

served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion.

For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*

As Paulo Freire shows so well in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,* the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships.

Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival.

*We have chosen each other
and the edge of each others battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday women's blood will congeal
upon a dead planet
if we win
there is no telling
we seek beyond history
for a new and more possible meeting.†*

*The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism**

Racism. The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied.

Women respond to racism. My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also.

Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and cooptation.

My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes. If your dealings with other women reflect those attitudes, then my anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth in the same way I have used learning to express anger for my growth. But for corrective surgery, not guilt. Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures.

Because I do not want this to become a theoretical discussion, I am going to give a few examples of interchanges between women that illustrate these points. In the interest of time, I am going to cut them short. I want you to know there were many more.

For example:

* Seabury Press, New York, 1970.

† From 'Outlines,' unpublished poem.

* Keynote presentation at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut, June 1981.

- I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, 'Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.' But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?
- The Women's Studies Program of a southern university invites a Black woman to read following a week-long forum on Black and white women. 'What has this week given to you?' I ask. The most vocal white woman says, 'I think I've gotten a lot. I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I'm coming from.' As if understanding her lay at the core of the racist problem.
- After fifteen years of a women's movement which professes to address the life concerns and possible futures of all women, I still hear, on campus after campus, 'How can we address the issues of racism? No women of Color attended.' Or, the other side of that statement, 'We have no one in our department equipped to teach their work.' In other words, racism is a Black women's problem, a problem of women of Color, and only we can discuss it.
- After I read from my work entitled 'Poems for Women in Rage,'* a white woman asks me: 'Are you going to do anything with how we can deal directly with *our* anger? I feel it's so important.' I ask, 'How do you use *your* rage?' And then I have to turn away from the blank look in her eyes, before she can invite me to participate in her own annihilation. I do not exist to feel her anger for her.
- White women are beginning to examine their relationships to Black women, yet often I hear them wanting only to deal with little colored children across the roads of childhood, the beloved nursemaid, the occasional second-grade classmate – those tender memories of

what was once mysterious and intriguing or neutral. You avoid the childhood assumptions formed by the raucous laughter at Rastus and Alfalfa, the acute message of your mommy's handkerchief spread upon the park bench because I had just been sitting there, the indelible and dehumanizing portraits of Amos 'n Andy and your daddy's humorous bedtime stories.

- I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in Eastchester in 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, 'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!' And your mother shushes you, but she does not correct you. And so fifteen years later, at a conference on racism, you can still find that story humorous. But I hear your laughter is full of terror and dis-ease.
- A white academic welcomes the appearance of a collection by non-Black women of Color.* 'It allows me to deal with racism without dealing with the harshness of Black women,' she says to me.
- At an international cultural gathering of women, a well-known white american woman poet interrupts the reading of the work of women of Color to read her own poem, and then dashes off to an 'important panel.'

If women in the academy truly want a dialogue about racism, it will require recognizing the needs and the living contexts of other women. When an academic woman says, 'I can't afford it,' she may mean she is making a choice about how to spend her available money. But when a woman on welfare says, 'I can't afford it,' she means she is surviving on an amount of money that was barely subsistence in 1972, and she often does not have enough to eat. Yet the National Women's Studies Association here in 1981 holds a conference in

* One poem from this series is included in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1978), pp. 105–108.

* *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York, 1984), first published in 1981.

which it commits itself to responding to racism, yet refuses to waive the registration fee for poor women and women of Color who wished to present and conduct workshops. This has made it impossible for many women of Color – for instance, Wilmette Brown, of Black Women for Wages for Housework – to participate in this conference. Is this to be merely another case of the academy discussing life within the closed circuits of the academy?

To the white women present who recognize these attitudes as familiar, but most of all, to all my sisters of Color who live and survive thousands of such encounters – to my sisters of Color who like me still tremble their rage under harness, or who sometimes question the expression of our rage as useless and disruptive (the two most popular accusations) – I want to speak about anger, my anger, and what I have learned from my travels through its dominions.

*Everything can be used / except what is wasteful / (you will need / to remember this when you are accused of destruction.)**

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives.

I have seen situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be hurled at the first woman of Color who talks about racism.

But anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that

* From 'For Each of You,' first published in *From A Land Where Other People Live* (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1973), and collected in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1982), p. 42.

we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies.

Anger is loaded with information and energy. When I speak of women of Color, I do not only mean Black women. The woman of Color who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us. If I participate, knowingly or otherwise, in my sister's oppression and she calls me on it, to answer her anger with my own only blankets the substance of our exchange with reaction. It wastes energy. And yes, it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another woman's voice delineate an agony I do not share, or one to which I myself have contributed.

In this place we speak removed from the more blatant reminders of our embattlement as women. This need not blind us to the size and complexities of the forces mounting against us and all that is most human within our environment. We are not here as women examining racism in a political and social vacuum. We operate in the teeth of a system for which racism and sexism are primary, established, and necessary props of profit. Women responding to racism is a topic so dangerous that when the local media attempt to discredit this conference they choose to focus upon the provision of lesbian housing as a diversionary device – as if the *Hartford Courant* dare not mention the topic chosen for discussion here, racism, lest it become apparent that women are in fact attempting to examine and to alter all the repressive conditions of our lives.

Mainstream communication does not want women, particularly white women, responding to racism. It wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of your existence, like eveningtime or the common cold.

So we are working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people – against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action.

Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger. This discussion must be direct and creative because it is crucial. We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us and of what we are trying to do here.

And while we scrutinize the often painful face of each other's anger, please remember that it is not our anger which makes me caution you to lock your doors at night and not to wander the streets of Hartford alone. It is the hatred which lurks in those streets, that urge to destroy us all if we truly work for change rather than merely indulge in academic rhetoric.

This hatred and our anger are very different. Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change. But our time is getting shorter. We have been raised to view any difference other than sex as a reason for destruction, and for Black women and white women to face each other's angers without denial or immobility or silence or guilt is in itself a heretical and generative idea. It implies peers meeting upon a common basis to examine difference, and to alter those distortions which history has created around our difference. For it is those distortions which separate us. And we must ask ourselves: Who profits from all this?

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters.

Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change. To those women here who fear the anger of women of Color more than their own unscrutinized racist attitudes, I ask: Is the anger of women of Color more threatening than the woman-hatred that tinges all aspects of our lives?

It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment.

I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.

Most women have not developed tools for facing anger constructively. CR groups in the past, largely white, dealt with how to express anger, usually at the world of men. And these groups were made up of white women who shared the terms of their oppressions. There was usually little attempt to articulate the genuine differences between women, such as those of race, color, age, class, and sexual identity. There was no apparent need at that time to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor. There was work on expressing anger, but very little on anger directed against each other. No tools were developed to deal with other women's anger except to avoid it, deflect it, or flee from it under a blanket of guilt.

I have no creative use for guilt, yours or my own. Guilt is only another way of avoiding informed action, of buying time out of the pressing need to make clear choices, out of the approaching storm that can feed the earth as well as bend the trees. If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you: I have not put a gun to your

head and shot you down in the street; I have not looked at your bleeding sister's body and asked, 'What did she do to deserve it?' This was the reaction of two white women to Mary Church Terrell's telling of the lynching of a pregnant Black woman whose baby was then torn from her body. That was in 1921, and Alice Paul had just refused to publicly endorse the enforcement of the Nineteenth Amendment for all women – by refusing to endorse the inclusion of women of Color, although we had worked to help bring about that amendment.

The angers between women will not kill us if we can articulate them with precision, if we listen to the content of what is said with at least as much intensity as we defend ourselves against the manner of saying. When we turn from anger we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, dead and safely familiar. I have tried to learn my anger's usefulness to me, as well as its limitations.

For women raised to fear, too often anger threatens annihilation. In the male construct of brute force, we were taught that our lives depended upon the good will of patriarchal power. The anger of others was to be avoided at all costs because there was nothing to be learned from it but pain, a judgment that we had been bad girls, come up lacking, not done what we were supposed to do. And if we accept our powerlessness, then of course any anger can destroy us.

But the strength of women lies in recognizing differences between us as creative, and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but which are now ours to alter. The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth.

My response to racism is anger. That anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone. It has also served me in classrooms without light or learning, where the work and history of Black women was less than a vapor. It has served me as fire in the ice zone of uncomprehending eyes of white women who see in my experience and the experience of my people

only new reasons for fear or guilt. And my anger is no excuse for not dealing with your blindness, no reason to withdraw from the results of your own actions.

When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are 'creating a mood of hopelessness,' 'preventing white women from getting past guilt,' or 'standing in the way of trusting communication and action.' All these quotes come directly from letters to me from members of this organization within the last two years. One woman wrote, 'Because you are Black and Lesbian, you seem to speak with the moral authority of suffering.' Yes, I am Black and Lesbian, and what you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering. Anger, not moral authority. There is a difference.

To turn aside from the anger of Black women with excuses or the pretexts of intimidation is to award no one power – it is merely another way of preserving racial blindness, the power of unaddressed privilege, unbreached, intact. Guilt is only another form of objectification. Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity. Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning. But that time is over. My anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival, and before I give it up I'm going to be sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity.

What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?

I am a lesbian woman of Color whose children eat regularly because I work in a university. If their full bellies make me fail to recognize my commonality with a woman of Color whose children do not eat because she cannot find work, or who has no children because her insides are rotted from home abortions and sterilization; if I fail to recognize the lesbian who chooses not to have children, the woman who remains closeted because her

homophobic community is her only life support, the woman who chooses silence instead of another death, the woman who is terrified lest my anger trigger the explosion of hers; if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own, and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment, not for evasion by guilt or for further separation. I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you.

I speak here as a woman of Color who is not bent upon destruction, but upon survival. No woman is responsible for altering the psyche of her oppressor, even when that psyche is embodied in another woman. I have suckled the wolf's lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter. We are not goddesses or matriarchs or edifices of divine forgiveness; we are not fiery fingers of judgment or instruments of flagellation; we are women forced back always upon our woman's power. We have learned to use anger as we have learned to use the dead flesh of animals, and bruised, battered, and changing, we have survived and grown and, in Angela Wilson's words, we *are* moving on. With or without uncolored women. We use whatever strengths we have fought for, including anger, to help define and fashion a world where all our sisters can grow, where our children can love, and where the power of touching and meeting another woman's difference and wonder will eventually transcend the need for destruction.

For it is not the anger of Black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets, spends over sixty thousand dollars a second on missiles and other agents of war and death, slaughters children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth. It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon the annihilation of us all unless we meet it with what we have, our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and

work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices.

We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt.

*Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger**

Where does the pain go when it goes away?†

Every Black woman in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers.

My Black woman's anger is a molten pond at the core of me, my most fiercely guarded secret. I know how much of my life as a powerful feeling woman is laced through with this net of rage. It is an electric thread woven into every emotional tapestry upon which I set the essentials of my life – a boiling hot spring likely to erupt at any point, leaping out of my consciousness like a fire on the landscape. How to train that anger with accuracy rather than deny it has been one of the major tasks of my life.

Other Black women are not the root cause nor the source of that pool of anger. I know this, no matter what the particular situation may be between me and another Black woman at the moment. Then why does that anger unleash itself most tellingly against another Black woman at the least excuse? Why do I judge her in a more critical light than any other, becoming enraged when she does not measure up?

And if behind the object of my attack should lie the face of my

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† From a poem by Dr. Gloria Joseph.

own self, unaccepted, then what could possibly quench a fire fueled by such reciprocating passions?

When I started to write about the intensity of the angers between Black women, I found I had only begun to touch one tip of a three-pronged iceberg, the deepest understructure of which was Hatred, that societal deathwish directed against us from the moment we were born Black and female in America. From that moment on we have been steeped in hatred – for our color, for our sex, for our effrontery in daring to presume we had any right to live. As children we absorbed that hatred, passed it through ourselves, and for the most part, we still live our lives outside of the recognition of what that hatred really is and how it functions. Echoes of it return as cruelty and anger in our dealings with each other. For each of us bears the face that hatred seeks, and we have each learned to be at home with cruelty because we have survived so much of it within our own lives.

Before I can write about Black women's anger, I must write about the poisonous seepage of hatred that fuels that anger, and of the cruelty that is spawned when they meet.

I have found this out by scrutinizing my own expectations of other Black women, by following the threads of my own rage at Blackwomanness back into the hatred and despal that embroidered my life with fire long before I knew where that hatred came from, or why it was being heaped upon me. Children know only themselves as reasons for the happenings in their lives. So of course as a child I decided there must be something terribly wrong with me that inspired such contempt. The bus driver didn't look at other people like that. All the things my mother had warned me not to do and be that I had gone right ahead and done and been must be to blame.

To search for power within myself means I must be willing to move through being afraid to whatever lies beyond. If I look at my most vulnerable places and acknowledge the pain I have felt, I can remove the source of that pain from my enemies' arsenals. My history cannot be used to feather my enemies' arrows then, and that lessens their power over me. Nothing I accept about myself can be

used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself.

America's measurement of me has lain like a barrier across the realization of my own powers. It was a barrier which I had to examine and dismantle, piece by painful piece, in order to use my energies fully and creatively. It is easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another.

But what is the nature of that reluctance to connect with each other on any but the most superficial levels? What is the source of that mistrust and distance maintained between Black women?

I don't like to talk about hate. I don't like to remember the cancellation and hatred, heavy as my wished-for death, seen in the eyes of so many white people from the time I could see. It was echoed in newspapers and movies and holy pictures and comic books and Amos 'n Andy radio programs. I had no tools to dissect it, no language to name it.

The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother's sleeve, her arms full of shopping bags, christmas-heavy. The wet smell of winter clothes, the train's lurching. My mother spots an almost seat, pushes my little snowsuited body down. On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us – probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she's looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a

shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train. Born and bred a New York City child, I quickly slide over to make room for my mother to sit down. No word has been spoken. I'm afraid to say anything to my mother because I don't know what I've done. I look at the sides of my snowpants, secretly. Is there something on them? Something's going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.

My three-year-old eyes ache from the machinery used to test them. My forehead is sore. I have been poked and prodded in the eyes and stared into all morning. I huddle into the tall metal and leather chair, frightened and miserable and wanting my mother. On the other side of the eye clinic's examining room, a group of young white men in white coats discuss my peculiar eyes. Only one voice remains in my memory. 'From the looks of her she's probably simple, too.' They all laugh. One of them comes over to me, enunciating slowly and carefully, 'OK, girly, go wait outside now.' He pats me on the cheek. I am grateful for the absence of harshness.

The Story Hour librarian reading *Little Black Sambo*. Her white fingers hold up the little book about a shoebutton-faced little boy with big red lips and many pigtails and a hatful of butter. I remember the pictures hurting me and my thinking again there must be something wrong with me because everybody else is laughing and besides the library downtown has given this little book a special prize, the library lady tells us.

SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU, ANYWAY? DON'T BE SO SENSITIVE!

Sixth grade in a new catholic school and I am the first Black student. The white girls laugh at my braided hair. The nun sends a note home to my mother saying that 'pigtails are not appropriate attire for school,' and that I should learn to comb my hair in 'a more becoming style.'

Lexie Goldman and I on Lexington Avenue, our adolescent faces flushed from springtime and our dash out of high school. We stop at a luncheonette, ask for water. The woman behind the counter smiles at Lexie. Gives us water. Lexie's in a glass. Mine in a paper cup. Afterward we joke about mine being portable. Too loudly.

My first interview for a part-time job after school. An optical company on Nassau Street has called my school and asked for one of its students. The man behind the counter reads my application and then looks up at me, surprised by my Black face. His eyes remind me of the woman on the train when I was five. Then something else is added, as he looks me up and down, pausing at my breasts.

My light-skinned mother kept me alive within an environment where my life was not a high priority. She used whatever methods she had at hand, few as they were. She never talked about color. My mother was a very brave woman, born in the West Indies, unprepared for america. And she disarmed me with her silences. Somewhere I knew it was a lie that nobody else noticed color. Me, darker than my two sisters. My father, darkest of all. I was always jealous of my sisters because my mother thought they were such good girls, whereas I was bad, always in trouble. 'Full of the devil,' she used to say. They were neat, I was untidy. They were quiet, I was noisy. They were well-behaved, I was rowdy. They took piano lessons and won prizes in deportment. I stole money from my father's pockets and broke my ankle sledding downhill. They were good-looking, I was dark. Bad, mischievous, a born troublemaker if ever there was one.

Did *bad* mean *Black*? The endless scrubbing with lemon juice in the cracks and crevices of my ripening, darkening, body. And oh, the sins of my dark elbows and knees, my gums and nipples, the folds of my neck and the cave of my armpits!

The hands that grab at me from behind the stairwell are Black hands. Boys' hands, punching, rubbing, pinching, pulling at my dress. I hurl the garbage bag I'm carrying into the ashcan and jerk away, fleeing back upstairs. Hoots follow me. 'That's right, you better run, you ugly yaller bitch, just wait!' Obviously, color was relative.

My mother taught me to survive from a very early age by her own example. Her silences also taught me isolation, fury, mistrust, self-rejection, and sadness. My survival lay in learning how to use

the weapons she gave me, also, to fight against those things within myself, unnamed.

And survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometimes, for Black mothers, it is the only gift possible, and tenderness gets lost. My mother bore me into life as if etching an angry message into marble. Yet I survived the hatred around me because my mother made me know, by oblique reference, that no matter what went on at home, outside shouldn't oughta be the way it was. But since it was that way outside, I moved in a fen of unexplained anger that encircled me and spilled out against whomever was closest that shared those hated selves. Of course I did not realize it at the time. That anger lay like a pool of acid deep inside me, and whenever I felt deeply, I felt it, attaching itself in the strangest places. Upon those as powerless as I. My first friend asking, 'Why do you go around hitting all the time? Is that the only way you know how to be friends?

What other creature in the world besides the Black woman has had to build the knowledge of so much hatred into her survival and keep going?

It is shortly after the Civil War. In a grey stone hospital on 110th Street in New York City a woman is screaming. She is Black, and healthy, and has been brought here from the South. I do not know her name. Her baby is ready to be born. But her legs have been tied together out of a curiosity masquerading as science. Her baby births itself to death against her bone.

Where are you seven-year-old Elizabeth Eckford of Little Rock, Arkansas? It is a bright Monday morning and you are on your way to your first day of school, draped in spittle, white hatred running down your pink sweater and a white mother's twisted mouth working – savage, inhuman – wide over your jaunty braids held high by their pink ribbons.

Numvulo has walked five days from the bleak place where the lorry deposited her. She stands in the Capetown, South Africa rain, her bare feet in the bulldozer tracks where her house once was. She

picks up a piece of soaked cardboard that once covered her table and holds it over the head of her baby strapped to her back. Soon she will be arrested and taken back to the reserve, where she does not even speak the language. She will never get permission to live near her husband.

The bicentennial, in Washington, D.C. Two ample Black women stand guard over household belongings piled haphazardly onto a sidewalk in front of a house. Furniture, toys, bundles of clothes. One woman absently rocks a toy horse with the toe of her shoe, back and forth. Across the street on the side of a building opposite is a sign painted in story-high black letters, *GOD HATES YOU*.

Addie Mae Collins, Carol Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair. Four little Black girls, none more than ten years of age, singing their last autumn song in a Sunday church school in Birmingham, Alabama. After the explosion clears it is not possible to tell which patent leather Sunday shoe belongs to which found leg.

What other human being absorbs so much virulent hostility and still functions?

Black women have a history of the use and sharing of power, from the Amazon legions of Dahomey through the Ashanti warrior queen Yaa Asantewaa and the freedom fighter Harriet Tubman, to the economically powerful market-women guilds of present West Africa. We have a tradition of closeness and mutual care and support, from the all-woman courts of the Queen Mothers of Benin to the present-day Sisterhood of the Good Death, a community of old women in Brazil who, as escaped slaves, provided escape and refuge for other enslaved women, and who now care for each other.*

We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred. As African women together, we once made the earth fertile with our fingers. We can make the earth bear as well as mount the first line of fire in defense of the

* Unpublished paper by Samella Lewis.

King. And having killed, in his name and in our own (Harriet's rifle speaks, shouldered in the grim marsh), we still know that the power to kill is less than the power to create, for it produces an ending rather than the beginning of something new.

Anger – a passion of displeasure that may be excessive or misplaced but not necessarily harmful. Hatred – an emotional habit or attitude of mind in which aversion is coupled with ill will. Anger, used, does not destroy. Hatred does.

Racism and sexism are grown-up words. Black children in America cannot avoid these distortions in their living and, too often, do not have the words for naming them. But both are correctly perceived as hatred.

Growing up, metabolizing hatred like a daily bread. Because I am Black, because I am woman, because I am not Black enough, because I am not some particular fantasy of a woman, because I AM. On such a consistent diet, one can eventually come to value the hatred of one's enemies more than one values the love of friends, for that hatred becomes the source of anger, and anger is a powerful fuel.

And true, sometimes it seems that anger alone keeps me alive; it burns with a bright and undiminished flame. Yet anger, like guilt, is an incomplete form of human knowledge. More useful than hatred, but still limited. Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create the future. It can only demolish the past. Such strength does not focus upon what lies ahead, but upon what lies behind, upon what created it – hatred. And hatred is a deathwish for the hated, not a lifewish for anything else.

To grow up metabolizing hatred like daily bread means that eventually every human interaction becomes tainted with the negative passion and intensity of its byproducts – anger and cruelty.

We are African women and we know, in our blood's telling, the tenderness with which our foremothers held each other. It is that connection which we are seeking. We have the stories of Black women who healed each other's wounds, raised each other's children, fought each other's battles, tilled each other's earth, and eased each other's passages into life and into death. We know the

possibilities of support and connection for which we all yearn, and about which we dream so often. We have a growing Black women's literature which is richly evocative of these possibilities and connections. But connections between Black women are not automatic by virtue of our similarities, and the possibilities of genuine communication between us are not easily achieved.

Often we give lip service to the idea of mutual support and connection between Black women because we have not yet crossed the barriers to these possibilities, nor fully explored the angers and fears that keep us from realizing the power of a real Black sisterhood. And to acknowledge our dreams is to sometimes acknowledge the distance between those dreams and our present situation. Acknowledged, our dreams can shape the realities of our future, if we arm them with the hard work and scrutiny of now. We cannot settle for the pretenses of connection, or for parodies of self-love. We cannot continue to evade each other on the deepest levels because we fear each other's angers, nor continue to believe that respect means never looking directly nor with openness into another Black woman's eyes.

*I was not meant to be alone and without you who understand.**

I

I know the anger that lies inside of me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be angry than to hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning. Easier to crucify myself in you than to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other.

As Black women, we have shared so many similar experiences. Why doesn't this commonality bring us closer together instead of setting us at each other's throats with weapons well-honed by familiarity?

The anger with which I meet another Black woman's slightest deviation from my immediate need or desire or concept of a proper

* From 'Letters from Black Feminists, 1972–1978' by Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith in *Conditions: Four* (1979).

response is a deep and hurtful anger, chosen only in the sense of a choice of desperation – reckless through despair. That anger which masks my pain that we are so separate who should most be together – my pain – that she could perhaps not need me as much as I need her, or see me through the blunted eye of the haters, that eye I know so well from my own distorted images of her. Erase or be erased!

I stand in the Public Library waiting to be recognized by the Black woman library clerk seated a few feet behind the desk. She seems engrossed in a book, beautiful in her youth and self-assuredness. I straighten my glasses, giving a tiny shake to my bangles in the process just in case she has not seen me, but I somehow know she has. Otherwise motionless, she slowly turns her head and looks up. Her eyes cross mine with a look of such incidental hostility that I feel pilloried to the wall. Two male patrons enter behind me. At that, she rises and moves toward me. 'Yes,' she says, with no inflection at all, her eyes carefully elsewhere. I've never seen this young woman before in my life. I think to myself, 'now that's what you call an attitude,' recognizing the rising tension inside of me.

The art, beyond insolence, of the Black girl's face as she cuts her elegant sidelong glance at me. What makes her eyes slide off of mine? What does she see that angers her so, or infuriates her, or disgusts her? Why do I want to break her face off when her eyes do not meet mine? Why does she wear my sister's face? My daughter's mouth turned down about to suck itself in? The eyes of a furious and rejected lover? Why do I dream I cradle you at night? Divide your limbs between the food bowls of my least favorite animals? Keep vigil for you night after terrible night, wondering? Oh sister, where is that dark rich land we wanted to wander through together?

Hate said the voice wired in 3/4 time printed in dirty type all the views fit to kill, me and you, me or you. And whose future image have we destroyed – your face or mine – without either how shall I look again at both – lacking either is lacking myself.

And if I trust you what pale dragon will you feed our brown flesh to from fear, self-preservation, or to what brothered altar all innocent of loving that has no place to go and so becomes another face of terror or of hate?

A dumb beast endlessly recording inside the poisonous attacks of silence – meat gone wrong – what could ever grow in that dim lair and how does the child convert from sacrifice to liar?

My blood sister, across her living room from me. Sitting back in her chair while I talk earnestly, trying to reach her, trying to alter the perceptions of me that cause her so much pain. Slowly, carefully, and coldly, so I will not miss one single scathing word, she says, 'I am not interested in understanding whatever you're trying to say – I don't care to hear it.'

I have never gotten over the anger that you did not want me as a sister, nor an ally, nor even a diversion one cut above the cat. You have never gotten over the anger that I appeared at all. And that I am different, but not different enough. One woman has eyes like my sister who never forgave me for appearing before she had a chance to win her mother's love, as if anybody ever could. Another woman wears the high cheekbones of my other sister who wanted to lead but had only been taught to obey, so now she is dedicated to ruling by obedience, a passive vision.

Who did we expect the other to be who is not yet at peace with our own selves? I cannot shut you out the way I shut the others out so maybe I can destroy you. Must destroy you?

We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other's face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting. Because we survived and survival breeds desire for more self. A face we never stopped wanting at the same time as we try to obliterate it.

Why don't we meet each other's eyes? Do we expect betrayal in each other's gaze, or recognition?

If just once we were to feel the pain of all Black women's blood flooding up to drown us! I stayed afloat buoyed by an anger so deep at my loneliness that I could only move toward further survival.

*When one cannot influence a situation it is an act of wisdom to withdraw.**

* From *The I Ching*.

Every Black woman in America has survived several lifetimes of hatred, where even in the candy store cases of our childhood, little brown niggerbaby candies testified against us. We survived the wind-driven spittle on our child's shoe and pink flesh-colored band-aids, attempted rapes on rooftops and the prodding fingers of the super's boy, seeing our girlfriends blown to bits in Sunday School, and we absorbed that loathing as a natural state. We had to metabolize such hatred that our cells have learned to live upon it because we had to, or die of it. Old King Mithridates learned to eat arsenic bit by bit and so outwitted his poisoners, but I'd have hated to kiss him upon his lips! Now we deny such hatred ever existed because we have learned to neutralize it through ourselves, and the catabolic process throws off waste products of fury even when we love.

*I see hatred
I am bathed in it, drowning in it
since almost the beginning of my life
it has been the air I breathe
the food I eat, the content of my perceptions;
the single most constant fact of my existence
is their hatred . . .
I am too young for my history**

It is not that Black women shed each other's psychic blood so easily, but that we have ourselves bled so often, the pain of bloodshed becomes almost commonplace. If I have learned to eat my own flesh in the forest – starving, keening, learning the lesson of the she-wolf who chews off her own paw to leave the trap behind – if I must drink my own blood, thirsting, why should I stop at yours until your dear dead arms hang like withered garlands upon my breast and I weep for your going, oh my sister, I grieve for our gone.

When an error of oversight allows one of us to escape without the full protective dose of fury and air of contemptuous disdain,

* From 'Nigger' by Judy Dothard Simmons in *Decent Intentions* (Blind Beggar Press, New York, 1983).

when she approaches us without a measure of distrust and reserve flowing from her pores, or without her eyes coloring each appraisal of us with that unrelenting sharpness and suspicion reserved only for each other, when she approaches without sufficient caution, then she is cursed by the first accusation of derision – *naive* – meaning not programmed for defensive attack before inquiry. Even more than *confused*, *naive* is the ultimate wipeout between us.

Black women eating our own hearts out for nourishment in an empty house empty compound empty city in an empty season, and for each of us one year the spring will not return – we learned to savor the taste of our own flesh before any other because that was all that was allowed us. And we have become to each other unmentionably dear and immeasurably dangerous. I am writing about an anger so huge and implacable, so corrosive, it must destroy what it most needs for its own solution, dissolution, resolution. Here we are attempting to address each others' eyes directly. Even if our words taste sharp as the edge of a lost woman's voice, we are speaking.

II

A Black woman, working her years, committed to life as she lives it, the children fed and clothed and loved as she can into some strength that does not allow them to encyst like horse chestnuts, knowing all the time from the start that she must either kill them or eventually send them into the deathlands, the white labyrinth.

I sat at our Thanksgiving Day table listening to my daughter talk about the university and the horrors of determined invisibility. Over the years I have recorded her dreams of death at their hands, sometimes glorious, sometimes cheap. She tells me of the teachers who refuse to understand simple questions, who look at her as if she were a benign – meaning powerless – but unsightly tumor. She weeps. I hold her. I tell her to remember the university doesn't own her, that she has a home. But I have let her go into that jungle of ghosts, having taught her only how to be fleet of foot, how to whistle, how to love, and how not to run. Unless she has to. It is never enough.

Black women give our children forth into a hatred that seared our own young days with bewilderment, hoping we have taught them something they can use to fashion their own new and less costly pathways to survival. Knowing I did not slit their throats at birth tear out the tiny beating heart with my own despairing teeth the way some sisters did in the slaveships chained to corpses and therefore was I committed to this very moment.

*The price of increasing power is increasing opposition.**

I sat listening to my girl talk about the bent world she was determined to reenter in spite of all she was saying, because she views a knowledge of that world as part of an arsenal which she can use to change it all. I listened, hiding my pained need to snatch her back into the web of my smaller protections. I sat watching while she worked it out bit by hurtful bit – what she really wanted – feeling her rage wax and wane, feeling her anger building against me because I could not help her do it nor do it for her, nor would she allow that.

All mothers see their daughters leaving. Black mothers see it happening as a sacrifice through the veil of hatred hung like sheets of lava in the pathway before their daughters. All daughters see their mothers leaving. Black girls see it happening through a veil of threatened isolation no fire of trusting pierces.

Last month I held another Black woman in my arms as she sobbed out the grief and deprivation of her mother's death. Her inconsolable loss – the emptiness of the emotional landscape she was seeing in front of her – spoke out of her mouth from a place of untouchable aloneness that could never admit another Black woman close enough again to matter. 'The world is divided into two kinds of people,' she said, 'those who have mothers and those who don't. And I don't have a mother anymore.' What I heard her saying was that no other Black woman would ever see who she was, ever trust or be trusted by her again. I heard in her cry of loneliness the source of the romance between Black women and our mommas.

Little Black girls, tutored by hate into wanting to become anything else. We cut our eyes at sister because she can only reflect

what everybody else except momma seemed to know – that we were hateful, or ugly, or worthless, but certainly unblest. We were not boys and we were not white, so we counted for less than nothing, except to our mommas.

If we can learn to give ourselves the recognition and acceptance that we have come to expect only from our mommas, Black women will be able to see each other much more clearly and deal with each other much more directly.

I think about the harshness that exists so often within the least encounter between Black women, the judgment and the sizing up, that cruel refusal to connect. I know sometimes I feel like it is worth my life to disagree with another Black woman. Better to ignore her, withdraw from her, go around her, just don't deal with her. Not just because she irritates me, but because she might destroy me with the cruel force of her response to what must feel like an affront, namely me. Or I might destroy her with the force of mine, for the very same reason. The fears are equal.

Once I can absorb the particulars of my life as a Black woman, and multiply them by my two children and all the days of our collective Black lives, and I do not falter beneath the weight – what Black woman is not a celebration, like water, like sunlight, like rock – is it any wonder that my voice is harsh? Now to require of myself the effort of awareness, so that harshness will not function in the places it is least deserved – toward my sisters.

Why do Black women reserve a particular voice of fury and disappointment for each other? Who is it we must destroy when we attack each other with that tone of predetermined and correct annihilation? We reduce one another to our own lowest common denominator, and then we proceed to try and obliterate what we most desire to love and touch, the problematic self, unclaimed but fiercely guarded from the other.

This cruelty between us, this harshness, is a piece of the legacy of hate with which we were inoculated from the time we were born by those who intended it to be an injection of death. But we adapted, learned to take it in and use it, unscrutinized. Yet at what

* From *The I Ching*.

cost! In order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone, and now we bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest.

How do I alter course so each Black woman's face I meet is not the face of my mother or my killer?

I loved you. I dreamed about you. I talked to you for hours in my sleep sitting under a silk-cotton tree our arms around each other or braiding each other's hair or oiling each other's backs, and every time I run into you on the street or at the post office or behind the Medicaid desk I want to wring your neck.

There are so many occasions in each of our lives for righteous fury, multiplied and dividing.

- Black women being told that we can be somehow better, and are worse, but never equal. To Black men. To other women. To human beings.
- The white academic feminist who tells me she is so glad *This Bridge Called My Back** exists, because now it gives her a chance to deal with racism without having to face the harshness of Black undiluted by other colors. What she means is she does not have to examine her own specific terror and loathing of Blackness, nor deal with the angers of Black women. So get away with your dirty ugly mean faces, all screwed up all the time!
- The racist filmstrip artist who I thought I had handled so patiently and well. I didn't blow up his damned machine. I explained how his racial blindness made me feel and how his film could be altered to have some meaning. He probably learned something about showing Black images. Then I came home and almost tore up my house and my lover because some invitations happened to be misprinted. Not seeing where the charge of rage was born.

* *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York, 1984).

- A convicted Black man, a torturer of women and children, army-trained to be a killer, writes in his journal in his death cell:

'I am the type of person you are most likely to find driving a Mercedes and sitting in the executive offices of 100 big corporations.' And he's right. Except he's Black.

How do we keep from releasing our angers at them upon ourselves and each other? How do I free myself from this poison I was force-fed like a Strasburg goose until I vomited anger at the least scent of anything nourishing, *oh my sister the belligerent lift of your shoulder the breath of your hair . . .* We each learned the craft of destruction. It is all they knew to allow us, yet look how our words are finding each other again.

It is difficult to construct a wholesomeness model when we are surrounded with synonyms for filth. But not impossible. We have, after all, survived for a reason. (How do I define my impact upon this earth?) I begin by searching for the right questions.

Dear Leora,

For two Black women to enter an analytic or therapeutic relationship means beginning an essentially uncharted and insecure journey. There are no prototypes, no models, no objectively accessible body of experience other than ourselves by which to examine the specific dynamics of our interactions as Black women. Yet this interaction can affect all the other psychic matter attended profoundly. It is to scrutinize that very interaction that I sought you out professionally, and I have come to see that it means picking my way through our similarities and our differences, as well as through our histories of calculated mistrust and desire.

Because it has not been done before or at least not been noted, this particular scrutiny is painful and fraught with the vulnerability of all psychic scrutinies plus all of the pitfalls created by our being Black women in a white male world, and Black women who have survived. This is a scrutiny often sidestepped or considered

unimportant or beside the point. EXAMPLE: I can't tell you how many good white psychwomen have said to me, 'Why should it matter if I am Black or white?' who would never think of saying, 'Why does it matter if I am female or male?' EXAMPLE: I don't know who you are in supervision with, but I can bet it's not with another Black woman.

So this territory between us feels new and frightening as well as urgent, rigged with detonating pieces of our own individual racial histories which neither of us chose but which each of us bears the scars from. And those are particular to each of us. But there is a history which we share because we are Black women in a racist sexist cauldron, and that means some part of this journey is yours, also.

I have many troubled areas of self that will be neither new nor problematic to you as a trained and capable psychperson. I think you are a brave woman and I respect that, yet I doubt that your training can have prepared you to explore the tangle of need, fear, distrust, despair, and hope which operates between us, and certainly not to the depth necessary. Because neither of us is male nor white, we belong to a group of human beings that has not been thought worthy of that kind of study. So we have only who we are, with or without the courage to use those selves for further exploration and clarification of how what lies between us as Black women affects us and the work we do together.

Yet if we do not do it here between us, each one of us will have to do it somewhere else, sometime.

I know these things: I do not yet know what to do about them. But I do want to make them fit together to serve my life and my work, and I don't mean merely in a way that feels safe. I don't know how they can further and illuminate your life and work, but I know they can. It is sometimes both the curse and the blessing of the poet to perceive without yet being able to order those perceptions, and that is another name for Chaos.

But of course it is out of Chaos that new worlds are born.

I look forward to our meeting eye to eye.

Audre

III

There has been so much death and loss around me recently, without metaphor or redeeming symbol, that sometimes I feel trapped into one idiom only – that one of suffering and its codicil, to bear. The same problem exists with anger. I have processed too much of it recently, or else the machinery is slowing down or becoming less efficient, and it creeps into my most crucial interchanges.

Perhaps this is why it is often easier for Black women to interact with white women, even though those interactions are often a dead end emotionally. For with white women there is a middle depth of interaction possible and sustainable, an emotional limit to relationships of self upon self acknowledged.

Now why is this not so with Frances, who is white, and whom I meet at a depth beyond anyone? When I speak of Frances and me I am talking about a relationship not only of great depth but one of great breadth also, a totaling of differences without merging. I am also speaking of a love shaped by our mutual commitment to hard work and confrontation over many years, each of us refusing to settle for what was easy, or simple, or acceptably convenient.

That middle depth of relationship more usually possible between Black and white women, however, is less threatening than the tangle of unexplored needs and furies that face any two Black women who seek to engage each other directly, emotionally, no matter what the context of their relationship may be. This holds true for office workers and political activists as well as lovers. But it is through threading this tangle that new visions of self and possibility between Black women emerge. Again, I am speaking here of social relationships, for it is crucial that we examine dynamics between women who are not lovers as well as between women who are.

I ask myself, do I ever use my war against racism to avoid other even more unanswerable pain? And if so, doesn't that make the energy behind my battles against racism sometimes more tenuous, or less clearheaded, or subject to unexpected stresses and disappointments?