bell hooks, and Bernice Johnson Reagon describe the limitations and dangers of white centered groups, and warn against simplistic diversification plans as a means of corrective action. Collectively, they call for a radical reconsideration of the ideologies and structures of our organizations and our lives.

### THE WILPF CONNECTION

In the National WILPF 1988-90 Racial Justice Program, the warnings and suggestions for change set out in the feminist discourse were both heeded and undertaken. The following observations by WILPF members reflect an earnest effort to reconcile the issues raised by Braden, hooks, and Reagon, and move beyond barriers towards the development of successful anti-racist strategies.

The Racial Justice Campaign grew out of internal developments in the organization and changing conditions in society. As one interviewee detailed:

I think by the mid-eighties, people realized that the Reagan administration was intent on not just not enforcing the civil rights laws, but actually trying to turn back the clock completely--in every way possible. In affirmative action, in changing key parts of civil rights enforcement and trying to get the Supreme Court to reverse the effect of many of the anti-racism laws, and just generally creating a climate of hate and encouraging this new wave of right wing hate.

WILPF's legislative activities on civil rights had been substantial as evidenced by their strong participation in national lobby efforts to stop the 1980's rollback of civil rights. WILPF members realized that the Racial Justice Campaign needed to go far beyond legislative reform. As one woman said:

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<sup>13</sup> Reagon, 365.

<sup>14</sup> Reagon, 359.

I mean, obviously, we should support civil rights legislation – the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which is very important – but what does it really mean to do anti-racism work as a predominantly white organization?

A 1987 WILPF national speaking tour "What is National Security: Listen to Women for a Change!" also gave impetus to the development of the Racial Justice program. It provided WILPF with an opportunity to make new alliances. Of the 294 co-sponsors of the tour, thirty six percent were people of color or organizations representing them.

The changing climate within WILPF helped to bring about an increased awareness of the need for a multi-faceted, national anti-racist program. A growing number of white women and women of color in local and national leadership positions encouraged an interpersonal style of political analysis and problem solving which helped to shape national organizational priorities. The formation of the first WILPF Women of Color Caucus in 1987 was a pivotal event which moved WILPF's anti-racism work beyond legislative action. In addition, a separate panel of six women of color at that year's organizational biennial meeting urged WILPF to promote cultural diversity and self-determination for all races; to lobby for changes defined by women of color; and to encourage individuals to accept responsibility for their own racism. Overall, the "minority" members of WILPF, women of color, lesbians, and working class women, were more active in bringing forward their grievances to WILPF leadership. Combined, the factors of societal racism, new WILPF leadership, and opportunities for grassroots alliance building, lay the foundation for a political program very new and challenging in form and intent.

The WILPF Racial Justice Campaign materialized during the 1987 national biennial meeting when the membership finally voted to make racial justice one of their top three political program areas. As one member said of that decision: "We no longer view racism as one of a number of issues, rather, we view it as a fundamental evil that we seek to eradicate." Once designated top priority, WILPF established four goals for the Racial Justice Campaign:

- (1) Recognize and undo racist patterns within WILPF;
- (2) Protest and publicize incidents of racial violence;
- (3) Build networks between WILPF and other organizations working for racial justice; and
- (4) Prepare WILPF members to take action against racism.

To accomplish these goals, the program developed three components which included intensive unlearning racism training, the development of branch programs to respond to acts of racial injustice in their local communities, and a re-evaluation of the organization's structure regarding affirmative action.

An important component was the two-and-a-half day "Undoing Racism" training run by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (People's Institute), based in New Orleans, Louisiana. The People's Institute training represented a substantial commitment of time, money, and political energy on behalf of WILPF. The training sessions were held in eight cities and were offered to all national WILPF board members, the twelve national office employees, and the general membership. One hundred-and-thirty-eight members from thirty-five branches attended the various training sessions which were paid for by the national office.

The People's Institute is a grass-roots organization that has been in operation since 1980, which employs people actively involved in progressive groups such as those that advocate for employment and health care rights and engage in anti-klan work. The People's Institute is led primarily by African American men. It aims to help both white people and people of color dismantle racist thinking and action through education as well as community and organization building. The Institute's educational workshops are designed to instill in individuals a commitment to disrupting the presence of racism in all forms and

places. The training consists of four components: a presentation of the history of racism; discussion of terms (i.e., race prejudice plus power equals racism, white skin privilege, institutional racism); an analysis of the structures of racism in society through the use of applied group exercises; and cultural sharing exercises.

The "Undoing Racism" training provided WILPF members with a language for dialogue and new tools to measure individual and collective success of their racial justice program. Women of color spoke specifically to the support they received from People's Institute training and trainers. They noted that the training surpassed their expectations as it provided them with empowerment and new skills to work within white dominated groups and society. Participants also appreciated the thoroughness of the history component of the training. The training afforded white WILPF members an important opportunity to accept leadership from people of color. One interviewee felt that the greatest strength of the training was in its ability to "break the silence" surrounding the need to discuss racism. As one program participant said, "they were the leaven that freed us from old and discouraging ways of working against racism."

The WILPF Racial Justice Campaign examined the spoken intentions of white women who claim they want more women of color in local chapters. The following comment by one African American board member marks the limits of their articulated desire for a diversified membership. She observed that this "desire" was often unexamined, token, and limited:

People feel that they would be more successful if they could get people of color involved. Yet, when I say, "Why do you want them?" and they say "Well, I think we would be more effective." I say, "What do you mean! Do you think they are going to do your work for you? Why don't you join their organizations?"

While the interviews reveal many calls for WILPF to diversify the organization, members also manifest a new awareness that the goal of multi-cultural membership alone does not constitute a comprehensive understanding of racism or a commitment to an anti-racist politic. Most women who participated in the interviews agreed that the real task for WILPF's members was to keep unlearning racism and to commit its resources to anti-racist issues and coalition work. They hope that through these efforts WILPF will become more multi-cultural.

The other main thing I took out of the training is that the work that has to happen in ending racism is whites stopping whites from being racist. So working against racism doesn't necessarily mean doing the things we usually think of. We need a shifting of framework. We are not "helping" people of color, we are working as allies with them. And we have to do our own piece.

This analysis is similar to that of bell hooks' who argues that white feminist political action is the proving ground, not merely the static stated desire for diverse membership, nor the number of trainings a woman has under her belt.

Within the context of the Racial Justice Campaign's goals and with the new awareness gained through the People's Institute training, local branches organized differently in their effort to work against racism. The Virginia branch developed a two-level approach involving both networking and community education. Their long-term project consisted of holding "tension relieving" meetings in coalition with Asian, African, and Euro-American community leaders. Their development of this project stemmed from the rise in interracial incidents in their city and the representation of the different racial groups in their own branch. The second approach involved bringing an

educational tool, "The World in a Trunk," to schools and leading students in multi-cultural educational exercises. The trunk contains cultural objects which represent the different peoples of the world. These tools are used to encourage discussion about ethnic and racial differences and similarities.

The Pennsylvania branch has had an active anti-racism committee for five years. Prior to the national Racial Justice Campaign, this all white group focused on educational work through reading, discussion and training. In the past three years it has organized an annual community forum and more recently worked in coalition with African American community leaders. According to the committee members, the three community forums were successful because they drew large, interracial audiences. The events included a viewing of the video "Black and Blue" about police brutality in Philadelphia, and a talk about African American women's history by an African American woman historian.

Committee members noted that although the events did not bring in large numbers of new members, they did receive favorable responses from African American communities in other ways. For example, the Pennsylvania WILPF branch has been called upon more frequently by the African American community and civil rights organizations for help. Recently it has played a central role in the boycott of the unfair wage practices of McDonald's restaurants. The branch has been asked by the African American led coalition to help secure a public access spot on local television stations. They are also considered a central member of ongoing coalition work to bring justice for the people who suffered from the bombing of MOVE members by the City of Philadelphia in 1985. The successful work of this branch reflects some of the steps outlined by bell hooks, such as a focus on internal education work coupled with community action.

The Massachusetts branch has also been involved in educational and coalition building work. They developed and have twice taught the course "Roots of Violence/Seeds of Change" at a local community college. The idea for the class came about as a result of members' involvement in the People's Institute training, and their curriculum incorporated many of the Institute's training methods and exercises. The branch also produces a weekly public television show based on the course, and helped found the Cape Cod United Against Racism coalition.

The three branches varied in evaluating their work. Virginia members were actively committed to their work but were overwhelmed by the manifestations of racism within one of their cities, including a redistricting campaign supported by City Hall and racist treatment towards homeless people receiving public services. Similarly, the Philadelphia branch members questioned their success and usefulness in the face of deep racism in the city. The Massachusetts members were more confident about the direction of their efforts. Their confidence may be attributable to the larger percentage of branch members who are actively involved in their local racial justice program.

These concerns arise from the newness of WILPF's strategies for confronting racism which makes it difficult to evaluate the appropriateness and/or effectiveness of their work. Yet, members' concerns were often balanced by a feeling of confidence and determination. "You take this step and you learn, you take that step and learn. I feel like that is what we have to do." A review of the individual interviews and the work of the three branches shows that WILPF has moved away from a fixation with membership statistics toward a concern with developing a multi-faceted anti-racist agenda. "The point isn't, 'Oh my god, do we have X number of women of color in the room with us.' But the question is, 'Are we working against racism effectively?'"

## CONCLUSION

WILPF members are generally satisfied with the beginning steps of their Racial Justice Campaign and are committed to continuing the work they have begun. Women who participated in the interviews identified two areas of on-going anti-racist work needed within WILPF to reach beyond the two year campaign. First, WILPF needs to continue offering "undoing racism" workshops, making them available to new members as well as providing advanced

or renewed training for existing members. The recommendation of continued training addresses the depth and tenacity of racist behavior, something that requires a life time of struggle. As stated by one WILPF member:

An understanding came out of the training that you don't just get trained and then get a certificate saying that you are no longer racist. Ron talked about this whole idea of a recovering racist, that it (racism) is something you review constantly—to see if it is something you are falling back into. Reminding us that as an organization we can fall back into all these old patterns unless we make a real effort.

The second area involves diversifying the nature of WILPF's coalition work and preparing members to be active participants in coalition building. Members expressed interest in moving beyond coalition work which promotes national legislation to undertake anti-racist work in coalition with regional and grass roots racial justice organizations such as the Center for Democratic Renewal and the Black Women's Health Project.

The WILPF program directly addresses the barriers to anti-racist work and provides a helpful model for all progressive organizations, particularly feminist organizations. WILPF has developed an effective way of working against racism in all its complexity. The four goals outlining the Racial Justice Campaign reflect an understanding of the importance of confronting racism both within WILPF's organizational walls and in society at large. The selection of the People's Institute as trainers confirmed WILPF's commitment to a model that extends beyond an isolated approach to racism. These two factors help to insure that WILPF's new work will be translated into political action and commitment on an individual, grassroots and national level.

The feminist discourse on multi-culturalism needs to be located within an anti-racism context. The possibility for interactive dialogue and political union amongst women of all ethnic and racial origins cannot be successful until there is an explicit recognition of how racism deeply permeates our lives. Models for changing feminist institutions need to be presented and debated. Works by women of color illustrate that a women's movement which continues to develop political agendas that speak only to the needs of white women will not accomplish necessary transformation. Further, the public discourse of women of color shows that they will fight for their liberation with or without white feminists. This places us in an exciting and challenging time in the history of feminism by suggesting the possibility of creating and sustaining a multi-cultural feminism. The WILPF example illustrates that this effort will entail the confrontation by white women with the ways in which racism affects and shapes feminist organizations and political priorities.