

RACE, RESPECT AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

THE IMPACT OF WHITE PRIVILEGE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

BY KATHLEEN SAADAT

A few years ago I received a telephone call asking me once again to do "one more thing" to help the movement. To fill the request would have taken me twelve to sixteen hours of prep-time and would have required me to travel for the equivalent of two days to make a presentation. I was told that there was no money to pay me. The organization calling, had (and still has) money. A sincere "thank you" would be my compensation. Over the years I have come to believe that people listen harder when they pay you. I have no investment in being "enjoyed" but not heard.

That particular time it was the lesbian/gay movement calling but as I started to write about my feelings, I realized that those feelings applied to each of the movement's in which I have been involved where it is the people of privilege who determine the direction of the movement. I shared the writing with a few of my African American sisters who laughed and said, "girl you have got it right, you should publish this". I am sharing here excerpts from that writing to try and give you a feel for how it is to work in movements where the work you do seems to be of little value, primarily because nothing seems to have changed except the presence of a few faces of color.

AUNT JEMIMA SPEAKS HER PANCAKE MIND

To whom it may concern:

Acting as a Progressive Black Lesbian Feminist has filled much of my life since the 1970's. There are things about my experiences that have been uplifting and that I love. Then there are the negatives that have repeated themselves so much in the last twenty two years they have started to erode my feelings of optimism and hope.

In the past several years I have started to tell white lesbian and gay audiences, "I am not in this movement because you invited me here. I am not in this movement because the movement has made me welcome. I am here because I am meaner than a junk-yard dog and am determined to stay because I believe the presence of people of color in this movement is critical."

But, I am tired of making pancakes. I am tired of working so hard to provide sustenance to a movement that will not acknowledge its hunger and yet voraciously and with much gusto continues to cannibalize me, then pick their teeth with the bones of my spirit, and act surprised when I yell ouch!

But today I decided, I ain't making no mo' pancakes. I'm gonna sit on the back of the stove with Uncle Ben and be the best saltshaker I can be, but I ain't making no mo' pancakes to feed your insatiable hunger for cultural connection, racial absolution, personal reassurance, self righteousness and the illusion of intellectual, personal and moral superiority. No mo' pancakes for the ones that won't say they's hungry. Nothin' to eat for the delusional starving spirit that keeps on gnawing on the bones of mine. I ain't got another pancake to feed you, all the rest is for me and mine.

I am without accrued resources. I would like to stop working so that I can devote my life to saving my life. I am on the verge of cynicism, another demon threatening to add itself to the list of my oppressors. I do not want a two week or two month vacation; I want to rest until I am rested. An I ain't making No mo' pancakes.

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When I wrote that piece I knew that the person who called me meant no harm, but I that did not stop me from being angry at the arrogance and insensitivity. I am pretty certain that a white man with a history in the movements similar to mine would not have been asked to do all this without any compensation.

I was also angry to think that the person I talked with might think my refusal was “only” about money, and that in turn might raise questions about my commitment. (In my experience “only” people who have more than enough money and other resources, say “only” about money.) But the crux of my anger rested in the convoluted thinking that allow someone to respect and want to use my knowledge and skills but disrespect me as a person. These kinds of things occur when leadership is privileged, narrow of vision and insensitive. It makes it hard for people of color and poor people to work with that kind of leadership. Those are the same kinds of leaders who are often willing to appropriate the contributions of people of color to benefit only themselves or their small circle of the elite.

These are the kinds of questions I have heard from women exploring the question of involvement in the “white women’s movement”: Why involve myself in a movement that I know is going to exploit me? Why involve myself in a movement that does not recognize me as a whole person, is not prepared to work on issues related to my life and struggles? Why involve myself in a movement where the leaders make no attempt to understand themselves in the totality of the socio-political context in which they operate? Why follow leadership that takes little/no responsibility for working to broaden its vision? Why support a leadership that refuses to take the steps that shift the personal paradigm and allow for a transition in identity and a concomitant change in political goals and objectives?

I believe that poor women of all colors, immigrant women and lesbians are waiting to see a leadership that answers these questions. Further, I believe that many women are waiting for the Reproductive Rights Movement to become a movement for reproductive rights that starts before termination of a pregnancy is the issue. I believe they are waiting for a movement that addresses overall health care (not just pre-natal care) as a part of the reproductive rights agenda; a movement that addresses the issues of race and

poverty; one that advocates for all women and all children.

Whether they are built consciously or unconsciously, the barriers erected by the privileged maintain the status quo. Limiting the activities of a movement to reflect just the concerns of the privileged insures that only small changes will occur, and that the greatest benefits will accrue to those already privileged. In many instances, laws protecting choice extend that freedom only as far as a woman’s bankroll can carry her. Status plus money can almost always insure the right to choose not just whether to have a baby but what doctor, lawyer or school you go to.

The rise of the right is about to overwhelm us all and completely destroy whatever small freedoms poor and working women have in controlling the reproductive functions of their bodies. That same right wing is committed to making sure that women return to the home and be subject to the authority of their husbands. If they continue to be successful, that same right wing will punish women it believes to be resisting their agenda because they are single, lesbian or “uppity”. Yes, I said if they continue to be successful or haven’t you noticed?

It is a unified right wing that is working to decimate the movements of people of color. It is the right wing that is determined to carry out a prolonged and ambiguous war so that it can make money on the profits of war and proceed to use that money to establish an even stronger foothold in these United States. Their goal is to return white men to undisputed positions of power.

The bottom line is, I cannot effectively resist the right wing without some privileged white women. Nor can privileged white women retain the freedoms they want without the support of poor women, young women, Latinas, Asian women, American Indian women, African American women and old women like me. I know this to be true. The trick is to get privileged women to listen to the rest of us and support our leadership. As I watch the rapidly increasing rise of the right wing, I am waiting for the leadership of the reproductive rights movement to demonstrate more than an intellectual understanding of their need to learn from other women. The nature of privilege is such that you cannot relinquish it but you can use it to the benefit of those that have none.

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ANYMORE

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in LA, and that meant no place to stay after the abortion. Since we could not afford the price of a hotel, we would have to fly straight back to Berkeley.

This was the way Berkeley abortion happened in 1965. At least as far as we could find out. No Berkeley doctor would do an abortion for a Bay Area woman, they only handled the out of town set. And, it seemed, the LA doctors followed a similar practice. This made abortions more expensive and dangerous.

After the money was raised, we did find ourselves in the abortion provider's Watts office. It was quite a lesson. He had two waiting rooms. One was for his local Black patients who were being treated for "legal" medical problems, and another room for his out of town pregnant patients who would pay him well to commit a "criminal act."

He was a highly capable doctor and Joan's abortion went smoothly. Although there was something annoying about the judgmental attitude he took toward us for intending to fly right back to Berkeley. Instead, he recommended for Joan, a few days of restful stay over in Los Angeles. His medical opinion was quite sound and desirable, but his disapproving look told us that it was our fault that Joan couldn't get an abortion in Berkeley and that we were too broke to pay for an LA hotel.

He also gave Joan a prescription for a painkiller that could be filled by a pharmacy that was right across the street from his office. When we

crossed the street, a police car passed by. In an instant we understood the prevailing system. Abortion was illegal, so how come a black doctor could have so many white patients in the middle of Watts, who would go quite visibly into a neighborhood drug store? And do this while police cars passed by? Ah yes, the doctor certainly wasn't getting to keep all of his five hundred dollar fee. No, some of it was a payoff to the racist Los Angeles police department who were obviously in clandestine partnership with our abortion provider. In addition to the system being oppressive and unfair, it was also corrupt. Those same cops who beat our heads at demonstrations were making money off of our abortions.

The flight back was OK. But that night Joan got sick with shivers and fever and thought that she was dying. Painkillers and antibiotics cooled things down and in the morning she felt a lot better. She and I could now live the next few years of lives on our own terms and in keeping with the spirit of those great, if imperfect times.

Of course we weren't the only people in our political scene to make that special trip to Los Angeles, but even us rebels who otherwise were willing, on occasion, to break the law and boast about it, even we kept kind of mum on that special subject. Some years later, a wonderful Supreme Court ruling would loosen our tongues and free us—women and men.

Race, Respect continued

The rise of the right is about to destroy whatever autonomy most of us have over our bodies. They are working to:

- Remove the option of whether to have a child by eliminating the right to choose
- Deny the hard-won and fragile rights to enter into loving adult lesbian and gay relationships
- In some cases re-criminalize acts between consenting adults
- Remove the opportunity of openly competing for jobs/positions by destroying affirmative action programs and EEO laws
- Deny workers the right to be safe in the workplace
- Override the right to live in an environment free of hazards to our children and ourselves
- Restrict the people's right to organize, unionize and meet
- Restrict civil rights/civil liberties
- Ignore human rights

Each of these individual issues is in some sense a struggle to have autonomy and control over our bodies and our lives. It is time to forge those separate struggles into a movement that will give us the greatest chance for success. The leadership of that movement must include and pay close respectful and full attention to the experiences, knowledge and courage of the women who bear the brunt of oppression's heavy load. It is time for privileged women to use their privilege to the advantage of the broader movement. We are not in Kansas and this is not just about abortion anymore. The ball is in your court.

Kathleen Saadat, long time civil and human rights activist, is concerned with all struggles for liberation, what happens to our children and issues affecting world peace. Currently self employed as consultant in the areas of human diversity, Kathleen makes her home in Portland, Oregon a significantly different experience from her birthplace, St. Louis, Mo.

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