





analysis, became a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. Fundamentally, I learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place.

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller lets us know in her introduction to the book *Prisoners of Childhood*,<sup>2</sup> that it was her own personal struggle to recover from the wounds of childhood that led her to rethink and theorize anew prevailing social and critical thought about the meaning of childhood pain, of child abuse. In her adult life, through her practice, she experienced theory as a healing place. Significantly, she had to imagine herself in the space of childhood, to look again from that perspective, to remember "crucial information, answers to questions which had gone unanswered throughout [her] study of philosophy and psychoanalysis." When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately

expansive perspective on the theorizing process .

**BREAK HERE**

Critical reflection on contemporary production of feminist theory makes it apparent that the shift from early conceptualizations of feminist theory which

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indulgent practice that most seeks to create a gap between theory and practice so as to perpetuate class elitism. There are so many settings in this country where the written word has only slight visual meaning, where individuals who cannot read or write can find no use for a published theory however lucid or opaque. Hence, any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public.

Imagine what a change has come about within feminist movements when students, most of whom are female, come to women's studies classes and read what they are told is feminist theory only to feel that what they are reading has no meaning, cannot be understood, or when understood in no way connects to "lived" realities beyond the classroom. As feminist activists we might ask ourselves of what use is feminist theory that assaults the fragile psyches of women struggling to throw off patriarchy's oppressive yoke. We might ask ourselves, of what use is feminist theory that literally beats them down, leaves them stumbling bleary-eyed from classroom settings feeling humiliated, feeling as though they could easily be standing in a living room or bedroom somewhere naked with someone who has seduced them or is going to, who also subjects them to a process of interaction that humiliates, that strips them of their sense of value. Clearly, a feminist theory that can do this may function to legitimize women's studies and feminist scholarship in the eyes of the ruling patriarchy, but it undermines and subverts feminist movements. Perhaps, it is the existence of this most highly visible feminist theory that compels us to talk about the gap between theory and practice. For it is indeed the purpose of such theory to divide, separate, exclude, keep at a distance. And because this theory continues to be used to silence, censor, and devalue various feminist theoretical voices, we cannot simply ignore it. Concurrently, despite its uses as an instrument of domination, it may also contain important ideas, thoughts, visions, that could, if used differently, serve a healing, liberatory function. However, we cannot ignore the dangers it poses to feminist struggle which must be rooted in a theory that informs, shapes, and makes feminist practice possible.

Within feminist circles, many women have responded to hegemonic feminist theory that does not speak clearly to us by this hegemonic trashing theory, and as a consequence, further promoting the false dichotomy between theory and practice. Hence, they collude with those whom they would oppose. By internalizing the false assumption that theory is not a social practice, they promote the formation within feminist circles of a potentially oppressive hierarchy where all concrete action is

or do without. I felt that we were engaged in a process of critical dialogue and theorizing that has long been taboo. Hence, from my perspective, we were charting new journeys, claiming for ourselves as black women an intellectual terrain where we could begin the collective construction of feminist theory.

In many black settings, I have witnessed the dismissal of intellectuals, the putting down of theory, and remained silent. I have come to see that silence as an act of complicity, one that helps perpetuate the idea that we can engage in revolutionary black liberation and/or feminist struggle without theory. Like many insurgent black intellectuals, whose intellectual work and teaching is often done in predominately white settings, I am often so pleased to be engaged with a collective group of black folks that I do not want to make waves, or make myself an outsider by disagreeing with the group. In such settings, when the work of intellectuals is devalued, I have in the past rarely contested prevailing assumptions, or spoken affirmatively or ecstatically about intellectual process. Afraid that if I took a stance that would insist on the importance of intellectual work, particularly theorizing, or if I just simply stated that I thought it was important to read widely, I would risk being seen as uppity, or as lording it over. Thus I have often remained silent.

Risking these blows to sense of self now seem trite when considered in relation to the crisis we are facing as African Americans, to our desperate need to rekindle and sustain the flame of black liberation struggle. At the gathering I mentioned, I dared to speak, saying in response to the suggestion that we were just wasting our time talking, that I saw our words as an action, that our collective struggle to discuss issues of gender and blackness without censorship was as subversive a practice. Urging us to consider that many of the issues that we continue to confront as black people—low self-esteem, intensified nihilism and despair, repressed rage and violence that destroys our physical and psychological well-being—cannot be addressed by survival strategies that have worked in the past. Insisting to the group that we need new theories that can move us towards revolutionary struggle rooted in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance struggle that would transform our

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current reality, I was, however, not rigorous and relentless as I would have been in a different setting in my efforts to emphasize the importance of intellectual work, the production of theory as a social practice that can be liberatory. Though not afraid to speak, I did not want to be seen as the one who "spoiled" the good time, the collective sense of sweet solidarity in blackness. This fear reminded me of what it was like more than ten years ago to be in feminist settings, posing questions about theory and practice, particularly about issues of race and racism that were seen as potentially disruptive of sisterhood and solidarity.

It seemed ironic that at a gathering called to honor a black male leader who had often dared to speak and act in resistance to the status quo, black women were still negating our right to engage in oppositional political dialogue and debate, especially since this is not a common occurrence in black communities. Why did the black women there feel the need to police one another, to deny one another a space within blackness where we could unself-consciously talk theory? Why, when we could celebrate together the power of a black male critical thinker who dared to stand apart, was there this eagerness to repress any viewpoint that would suggest we might collectively learn from the ideas and visions of insurgent black female intellectuals/theorists who by the nature of the work they do are necessarily breaking with that stereotype that would have us believe that the "real" black woman is always the one who speaks from the gut, who righteously praises the concrete over the abstract, the material over the theoretical?

Again and again, black women find our efforts to speak, to break silences that would enable us to engage in radical progressive political debates on a number of fronts, opposed. There is a link between the silencing we experience, the censoring, the anti-intellectualism in predominantly black settings that are supposedly supportive (like all-black woman space), and that silencing that takes place in institutions wherein black women/women of color are told that we cannot be fully heard or listened to because our work is not theoretical enough. Cultural critic Kobena Mercer reminds us that "blackness is . . . complex and multifaceted" and that "black people can be interpolated into reactionary and anti-democratic politics."<sup>10</sup> Just as some elite academics who construct theories of "blackness" in ways that make it a critical terrain which only the chosen few can enter, using theoretical work on race to assert their authority over black experience, denying democratic access to the process of theory making, threaten collective black liberation struggle, so do those among us who react to this by promoting anti-intellectualism by declaring all theory as worthless. By reinforcing the idea that there is a split between theory and practice or by creating such a

talk-to be most meaningful that which invites readers to engage in critical reflection and to engage in the practice of feminism. To me, this theory emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to critically intervene in my life and the lives of others. This to me is what makes feminist transformation possible. Personal testimony, personal experience, is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory because usually it forms the base of our theory making. While we work to resolve those issues (our need for literacy, for an end to violence against women and children, women's health and reproductive rights, our need for housing, for sexual freedom, etc. to name a few) that are most pressing in daily life, we engage in a critical process of theorizing that enables and empowers. I continue to be amazed that there is so much feminist

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writing produced and yet so little feminist theory that strives to speak to women, men and children about ways we might transform our lives via a conversion to feminist politics, to feminist practice. Where can we find a body of feminist theory that is directed toward helping individuals integrate feminist thinking and practice into daily life? For example, what feminist theory is directed toward assisting women who live in sexist households in their efforts to bring about feminist change?

We know that many individuals in the United States have used feminist thinking to educate themselves in ways that allow them to transform their lives. I am often critical of a lifestyle-based feminism, because I fear that any feminist transformational process that seeks to change society is easily co-opted if it is not rooted in a political commitment to mass based feminist movement. Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, we have already witnessed the commodification of feminist thinking



reflection, about using this feminist work to understand the implications of patriarchy as a force shaping their identities, their ideas of manhood. After

our meeting, our theorizing of race, gender and sexuality that afternoon had eased her pain, testifying that she could feel the hurt going away, that she could feel a healing taking place within. Holding my hands, standing body to body, eye to eye, she allowed me to empathically share the warmth of that healing. She wanted me to bear witness, to hear again both the naming of her pain and the power that emerged when she felt the hurt go away.

It is not easy to name our pain, to make it a location for theorizing. Patricia Williams in her essay, *On Being the Object of Property*,<sup>4</sup> names that even those of us who are "aware" are made to feel the pain that all forms of domination (homophobia, class exploitation, racism, sexism, imperialism) engender. Sharing from her experience, Patricia Williams says:

There are moments in my life when I feel as though a part of me is missing. There are days when I feel so invisible that I can't remember what day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can't remember my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to the people who love me best. These are the times when I catch sight of my reflection in store windows and am surprised to see a whole person looking back . . . . I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal pattern that is smooth and whole."<sup>5</sup>

It is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that location. I am grateful to the many women and men who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys. Their work is liberatory. It not only enables us to remember and recover ourselves, it charges and challenges us to renew our commitment to an active, inclusive feminist struggle. We have still to collectively make feminist revolution. I am grateful that we are collectively searching as feminist thinkers/theorists for ways to make this movement happen. Our search leads us back to where it all began, to that moment when an individual woman or child, who may have thought she was all alone, began feminist uprising, began to name her practice, indeed began to formulate theory from lived experience.

14. WILLIAMS, *On Being the Object of Property*, in  
216 (1991).  
at 228-29.

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Let us imagine that this woman or child was suffering the pain of sexism and sexist oppression, that she wanted to make the hurt go away. I am grateful that I can be a witness, testifying that we can create a feminist theory, a feminist practice, a revolutionary feminist movement that can speak directly to the pain that is within folks, and offer them healing words, healing strategies, healing theory. There is no one among us who has not felt the pain of sexism and sexist oppression, the anguish that male domination can create in daily life, the profound and unrelenting misery and sorrow.

**Mari** Matsuda told us today that "we are fed a lie that there is no pain in She told us that patriarchy makes this pain possible. Catharine MacKinnon reminded us that "we know things with our lives and we live that knowledge, beyond what any theory has yet theorized.""<sup>7</sup> Making this theory is the challenge before us. For in its production lies the hope of our liberation, in its production lies

between feminist theory and feminist practice.

**16. Matsuda, speech given at the Conference (Feb. 9, 1991).**

17. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *From Practice to Theory, or* *Isa White Woman Anyway?*, 4 YALE L. & (1991).