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feminist scholarship: ethical issues

When students in a course I was teaching on women and race began to discuss Bettina Aptheker's work, *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class*, we raised the issues of whether or not white women should or should not write about black women's lives. The class was composed of thirty white students and three non-white students, three men and thirty women. A few students quickly addressed the issue by responding, "Of course, we should all write about whatever we want to write about." Other students said, "No—absolutely not—white women should not write about black women or any other group of non-white women." Many students in the class were lesbian and the majority agreed that they did not feel that non-lesbian women should write books that address lesbian experience. We talked about the fact that there was a time when almost all books written about feminist movement were written by white men, when a vast majority of books about slavery and black experience—especially academic books—were written by white people (and sometimes black men), when the few books about homosexual experience were written by non-homosexuals, relating our discussion to growing awareness that a dimension of the oppressor/oppressed, exploiter/exploited relationship is that those who dominate are seen as subjects and those who are dominated objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is

defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject.

We talked about the way in which every liberatory struggle initiated by groups of people who have been seen as objects begins with a revolutionary process wherein they assert that they are subjects. It is this process that Paulo Freire stresses: "we cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects." Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story. For white women, non-white women, black people, and all individuals from various ethnic groups who are gay, there have been historical moments wherein each of our experiences were most studied, interpreted, and written about solely by white males, or solely by a group with greater power. That group became the "authority" to consult if anyone wanted to understand the experiences of these powerless groups. This process was a manifestation of the politics of domination. It is this notion of "authority" that we began to critique and discuss in the class.

Even if perceived "authorities" writing about a group to which they do not belong and/or over which they wield power, are progressive, caring, and right-on in every way, as long as their authority is constituted by either the absence of the voices of the individuals whose experiences they seek to address, or the dismissal of those voices as unimportant, the subject-object dichotomy is maintained and domination is reinforced. In some cases, the individual who wishes to be perceived as "the authority" may go to great lengths to emphasize to readers that, for example, she is writing from her perspective as a white woman intending to diminish in no way black women's experience or our right to tell our story. Given the structure of white supremacy, her version, her take on our past may be viewed as more legitimate than similar work done by black women.

When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination. I was discussing this subject with another black woman professor and she said: "There was a time when we black people needed other people to speak for us because we could not always speak for ourselves. And though I am very grateful to white historians and the like who worked to inform people about black experience—we can and do speak for ourselves. And our struggle today is to be heard." Given the politics of domination—race, sex, and class exploitation—the tendency in this society is to place more value on what white people are writing about black people, or non-white people, rather than what we are writing about ourselves. By this comment I do not mean to suggest that white people have not written excellent books that focus on black experience; a few have. Rather, I mean that those books should not be seen as more significant and valuable than similar books by black people. Until the work of black writers and scholars is given respect and serious consideration, this overvaluation of work done by whites,

which usually exists in a context wherein work done by blacks is devalued, helps maintain racism and white-supremacist attitudes.

One white Jewish student commented to me that although she had previously interpreted white Jewish intellectual study and interpretation of black experience as a sign of non-racism, of identification and concern with the political plight of black people, she had begun to see it as a sign of race and, in some cases, class privilege. She asked the class if Jewish scholars had ever encouraged black people to study and write a body of literature that purports to address and explain aspects of white Jewish experience; no one could think of an example. Yet we all agreed that if such scholarship existed in a context of diversity where black people were writing about Anglo-American experience, or Chinese-American experience, and vice-versa, there would not be the sense that such scholarship aims to maintain white supremacy. In a conversation with a Chicano historian about white scholars writing Chicano history, he mentioned a conference where a famous white male spoke of the necessity of white people writing on Chicanos so as to give the subject scholarly legitimacy, to ensure that such work would receive the proper attention, consideration, and scholarly respect. This historian could not understand that it is white-supremacist attitudes that make Chicano history more worthy of note if white people are writing it and that such "legitimation," while it may lead established white scholars to recognize the value of Chicano experience, would also perpetuate and maintain white supremacy and racist domination of Chicanos. Of course, what is negative about this situation is not that a white historian is writing about Chicano experience but the attitude toward the writing. Scholars who write about an ethnic group to which they do not belong rarely discuss in the introductions to their work the ethical issues of their race privilege, or what motivates them, or why they feel their perspective is important.

It is even more difficult for scholars who write about an ethnic group to which they do not belong to acknowledge that their work differs significantly from work done by a member of that ethnic group. Often a scholar with the same intellectual qualifications as his or her white colleague, who also has the authority of lived experience, is in the best possible position to share information about that group. When I was teaching a course called Third World Women in the United States in the Women's Studies Program at San Francisco State University, in which I endeavored to teach aspects of the history and experience of women from various ethnic groups, I was acutely conscious that my perspective, however interesting and informed, was limited. I felt that if any student in the class had the same or more advanced knowledge than myself coupled with experience of the culture we were studying that I was eager to learn from them, to abdicate my role as teacher/authority.

In crucial ways, writing about cultures or experiences of ethnic groups different from one's own becomes most political when the issue is who

will be regarded as the "authoritative" voice. I can remember sitting in a classroom wherein a white woman student, who had like myself written about black slave experience, reading and studying much of the material but interpreting it differently, was seen by the white professor and classmates as the "authority" on black experience. I would make a comment about black culture and they would look to this white woman to confirm the truth or untruth of my statement. When I shared this observation, I was told that she was an "authority." What made her an authority was that her writing and training were recognized as important by white male and female academics, even though she had gleaned much of her material from black women. It did not matter to that group that she would never know what it is like to be black, to live as a black person in that very South she writes about. While I agree that her work is important, and did not feel the need to diminish it, or to suggest that it should not have been done, I felt it was important to seriously question the racist and sexist politics which determine who is an authority. White women active in feminist movement do not encourage white men to take the leading role in the making of feminist theory and scholarship, even though it is obvious that many white male academics have more experience and prestige, and one might argue are in the better position to be viewed as "authoritative voices." Yet it is acknowledged by feminist scholars that sexist biases might limit the type of work they would produce, or if they are non-sexist that their "maleness" might also serve as a barrier to understanding. This does not mean that the work of white male scholars on white women's history and sociology, etc., is not valuable. It does mean that this work is not perceived as "definitive" or the scholars themselves regarded as the most relevant voices articulating feminist thought. Yet white women who easily see the problems that arise if white males are seen as the authoritative voices within the area of scholarship about women have difficulty seeing the same issues in regards to scholarship by whites on non-white groups. Concurrently, just as racism may mean that a black woman's scholarship on black women may be seen as less than definitive, she may also receive no validation for writing on subjects that do not pertain to race or gender.

Arguing, as many feminist scholars do, against the notion of a definitive work or the very idea of "authority," can help to create a climate where scholarship from diverse groups could flourish and we would be better able to appreciate the significance of scholarship that emerges from a particular race, sex, and class perspective. In our class, we read Bettina Aptheker's *Woman's Legacy* and Grace Halsell's *Soul Sister*, and discussed both books in terms of how the authors' white, female identities may have shaped their perspectives or thoughts, highlighting the value of those perspectives while also looking at potential areas of knowledge that we felt they may have overlooked. We did the same for books by black women. Students in this course felt that if the writings by black women had not existed, there would have been a crucial gap in our understanding, that it

was important to them to read black women writing about our collective history, telling stories, interpreting our experience rather than solely reading white perspectives. While these writings seemed much more relevant to the students than the writings by white women, it was important to have white perspectives for comparison and contrast, to see similarities in perspective, and differences.

Certainly it is important and necessary for people from any ethnic/racial group to play a significant role in the creation and dissemination of material about their particular experience. It is equally important for all of us to work at learning more about one another, and such learning is often best expressed in concentrated work and study on another group. I would not discourage any black student who wanted to write about the experience of Japanese-Americans in U.S. detention camps during WWII, but I would want that student to be clear about why she or he wanted to write about this subject and I would suggest careful examination to ensure that the student's perspective did not reflect racial biases. Learning about other groups and writing about what we learn can be a way to unlearn racism, to challenge structures of domination. This is especially true for scholarship non-white people do about one another. Many black people know little about Asian-American or Native American experience. Even though there are several new books about black intermingling with different Native American groups, there is no work done yet from a black perspective (that I know about), which could add so much to our understanding of that experience. When white male scholar Robert Hemenway published his biography of Zora Neale Hurston, he wrote in his introduction:

My intention has always been simple. Zora Neale Hurston is a literary artist of sufficient talent to deserve intensive study, both as an artist and as an intellect. She deserves an important place in American literary history. I have tried to demonstrate why this is so, not in the interest of producing a "definitive" book—that book remains to be written, and by a black woman—but in order to provide a new, closer examination of the unusual career of this complex author.

As a black female literary critic, I have always appreciated this statement, not because I share the notion of "definitive" works, but because I share the sense that a black woman might write about Hurston in ways that would illuminate her writing that would be radically different from that of other scholars. By actively refusing the position of "authority," Hemenway encourages black women to participate in the making of Hurston scholarship and allows for the possibility that a black woman writing about Hurston may have special insight.

On the first day of my class on Contemporary Black Women Novelists, a class in which all the students were white, students expressed discomfort that there were no black women in the class, and then other students expressed similar feelings. When I asked them to explain why this dis-

turbed them, they responded by saying that it seemed a bit ludicrous for them to be listening to one another talk about black women's fiction, that they would probably say stupid, racist things, and that they wanted to hear from black women. While I think it a meaningful gesture for young white women in a white-supremacist culture to seek to hear from black women, to wish to listen and learn from black women, I cautioned them against turning the spheres of discussion on racial topics (or in this case, black women's writing) into yet another arena where we as black people are called upon to take primary responsibility for sharing experiences, ideas, and information. Such a gesture places black people once again in a service position, meeting the needs of whites. I stressed that the ideal situation for learning is always one where there is diversity and dialogue, where there would be women and men from various groups. But I also insisted that we should all be capable of learning about an ethnic/racial group and studying its literature even if no person from that group is present. I told students that I did not think that I needed to be a white man to understand Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* nor did I think I needed to be in a classroom with white men to study this novel. However, I do recognize that as a black woman reading this white male writer I might have insights and interpretations that would be quite different from those of white male readers who might approach the text with the assumption that the novel's depiction of white male social reality was one they shared. I would, however, consider my insights equally valuable, just as I thought my students should see their insights about black women's fiction as valuable even though the discussion might be more complex and interesting if those insights were shared in a context with black women's ideas.

I shared with this class a concern about the way in which recent feminist focus on differences, especially racial differences, has led to a sense that white women must abdicate responsibility for responding to works by "different others." I was disturbed when I read Joanna Russ' book *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, where she continually stressed the importance of literature by women of color by saying that she did not feel that as a white woman scholar she was in a position to speak about these works. Toward the end of the book, she listed many quotes from works by women of color ostensibly encouraging readers to read these writers, to see their words as important. Yet this gesture disturbed me because it also implied that women of color represent this group whose experiences and whose writing is so removed from that of white women that they cannot address such work critically and analytically. This assumption may very well reinforce racism. It helps (as white students in class pointed out) take the burden of accountability away from white women and places it solely onto women of color. While I recognize that there are probably women of color who feel it is appropriate for Russ to assume such a passive position, not asserting her thoughts about black women's literature, I would have appreciated hearing those thoughts. I would have appreciated a sentence that

might have begun, "As a white woman reading Toni Morrison's *Sula*, I was..." Such a position would allow white women scholars to share their ideas about black women's writing (or any group of women's writing) without assuming that their thoughts would be seen as "definitive" or that they would be trying to be "the authority." Again, I can only reiterate a point made throughout this piece, that problems arise not when white women choose to write about the experiences of non-white people, but when such material is presented as "authoritative."

Cross-ethnic feminist scholarship should emphasize the value of a scholar's work as well as the unique perspective that scholar brings to bear on the subject. I do not wish for a situation where only black women are encouraged to write about issues related to black female experience. I do, however, wish to help make a world wherein scholarship and work by black women is valued so that we will be motivated to do such work, so that our voices will be heard. I wish to help make a world where our work will be taken seriously, given appreciation, and acclaimed, a world in which such work will be seen as necessary and significant.