Elizabeth Spelman Inessential Woman
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You don't really want Black folks, you are just looking for yourself with a little color to it.

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Gender & Race: The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought

In earlier chapters we have examined how attempts to focus on gender in isolation from other aspects of identity such as race and class can work to obscure the effect race, class, and gender have on each other.[1] In particular, we've looked at how gender can be treated in a way that obscures the race and class identity of privileged women—for example, of contemporary white middle-class women or the free women of ancient Greece—and simultaneously makes it hard to conceive of women who are not of that particular class and race as "women." Precisely insofar as a discussion of gender and gender relations is really, even if obscurely, about a particular group of women and their relation to a particular group of men, it is unlikely to be applicable to any other group of women. At the same time, the particular race and class identity of those referred to simply as "women" becomes explicit when we see the inapplicability of statements about "women" to women who are not of that race or class.

As mentioned in the Introduction, some of these points are illustrated tellingly in an article in the *New York Times* about how "women and Blacks" have fared in the U.S. military.[2] The author of the article does not discuss women who are Black or Blacks who are women. Indeed, it is clear that the "women" referred to are white, the "Blacks" referred to are male, even though, in a chart comparing the numbers and the placement of "women" and "Blacks," a small note appears telling the reader that Black women are included in the category "Blacks."[3] There are several things to note about the sexual and racial ontology of the article. The

racial identity of those identified as "women" does not become explicit until reference is made to Black women, at which point it also becomes clear that the category "women" excludes Black women. In the contrast between "women" and "Blacks" the usual contrast between "men" and "women" is dropped, even though the distinction is in effect between a group of men and a group of women. But the men in question are not called men. They are called "Blacks."

It is not easy to think about gender, race, and class in ways that don't obscure or underplay their effects on one another. The crucial question is how the links between them are conceived. So, for example, we see that de Beauvoir tends to talk about comparisons between sex and race, or between sex and class, or between sex and culture; she describes what she takes to be comparisons between sexism and racism, between sexism and classism, between sexism and anti-Semitism. In the work of Chodorow and others influenced by her, we observe a readiness to look for links between sexism and other forms of oppression depicted as distinct from sexism. In both examples, we find an additive analysis of the various elements of identity and of various forms of oppression: there's sex *and* race *and* class; there's sexism *and* racism *and* classism. In both examples, attempts to bring in elements of identity other than gender, to bring in kinds of oppression other than sexism, still have the effect of obscuring the racial and class identity of those described as "women," still make it hard to see how women not of a particular race and class can be included in the description.

In this chapter we shall examine in more detail how additive analyses of identity and of oppression can work against an understanding of the relations between gender and other elements of identity, between sexism and other forms of oppression. In particular we will see how some very interesting and important attempts to link sexism and racism themselves reflect and perpetuate racism. Ironically, the categories and methods we may find most natural and straightforward to use as we explore the connections between sex and race, sexism and racism, confuse those connections rather than clarify them.

As has often been pointed out, what have been called the first and second waves of the women's movement in the United States followed closely on the heels of women's involvement in the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement and the twentieth-century civil rights movement. In both centuries, challenges to North American racism served as an impetus to, and model for, the feminist attack on sexist institutions, practices, and ideology. But this is not to say that all antiracists were antisexists, or that all antisexists were antiracists. Indeed, many abolitionists of the

nineteenth century and civil rights workers of the twentieth did not take sexism seriously, and we continue to learn about the sad, bitter, and confusing history of women who in fighting hard for feminist ends did not take racism seriously.[4]

Recent feminist theory has not totally ignored white racism, though white feminists have paid much less attention to it than have Black feminists. Much of feminist theory has reflected and contributed to what Adrienne Rich has called "white solipsism": the tendency "to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world."[5] While solipsism is "not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness."[6]

In this chapter I shall focus on what I take to be instances and sustaining sources of this tendency in recent theoretical works by, or of interest to, feminists. In particular, I examine certain ways of comparing sexism and racism in the United States, as well as habits of thought about the source of women's oppression and the possibility of our liberation. I hope that exposing some of the symptoms of white solipsism—especially in places where we might least expect to find them—will help to eliminate tunnel vision and to widen the descriptive and explanatory scope of feminist theory. Perhaps we might hasten the day when it will no longer be necessary for anyone to have to say, as Audre Lorde has, "How difficult and time-consuming it is to have to reinvent the pencil every time you want to send a message."[7]

I shall not explicitly be examining class and classism, though at a number of points I suggest ways in which considerations of class and classism affect the topic at hand. Many of the questions I raise about comparisons between sexism and racism could also be raised about comparison between sexism and classism or racism and classism.

I

It is perhaps inevitable that comparisons of sexism and racism include, and often culminate in, questions about which form of oppression is more "fundamental."[8] Whether or not one believes that this way of thinking will bear any strategic or theoretic fruit, such comparisons have come to inform analyses of the nature of sexism and the nature of racism. To begin, I will examine some recent claims that sexism is more fundamental than racism, a highly ambiguous argument. In many instances the

evidence offered in support turns out to refute the claim; and this way of comparing sexism and racism often presupposes the nonexistence of Black women, insofar as neither the description of sexism nor that of racism seems to apply to them. This is a bitter irony indeed, since Black women are the victims of both sexism and racism.

We need to ask first what "more fundamental" means in a comparison of racism and sexism. It has meant or might mean several different though related things:[9]

It is harder to eradicate sexism than it is to eradicate racism.

There might be sexism without racism but not racism without sexism: any social and political changes that eradicate sexism will eradicate racism, but social and political changes that eradicate racism will not eradicate sexism.

Sexism is the first form of oppression learned by children.

Sexism predates racism.

Sexism is the cause of racism.

Sexism is used to justify racism.

Sexism is the model for racism.

We can trace these arguments in the work of two important feminist theorists: Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*. It is worth remembering that these authors did not ignore race and racism. But their treatments of the subjects enable us to see that as long as race is taken to be independent of sex, racism as independent of sexism, we are bound to give seriously misleading descriptions of gender and gender relations.

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett seems to hold that sexism is more fundamental than racism in three senses: it is "sturdier" than racism and so presumably is harder to eradicate; it has a more "pervasive ideology" than racism, and so those who are not racists may nevertheless embrace sexist beliefs; and it provides our culture's "most fundamental concept of power."[10] But as Margaret Simons has pointed out, Millett ignores the fact that Black women and other women of color do not usually describe their own lives as ones in which they experience sexism as more fundamental than racism.[11] There is indeed something very peculiar about the evidence Millett offers in behalf of her view that sexism is the more endemic oppression.

On the one hand, she states that everywhere men have power over women. On the other hand, she notes with interest that some observers have described as an effect of racism that Black men do not have such

power over Black women, and that only when racism is eradicated will Black men assume their proper position of superiority. She goes on to argue that "the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance—in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands."[12] But surely that is white male supremacy. Since when did Black males have such institutionally based power, in what Millett calls "our culture"? She thus correctly describes as sexist the hope that Black men could assume their "proper authority" over Black women, but her claim about the pervasiveness of sexism is belied by her reference to the lack of authority of Black males.

There is no doubt that Millett is right to view as sexist the hope that racial equity will be established when Black males have authority over Black females, but it also is correct to describe as racist the hope—not uncommonly found in feminist arguments—that sexual equity will be established when women can be presidents or heads of business. That is no guarantee that they will not be running racist countries and corporations. As Elizabeth F. Hood said: "Many white women define liberation as the access to those thrones traditionally occupied by white men—positions in the kingdoms which support racism."[13] Of course, one might insist that any truly antisexist vision also is an antiracist vision, for it requires the elimination of all forms of oppression against all women, white or Black.[14] But, similarly, it can be said that any truly antiracist vision would have to be antisexist, for it requires the elimination of all forms of oppression against all Blacks and other people of color, women or men.

In arguing for the position in *The Dialectic of Sex* that racism is "extended sexism," Shulamith Firestone provides another variation on the view that sexism is more fundamental:

> Racism is sexism extended. . . . Let us look at race relations in America, a macrocosm of the hierarchical relations within the nuclear family: the white man is father, the white woman wife-and-mother, her status dependent on his; the blacks, like children, are his property, their physical differentiation branding them the subservient class, in the same way that children form so easily distinguishable a servile class vis-à-vis adults. The power hierarchy creates the psychology of racism, just as, in the nuclear family, it creates the psychology of sexism.[15]

It is clear that Firestone sees sexism as the model for racism; as the cause of racism, so that racism cannot disappear unless sexism does; and as the historical precursor of racism. Moreover, with this model she sees the goal of the Black man (male child) to be to usurp the power of the white man (father), which means that the restoration of the authority of the

Black man will involve his domination of women.[16] Hence sexism according to Firestone is more fundamental than racism, in the sense that the eradication of racism is portrayed as compatible with the continuation of sexism.

Here, as in the case of Millett, the evidence Firestone offers actually undermines her claim. First of all, she points out, and her analogy to the family requires, that the Black man is not really "the *real* man."[17] However much the Black man tries to act like the white man, and however much his treatment of Black women resembles the white man's treatment of white women and Black women, he isn't really The Man. Now if this is so, it seems odd to claim that sexism is more fundamental than racism, since according to Firestone's own account the Black man's identity as a man is obscured or erased by his identity as a Black. Thus according to her own account, the racial identity of being an inferior assigned him by racists is more fundamental than the sexual identity of being a superior assigned him by sexists.

Firestone also claims that "the All-American Family is predicated on the existence of the black ghetto whorehouse. The rape of the black community in America makes possible the existence of the family structure of the larger white community."[18] But to say in these ways that racism makes sexism possible is to say that in the absence of racism, sexism could not exist—surely just the opposite of the claim that sexism is more fundamental than racism, the claim Firestone wishes to establish.

II

If Millett's and Firestone's accounts tend to ignore facts about the status of Black men, other similar accounts ignore the existence of Black women. In the process of comparing racism and sexism, Richard Wasserstrom describes the ways in which women and Blacks have been stereotypically conceived of as less fully developed than white men: In the United States, "men and women are taught to see men as independent, capable, and powerful; men and women are taught to see women as dependent, limited in abilities, and passive."[19] But who is taught to see Black men as "independent, capable, and powerful," and by whom are they taught? Are Black men taught that? Black women? White men? White women? Similarly, who is taught to see Black women as "dependent, limited in abilities, and passive"? If this stereotype is so prevalent, why then have Black women had to defend themselves against the images of matriarch and whore?

Wasserstrom continues:

As is true for race, it is also a significant social fact that to be a female is to be an entity or creature viewed as different from the standard, fully developed person who is male as well as white. But to be female, as opposed to being black, is not to be conceived of as simply a creature of less worth. That is one important thing that differentiates sexism from racism: the ideology of sex, as opposed to the ideology of race, is a good deal more complex and confusing. Women are both put on a pedestal and deemed not fully developed persons.[20]

He leaves no room for the Black woman. For a Black woman cannot be "female, as opposed to being Black"; she is female *and* Black. Since Wasserstrom's argument proceeds from the assumption that one is either female or Black, it cannot be an argument that applies to Black women. Moreover, we cannot generate a composite image of the Black women from Wasserstrom's argument, since the description of women as being put on a pedestal, or being dependent, never generally applied to Black women in the United States and was never meant to apply to them.

Wasserstrom's argument about the priority of sexism over racism has an odd result, which stems from the erasure of Black women in his analysis. He wishes to claim that in this society sex is a more fundamental fact about people than race. Yet his description of women does not apply to the Black woman, which implies that being Black is a more fundamental fact about her than being a woman and hence that her sex is not a more fundamental fact about her than her race. I am not saying that Wasserstrom actually believes this is true, but that paradoxically the terms of his theory force him into that position. If the terms of one's theory require that a person is either female or Black, clearly there is no room to describe someone who is both.

A similar erasure of the Black woman, through failure to note how sexist stereotypes are influenced by racist ones, is found in Laurence Thomas's comparison of sexism and racism.[21] Like Wasserstrom, Thomas believes that sexism is more deeply ingrained in our culture. Racist attitudes, he says, are easier to give up than sexist ones for two reasons: First, "sexism, unlike racism, readily lends itself to a morally unobjectionable description," and second, "the positive self-concept of men has been more centrally tied to their being sexists than has been the positive self-concept of whites to their being racists."[22]

Thomas argues that it is not morally objectionable that "a natural outcome of a sexist conception of women" is the role of men as benefactors of women—part of men's role vis-à-vis women is to "protect women and to provide them with the comforts of life."[23] But at best, Thomas's claim about the man's role as benefactor of woman only applies to men and

women of the same race (and probably of the same class). It is of course difficult to explain how claims about roles are established, but the history of race relations in the United States surely makes ludicrous the idea that the role of white men is to be the benefactors of Black women—to "protect" them and to "provide them with the comforts of life." This neither describes what white men have done, nor what they have been told they ought to have done, with respect to Black women.

Thomas's description of sexism in relations between women and men leaves out the reality of racism in relations between Blacks and whites. If he wishes to insist that his analysis was only meant to apply to same-race sexual relations, then he cannot continue to speak unqualifiedly about relations between men and women. My point is not that Black men cannot in any way be sexist to white or to Black women, for indeed they can, just as white women can be racist to Black men or to Black women. My point, rather, is that a theory of sexism that describes men's and women's roles can itself reflect the racist society in which it develops, insofar as it is based on an erasure of the realities of white racism.

Thomas also holds that sexism is more central to the positive self-concept of men than racism has been to the positive self-concept of whites. He claims that, although being benefactors of women is essential to men's self-esteem as "real" men, for whites it is not necessary to own slaves or to hate Blacks in order to be "really" white.[24] Once again, we have to see what happens to Thomas's claim when we put "Black" or "white" in front of "men" or "women" in his formula: "For white men, being benefactors of Black women is essential to their self-esteem as 'real' men." That is false. Indeed, in a racist society, white men's self-esteem requires the opposite position and attitude toward Black women.

Reflection on this leads to doubts about the second part of Thomas's claim—that whites don't have to be racists in order to be "really" white. Does he mean to say that in our society a white man feels no threat to his self-esteem if a Black man gets the job for which they both are candidates? That a white man feels no threat to his self-esteem if a Black man marries the white woman the white man is hoping to marry? That a white man feels no threat to his self-esteem if he lives in a neighborhood with Blacks? Certainly not all white men's self-esteem is so threatened. But this is a racist society, and generally, the self-esteem of white people is deeply influenced by their difference from and supposed superiority to Black people.[25] Those of us who are white may not think of ourselves as racists, because we do not own slaves or hate Blacks, but that does not mean that much of what props up our sense of self is not based on the racism that unfairly distributes benefits and burdens to whites and Blacks.

For example, think for a moment about a case of self-esteem that seems on the surface most unlikely to be supported by racism: the self-esteem that might be thought to attend sincere and serious philosophical reflection on the problems of racism. How could this be said to be based on racism, especially if the philosopher is trying to eliminate racism? As the editors of the *Philosophical Forum* in an issue on philosophy and the Black experience pointed out, "Black people have to a disproportionate extent supplied the labor which has made possible the cultivation of philosophical inquiry."[26] A disproportionate amount of the labor that makes it possible for some people to have philosophy as a profession has been done by Blacks and others under conditions that can only be described as racist. If the connection between philosophy and racism is not very visible, that invisibility itself is a product of racism. Any feminist would recognize a similar point about sexism: it is only in footnotes and prefaces that we see a visible connection made between a man's satisfaction in having finished an article or book and a woman's having made that completion possible.[27]

At several points early in his essay, Thomas says that he is going to consider the "way in which sexism and racism each conceives of its object: woman and Blacks, respectively."[28] But there are many difficulties in talking about sexism and racism in this way, some of which we have noted, and others to which we now turn.

III

First of all, sexism and racism do not have different "objects" in the case of Black women. It is highly misleading to say, without further explanation, that Black women experience "sexism and racism." For to say merely that suggests that Black women experience one form of oppression, as Blacks (the same thing Black men experience) and that they experience another form of oppression, as women (the same thing white women experience). While it is true that images and institutions that are described as sexist affect both Black and white women, they are affected in different ways, depending upon the extent to which they are affected by other forms of oppression. Thus, as noted earlier, it will not do to say that women are oppressed by the image of the "feminine" woman as fair, delicate, and in need of support and protection by men. As Linda Brent succinctly puts it, "That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave."[29] More specifically, as Angela Davis reminds us, "the alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not accrue" to the Black female slave—she was expected to toil in the fields for just as long and hard as the Black male was.[30]

Reflection on the experience of Black women also shows that it is not as if one form of oppression is merely piled upon another. As Barbara Smith has remarked, the effect of multiple oppression "is not merely arithmetic."[31] This additive method informs Gerda Lerner's analysis of the oppression of Black women under slavery: "Their work and duties were the same as that of the men, while childbearing and rearing fell upon them as an added burden."[32] But as Angela Davis has pointed out, the mother/housewife role (even the words seem inappropriate) doesn't have the same meaning for women who experience racism as it does for those who are not so oppressed:

> In the infinite anguish of ministering to the needs of the men and children around her (who were not necessarily members of her immediate family), she was performing the only labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor.[3]

The meaning and the oppressive nature of the "housewife" role has to be understood in relation to the roles against which it is contrasted. The work of mate/mother/nurturer has a different meaning depending on whether it is contrasted to work that has high social value and ensures economic independence or to labor that is forced, degrading, and unpaid. All of these factors are left out in a simple additive analysis. How one form of oppression is experienced is influenced by and influences how another form is experienced. An additive analysis treats the oppression of a Black woman in a society that is racist as well as sexist as if it were a further burden when, in fact, it is a different burden. As the work of Davis, among others, shows, to ignore the difference is to deny the particular reality of the Black woman's experience.

If sexism and racism must be seen as interlocking, and not as piled upon each other, serious problems arise for the claim that one of them is more fundamental than the other. As we saw, one meaning of the claim that sexism is more fundamental than racism is that sexism causes racism: racism would not exist if sexism did not, while sexism could and would continue to exist even in the absence of racism. In this connection, racism is sometimes seen as something that is both derivative from sexism and in the service of it: racism keeps women from uniting in alliance against sexism. This view has been articulated by Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father*. According to Daly, sexism is the "root and paradigm" of other forms of oppression such as racism. Racism is a "deformity *within* patriarchy. . . . It is most unlikely that racism will be eradicated as long as sexism prevails."[34]

Daly's theory relies on an additive analysis, and we can see again why such an analysis fails to describe adequately Black women's experience.

Daly's analysis makes it look simply as if both Black women and white women experience sexism, while Black women also experience racism. Black women, Daly says, must come to see what they have in common with white women—shared sexist oppression—and see that they are all "pawns in the racial struggle, which is basically not the struggle that will set them free as women."[35] But insofar as she is oppressed by racism in a sexist context and sexism in a racist context, the Black woman's struggle cannot be compartmentalized into two struggles—one as a Black and one as a woman. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine why a Black woman would think of her struggles this way except in the face of demands by white women or by Black men that she do so. This way of speaking about her struggle is required by a theory that insists not only that sexism and racism are distinct but that one might be eradicated before the other. Daly rightly points out that the Black woman's struggle can easily be, and has usually been, subordinated to the Black man's struggle in antiracist organizations. But she does not point out that the Black woman's struggle can easily be, and usually has been, subordinated to the white woman's struggle in antisexist organizations.

Daly's line of thought also promotes the idea that, were it not for racism, there would be no important differences between Black and white women. Since, according to her view, sexism is the fundamental form of oppression and racism works in its service, the only significant differences between Black and white women are differences that men (Daly doesn't say whether she means white men or Black men or both) have created and that are the source of antagonism between women. What is really crucial about us is our sex; racial distinctions are one of the many products of sexism, of patriarchy's attempt to keep women from uniting. According to Daly, then, it is through our shared sexual identity that we are oppressed together; it is through our shared sexual identity that we shall be liberated together.

This view not only ignores the role women play in racism and classism, but it seems to deny the positive aspects of racial identities. It ignores the fact that being Black is a source of pride, as well as an occasion for being oppressed. It suggests that once racism is eliminated, Black women no longer need be concerned about or interested in their Blackness—as if the only reason for paying attention to one's Blackness is that it is the source of pain and sorrow and agony. The assumption that there is nothing positive about having a Black history and identity is racism pure and simple. Recall the lines of Nikki Giovanni:

> and I really hope no white person ever has cause
> to write about me
> because they never understand Black love is
> Black wealth and they'll
> probably talk about my hard childhood
> and never understand that
> all the while I was quite happy.[36]

Or recall the chagrin of the central character in Paule Marshall's story "Reena," when she discovered that her white boyfriend could only see her Blackness in terms of her suffering and not as something compatible with taking joy and pleasure in life.[37] I think it is helpful too in this connection to remember the opening lines of Pat Parker's "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend":

> The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black.
> Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.[38]

Perhaps it does not occur to feminists who are white that celebrating being white has anything to do with our celebrating being women. But that may be so because celebrating being white is already taken care of by the predominantly white culture in which we live in North America. Certainly feminist theory and activity on the whole have recognized that it is possible, if difficult, to celebrate being a woman without at the same time conceiving of woman in terms of the sexist imagery and lore of the centuries. (That celebrating womanhood is a tricky business we know from the insidiousness of the "two-sphere" ideology of the nineteenth century and of the image of the "total woman"—in Daly's wonderful phrase, the "totaled woman"—of the twentieth century: as if by celebrating what men tell us we are, the burden magically disappears because we embrace it.) But just as it is possible and desirable to identify oneself as a woman and yet think of and describe oneself in ways that are not sexist, so it is possible and desirable to identify oneself as a Black woman and yet think of oneself in ways that are not racist.

In sum, according to an additive analysis of sexism and racism, all women are oppressed by sexism; some women are further oppressed by racism. Such an analysis distorts Black women's experiences of oppression by failing to note important differences between the contexts in which Black women and white women experience sexism. The additive analysis also suggests that a woman's racial identity can be "subtracted" from her combined sexual and racial identity: "We are all women." But this does not leave room for the fact that different women may look to different forms of liberation just because they are white or Black women, rich or poor women, Catholic or Jewish women.

IV

As we saw in the Introduction, feminist leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton used racist arguments in pleas to better the condition of "women." Though such blatant racism is not as likely to appear in contemporary feminism, that doesn't mean that visions of a nonsexist world will also be visions of a nonracist world. In the rest of the chapter I will explore how some ways of conceiving women's oppression and liberation contribute to the white solipsism of feminist theory.

As I have argued in detail elsewhere, feminist theorists as politically diverse as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Shulamith Firestone have described the conditions of women's liberation in terms that suggest that the identification of woman with her body has been the source of our oppression, and hence that the source of our liberation lies in sundering that connection.[39] For example, de Beauvoir introduces *The Second Sex* with the comment that woman has been regarded as "womb"; and she later observes that woman is thought of as planted firmly in the world of "immanence," that is, the physical world of nature, her life defined by the dictates of her "biologic fate."[40] In contrast, men live in the world of "transcendence," actively using their minds to create "values, mores, religions."[41] Theirs is the world of culture as opposed to the world of nature. Among Friedan's central messages is that women should be allowed and encouraged to be "culturally" as well as "biologically" creative, because the former activities, in contrast to childbearing and rearing, are "mental" and are of "highest value to society"—"mastering the secrets of atoms, or the stars, composing symphonies, pioneering a new concept in government or society."[42]

This view comes out especially clearly in Firestone's work. According to her, the biological difference between women and men is at the root of women's oppression. It is woman's body—in particular, our body's capacity to bear children—that makes, or makes possible, the oppression of women by men. Hence we must disassociate ourselves from our bodies—most radically—by making it possible, or even necessary, to conceive and bear children outside the womb, and by otherwise generally disassociating our lives from the thankless tasks associated with the body.[43]

In predicating women's liberation on a disassociation from our bodies, Firestone oddly enough joins the chorus of male voices that has told us over the centuries about the disappointments entailed in being embodied creatures. What might be called "somatophobia" (fear of and disdain for the body) is part of a centuries-long tradition in Western culture. As de Beauvoir so thoroughly described in *The Second Sex*, the responsibility for being embodied creatures has been assigned to women: we have been

associated, indeed virtually identified, with the body; men (or some men) have been associated and virtually identified with the mind. Women have been portrayed as possessing bodies in a way men have not. It is as if women essentially, men only accidentally, have bodies. It seems to me that Firestone's (as well as Friedan's and de Beauvoir's) prescription for women's liberation does not challenge the negative attitude toward the body; it only hopes to end the association between the body, so negatively characterized, and women.

I think the somatophobia we see in the work of Firestone and others is a force that contributes to white solipsism in feminist thought, in at least three related ways. First, insofar as feminists ignore, or indeed accept, negative views of the body in prescriptions for women's liberation, we will also ignore an important element in racist thinking. For the superiority of men to women (or, as we have seen, of some men to some women) is not the only hierarchical relationship that has been linked to the superiority of the mind to the body. Certain kinds, or "races," of people have been held to be more body-like than others, and this has meant that they are perceived as more animal-like and less god-like. For example, in *The White Man's Burden*, Winthrop Jordan describes ways in which white Englishmen portrayed black Africans as beastly, dirty, highly sexual beings.[44] Lillian Smith tells us in *Killers of the Dream* how closely run together were her lessons about the evil of the body and the evil of Blacks.[45]

We need to examine and understand somatophobia and look for it in our own thinking, for the idea that the work of the body and for the body has no part in real human dignity has been part of racist as well as sexist ideology. That is, oppressive stereotypes of "inferior races" and of women (notice that even in order to make the point in this way, we leave up in the air the question of how we shall refer to those who belong to both categories) have typically involved images of their lives as determined by basic bodily functions (sex, reproduction, appetite, secretions, and excretions) and as given over to attending to the bodily functions of others (feeding, washing, cleaning, doing the "dirty work"). Superior groups, we have been told from Plato on down, have better things to do with their lives. It certainly does not follow from the presence of somatophobia in a person's writings that she or he is a racist or a sexist. But disdain for the body historically has been symptomatic of sexist and racist (as well as classist) attitudes.

Human groups know that the work of the body and for the body is necessary for human existence, and they make provisions for that necessity. Thus even when a group views its liberation in terms of being free of association with, or responsibility for, bodily tasks, its own liberation is

likely to be predicated on the oppression of other groups—those assigned to do the body's work. For example, if feminists decide that women are not going to be relegated to doing such work, who do we think is going to do it? Have we attended to the role that racism and classism historically have played in settling that question? We may recall why Plato and Aristotle thought philosophers and citizens needed leisure from this kind of work and who they thought ought to do it.

Finally, if one thinks—as de Beauvoir, Friedan, and Firestone do—that the liberation of women requires abstracting the notion of woman from the notion of woman's body, then one might logically think that the liberation of Blacks requires abstracting the notion of a Black person from the notion of a black body. Since the body, or at least certain of its aspects, may be thought to be the culprit, the solution may seem to be: Keep the person and leave the occasion for oppression behind. Keep the woman, somehow, but leave behind her woman's body; keep the Black person but leave the Blackness behind. Once one attempts to stop thinking about oneself in terms of having a body, then one not only will stop thinking in terms of characteristics such as womb and breast, but also will stop thinking in terms of skin and hair. We would expect to find that any feminist theory based in part on a disembodied view of human identity would regard blackness (or any other physical characteristic that may serve as a centering post for one's identity) as of temporary and negative importance.

Once the concept of woman is divorced from the concept of woman's body, conceptual room is made for the idea of a woman who is no particular historical woman—she has no color, no accent, no particular characteristics that require having a body. She is somehow all and only woman; that is her only identifying feature. And so it will seem inappropriate or beside the point to think of women in terms of any physical characteristics, especially if their oppression has been rationalized by reference to those characteristics.

None of this is to say that the historical and cultural identity of being Black or white is the same thing as, or is reducible to, the physical feature of having black or white skin. Historical and cultural identity is not constituted by having a body with particular identifying features, but it cannot be comprehended without such features and the significance attached to them.

V

Adrienne Rich was perhaps the first well-known contemporary white feminist to have noted "white solipsism" in feminist theorizing and activity. I think it is no coincidence that she also noticed and attended to the strong strain of somatophobia in feminist theory. *Of Woman Born* updates the connection between somatophobia and misogyny/gynephobia that Simone de Beauvoir described at length in *The Second Sex*.[46] But unlike de Beauvoir or Firestone, Rich refuses to throw out the baby with the bathwater: she sees that the historical negative connection between woman and body (in particular, between woman and womb) can be broken in more than one way. Both de Beauvoir and Firestone wanted to break it by insisting that women need be no more connected—in thought or deed—with the body than men have been. In their view of embodiment as a liability, de Beauvoir and Firestone are in virtual agreement with the patriarchal cultural history they otherwise question. Rich, however, insists that the negative connection between woman and body be broken along other lines. She asks us to think about whether what she calls "flesh-loathing" is the only attitude it is possible to have toward our bodies. Just as she explicitly distinguishes between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution, so she implicitly asks us to distinguish between embodiment as experience and embodiment as institution. Flesh-loathing is part of the well-entrenched beliefs, habits, and practices epitomized in the treatment of pregnancy as a disease. But we need not experience our flesh, our body, as loathsome.

I think it is not a psychological or historical accident that having examined the way women view their bodies, Rich also focused on the failure of white women to see Black women's experiences as different from their own. For looking at embodiment is one way (though not the only one) of coming to recognize and understand the particularity of experience. Without bodies we could not have personal histories. Nor could we be identified as woman or man, Black or white. This is not to say that reference to publicly observable bodily characteristics settles the question of whether someone is woman or man, Black or white; nor is it to say that being woman or man, Black or white, just means having certain bodily characteristics (that is one reason some Blacks want to capitalize the term; "Black" refers to a cultural identity, not simply a skin color). But different meanings are attached to having certain characteristics, in different places and at different times and by different people, and those differences affect enormously the kinds of lives we lead or experiences we have. Women's oppression has been linked to the meanings assigned to having a woman's body by male oppressors. Blacks' oppression has been linked to the meanings assigned to having a black body by white oppressors. (Note how insidiously this way of speaking once again leaves unmentioned the situation for Black women.) We cannot hope to understand the meaning of a person's experiences, including her experiences of oppres-

sion, without first thinking of her as embodied, and second thinking about the particular meanings assigned to that embodiment. If, because of somatophobia, we think and write as if we are not embodied, or as if we would be better off if we were not embodied, we are likely to ignore the ways in which different forms of embodiment are correlated with different kinds of experience.

Rich—unlike de Beauvoir—asks us to reflect on the culturally assigned differences between having a Black or a white body, as well as on the differences between having the body of a woman or of a man. Other feminists have reflected on the meaning of embodiment and recognized the connection between flesh-loathing and woman-hatred, but they have only considered it far enough to try to divorce the concept of woman from the concept of the flesh. In effect, they have insisted that having different bodies does not or need not mean men and women are any different as humans; and having said that, they imply that having different colored bodies does not mean that Black women and white women are any different. Such statements are fine if interpreted to mean that the differences between woman and man, Black and white, should not be used against Black women and white women and Black men. But not paying attention to embodiment and to the cultural meanings assigned to different forms of it is to encourage sexblindness and colorblindness. These blindnesses are vicious when they are used to support the idea that all experience is male experience or that all experience is white experience. Rich does not run away from the fact that women have bodies, nor does she wish that women's bodies were not so different from men's. That healthy regard for the ground of our differences from men is logically connected to—though of course does not ensure—a healthy regard for the ground of the differences between Black women and white women.

> "Colorblindness" . . . implies that I would look at a Black woman and see her as white, thus engaging in white solipsism to the utter erasure of her particular reality.[47]

Colorblindness denies the particularity of the Black woman and rules out the possibility both that her history has been different and that her future might be different in any significant way from the white woman's.

VI

I have been discussing the ways in which some aspects of feminist theory exhibit what Adrienne Rich has called "white solipsism." In particular, I have been examining ways in which some prominent claims about the relation between sexism and racism ignore the realities of racism. I have also suggested that there are ways of thinking about women's oppression and about women's liberation that reflect and encourage white solipsism, but that thinking differently about women and about sexism might lead to thinking differently about Blackness and about racism.

First, we have to continue to reexamine the traditions which reinforce sexism and racism. Though feminist theory has recognized the connection between somatophobia and misogyny/gynephobia, it has tended to challenge the misogyny without challenging the somatophobia, and without fully appreciating the connection between somatophobia and racism.

Second, we have to keep a cautious eye on discussions of racism versus sexism. They keep us from seeing ways in which what sexism means and how it works is modulated by racism, and ways in which what racism means is modulated by sexism. Most important, discussions of sexism versus racism tend to proceed as if Black women—to take one example—do not exist. None of this is to say that sexism and racism are thoroughly and in every context indistinguishable. Certain political and social changes may point to the conclusion that some aspects of racism will disappear sooner than some aspects of sexism (see, for example, the statistics Diane Lewis cites in "A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism").[48] Other changes may point to the conclusion that some aspects of sexism will disappear sooner than some aspects of racism (e.g., scepticism about the possible effects of passage of the ERA on the lives of Black women in the ghetto). And there undoubtedly is disagreement about when certain changes should be seen as making any dent in sexism or racism at all. But as long as Black women and other women of color are at the bottom of the economic heap (which clearly we cannot fully understand in the absence of a class analysis), and as long as our descriptions of sexism and racism themselves reveal racist and sexist perspectives, it seems both empirically and conceptually premature to make grand claims about whether sexism or racism is "more fundamental." For many reasons, then, it seems wise to proceed very cautiously in this inquiry.

Third, it is crucial to sustain a lively regard for the variety of women's experiences. On the one hand, what unifies women and justifies us in talking about the oppression of women is the overwhelming evidence of the worldwide and historical subordination of women to men. On the other, while it may be possible for us to speak about women in a general way, it also is inevitable that any statement we make about women in some particular place at some particular time is bound to suffer from ethnocentrism if we try to claim for it more generality than it has. So, for

example, to say that the image of woman as frail and dependent is oppressive is certainly true. But it is oppressive to white women in the United States in quite a different way than it is oppressive to Black women, for the sexism Black women experience is in the context of their experience of racism. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* the causes and consequences of Pecola's longing to have blue eyes are surely quite different from the causes and consequences of a white girl with brown eyes having a similar desire.[49] More to the point, the consequences of *not* having blue eyes are quite different for the two. Similarly, the family may be the locus of oppression for white middle-class women, but to claim that it is the locus of oppression for all women is to ignore the fact that for Blacks in America the family has been a source of resistance against white oppression.[50]

In short, the claim that all women are oppressed is fully compatible with, and needs to be explicated in terms of, the many varieties of oppression that different populations of women have been subject to. After all, why should oppressors settle for uniform kinds of oppression, when to oppress their victims in many different ways—consciously or unconsciously—makes it more likely that the oppressed groups will not perceive it to be in their interest to work together?

Finally, it is crucial not to see Blackness only as the occasion for oppression—any more than one sees being a woman only as the occasion for oppression. No one ought to expect the forms of our liberation to be any less various than the forms of our oppression. We need to be at least as generous in imagining what women's liberation will be like as our oppressors have been in devising what women's oppression has been.

Women don't lead their lives like, "Well, this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women's identities," so it's confusing.

BEVERLY SMITH

Woman: The One and the Many

I suspect it may be hard not to have the feeling that some philosophical sleight of hand is going on here, that there is something wantonly obscure in piling up argument after argument to the effect that it isn't as easy as one might think to talk coherently about a woman "as a woman," that attempts to isolate gender from race and class don't succeed in doing so. After all, most everyone has no trouble at all answering questions such as "What gender are you?" "What race are you?" and so on. This is not to say that there are not, for example, debates about the "racial" categories on United States census forms. Nor is it to forget that in countries like the United States the pretense of there being no class differences makes it very hard for many people to answer questions about what class they belong to. But I may seem to have forgotten that at least some of these questions about one's identity are easy to answer. I agree: I don't have any trouble answering that I am a woman and that I am white. These appear to be two separate questions, which I can answer separately; my brother answers one of them as I do, the other not. So it seems that I can easily pick out the "woman part" of me and the "white part" of me and, moreover, tell the difference between them.

But does this mean that there is a "woman part" of me, and that it is distinct, for example, from something that is the "white part" of me? If there is a "woman part" of me, it doesn't seem to be the kind of thing I could point to—not because etiquette demands that nice people don't point to their private or covered parts, but because even if I broke a social