

Speech delivered by Dr. Angela Bowen
Mira Centre National Conference. Oslo, Norway, 1997.
"Is Racism a Women's Issue? What can 'progressive' Norway learn
from Black U.S. Feminism?"

Let me begin by saying that I was invited here to share a few ideas about Black U.S. Feminism with women in Norway, which I came prepared to do; and, while I understand the intention of the title of this address, I did not select it. Therefore, rather than concentrating on racism, which I cannot address in any knowledgeable way within the context of Norway, I would prefer to speak from a somewhat different perspective, addressing two areas: first, the dangers of unacknowledged white skin privilege; second, some connections between Black U.S. feminism of two different eras.

On the first point, having white skin places one in a position of privilege throughout the world, Norway included. Yet most Whites neither notice nor acknowledge that they have this privilege. Of course, they know that they are white, and if they give it any thought, they will admit to being glad they're white--but still they don't think of themselves as being in a privileged position. Some Whites who do notice and acknowledge their privilege feel that there is nothing they can do about it; after all, how can you help the way you were born? And some Whites who do notice and acknowledge their privilege decide to use it. But use it how? To exclude people of color? To exchange favors, jobs, and information with only one another, thus consolidating and gaining even more power? To speak against any non-White person who wants access to their rightful place as citizens? To foster the creation of an untouchable group?

Whites who do not notice and acknowledge their privilege are as large a danger to people of color as are Whites who recognize their privilege and make a conscious decision to use their whiteness as a tool of oppression over people of color. Unacknowledged white-skin privilege is not benign; it's a fertile place where seeds strategically dropped can grow insidiously into racism. Lack of consciousness about how Whiteness grants you automatic acceptance and the

unquestioned right to accept or reject others who are not White can leave well-meaning White people open to manipulation by those who seek power. Furthermore, women--particularly those who consider themselves feminists--cannot in good conscience countenance racism. Feminism in its theory and its vision staked a claim to an anti-racist position. Therefore, how feminists use their white-skin privilege is hugely important to how they see themselves and the use of their lives in the world.

Not long ago I was teaching a class when the discussion led me to refer to an essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack," by a White scholar named Peggy McIntosh, in which she lists over two dozen unconscious privileges she had always taken for granted. McIntosh says that she immersed herself in the arguments that women of color had been making for years and which she had never fully understood. Then, once she grasped the connection between male privilege in relation to women and white privilege in relation to people of color, she achieved a greater understanding. She then began conducting her own examination of her everyday, taken-for-granted privileges within her white skin. In explaining her point to my class, I began her list by mentioning a few of her most benign examples, for instance: 1) Peggy McIntosh can walk into a store and buy "skin-colored" band aids that are actually the color of her skin; 2) she can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, or to the poverty or illiteracy of her race.

I had barely stated these examples to the predominantly white class when one White student spoke up, saying that she didn't feel privileged because, although she was White, she was still working-class; another White student quickly agreed with her, adding that although she herself wasn't working-class, she received disapproval whenever she dressed in a "punk style." I realized that they were not as ready as I had thought for such a discussion and decided not to continue. What had started out to be an anecdotal example on the way to a larger point was now leading to a discussion for which more groundwork would have needed to be laid. Since we

were two weeks away from the close of the semester, we obviously did not have time to lay that ground and we would all have ended up frustrated, especially the handful of women students of color, who were avidly urging me to continue. Instead I suggested that we return to our original discussion and referred the students to the library, where, if they were interested, they could read the McIntosh essay in a book which I had on reserve for another class.

The incident reminded me of Audre Lorde's statement that she was always promising herself that she would no longer speak with White women about racism because the emotional cost was too steep for her, as White women thwarted the discussion by engaging in guilt, defensiveness and anger. Therefore, it was best that they speak about it among themselves, helping each other to acknowledge and work on their racism.¹ Still, Lorde would continue to break her promise time after time, for, however short her efforts might fall, she always felt that she had to try again--after all, what could she do, being committed to change as she was? In her case, however, Lorde was attempting these discussions with women who were feminists, who had a commitment to anti-racism, ideologically at least. The class I was dealing with, however, had no previous commitment to anti-racism. They were simply a group of students who had spent a semester studying and responding enthusiastically to the ethnic literature that constituted the course. Yet within a spontaneous discussion, the mere mention of white-skin privilege--not racism, remember, which was not under discussion--had produced immediate tension.

People of color constantly walk a tightwire when introducing race, ethnicity or color issues around power and privilege to Whites who might not have worked on or in many cases been exposed to these issues in relation to themselves and their own privilege. The pain and tension accompanying such discussions arise particularly with well-intentioned Whites, often liberals who see themselves as sympathetic to the plight of people of color--and sometimes even as allies.

The same tensions existed in the first wave of U.S. feminism, beginning in the 19th century, in a Women's Rights Movement originated by White women who had begun as abolitionists fighting against slavery; and in exactly the same way, slightly more than a century later, the second wave of U.S. feminism, the Women's Liberation Movement, began. In the middle 1960s, large numbers of White middle-class women who were engaged in the Civil Rights Movement as foot soldiers in the struggle for Black liberation became conscious of their own second-class condition as women. Others came to the same consciousness within predominantly White groups of the left, including Students for a Democratic Society and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Some had been simultaneous members of several of these groups.

The first wave of U.S. feminism, which took much of its inspiration and many of its tactics from suffragists in England, was a large presence from the 1840s to the 1920s, becoming dormant once American women gained the right to vote, although the movement had been much more radical in its initial aims. Suffrage was seen initially as one of the movement's many goals, not the only one. Among a number of famous first wave women's rights advocates, White and Black, women and men, were two White women, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and two former slaves, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth.

This committed coalition of Blacks and Whites, women and men, had come together to work for the abolition of slavery and for women's rights. After emancipation, they continued working to gain citizenship for newly freed slaves and voting rights for ex-slaves and women. However, the coalition was divided and conquered in their response to the cunning 15th amendment, in which Congressional legislators prohibited denying suffrage on the condition of race, color or previous condition of servitude. This would assure that all male citizens--including Black men, newly freed from slavery--would receive the vote while women's demands to gain suffrage would be denied. The legislators decided to keep women in the position of nonvoting citizens.² The Women's Rights Movement was in turmoil about whether

to insist that the coalition support the enfranchisement of newly freed slaves while continuing to work on gaining the vote for women or to protest by continuing to press legislators for a new amendment that included women. Anguished debates ensued. Black ex-slave Frederick Douglass, committed though he was to women's liberation, finally succumbed, speaking out for the need to accept what they could get and continue fighting for the women's vote. Sojourner Truth, a former slave also, insisted that they should stand firm together and insist that everyone get the vote, no matter how long it took. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton broke with the abolitionists, reacting in such a publicly racist way that the repercussions continue to this day. Stanton delivered a speech in which she said:

Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who can not read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's spelling-book, making laws for Lucretia Mott, Ernestine L. Rose, and Anna E. Dickinson. ³

Stanton's reference to Sambo was obviously aimed at Black men but her remarks about Patrick, Hans and Yung Tung disparaged Irish, German and Chinese men as well. Susan B. Anthony also asked Frederick Douglass, one of the most outspoken and eloquent orators for the women's cause, not to come along when the suffragists went to the South to speak because she was fearful that his presence would alienate Southern White women

Both Stanton's racist public remarks and Anthony's request to Douglass, which no doubt she saw as simple pragmatism, have had a residual effect, as many contemporary Black women still link them to attitudes of contemporary White feminists, enabling Black women to turning their backs on feminism altogether. However, many contemporary Black feminists, myself included, see Sojourner Truth's position as the correct one, regardless of the virulent racism exhibited by Stanton and Anthony. The movement split bitterly on the issue, leaving half the women on the

side of Frederick Douglass and most of the men, while the other half sided with Stanton, Anthony, and Truth.

Most Black women who were abolitionists and suffragists, including writer/activist Frances E. W. Harper, went along with Douglass (or perhaps strategically remained silent), supporting unity within the race. Sojourner Truth, however, in her ardent desire that they should hold out until they all obtained suffrage, said in an 1867 speech that "When Woman Gets Her Rights, Man Will Be Right":

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women get theirs, there will be a bad time about it. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again.⁴

Truth's words were prophetic indeed. The amendment passed in 1868 but was so fraught with bitter battles that it took another amendment, the 15th, which passed in 1870, to assure that states could not deny the right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."⁵ It would be another 50 years before women achieved suffrage in 1920. Although she was illiterate, Sojourner Truth was a powerful and witty speaker and a theoretical strategist. She memorized passages from the bible and interlaced biblical parables at strategic places to support her arguments. Using herself as an example, she illustrated the complicated position of the Black woman who is oppressed not only regarding her sex, as are White women, but in matters of race and class as well--although certainly Sojourner Truth did not use those words, but painted pictures instead. Pointing out "that man over there," who says women have to be protected and helped into carriages, she reveals racism by stating, "No one ever helps me into carriages and ain't I a woman?" Illuminating how economic differences separate White and Black women, she points out that she works twice as long as a man and gets paid half as much.

Then, raising her strong arm, she boasts, "look at my arm." She can eat as much as a man, she states, wryly adding, "when I can get it."⁶

The analysis that the keenly intelligent and illiterate Sojourner Truth put forth within first wave 19th century feminism is clearly a dynamic forerunner of the theory of "simultaneous oppression" developed by an educated and sophisticated Black second wave feminist group in a 1977 position paper, "The Combahee River Collective Statement." The statement asserts that since oppressions of race, sex, class, and sexual orientation occur simultaneously, it is therefore impossible for Black women to deal with oppressions one at a time, like links in a chain. Rather, they must all be dealt with simultaneously.⁷

The Combahee River Collective was formed in the middle 1970s as a chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), which came into being in 1973. Although NBFO lasted only a few years, it was hugely important in developing an ongoing Black feminist network across the U.S. Like White women who were at the vanguard of second wave U.S. feminism, Black feminists also emerged from the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and 70s. Black women had worked equally with Black men on policy, strategy, and organizing within various Black groups, from the integrationist to the separatist, from striving to register voters to attempting to bring about revolutionary change within the structure of the capitalist system. As women fulfilled the daily behind-the-scenes grunt work necessary to keep organizations going, men held firmly onto their leadership and spokesperson positions, stepping forward to take the credit whenever negotiations were at hand or cameras and journalists were present. When men urged Black women to step back so that Black men could appear to be leading, a great number of women did so. But a good number refused. Women like Frances Beal, Cellestine Ware, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, all of whom had long been immersed in leftist politics, emerged from those 60s and 70s crucibles of change as feminists, unwilling to pretend that they were content to follow ten steps behind. Nor did they concede any ground to either Black men or White women,

continuing their commitment to the Black Liberation movement even as they embraced feminism, which they never saw as "belonging" to White middle-class women. On the contrary, they saw feminism as a valid and dynamic tool which would change the conditions of all women's lives, including Black women. Therefore, to leave feminism to White women was not an option.

Thus, Black women waged a simultaneous battle against racism within Women's Liberation and against sexism within the male-dominated Black Liberation Movement. Audre Lorde's experience in May of 1979 is a perfect example of how the simultaneous oppression of Black women caused them to do double and triple duty. Having undergone a mastectomy in the fall of 1978, she was home recovering when she read Mary Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology*, which Daly, who was a leading feminist scholar and a friendly acquaintance whom Lorde considered a sister in the movement, had sent to her. In the book Daly used some of Lorde's work to illustrate her chapter on clitoridectomy--the only reference to Black women she had made in the book. Lorde felt that Daly's choices valorized the power of White women while showing Black women only as victims. Lorde wrote Daly a respectful letter asking her to respond to her concerns about the racial dynamics of the book and the inappropriate use of Lorde's work within that context. When Daly did not respond to her letter after four months, Lorde published it as an open letter. Lorde's letter caused anger and hostility on the part of some White women who felt that Lorde had gone too far; and responsive outrage from most women of color, who felt that Lorde was justified and perhaps even duty-bound to have done so, she being one of the few prominent and conscious voices for the concerns of women of color. The discourse on the controversy continues to this day, not only within the U.S. but throughout transnational feminist communities. Because she saw herself not only as an individual Black woman but also as a representative voice of women of color who had no access to a speaking platform, Lorde felt that she was acting responsibly. She pressed Daly to acknowledge her own responsibility as a feminist to respond to the concerns which Lorde was airing on behalf of all women of color:

I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of Black women and other women of color, and how it devalues your own words... This dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us.⁸

Daly never responded in public to Lorde, thus compounding the problem. By refusing to address Lorde's concerns--and in print, as Lorde had done--Daly turned what might have begun as unconsciousness about the differences of race into what Lorde perceived as an insulting dismissal of herself and by extension other women of color as well. Daly also missed an opportunity to show how sisterly solidarity could move beyond theory into actual practice.

Simultaneously, while she was writing to Daly, Lorde was also formulating a detailed response for the May/June 1979 issue of *The Black Scholar* magazine to Robert Staples, a Black male sociologist. Staples had delivered a wide-ranging attack on Black feminists in the previous issue, accusing them, among many other things, of joining with White feminists to emasculate Black men. Lorde begins her stinging rebuke by telling him that "Black feminism is not White feminism in Blackface."⁹

These simultaneous battles against racism within women's groups and against sexism in male-dominated groups were and are ongoing and wearying. Simultaneous oppression exists for all women of color the world over, for we can never separate our color from our sex from our class, or from our sexual orientation. For those of us who are lesbians of color and choose to work within groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people struggling for liberation, ongoing problems arise around issues of racism, sexism and classism there as well. All of us at this conference today--women, men, White, Black, Colored, Norwegian, African, Pakistani, Indian, American, citizen, immigrant--are here because the MIRA Centre brought us together, knowing that anyone who showed up here would at the very least be willing to listen, and at best,

try to address the unfortunate reality of these problems of exclusion. We are not hopeless, obviously, for if we were hopeless, we would not be here. Nor are we helpless.

What, then, can we do? How do we move ourselves and our concerns into mainstream discourse? You in Norway are lucky to have these nationwide equality debates, which are sanctioned, supported and funded by your government. You are aware, of course, that no such government-based forum exists in most countries, and certainly not in the U.S. Here in Norway, however resistant some of those in power might be, yours is a small and affluent country with the kind of government structure that allows problems to be aired and often resolved. This racial business is truly difficult everywhere in the world. But here your racial and ethnic problems, in regard to people of color, have not yet become too deeply entrenched and entangled with slavery, guilt, and denial to be uprooted and hacked away by enough people of good will.

You are in a good position and frame of mind to find your way into the equality debates by planning, organizing, seeking out the people you want and never taking no for an answer. I cannot overstate the necessity of finding allies. Some of the people who showed up here out of simple curiosity in response to leaflets or posters are already potential allies. If one person is interested in being an ally but cannot join forces with you at the moment, find out whom she or he knows who can get you time with their group with which you can connect. If your acquaintance is not part of a group but knows even one person whom they think might be helpful, see that they introduce you to that person. Be persistent. Cultivate everyone, including men who are pro-feminist, and young people with ideals, who have time on their hands and are willing to advocate for a cause. Train a group from the Centre who can show up at the equality debates and speak for your position. Continue expanding your own group while extending your network. Locate a few sympathetic people within the council, or whatever the deliberative body is called, and lobby them to put you forward to speak. Even go uninvited if you must. But never go to such a meeting alone. Take a support team with you, even if it's only one other person.

And try very hard to have at least one--and maybe more--people who know that you will be coming to the meeting and will be welcoming to you. Allies, allies, allies. That is the key to breaking into these debates and making your needs a national priority. And, finally, cultivate allies who will commit themselves to speaking up for your position whenever your own group members cannot be present. We need to remember what our spiritual mentor, Audre Lorde, said, in addressing a group of privileged White college students who had invited her to speak.

To White students, I really want to say, you cannot be Black; you cannot be other than who you are. You need to identify who you are and begin to use it for the things you say you believe. And if you believe something different, you have to recognize what it is and choose what you want to believe; but in any event, you have to *use* who you are. There are . . . places that you can reach . . . people to whom you can speak who will hear you who will never hear me. So I do not need you being guilty, I do not need you rejecting who you are, I do not need you lambasting yourself for being White and privileged and well-to-do. I need you to recognize that you *are* privileged and to use that privilege in the service of something we both believe. *If* we both believe it.¹⁰

I have no doubt that each and every one of us here this evening understands the full meaning of Lorde's words, even those who have not heard of Lorde or heard her speak. Some of us have examined ourselves and know what we believe; perhaps some of us still have some work to do on that score. We know, of course, that we are all works in progress. But wherever we are on our journey, even as we keep changing, we must use whatever advantages or privileges we have at the time in the service of what we believe.

Notes

1. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. 70-71, and
“A Radio Profile of Audre Lorde.” Producer, Jennifer Abod.
2. Norton et al. *A People and A Nation*, 429.
3. Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *The Woman's Bible*.
4. Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*.
5. Norton et al. *A People and A Nation*, 428-431; A-13
6. Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*.
7. Combahee River Collective. *Feminist Theory*. Ed. Wendy Kolmar,
8. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*, 70-71.
9. Lorde's essay, “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface,” and her “Open Letter to Mary Daly” appear in her book *Sister Outsider* and in several anthologies. The original article by Robert Staples, “The Myth of Black Macho,” appears in *The Black Scholar*, 10:8 (1979). Lorde's response, “Sexism: The Great American Disease,” is in *The Black Scholar*, 10:9 (1979).
10. Abod, Jennifer. “A Radio Profile of Audre Lorde.” 1987.

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