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## X. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Politics of White Feminists Conducting Research on Black Women in South Africa

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I was born in South Africa into a white, upper-class English-speaking Anglican family. In 1962, at the age of 22, I joined the African Resistance Movement, an underground revolutionary organization that bombed government property to destabilize the economy and to protest against apartheid. I left South Africa to study in the United States of America before this organization was decimated by the police in 1964. I ended up staying in the USA and making my home base in the San Francisco Bay Area. In my early 30s, I became a feminist, a perspective which has been central to my life and work ever since.

Still deeply troubled by apartheid, I went back to South Africa in 1987 to interview women in the liberation movement, most of whom were black. My goal in 'representing the Other' was to provide them with the opportunity to publicize their cause in the USA and to move Americans to support the armed struggle against apartheid. Most recently, I conducted interviews with incest survivors in South Africa between 1991 and 1993 (Russell, 1995). Each project posed special dilemmas in terms of 'representing the Other,' but here I will focus on the more recent experience and the special problems of conducting research on a taboo subject.

My objective was to provide research material that would support the South African women who were demanding violence against women be given greater priority. Most anti-apartheid supporters considered the oppression of women to be a trivial and irrelevant problem, distracting progressive people from the struggle against racism. I wanted to publicize some accounts of women's personal experiences of male violence, because such stories have often succeeded in

breaking through people's intellectual and ideological defenses, making it more difficult for them to dismiss these manifestations of sexism as insignificant.

I decided to focus on incestuous abuse — the most neglected and misunderstood form of violence against females in South Africa. I hoped that this choice would help to bring this particularly taboo and heinous form of sexual exploitation out of the crowded South African closet. Feminists have been quite successful at raising people's awareness about rape in South Africa, starting the first Rape Crisis Center in 1976, and the first battered women's shelter several years later (Mayne, 1989). But they have been much slower to confront the problem of incestuous abuse.

Were I to have interviewed incest survivors in proportion to the racial composition of South Africa in 1991, 75 percent of them would have been African, 14 percent white, 9 percent coloured and 3 percent Indian South African. Thus most of my interviewees would have been of another race than mine. More importantly, they would have been from racial/ethnic groups that have long been — and continue to be — severely oppressed by white South Africans.

Although traditional survey researchers have often denied the relevance of power and status differences between interviewers and interviewees, as feminists we must strive to be aware of the impact these differences typically have on the quality and content of the information obtained. This serious methodological problem would have been compounded by the political problems entailed had I, a white woman, interviewed black incest survivors. In the USA, Britain and Germany, many feminists of color, as well as white feminists, would consider my conducting such interviews to be politically insensitive and unacceptable. Even were I to disagree with this assessment, the fact that many other feminists subscribe to this view would probably diminish, or even destroy, the positive consequences that might otherwise result from this research.

On the other hand, it could be argued that it would be wrong — perhaps even an example of cultural imperialism — to assume that the political assessment of my conducting this research would be the same in South Africa as in Western nations. Indeed, the very definition of racism frequently differs in South Africa and the USA.

For example, an African-American feminist took me to task because she felt I was being critical of a black South African woman's notion of feminism in an article I had written (1989a). I disagreed that I had been critical, but more to the point, I told her that I had asked the two black South African feminists whose views were the subject of this piece, for their corrections or objections, if any, before I submitted it for publication. They both loved it. The African-American woman considered this irrelevant. I wondered if this wasn't an example of cultural imperialism: assuming that she knew what black South Africans *should* feel about the article, assuming that her principles, according to which I was guilty of racism, were superior to theirs, and assuming that she was in a position to judge the situation better than I was, although she had never visited South Africa or been a student of South African politics.

The dominant liberation politics in South Africa, reflected in the policies of the African National Congress (ANC), explicitly rejects evaluating someone on the basis of their race/color/ethnicity. Not a single black South African anti-apartheid activist whom I requested to interview for my book, *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa* (1989b), expressed disapproval of the fact that I was white and/or suspicion of my motives. To assume that these women were all being Aunt Tomasinas, because this is how such behavior might be interpreted in the USA, for example, could be viewed as insulting, matronizing and imperialistic.

Given the demographic and political realities described above, additional dilemmas were posed by the research topic itself — incestuous abuse. Women's incest stories typically portray their families in an extremely negative light, often evoking readers' feelings of anger, disgust, outrage, contempt and moral condemnation. Although the research would merely reflect the ratio of blacks to whites in the population at large, the experience of reading seven gruesome portraits of black families for every one such portrait of a white family would inevitably create the impression that black families are uglier and more reprehensible than white families. Statements by me to the contrary would be unlikely to erase this impression. In a country still dominated at the time by whites, whose racism continues to be deeply entrenched, this depiction of the black community would undoubtedly exacerbate white racism.

Many white South Africans smugly believe that incestuous abuse rarely occurs in their communities, yet believe that it is common in black communities. Some feminists and black South Africans, very few of whom are feminist, would argue that research that appears to reinforce rather than dispel this illusion, is irresponsible and racist. They might well denounce me as a racist for bolstering destructive stereotypes of the black community.

The negative impression of black families could also reinforce some black people's already internalized beliefs that blacks are more likely to commit heinous personal crimes of violence than are whites. White South African feminist Ann Mayne notes that although:

a significantly higher incidence of rape of black women by white men was reported to the [South African] police than vice versa, both white and black audiences are surprised when we report these statistics because they've really bought the myth ... that whites don't do such nasty things as rape and batter their wives (1989: 232–3).

For these and other research-related reasons (for example, it was much easier for me to locate volunteer incest survivors who were white), I stopped interviewing black survivors and limited my study to white women. This choice was also fraught with dilemmas, however, including the fact that this radical change in research design got me into considerable trouble with my white-dominated South African funding agency — the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Boycotted for years by progressive South Africans for serving the interests of the

white Afrikaner government, the HSRC was supposed to be cleaning up its act in 1993 by becoming more open to the concerns of black people. My decision to limit my study to white survivors was contrary to the new image they wanted to project. Despite the lengthy rationale I provided for the HSRC, and despite their gross under-funding of this research (approximately \$8000 for a full-time, one-year research project), they threatened to withdraw some of their funds.

Two of the reviewers of my Final Report on this research questioned my objectivity (as if this were a quality that they possessed). One of them objected to my statement that most white South Africans would be shocked to find out how much incest was happening in their families, given their racist belief that such despicable behavior is largely confined to black families (personal communication by Evaluator 2, 11 May 1994). The other reviewer commented:

The impression has been created, rightly or wrongly, that this research was done from a feminist frame of reference and the question can be posed whether this has influenced the objectivity of the researcher and consequently the scientific value of the investigation (personal communication by Evaluator 3, 11 May 1994).

Having abandoned my original research design primarily because of my concerns about the likely racist consequences, does not free me from charges of racism. Some people, both within and outside South Africa, will almost certainly consider me racist for limiting my research to whites. Because the findings will be limited to a small group of white women, they may more readily be dismissed as insignificant and unworthy of serious attention, particularly by the new, democratically elected government in South Africa. The problem isn't only in the small size of the white community. If a member of the 'coloured' community (only 9 percent of the population) were to limit her/his research to 'coloured' women, it would probably not be viewed as racist.

If it is 'a form of colonisation' to 'speak for or assume another's voice' (Dyke, 1990: 4), should I, an English South African-born woman, also have excluded white Afrikaners from my study? Afrikaners — the white descendants of early Dutch, German and Huguenot settlers — constitute 56 percent of white South Africans. Although no simple power relationship exists between Afrikaners and English South Africans, English ethnocentrism, in the form of a robust assumption of superiority vis-a-vis Afrikaners, has a long history in South Africa.

Since I *have* included Afrikaners in my study, I could be faulted for being inconsistent and/or racist in thinking that it is acceptable to include a white ethnic group of which I am not a member while excluding all black groups. Certainly, many Afrikaners are likely to protest the very negative picture of their families that emerges in my study, and to argue against its validity on one ground or another.

If I believed that feminists should never represent 'the Other', I would have

confined my study to English South Africans, who constitute a mere 43 percent of whites (i.e. 6–7 percent of the total population). I should also have excluded all Jews and middle- and working-class English South African women. Let us not forget that some incest survivors also feel they cannot be understood by people who were never similarly abused. To avoid accusations of 'colonization', must I be willing to explain where I stand in 'representing the Other', to the interviewees and/or in my publications? This would require describing my sexual preference, my history of sexual assault, my age, for example — admissions that are likely to have a great impact on some women.

If I accepted that feminists should never represent 'the Other', I would have to confine my research to upper-class, white, South African-born ex-Anglican women in their 50s, who now live in the US of America. If we do not continue to 'take on the whole world,' many of us could not do research or publish materials that contribute to furthering radical feminist goals.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Kate McKinley for her helpful editing suggestions. I am also indebted to Barbara Smith for my title ('Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Relationships Between Black and Jewish Women', in *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*. New York: Long Haul Press, 1984).

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