

that is constantly threatened and attacked both from within and without. This is particularly true for people of color who are gay. It is essential that non-gay black people recognize and respect the hardships, the difficulties gay black people experience, extending the love and understanding that is essential for the making of authentic black community. One way we show our care is by vigilant protest of homophobia. By acknowledging the union between black liberation struggle and gay liberation struggle, we strengthen our solidarity, enhance the scope and power of our allegiances, and further our resistance.

feminist focus on men: a comment

Thinking about men, about masculinity as the subject for a new book I wanted to write, I began to see that in this feminist struggle of ours and in the writings that express the various dimensions of that struggle, there is very little and certainly not enough said about men, about the social construction of masculinity, about the possibilities for transformation. In the early stages of contemporary feminist movement, labeling men "the enemy" or "male chauvinist pigs" was perhaps an effective way for women to begin making the critical separation that would enable rebellion to begin—rebellion against patriarchy, rebellion against male domination. As a strategy of defiance it worked. Men could not consider themselves leaders or even radical participants in feminist movement. Men could not be "feminists." Women were the insiders—men the outsiders. In effect, the women's movement announced its exclusivity. Given this framework, feminist activists and scholars felt little or no responsibility to critically explore the issues of men, to map out feminist strategies for the transformation of masculinity.

As feminist struggle has progressed, as our critical consciousness has deepened and matured, we can see the error in this stance. Now we can acknowledge that the reconstruction and transformation of male behavior, of masculinity, is a necessary and essential part of feminist revolution. Yet critical awareness of the necessity for such work has not led to the production of a significant body of feminist scholarship that fully addresses these issues. Much of the small body of work on men has been done by men.

Only recently have feminist women scholars strongly asserted our concern, our interest in thinking about and doing work on men. Those women who have written about men (for example, Phyllis Chesler and Barbara Ehrenreich) have not talked about their work as though it was in any way exceptional or unique. Given the many feminist works which do not focus in any way on men, it is worthwhile to speculate about and explore the nature of this silence.

For many women, it is not a simple task to talk about men or to consider writing about men. Within patriarchal society, silence has been for women a gesture of submission and complicity, especially silence about men. Women have faithfully kept male secrets, have passionately refused to speak on the subject of men—who they are, how they think, how they behave, how they dominate. This silence is often learned when we are young female children. Many of us were taught that our fathers, because they were men, were not to be spoken to or about, unless they wished to speak with us, and then they were never to be addressed critically.

Growing up in a male-dominated, southern, black, working-class household, we lived as though in two social spaces. One was a world without the father, when he would go to work, and that world was full of speech. Our volumes could be turned up. We could express ourselves loudly, passionately, outrageously. The other world was a male-dominated social space where sound and silence were dictated by his presence. When he returned home (and we would often wait, watch and listen for the sound of him coming), we would adjust our speech to his mood. We would turn our volumes down, lower our voices; we would, if need be, remain silent. In this same childhood world we witnessed women—our grandmothers, mothers, aunts—speak with force and power in sex-segregated spaces, then retreat into a realm of silence in the presence of men. Our grandmother, who talked endlessly, rapidly, harshly, was an example for me and my sisters of the woman we were not to become. Somehow, her mere love of words, of speech, her willingness to fight back, talk back, had stolen male privilege from my grandfather. She had made him less; she had become less. We knew this from listening to what the adults around us said about her and we feared being like her. We feared speech. We feared the words of a woman who could hold her own in any discussion or argument with a man.

Feminist scholarship about women who are physically assaulted by men is full of autobiographical accounts of males punishing women for speaking, whether we speak to defend ourselves, to engage in critical argument, or just to say something—anything. It is as though the very act of speech, wherein a woman talks to a man, carries embedded in that gesture a challenge, a threat to male domination. Perhaps it was a deeply socialized longing to avoid such speech, such confrontation that led contemporary women to promote a feminist activism that devalued the importance of talk with and about men. Perhaps there was a deep-seated fear

that we would not emerge from such confrontations triumphant, victorious. Perhaps we feared that feminism would fail us. Certainly many individual feminist women, myself included, have experienced that loss of strength and power as we struggled to talk to and with the men in our lives about male domination, about the need for change. Perhaps a profound despair informed and informs feminist feeling that it is useless to talk to men or about men. Yet to maintain this silence, to not resist it collectively, is to surrender the power that emerges with feminist speech.

In much feminist writing, silence is evoked as a signifier, a marker of exploitation, oppression, dehumanization. Silence is the condition of one who has been dominated, made an object; talk is the mark of freeing, of making one subject. Challenging the oppressed to speak as a way to resist and rebel in *Litany for Survival*, poet Audre Lorde writes:

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive

The act of speaking is a way women come to power, telling our stories, sharing history, engaging in feminist discussion. Early on, feminist consciousness-raising sessions provided a space for women to bear witness to the pain of exploitation and oppression in male-dominated society. Breaking through long silences, many women gave voice for the first time to personal sorrow and anguish, rage, bitterness, and even deep hatred. This speech was a part of women's struggle to resist the silence imposed by male domination. It was an act of resistance. And it was threatening. While it was speech that enabled women to rebel and resist, it was only one stage in the process of feminist education for critical consciousness, one stage in the process of radical transformation.

The next stage would have been the confrontation between women and men, the sharing of this new, and radical speech: women speaking to men in a liberated voice. It was this confrontation that has been to a grave extent avoided. Yet it must continually occur if women are to fully enter feminist struggle as subjects and not objects. This confrontational, fundamentally rebellious and defiant feminist speech indicates a change in women's subordinate status. It identifies us as active participants in a revolutionary feminist struggle. In such a struggle, it is essential for the transformation of gender roles, of society that the exploited and oppressed speak to and among ourselves, but it is equally essential that we address without fear those who exploit, oppress, and dominate us. If women remain un-

able to speak to and about men in a feminist voice then our challenge to male domination on other fronts is seriously undermined.

Sexism is unique. It is unlike other forms of domination—racism or classism—where the exploited and oppressed do not live in large numbers intimately with their oppressors or develop their primary love relationships (familial and/or romantic) with individuals who oppress and dominate or share in the privileges attained by domination. Hence, it is all the more necessary that women speak to men in a liberated voice. The context of these intimate relationships is also the site of domination and oppression. When one girl in four is a victim of male incest, one woman in three is raped, and half of all married women are victims of male violence, addressing ways men and women interact with one another daily must be a concern of feminists. Relationships of care and intimacy often mediate contact between women and men within patriarchy so that all men do not necessarily dominate and oppress women. Despite patriarchy and sexism, there is potential among men for education for critical consciousness, there is possibility for radicalization and transformation. As long as a vast majority of women choose to develop and maintain intimate relationships with men, transformation of these encounters so that they do not become a site for male domination and oppression of women must necessarily be an essential focus of feminist struggle.

Contemporary women's movement in the United States has had great impact on individual women struggling to transform their lives, their particular situations. Not surprisingly, women with the greatest degree of class and race privilege have had the greatest success fighting against the constraints imposed by sexism and domination. Their experience is exceptional. Feminist consciousness-raising for women who do not have these privileges may heighten and intensify frustration and despair rather than serving a liberatory function. It may lead to a greater feeling of powerlessness, hopelessness, and set the stage for debilitating depression. This is particularly the case for those non-privileged women who live in relationships with men, who parent, and who see no way to survive economically or obtain economic self-sufficiency alone. While feminist education for critical consciousness, whether it comes in the form of reading feminist writing or sharing feminist thoughts with a friend, may bring critical self-awareness and greater understanding about the forms male domination takes in their lives, it will not enable them to transform their relationships with men. Feminist works that focus on strategies women can use to speak to males about male domination and change are not readily available, if they exist at all. Yet women have a deep longing to share feminist consciousness with the men in their lives, and together work at transforming their relationships. Concern for this basic struggle should motivate feminist thinkers to talk and write more about how we relate to men and how we change and transform relationships with men characterized by domination.

Considering the extent to which masculinity as it is socially constructed within patriarchy encourages males to regard woman's words, woman's talk as without substance or value, or as a potential threat, individual women cannot hope to effectively communicate feminist thinking with male relatives, companions, etc. without carefully considered strategies. We as women really need to hear from one another about how we communicate feminist thinking to men. Struggling to make a context for dialogue between women and men is a subversive and radical task. Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue and connects it to the struggle of the oppressed to become subjects. He stresses that, "Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogical itself. It is thus necessarily the task of responsible Subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination." Freire comments further, "I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love... The distortion imposed on the word *love* by the capitalist world cannot prevent the revolution from being essentially loving in character..." Significantly, male domination suppresses this dialogue that is essential to love, so that women and men cannot hear themselves talking to one another as they go about their daily lives. As feminists speak more to women and men about patriarchy, it is important that we address the truth that circumstances of male domination make authentic, loving relationships between most women and men impossible. We must distinguish between the bonds of care and commitment that develop in a dominant-submissive, subject-object encounter and that care and commitment which emerges in a context of non-domination, of reciprocity, of mutuality. It is this bonding that enables sustained love, that enables men and women to nurture one another, to grow fully and freely.

Male domination has not destroyed the longing men and women have to love one another, even though it makes fulfilling that longing almost impossible to realize. The context of love between males and females is varied and multidimensional (there is the relationship between mother and son, sister and brother, father and daughter, etc.). Whenever this longing to love exists there is present the possibility that the forms of discourse within patriarchy that estrange and alienate women and men from one another can be resisted, that a context for dialogue can be created, that a liberatory exchange can take place. However, dialogue can only emerge if there is awareness that women and men must consciously alter the way we talk to and about one another so that we do not perpetuate and reinforce male domination. Failure to focus on the ways women and men talk to one another or refusal to address this problem because it means we must speak about and/or to men significantly retard feminist movement. Most women

active in feminist struggle—whether it be the efforts of a lesbian daughter to communicate with a father, or the effort wife and husband make, or the efforts of friends—have had to confront males as we try to share feminist thinking. To know the strategies that have made dialogues possible, that have made for reconciliation and communication, would be useful information to share. It will not be shared as long as feminist activists do not assert the primacy of work by women about men.

Many feminist women who teach, who do feminist scholarship have engaged in difficult and often bitter struggles to make a space for dialogue with males in our private and work lives. In these confrontations, we have learned more effective ways to communicate feminist thinking with men. Many of us have tried to make a space for dialogue in our classrooms. When Women's Studies and feminist classrooms were primarily peopled by young women eager to learn and share feminist perspectives, willing to commit themselves to feminist struggle, we were not compelled to develop strategies that would make communication with male students possible. It has been the growing presence of men in my classrooms that has led me to consider both the difficulties that arise when we work to communicate feminist thinking to men and the importance of such communication. This experience has also compelled me to recognize the need for more scholarship by women about men.

Just as love relationships between females and males are a space where feminist struggle to make a context for dialogue can take place, feminist teaching and scholarship can also and must necessarily be a space for dialogue. It is in that space that we share feminist thinking with a willing audience. It is in that space that we can engage in constructive confrontation and critique. Stereotypes that feminist women are man-hating cause many teachers to feel awkward when making critical comments about men, especially when there is the recognition that more and more males need to engage in feminist struggle if there is to be an end to sexist oppression, to male domination. Not wanting to reinforce the stereotype, feminist women professors are often reluctant to discuss masculinity critically, or the ways in which sexism seriously limits men, or we raise these issues in ways that alienate, that convey ridicule, contempt, or our own uncertainty. Feminist scholars must be a vanguard, mapping out a terrain where women can speak to and about men in ways that challenge but do not diminish.

Challenging and changing the way feminist women scholars talk to and about men and promoting more work on men is an important direction for revolutionary feminist struggle. While it is critical that male scholars committed to feminist struggle do scholarship that focusses on men, it is equally important that women scholars focus on men. When women scholars write about men, such work alters the subject-object relationship that has been a sign of our exploited and oppressed state. Our perspective can provide unique and critical insight, as well as connecting us intimate-

ly with the day-to-day struggle of all women who are seeking to make a space for dialogue with men, a space that is not shaped by domination. Rather than focussing on men in a way that renders them objects, feminist scholarship on men by women is informed by a politic that resists domination, that is humanizing and liberatory. This feminist scholarship is informed by the longing for a subject-to-subject encounter, by the longing for a meeting place, a place for solidarity where women can speak to and/or about men in a feminist voice, where our words can be heard, where we can speak the truth that heals, that transforms—that makes feminist revolution.