

Opinion Feature by Maria Kubacki

Feminism and the will to whiteness

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Last spring I made a pilgrimage to Banff to attend the Canadian Mental Health Association conference on women and violence. It promised to be quite an event: about 1000 psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, rape crisis centre volunteers and interested laypersons participating (mostly women - only a handful of men attended), and such revered activist/theorists as Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millett, Sandra Butler and Shirley Turcotte scheduled as keynote speakers. All this plus fabulous food, shopping, tennis, swimming and horseback riding at the Banff Springs Hotel. A conference in the grand style; proof that feminist mental health workers can be just as extravagant as businessmen, doctors and lawyers. We've come a long way, baby.

As it turned out, we were jolted out on our yuppie feminist stupor by an event that made headlines across Canada.

Already by the afternoon of the second day of the conference, there were signs of conflict. A number of caucuses sprang up, including a lesbian caucus and a women of colour caucus. A woman approached the microphone while we were eating lunch and encouraged the lesbians among us to wear lavender armbands in order to make themselves visible. Another woman announced a meeting to discuss the concerns of women of colour.

Vaguely embarrassed, but determined to be good sports about the whole thing, the white and straight majority smiled encouragingly ("You go right ahead and discuss whatever you need to discuss, dear") and went on talking. "I've read Toni Morrison and listened to Holly Near," we were all thinking, "so I'm not the one making these women feel alienated and invisible".

Back to the vegetarian quiche, the gossip, the networking and the plans for the evening. "There's an absolutely marvelous little cafe just down the street from the Roots store. Let's go there for capuccino after our massage".

That night at dinner, all hell broke loose. Rozena Maart, a black South African poet now living in Toronto, was scheduled to read her poetry while we were eating. It seems crazy to expect people to listen to speakers during meals, but evidently the conference organizers wanted to squeeze in as many speakers as possible over the three day period. At lunch that day we'd

listened to Shirley Turcotte's testimony about ritual abuse. If you can bear to hear stories of sexual torture and murder over lunch, you're probably tough enough to listen to poetry at dinner. We were a hardened audience by this point, prepared for just about anything.

Anything but a black woman reading poetry about racism, that is. A few minutes into the reading, you could hear the buzz of irritation and disapproval in the room. I happened to be sitting across from one of the conference organizers, who leaned towards me conspiratorially, rolled her eyes and said something like, "Isn't this awful? I mean, at dinner, I hope she'll stop soon so I can enjoy my meal".

The conference organizer's prayers were answered. A white woman sitting close to the stage suddenly jumped up, took the microphone and said something like, "Look, I've been listening to horror stories for two days straight. We're all drained - we just can't take any more. Let's just forget about this and PARTY".

A stunned silence, and then cheers and claps of approval from most of the audience. "Yeah, PARTY!"

There was definitely a good women of colour/bad women of colour split going on. Native spirituality is right on; black anger is, well, gauche.

A few minutes later, another white woman took the microphone and said that she was shocked that we could call ourselves feminists when we were all too ready to silence our sisters of colour. Then the first white woman reiterating her call for us to loosen up, tighten up and PARTY. And then a spokeswoman for the women of colour caucus, who said that the caucus had discussed the racism and elitism of the conference and had intended to raise the issue the next day (when Rosemary Brown, the only woman of colour asked to give a keynote speech, would be speaking), but that she thought that this was probably a good time to discuss the issue.

Razena Maart came to the microphone and tried to resume her reading, but soon gave up. Eventually a group of women of colour and their supporters gathered on one side of the room to show their solidarity with Maart. By then we were all screaming at each other. One woman was so upset

by the whole thing that she fainted and had to be carried out.

I guess men don't have a monopoly on hatred and violence after all. And here I was believing all those studies linking aggression with testosterone!

Eventually a group of native women formed a circle on the stage and urged us to hold hands and chant for peace and forgiveness. Personally, the last thing I wanted to do was to hold hands with any of these women, but I did it, and even hugged some of them. Amazingly, the healing circle worked. At least, it calmed me down.

Rozena Maart walked out muttering, "I don't believe this. I need a drink". Who can blame her? There was definitely a good women of colour/bad women of colour split going on. Native spirituality is right on; black anger is, well, gauche.

Almost more incredible than the events themselves, though, was Kate Millett's reaction to them. She was to speak after dinner that night, and I think we were all counting on her to do something: pull us all together again; remind us of our common goals. Kate had other things on her mind, however, and she just read the speech she had prepared on the evils of psychiatry. She didn't even mention the clash over Maart's poetry. It was as if it never happened. The amazing power of group denial.

The media, of course, had a field day. "Fur Flies at Feminist Fracas" style headlines appeared not just in the local papers and the

Globe and Mail, but in small newspapers across the country.

The 'fracas' in Banff was by no means an aberration. For her part, Rozena Maart expected it. It happens all the time, at every conference.

What happened in Banff is, in fact, a pretty good indication of the state of the women's movement. Mainstream feminism (read: white, straight and middle class) simply doesn't speak for women of colour. Or for lesbians, or for working class women, for that matter.

Two years ago, a letter signed "an excluded woman of colour" appeared in the Blood and Thunder section of the Bruns. "The feminism at UNB", she wrote, "is an exclusive club where white women make decisions that enhance their own group".

Oddly enough, that's exactly what Camille Paglia (every feminist's nightmare) is saying about the women's movement. For Paglia, feminism has degen-

erated into whining about the glass ceiling and equity for executives and professors - issues that directly concern only a small percentage of women. According to Paglia, the backlash against feminism comes partly from feminism's failure to deal adequately with the concerns of women who aren't executives or professors.

I hate to agree with Camille Paglia about anything, but there is certainly a strain of feminism that's concerned mainly with making it possible for certain women to get to the top so that they can lie back and let certain other women take care of their kids, clean their houses and type their quarterly reports or manuscripts or whatever for obscenely low wages.

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Am I one of those feminists? I don't know. Whenever I ask myself questions like that, my defense mechanism kick in. I dissociate: to a safer place - like Club Monaco, maybe.

"An exclusive club". That's true. But it isn't the whole story, however. I think that most feminists start out with the best intentions. I know that when I first became a feminist, I thought that all women were my sisters; that what we had in common far outweighed our differences. Pretty naive, huh? Not to mention pretty corny. But I really did feel that way. Sisterhood is powerful and all that.

And let's face it: any woman who becomes a feminist has probably been through the wringer. If you're a woman, you don't become a feminist out of some abstract sense of justice. There's such pressure not to be a feminist that if you start speaking out, you must be pretty hurt and pretty angry.

What sustains us through the endless protests, the mind-numbing repetition of the same arguments, the humiliation and creeping paranoia that comes from being the lone feminist voice in the wilderness day in day out, is the hope that we're helping to build a better world for all women.

In our eagerness, our desperation to make things better, we take shortcuts that we shouldn't take; we make compromises that shouldn't be made. We strive to present a united front at all costs. We suppress our own particular backgrounds and (mis)identify with a WASPy feminism that we hope will be acceptable to the mostly male establishment. We can't even get the establishment to listen to demands for the fair treatment of just plain old women,

so how can we hope to get separate demands for women of colour, lesbians, working class women and disabled women heard?

None of this excuses the elitism of the women's movement, of course. I think it's important to remember, though, that we (feminists) were raised in the same racist, sexist, heterosexist and classist world that everyone else was raised in. And we're a little more tired than everybody else because we're constantly swimming against the current.

I think that the first thing we (white women) need to do is to be honest with ourselves. There are a couple of ways of dealing with differences:

(a) denying it ("I've just never noticed that you're black/Chinese/Hispanic/Jewish/lesbian" etc.)

(b) treating ethnicity as a great source of spicy food, cheap jewellery and clothing, funky music, etc. - the Third World as smorgasbord or

(c) facing the fact that you're probably as much of a bigot as everybody else and dealing with it.

There's something else that's particularly relevant in a university context. Few of us are as white as we pretend to be; as we might secretly like to be. There's a kind of Will to Whiteness operating on campuses. Part of the secret of rising to the top is to look and act as much like your economic superiors as possible - or at least as much like what your economic superiors wish they could be. In Canada that means looking and acting like an upper middle class WASP. Pretty hard if you've got olive skin and/or brown eyes, but, hey, with coloured contacts and the right clothes, you're all set.

After a few years of aping WASPness, you forget that you aren't actually a WASP princess. You come home and you're kind of shocked to see your mother making borsch and speaking with an accent, or your father with his hands dirty from working at the garage. This can't be my home, you think to yourself. "Mom, Day, what's up? Just having fun role-playing, huh?"

I think it's a lot easier to deal with the difference without once you've dealt with the difference within.