Bridging the Gap: Moving toward Women's Solidarity

Circles
Bridging The Gap:  
Moving  
Toward  
Women's  
Solidarity

In the aftermath of the verdict to the OJ Simpson murder trial, many of us were struck by the polarization of reactions to the verdict across lines of color. To a large extent, women's groups, in claiming violence against women as the central issue of the case, had failed to appreciate how issues of sexism intersect with race and class and every other source of oppression - a common critique of the "feminist agenda." What is both telling and surprising about the disparity of reactions to the verdict is what it reveals about how much, or how little, we understand each other's lives.

The gap that surfaced is not new. The truth is, we as women rarely talk with each other about the things that divide us. Through the desire to put racism, classism, heterosexism, and all forms of discrimination behind us, our approach is often to deny them amongst ourselves. We act as if they don't exist, as though we have completely resolved them, or we speak about such issues in the abstract, and not as though they affect our personal relationships with each other. But in smaller groups, when everyone in the room is the same color (or thinks they are), or of the same class (or presumes they are), or of the same sexuality (or assumes they are), these issues do come up, and women do talk about them. These conversations are different in supposedly "homogenous" groups than in groups in which we are aware of our differences. These issues are very real for women; they confuse us, offend us, intimidate us, embarrass us and divide us.

In an atmosphere of oppression and denial, it is with good reason that we have avoided difficult conversations. We run the risk of being uncomfortable, or exposing our own prejudices. As a result, the gap in understanding remains filled with silence, mistrust, resentment, and rage. We at CIRCLES have dedicated this project to bridging that gap. The pieces that follow are in response to an invitation to women to address some of the issues that affect our solidarity. They are intended as the beginning of a conversation between women who are acknowledging their differences and deciding to trust each other enough to share their thoughts and experiences. In order to respect the spirit of the discussion, we have decided to let the pieces speak for themselves, and they have been left unedited. While we are thankful to the women who participated in this project, they are not intended to represent any one other than themselves. We realize that many voices are missing, and invite our readers to become part of the discussion.
Agi'si

**exotic**: 1 foreign; not native; 2 strange or different in a way that is striking or fascinating; strangely beautiful, enticing, etc.-n. 1 a foreign or imported thing.

**exotica**: foreign or unfamiliar things, as curious or rare art objects, strange customs, etc.

One rarely consciously associates the above words with Native Americans. Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere, Indian, etc. (and none of these terms are the names which we chose for ourselves thousands of years ago, of course). The truth is, though, from the perspective of an Indian law student, "exotica" is a fact of life for me in dealing with the non-Indian world on a daily basis. It is not because I view myself as anything above the ordinary; it is merely because I, like my ancestors and relations of the past 500 years of military and colonial occupation, am viewed by that non-Indian colonial world as "strange," "foreign," and "curious or rare art." The things I say, the things I feel, the way I look, are all somehow adjudged by fantastical, unrealistic standards set by others when in fact, if you were to ask me, I feel quite normal!

For this article in CIRCLES, our Native group was approached and asked how we feel about the O.J. Simpson decision, or what we feel in general. This brought to mind two immediate and conflicting thoughts which I found were shared by one of my Native friends, and these were 1) That's somethin'! No one has asked before what we thought about race relations in this country; and 2) (Suspiciously) Why are they asking? What do they want, something wise and all-knowing, something NOBLE?

So in writing this, I am answering as one who is "exotica," who lives a life defined continuously by these two alternating extremes.

"Rare".....Non-existent

On the one hand, to be exotic this way is to be too different, too strange and remote to be considered part of the American experience. It is true that our worldview and lifeways have fundamental differences, differences that we have protected as part of our unique cultural and political heritage as sovereign entities within U.S. borders.

This ties in specifically with having a unique Indian "identity," which all the modern trends of multiculturalism claim to uphold as our right. The way I see it, and the way I have heard many other Native people express it, a person without a healthy sense of their own identity, especially a cultural identity, is like a perpetually bewildered infant trying to find a place in the world. Without a sense of where one comes from, a strong, positive awareness of your own beginnings, where can you go? What kind of road begins nowhere? As Native people, as people period, we should not be asked to compromise that which makes us unique.

At the same time, though, we must eat, we must go to school, we must face the same racism as any other people of color in this country. Yes, some of us do get watched in stores (myself included). Yes, there are places where we obviously are not wanted (like those stores with "No Indians or dogs Allowed" signs in lovely South Dakota).

In this country, which sees life in bipolar, linear, straight up and down, only right or wrong modes of thought, people seem to see issues of race purely in terms of "Black" and "White." Us more exotic folks (and Indians are not the only ones in the American consciousness) usually stay in the background because we are too different and therefore too insignificant to matter. We are, in fact, so very
exotic that most history books teach your young that we do not even exist, that we all went out with the Plains Wars (except for those curious times when someone hears the word "tax-free gambling" or "land claim," then we and our land exist very much).

"Foreign or Unfamiliar"..."Not Native"

AND YET! We also live at the other end of this "Exotic Realm," where when we are noticed, when we come across someone's path who has never met one of us before, we are suddenly so strange and "strikingly different" that we are treated like creatures literally from another planet! If I had a dime for every time...you know how the saying goes. Well, if I DID have one for every time I heard some of the most ridiculous questions on Earth, I would indeed have no concerns about law debts or anything else.

Very high on the list is, "Are you really Indian?" This assumes that you "don't look like one," from people who wouldn't know anyway because they don't KNOW any Indian people. When you are exotic, like some kind of bird of paradise, science can classify you, make you fit some kind of definition that scientists feel is appropriate. Well, I meet a million scientists a year, all convinced they know what Indianness is merely judging by looks.

Very close to that one is, "How much Indian are you?" This assumes you are not a whole human being, that you must justify who and what you are to please the non-Indian world. I have never had the stupidity to ask a White person, "How much White are you?" That question would be inconceivable as well as purposeless.

And, depending on the latest Ted Turner endeavor or the latest big screen hit, "Have you seen Pocahontas?" It seems non-Indians go out of their way to think of "Indian" things to say. And yes, I did see it, but I also saw To Die For and The Net. THAT gets a reaction, like, "Wow! An Indian who watches REGULAR movies!" (Are you catching my drift on the whole exotica thing by now?)

Last but not least, if it's not about gambling, or the environment or anything viewed by everyone else as "Indian things to talk about," it's that same old "show me your ways, oh wise ones!" Dances with Wolves routine. Non-Indians seem to hear things only selectively, they have heard that Indian people are very spiritual, that we do have a lot of ancient wisdom about the Earth and about peoples' relationships with each other. It's been written about ever since the first foreign landing (I mean Columbus, but that's another chapter). To some extent, it's true; our elders do retain a lot of that wisdom, and they have kept it for us to sustain us through the years.

Unfortunately, though non-Indians don't like to hear this, it wasn't all meant to be handed out or sold like a handful of crystals. Those who want to share that knowledge must respect it and sadly, most of the time it's not what happens. Our religions, our spirituality, become sideshows, more entertainment for the curious or those who have somehow lost touch with their own spiritual gifts and now demand ours. We become these great, ever-flowing fountains of wit and wisdom, still only respected for the moment, still somehow not like everyone else, still exotic and not human.

So IS there a "Native viewpoint" on the O.J. Simpson trial? No, such as there is no "Black" viewpoint or "Asian" viewpoint, like groups of people can't retain their own individual thoughts or emotions. I can't sit here and speak for millions of other Indian people I've never met; no matter how exotic I am, I'm not a telepath on top of it (although, according to Legends of the Fall, we DO have those kinds of powers).

What is "the point" of what I have just written? Here is something that I, in my infinite "wisdom," have decided to pass along.
Long ago, there was an elderly woman. She was a grandmother and lived with her old husband. They had two grandsons, one adopted, the other naturally theirs. She cooked every day for them while they all hunted. On three days, when they came home, the grandsons found a delicious bowl of food they had never eaten before. They asked their Grandmother, "What is this food? It's very delicious!" And she only smiled each time and told them, "Don't worry. It's hominy."

These two boys kept demanding to know where she had gotten it from, but she would only smile. Finally, one day they decided to spy on her to find out where this "hominy" came from. They hid behind the cook house where she was and spied upon her. They saw her shake herself and when she did, little white grains fell everywhere. She put them in a bowl and carried them to the house. When the two grandsons came in, they said, "Yes! We saw you! We know where it comes from now and we won't eat it anymore!"

Within a short time, the Grandmother became very sad and very ill. She told them she was going to pass away soon, and that when she did, she would give them one more chance to be good grandsons. She told them to bury her and build a fence around her. Where she lay would grow a tall stalk and she told them how to care for what grew from it. The grandsons only had to be told once. They did as she asked when she passed away, and within a year, they had the gift she had left them as her own sacrifice: corn.

Five hundred years is a long time to still be considered "exotic" by neighbors. Like the Grandmother in this story, we won't stop giving the non-Indian world its chance to "be good grandsons" and respect us whether or not it understands us completely. While it may be hard to accept the differences, always, ALWAYS respect the humanity.

---

M. Pendrak

I was surprised when I was asked to join this discussion because most law school conversations do not include me. I was also skeptical. Did you ask me to write, because as a dyke who grew up poor I am "interesting?" or is it because I round the discussion out nicely? "Oops! We forgot to get someone who is not middle or upper class and we have no lesbians" - is that where I come in? I assumed none of the women who created the project were poor or working class.

I was taught to hate and mistrust any one who was "rich" or as least "middle class." I learned that rich people had it easy, were lazy, and always took advantage of those who did not "have it easy." Sound familiar? I was taught the same assumptions about the rich as Mr. Gingrich was about the poor. Classism is insidious.

I am writing because I believe that if we can talk to each other, in spite of being suspicious, fearful, angry or just plain hateful,
we can move on to the really important issues like changing the social conditions that create these feelings. The feminist movement seems to have gotten stuck there. We are unable to find unity in our diversity. We struggle among ourselves rather than put that energy outward. This is frustrating, especially at a time when women - poor women in particular - are still one of the many scapegoats for the country's ills (i.e. welfare mothers).

Here is my own version of "HOW TO OVERCOME CLASSISM 101." First think of me sitting next to you in your law class. In my life I have been the abused, unfed, unkempt child; the unemployed welfare recipient who won't work; the girl staggering down the street with a bottle of booze; the woman standing next to you who stinks to high heaven, and the crazy person locked on a ward. I have been all these things. I have also been the honors college student who works 30 hours a week to get through college; the adventurer who worked on ships and traveled to different parts of the world; the woman who volunteers at a local nonprofit agency. Classism tells you [and me] I could never be all those women in the first category and sit next to you in law school, but here I am. Classism tells me you had advantage and privilege and therefore you are shallow and untrustworthy, and have never had to work for anything in your life. Overcoming classism means a willingness to try to understand why we make these assumptions, and why we do not trust each other. It involves sorting it all out regardless of how uncomfortable it makes us. We must look at how we oppress each other and then take responsibility for our part in it. Me blaming you for my oppression is not going to solve anything, but it was a necessary part of my struggle. I thank the people who understood and did not take my anger personally. They encouraged me to join the struggle; the struggle to end oppression.

To bring my abstract "HOW TO END CLASSISM 101" back down to earth, here is an example of how it worked in my life. I met a woman through mutual friends, she seemed nice with a good sense of humor. Over time we became friends - spending time together, going to the movies, having lunch and talking on the phone. After knowing each other for some time there was this growing animosity between us. We never really talked about the problem and tried to ignore it. We spent less time together and had a falling out.

After awhile we had dinner together and finally began to talk about what was going on. I was resentful of her wealth, of her "easy life," that she never had to worry where her next meal was coming from. I was embarrassed that I would have to scrimp and save in order to go to the movies or have lunch with her. I had never told her this. She was uncomfortable with my taking no initiative to get off welfare. I was bright and talented and hardworking so why didn't I do more than collect a welfare check or work part-time? Finally we were able to put all this all out for discussion. I came to realize that my friend was very lonely as a child; other parents thought their kids were not "good enough" to play with her. She also was much ignored by her parents and had been a very unhappy child. She learned that I was afraid to succeed. Afraid of being different from the rest of my family, who had all (except my father) been on welfare at some point in their lives. I was afraid of becoming like those people I was taught to hate. She was afraid people just wanted her money and not friendship, or just a handout. I was surprised to hear how many people had asked her for money. She resented the fact that I wouldn't come to her home. I was afraid I would break something. She really wanted to help me go to law school. I wanted to ease her loneliness.

We found out we needed each other. We are still friends and continue to talk and to struggle. We both work, each in our own way, for social change bringing what we have
learned on a personal level to our political struggles and what we learn politically to our personal relationships. "HOW TO END CLASSISM 101" does not just take place in the classroom - there is a lab.

Anonymous

When the Editor approached me about submitting an article, the voice in my head loudly enunciated each syllable: “No way!” I had been asked to share my experiences as an African American woman in the wake of the O.J. Simpson trial. I hesitated and with good reason. I have learned, that it takes a very special listener to hear what I have to say and comprehend where I’m coming from. I used to get annoyed by the T-shirts that said “It’s a Black thing, you wouldn’t understand.” Why even say that? Did anyone that couldn’t or wouldn’t understand need to be aware that he or she was deemed as lacking somehow? Or even care? It’s true that certain things cannot be understood without the experience. I am not going to share anything too emotionally revealing. Instead, I’ll share some amusing and amusingly cruel moments of what it’s like to be me.

Going shopping: I was so accustomed to being followed in the store, that I used to take my packages back to the car after every purchase. My new high is to carry as much junk as I can from store to store. I am at the point where I will bring a blouse purchased from another store to match it with pants or a skirt, instead of guessing at the right color.

A Trip to the Bank: My white friend and I went to my bank. I had a check for $102.15 and I wanted to deposit $100 (easy bookkeeping) and receive the change. The teller asked me for ID (besides my deposit slip). Before I could reach for it my friend said “Wow, I’ve never been asked for ID.” The teller replied, “Is this your branch?” My friend answered, “No, and I’ve never been asked for ID here, in fact I’ve never been asked for ID at any bank.” Sensing the implications of this conversation, my friend continued, “I think its good that you proof people cashing checks; I wish someone would proof me.” We looked at each other and smiled. We left the bank and my friend went on about the incident for about ten minutes. I said, “I choose my battles more carefully as I get older. My older sister, on the other hand, never lets anything slide.” I admire her, but she has much more stamina than I do.

Classification: Do I refer to myself as an “African-American” or “Person of Color?” My southern grandmother refers to herself as “Colored” (which grates my nerves to no end), my mom grew up from “Colored” to “Negro” to “Afro-American” to “Black” to “African-American” (she must really have a headache). I like “Black,” but as my niece astutely said when she was two, “Auntie, I’m not black, I’m brown.” And of course, there are many derogatory phrases that some people use. Some of them are so stupid, they make me laugh. Did you ever notice that only non-whites are described by their color?

Language: “You don’t sound black.” My mom really wanted her children to have a good command over the English language. Consequently, I worked especially hard on becoming articulate. I grew up in the inner-city and was bussed to the country for school. During the transition from childhood to adulthood, the country kids mocked my “accent” and my neighborhood friends called me “Oreo” (black on the outside white on the inside). I wondered why a Black person couldn’t speak correctly and remain Black. Perhaps too much media influence has dictated
what a “Black Person” should sound like and how one should behave. This is still a huge problem.

Residence: In high school, there was a running joke that I lived in a rat-infested, ghetto apartment. Truth was, I lived in a very clean, tastefully decorated house with no mice, or roaches or even ants (a secret revealed). You could eat off my mom’s floor. But most found the ghetto story much more believable.

College: I was sitting in my Legal Environment of Business class waiting for my term paper to be returned. The professor called my last name and motioned for me to come to the front of the classroom. He then announced that there was a problem with my paper. I had received a 98 (the highest grade in the class), and he accused me of plagiarism because it was “too good for me to have written it.” (So why didn’t he give me a perfect score?) Luckily, I had saved my original note cards, and my rough draft. (I love my 10th grade English teacher). I presented all the materials, received my A+, but no apology!

Law school: When I got accepted into law school, a non-Black relative asked me if I was worried about getting a job - “Too many lawyers,” etc. When I replied rather confidently, “Someone will get the job, why can't it be me?” She then replied, “Do you think it will be easier because you're Black?” Good Lord, I thought, good thing you’re cute, because you don’t have a clue.

On success: Society says if I fail it's because I'm Black, and if I succeed it's only because I'm Black.

Oh no, this is starting to get painful. I better stop here.

M. B.

Discussing differences among women is so difficult because many of us aren't aware of the underlying differences that exist, especially when we talk about privilege. White privilege exists every day in our society, yet it is so subtle, that those of us who have it usually aren't aware of it. Those who don't have it, however, are quite aware they don't.

I learned about this white privilege only recently. I too was not aware that it existed. As I got older though, it became quite clear to me, that if I dressed a certain way, talked a certain way, and behaved a certain way, I would be treated in a much different manner than my nonwhite counterparts.

For example, being white means people just assume you're telling the truth. I can recall several times using my mother's credit card at Kaufmann's, often without her permission. I would charge something, sign her name to the slip, and no one would question me. One time, only minutes after I had used my mother's card, I saw an African-American girl about my age yelling at a clerk. Apparently, the girl was attempting to charge something, and the clerk told her she needed proof of identification. The girl was yelling, "I don't have to show you ID, that's my credit card, my signature's my ID." I was with a friend at the time, and I remember her saying to me, "I don't know why she has to make such a scene." I said nothing, but was thinking to myself that no one had asked me for i.d. just minutes before, and it wasn't even my own card.

Another time I was with an African-American friend, and we were shopping at a rather expensive department store. She warned me before we went in that clerks would be following us, because they don't trust black people. I remember being very annoyed with her, thinking to myself, we're not living in the south in the 1950s. She must just be paranoid. Sure enough though, we were followed. When
I went into the dressing room, the clerk asked me how many items I had, I told her, and she let me through. When she asked my friend, she told her, but the clerk then took her items and counted them. The clerk must have assumed I was telling the truth, but that my friend wasn’t.

Another subtle example of the "privilege" occurred in my sophomore year of college, when a piece of my roommate’s luggage was missing. We had two African-American girls who lived next door, and she instantly assumed that one of them had stolen it. We later found out that a white girl down the hall had "borrowed" the bag and forgot to return it. To my knowledge, my roommate never once suspected me, the person who would’ve had the easiest access to her things.

It took me a long time to become conscious of this privilege, and how I'm afforded things in life simply because I am white and playing the part. That is where the problem lies. Many of us aren't aware that a privilege exists. And even if we all did, what can be done about it? We don't want to give it up, we don't want the tables turned on us. Therefore non-whites go on suffering because they don't have the privilege, and we keep taking advantage of it, if we are even conscious of it at all.

R. Marcelle Cowie

Since the OJ Simpson verdict and the Million Man March, I have been bombarded with the question: "As a black woman, what do you think?" My response is very unsatisfactory to those who seek great philosophical insights. What "I think" is that everyone should resume their normal life activities and stop philosophizing, since this is just another event in the life of a black woman. It is nothing new, nothing unheard of, nothing strange.

The OJ Simpson verdict caused some whites to explode with what the media described as "hidden" rage and hatred. Maybe this rage was hidden from other whites, but as an African American, it has not been hidden from me. It has been there since the time we were brought to this continent. White women exploded at the torture and disrespect "women" were meted out, but this torture and disrespect were the conditions under which many black women learned to make a life for themselves and their families. So you want to know what I think? Well, I think that the black woman existed before the OJ verdict. Didn't my opinion count before? This verdict was eventful and educational only for whites who had their heads stuck in the sand of indifference for too long. It did not irritate me, surprise me, or shock me. In fact, it just saddened me. It saddened me to think that it took a white woman to be abused and disrespected, tortured and murdered, to capture the attention of the public. How long have the voices of black women been ignored? How long have our screams for help been covered over? How long has the sexual and physical abuse we suffer at the hands of white and black men been categorized as what "they like?" From the days of slavery we were stereotyped as "sex machines" always ready, always available. This had to be projected by the white male system of the time. By what other means could they justify raping young girls, fathering uncountable children, and creating a sexual "free for all" out of the black women who they "owned?" This stereotype exists to this day in more sophisticated ways.

OJ did what men have been doing to us for centuries, however, he made a big mistake; he did not do it to his own. Had he been accused of doing this to one of us, who would have cared, but our mothers? Sometimes it is difficult to see beyond the stain of injustice we experience, however, the black woman has a peculiar disposition. She is black, and she is female. In that light I can not condone sexual
or physical abuse under any circumstances, be it to a black, white, pink, or green woman. For me, this is where the issue becomes complex. It is easy for segments of white America to be upset about the race aspect, and it is easy for segments of feminist America to be concerned about the woman's aspect, but who is concerned for the category where race and gender intersect? As a black woman I have experienced the "in limbo" position of my being, and because of that, it has been sometimes difficult to align myself with the "right" group. I think that as black sisters, we have just begun to realize that we are our "right" group. This realization is only the beginning of the healing process which we must undergo in order to fully achieve our birthright of recognition.

The Million Man March on its face was a great event for us as a black people, who have been ostracized and suppressed for so long. However, I felt there was a lot more beneath the surface. Many white Americans felt it was counter productive to peace, unity and acceptance to congregate with only one's own race, but since we were removed from our continent, it has been very difficult to achieve the unity necessary for our progress. The time to make a difference is now. The fact that the march concentrated on black males can not be totally condemned. Black men do need to unite, empower themselves and just all around get their !@#$ together. However, I felt that the exclusion of the black woman was not necessary to accomplish that goal.

Throughout history, black women have been strong, and also supportive of their black men. When our husbands, brothers and fathers were lynched and tortured, we collectively stiffened our backs and continued the struggle. There has never been a time when we were not supportive and understanding of the black man's struggle. His struggle was our struggle. To me, this march served to create a distinction that should not be drawn. There can be no real black struggle or progress without the black woman's presence. The best analogy I could think of is that of a dish newly tried called the Million Man March. After following the directions, the result was good. The taste was palatable, the appearance appealing. However, one cannot help but feel that there was just one more additive needed for it to be a superb dish. The black woman's flavor was undeniably missing.

Therefore, as I come to a close, I feel that again the black woman and her issues are ignored. What is even more sickening is that we are being ignored by our own. OJ didn't want to associate with us, and the planners of the Million Man March asked us to support them at home. At the same time, parts of white America are up in arms over these two incidents in American history which they interpret as threats to their position, while we have been, and continue to be in a threatened position. So if you really want to know what I think, I think that before you ask me what I think, you should think!

**********************
Susan

As I struggle to put society's continual affronts upon women's solidarity into perspective, I cannot help but be struck by the expansiveness of the problem. Having thought about the divisions between women in light of the O.J. Simpson trial, I was struck by Nicole Brown's embodiment of the "ideal" picture of beauty. She was thin, blond, white and had the face of a cover-girl. I wondered whether, if she had been fat and mousy-looking, the country's interest would have been as profound. Then, when asked to be a part of this discussion about women's solidarity, I realized that there exists an issue as divisive as race and sexual orientation: weight. Women of all races, religions, ages and sexual orientation live a constant struggle to live up to society's thin
I am a fat woman. I am a fat woman who is both tired of and furious about the constant social pressure to conform to a patriarchal archetype circumscribing my ideal weight. I am tired of hearing the medical community tell me that it is unhealthy to be overweight. A health issue has been created to maintain the fiction that we all must be thin. Women must all work day in and day out to come as close as possible to the wispy, child-like body of Kate Moss. No one ever talks about Kate Moss's health, which, I daresay, is dangerously close to death.

Weight discrimination is as invidious and dividing as racial, ethnic, religious or gender discrimination. It places women into competition to obtain jobs, services and even mates. Like other forms of discrimination, weight and size discrimination is based upon power relationships and the need to destroy any perceived threat to the status quo. It crosses all races, ages, classes and sexual preferences.

Food is power. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, provides insight into the food/power relationship when she explains the historical food deprivation women have suffered. Women who are kept hungry, who are not able to eat as men eat, are not able to function as well as men physically, mentally and psychologically. We fight for reproductive freedom, for the environment, for an end to gender harassment, but not for the freedom to rid ourselves of the oppression of our size. Strangely enough, though I am not grossly obese, I also received such comments several years ago when I was much smaller. I used to be considered a "normal" size, (though I always considered myself overweight) yet still faced size discrimination because I was never a size 3. This only goes to show that women of ALL sizes can face discrimination in comparison to someone who will always be thinner and more typical of the proscribed ideal.

I work at a retail clothing store that caters to larger size women. What I see there sometimes amuses, but often infuriates me. Some women enter our store with a loving acceptance of their size and an appreciation of the fact that the store exists. After all, large size women are not welcome in at least eighty percent of retail clothing stores because these stores do not carry their sizes. I have been shunned by store clerks because I am obviously out of place in a small size store. I am not waited on, not asked if I need help finding an item. It is so surprising to see me there, that it is inconceivable that I could be looking for a gift or searching for my friend in the store. I am marginalized by the very women who
would consider me a sister in another context.

When women walk into the store where I work, they frequently make comments which illuminate my understanding of women's solidarity and how we both support and undermine each other. One comment refers to the advertisements throughout the store, which sport women wearing the clothes we sell. The majority of ads feature young, very thin women, not the larger women that comprise our clientele. There are a few ads which have a larger size model, but these models are typically very tall and sport the smallest size found in our store. Some customers comment on this disparity between our clothes and our models. It is hypocritical to sell an image while refusing to truly support the company motto: that beauty has nothing to do with age or size. Pictures speak louder than words.

Sometimes women try our clothes on, constantly questioning the sales associates about whether this or that makes them look heavier. I want to say, "Look, we are all fat ladies here! Can't we just accept that? What's wrong with it? The clothes aren't going to make you thin. Some styles may look better than others, but that is simply the nature of finding something that enhances your own beauty. You can buy bright colors. You can stand out. You do not need to wear black and try to disappear into the background. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You are beautiful." Of course, I say what is expected of me, what helps me keep my job, "No, of course it doesn't make you look fat."

The real frustration is the thin women who mistakenly enter the store, not realizing that it caters only to larger sized women. When we are able to, we greet them and explain that our store is for larger sizes and, if we can help them find a gift, we will be glad to do so. Often, though, we haven't the opportunity to greet these women because we are busy assisting other customers. When they realize their mistake, every one of them breaks the sound barrier in their red-faced rush to exit the store. Many young girls laugh and giggle at their mistake as they leave, rudely commenting about the "fat lady store" and worried that someone they know will see them leaving. Every time this happens, I am struck by the demeaning and marginalizing impact of such actions. Such women support the existence of the discriminatory male construct of the ideal woman by treating larger women as abhorrent and embarrassing to be associated with. They align themselves with the male power structure to disempower their sisters. In so doing, they also demean and disempower themselves.

The time has come for women to stop judging each other because of size. I am tired of being treated as stupid, as the dopey fat girl. I challenge women to stop dieting. I challenge women to free up their minds from the constant thought of food and exercise and consider their own empowerment. If we refuse to accept the male construct of what our bodies should be, perhaps we can own our bodies. If we own our bodies, then we can further our struggle for reproductive freedom, women's solidarity, economic equality and an end to gender harassment. After all, what does the right to reproductive freedom mean when we cannot eat?

P.S.

Probably the best way to describe myself to you is to say that in everyday life I'm invisible. If you see me on the street there is nothing about me which would catch your attention. I am a white European graduate student in an American university. I have an average figure, dress in international clothes with no indication of an ethnic or cultural belonging. However, this is until I open my mouth. Then my accent marks me as different. But even then, people don't realize how different I am from them because my difference is not measured by the color of my skin, the
size of my body, etc. My "foreigness" in the general and in the concrete sense of the word is rooted in my experiences in an ex-socialist country in Eastern Europe, which, with its totalitarian regime was like a concentration camp. Lack of political and economic freedom, as well as the constant fear from secret agencies, were so intertwined in one's everyday life that often, they turned into paranoia.

To illustrate, I will tell you about a recent event. Once depression hit me so severely that despite my cultural resistance to ask for specialized help for "such" problems, I went to a psychologist. Given the possibility to talk about my favorite topic - myself, I "covered" the male specialist with all these hectic words describing how horrible and miserable I felt. Suddenly he stopped me and said impatiently: "Wait a minute. Answer with "yes" or "no" to the following questions: Do you have the feeling that while you are in public someone follows you? Do you hear voices or have unusual psychic experiences? Do you want to kill someone or yourself?" I stalled for a while and tried to fill the pause with a smile.

"Do you have the feeling that while you are in public someone follows you?"

- Yes, of course, I thought, all my adult life. Being born and raised in an ex-socialist country, I have been filled with the fear that I am watched, listened to, followed, recorded, etc. to the smallest atom of my identity. My entire existence was synthesized into an exposed public I.D. ready to be documented within the two coordinates - loyal or not to the ruling regime, i.e. either you are like "us" - the communists, or you are against "us" and you are a political enemy. The possible ways to show who you are were not many. Fortunately, belonging to the educated elite gave me the option to hide myself with the help of words - the more sophisticated and theoretical way of expression I had, safer I felt. I was simply accepted as a "crazy theorist," and this happened to be my best survival mechanism.

When I came to the U.S., during my first year, I was still paralyzed with the paranoia that "someone" follows me. While the other foreigners were concerned with discovering and adjusting to the new culture, I was dealing with the fear that I shouldn't reveal what I think, like or dislike, what I want or plan to do with my life. I was convinced that my phone was tapped, my office and apartment were rummaged through, and my mail opened. I always checked behind my back before making a statement, or long after a conversation I wondered whether and how the other person understood me. If someone happened to approach me and behave friendly to me, which is very typical for Americans, I was automatically suspicious of them. The people in the university at that time were excited by the Rodney King incident and the riots in L.A. When asked how I feel about this "revolution" in the U.S., I would ask myself nervously "Why does he/she want to be friends with me? Why does s/he have any interest in who I am, what I think and believe? Where does s/he possibly hide the tape recorder?" The few friends with whom I shared my "problem" were wondering why I should be afraid - "Are you a communist or an international terrorist?" I was neither, but I couldn't explain that my fear wasn't concretely connected to the KGB, CIA, or some other intelligence service. It was related to "them" - this almost universal anonymous conscience which watches my steps and controls all my actions, this is the "something" or "someone" which/who will judge me, use me and punish me because of my beliefs, ideas, dreams, and feelings.

In order to cope with my fear, I decided that I should deal with the origin of it - you cannot be watched if you are invisible. Therefore, first, I deepened my accent and started speaking again in a very "abstract" way within "theoretical frameworks." People usually couldn't understand what I was talking
about, and that's what I wanted. I needed to be respected in my essence as a human being, not with the political, economic, and sexual, lens of the "others." I wanted to be recognized with my unique standpoint as an individual, not as a token white, East European, educated woman. If I was visible and accepted in the U.S. only as a "commodified identity," somebody exotic who can be used for propaganda purposes, then I didn't want to be heard, understood, or united in solidarity with other women or men. I wanted to take off the fearful "uniform" of my visible personality, and become a generic foreign-born female Ph.D. student in an American university.

"Do you sometimes hear voices or have unusual psychic experiences?"
- How couldn't I? - I am "the best psychic in Buffalo." Visible or not by others, yet I have to "exist" in some way. It turns out that my "exotic self" which causes me so many problems is also the easiest way to be connected to the other people, especially women. I am "heard," "seen," and "accepted" by other women (American and foreign) because I claim that I can read their future. I really cannot complain that I don't have female friends, because I am chased everywhere, accepted everywhere and greeted as a celebrity. Through my access to people's intimate secrets I accumulate so much social information that I really don't need sociological studies to know what the current crises of the society are. It seems to me that I am not the only one contaminated with the "fear" disease, although our fears are of different kind, I can feel that women in the U.S irrespective of their class, education, and sexuality are generally insecure and very vulnerable.

"Do you want to kill yourself or someone?"
- Let me see...who shall I start with? To be a foreign woman means not only to be deprived of all status; in the social hierarchy, you are lower than lesbian, illiterate, communist, or welfare recipient in the U.S. because at least all of these women have constitutional rights and various organizations which can protect them. While foreign-born non-immigrant women are like slaves - they don't possess anything for sure, even themselves. The awareness of this hopeless trap is usually expressed in two extremes: either you are paralyzed with submissive fear to the "master" (the natives), or you become surprisingly aggressive. If you don't possess anything, you have nothing to lose. From here comes the well known immigrant rage, impulsivity, and intolerance which are predominantly destructive and only rarely can be creative. Can constant humiliation, harassment, and disrespect really make you a nice person?

These were the thoughts which passed through my mind at my visit with the psychologist. I answered all questions with "no" in English although I am sure that it wouldn't make any difference if I said it in Chinese. He couldn't understand me in any case. Did you?

Lori

What impedes me from working with women in solidarity sometimes is the lack of connections and the knowledge that we all have the capacity to oppress others - I am sick of white women who think that "including" black women in their struggles is what anti-racism is all about. I am sick of straight women's homophobia and I'm sick of women who try to fight sexism alone without an analysis of racism, anti-semitism, classism, homophobia, and ableism - all these forms of oppression are inextricably linked and we will never end one while the others exist.