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## FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: LOCATING THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE

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Feminist and anti-racist struggles in the 1990s face some of the same urgent questions encountered in the 1970s. After two decades of engagement in feminist political activism and scholarship in a variety of sociopolitical and geographical locations, questions of difference (sex, race, class, nation), experience and history remain at the centre of feminist analysis. Only, at least in the U.S. academy, feminists no longer have to contend as they did in the 1970s with phallogentric denials of the legitimacy of gender as a category of analysis. Instead, the crucial questions in the 1990s concern the construction, examination and, most significantly, the institutionalization of difference *within* feminist discourses. It is this institutionalization of difference that concerns me here. Specifically, I ask the following question: how does the politics of location in the contemporary U.S.A. determine and produce experience and difference as analytical and political categories in feminist "cross-cultural" work? By the term "politics of location" I refer to the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self-definition for contemporary U.S. feminists.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1970s, there have been key paradigm shifts in western feminist theory. These shifts can be traced to political, historical, methodological, and philosophical developments in our understanding of questions of power, struggle, and social transformation. Feminists have drawn on decolonization movements around the world, on movements for racial equality, on peasant struggles and gay and lesbian movements, as well as on the methodologies of Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and post-structuralism to situate our thinking in the 1990s. While these developments have often led to progressive, indeed radical analyses of sexual difference, the focus on questions of subjectivity and identity which is a hallmark of contemporary feminist theory has also had some problematic effects in the area of race and Third World/postcolonial studies. One problematic effect of the post-modern critique of essentialist notions of identity has been the dissolution of the category of race—however, this is often accomplished at the expense of a recognition of racism. Another effect has been the generation of discourses of diversity and pluralism which are grounded in an apolitical, often individualized identity politics.<sup>2</sup> Here, questions of *historical interconnection* are transformed into questions of discrete and separate histories (or even herstories) and into questions

of identity politics.<sup>3</sup> While I cannot deal with such effects in detail here, I work through them in a limited way by suggesting the importance of analysing and theorizing difference in the context of feminist cross-cultural work. Through this theorization of experience, I suggest that historicizing and locating political agency is a necessary alternative to formulations of the "universality" of gendered oppression and struggles. This universality of gender oppression is problematic, based as it is on the assumption that the categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible. In the 1990s, the challenges posed by black and Third World feminists can point the way towards a more precise, transformative feminist politics. Thus, the juncture of feminist and anti-racist/Third World/post-colonial studies is of great significance, materially as well as methodologically.<sup>4</sup>

Feminist analyses which attempt to cross national, racial, and ethnic boundaries produce and reproduce difference in particular ways. This codification of difference occurs through the naturalization of analytic categories which are supposed to have cross-cultural validity. I attempt an analysis of two recent feminist texts which address the turn of the century directly. Both texts also foreground analytic categories which address questions of cross-cultural, cross-national differences among women. Robin Morgan's "Planetary Feminism: The Politics of the 21st Century" and Bernice Johnson Reagon's "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" are both *movement* texts and are written for diverse mass audiences. Morgan's essay forms the introduction to her 1984 book, *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, while Reagon's piece was first given as a talk at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in 1981, and has since been published in Barbara Smith's 1983 anthology, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.<sup>5</sup> Both essays construct contesting notions of experience, difference, and struggle within and across cultural boundaries. I stage an encounter between these texts because they represent for me, despite their differences from each other, an alternative presence—a thought, an idea, a record of activism and struggle—which can help me both locate and position myself in relation to "history." Through this presence, and with these texts, I can hope to approach the end of the century and not be overwhelmed....

#### "A Place on the Map is Also a Place in History"<sup>6</sup>

The last decade has witnessed the publication of numerous feminist writings on what is generally referred to as an international women's movement, and we have its concrete embodiment in *Sisterhood Is Global*, a text which in fact describes itself as "The International Women's Movement Anthology." There is considerable difference between international feminist networks organized around specific issues like sex-tourism and multinational exploitation of women's work, and the notion of an international women's movement which, as I attempt to demonstrate, implicitly *assumes* global or universal sisterhood. But it is best to begin by recognizing the significance and value of the publication of an anthology such as this. The value of documenting the indigenous histories of women's struggles is unquestionable.

Morgan states that the book took twelve years in conception and development, five years in actual work, and innumerable hours in networking and fundraising. It is obvious that without Morgan's vision and perseverance this anthology would not have been published. The range of writing represented is truly impressive. At a time when most of the globe seems to be taken over by religious fundamentalism and big business, and the colonization of space takes precedence over survival concerns, an anthology that documents women's organized resistance has significant value in helping us envision a better future. In fact, it is because I recognize the value and importance of this anthology that I am concerned about the political implications of Morgan's framework for cross-cultural comparison. Thus my comments and criticisms are intended to encourage a greater internal self-consciousness within feminist politics and writing, not to lay blame or induce guilt.

Universal sisterhood is produced in Morgan's text through specific assumptions about women as a cross-culturally singular, homogeneous group with the same interests, perspectives and goals and similar experiences. Morgan's definitions of "women's experience" and history lead to a particular self-presentation of western women, a specific codification of differences among women, and eventually to what I consider to be problematic suggestions for political strategy.<sup>7</sup> Since feminist discourse is productive of analytic categories and strategic decisions which have material effects, the construction of the category of universal sisterhood in a text which is widely read deserves attention. In addition, *Sisterhood Is Global* is still the only text which proclaims itself as the anthology of the international women's movement. It has had worldwide distribution, and Robin Morgan herself has earned the respect of feminists everywhere. And since authority is always charged with responsibility, the discursive production and dissemination of notions of universal sisterhood is a significant political event which perhaps solicits its own analysis.

Morgan's explicit intent is "to further the dialogue between and solidarity of women everywhere" (p. 8). This is a valid and admirable project to the extent that one is willing to assume, if not the reality, then at least the possibility, of universal sisterhood on the basis of shared good will. But the moment we attempt to articulate the operation of contemporary imperialism with the notion of an international women's movement based on global sisterhood, the awkward political implications of Morgan's task become clear. Her particular notion of universal sisterhood seems predicated on the erasure of the history and effects of contemporary imperialism. Robin Morgan seems to situate *all* women (including herself) outside contemporary world history, leading to what I see as her ultimate suggestion that transcendence rather than engagement is the model for future social change. And this, I think, is a model which can have dangerous implications for women who do not and cannot speak from a location of white, western, middle-class privilege. A place on the map (New York City) is, after all, also a locatable place in history.

What is the relation between experience and politics in Robin Morgan's text? In "Planetary Feminism" the category of "women's experience" is constructed

within two parameters: woman as victim, and, woman as truth-teller. Morgan suggests that it is not mystical or biological commonalities which characterize women across cultures and histories, but rather a common condition and world view. . . . This may be convincing up to a point, but the political analysis that underlies this characterization of the commonality among women is shaky at best. At various points in the essay, this "common condition" that women share is referred to as the suffering inflicted by a universal "patriarchal mentality" (p. 1), women's opposition to male power and androcentrism, and the experience of rape, battery, labour and childbirth. For Morgan, the magnitude of suffering experienced by most of the women in the world leads to their potential power as a world political force, a force constituted in opposition to Big Brother in the U.S., Western and Eastern Europe, Moscow, China, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. The assertion that women constitute a potential world political force is suggestive; however, Big Brother is *not exactly the same* even in, say, the U.S. and Latin America. Despite the similarity of power interests and location, the two contexts present significant differences in the manifestations of power and hence of the possibility of struggles against it. I part company with Morgan when she seems to believe that Big Brother is the same the world over because "he" simply represents male interests, notwithstanding particular imperial histories or the role of monopoly capital in different countries.

In Morgan's analysis, women are unified by their shared perspective (for example, opposition to war), shared goals (betterment of human beings) and shared experience of oppression. Here the homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials (Morgan offers a rich, layered critique of biological materialism), but rather through the psychologization of complex and contradictory historical and cultural realities. This leads in turn to the assumption of women as a unified group on the basis of secondary sociological universals. What binds women together is an ahistorical notion of the sameness of their oppression and, consequently, the sameness of their struggles. Therefore in Morgan's text cross-cultural comparisons are based on the assumption of the singularity and homogeneity of women as a *group*. This homogeneity of women as a group, is, in turn, predicated on a definition of the *experience of oppression* where difference can only be understood as male/female. . . .

Assumptions pertaining to the relation of experience to history are evident in Morgan's discussion of another aspect of women's experience: woman as truth-teller. According to her, women speak of the "real" unsullied by "rhetoric" or "diplomatic abstractions." They, as opposed to men (also a coherent singular group in this analytic economy), are authentic human beings whose "freedom of choice" has been taken away from them: "Our emphasis is on the individual voice of a woman speaking not as an official representative of her country, but rather as a truth-teller, with an emphasis on reality as opposed to rhetoric" (p. xvi). In addition, Morgan asserts that women social scientists are "freer of androcentric bias" and "more likely to elicit more trust and . . . more honest responses from female respondents of their studies" (p. xvii). There is an argument to be made for

women interviewing women, but I do not think this is it. The assumptions underlying these statements indicate to me that Morgan thinks women have some kind of privileged access to the "real," the "truth," and can elicit "trust" from other women purely on the basis of their being not-male. There is a problematic conflation here of the biological and the psychological with the discursive and the ideological. "Women" are collapsed into the "suppressed feminine" and men into the dominant ideology....

What, then, does this analysis suggest about the status of experience in this text? In Morgan's account, women have a sort of cross-cultural coherence as distinct from men. The status or position of women is assumed to be self-evident. However, this focus on the position of women whereby women are seen as a coherent group in *all* contexts, regardless of class or ethnicity, structures the world in ultimately Manichaean terms, where women are always seen in opposition to men, patriarchy is always essentially the invariable phenomenon of male domination, and the religious, legal, economic, and familial systems are implicitly assumed to be constructed by men. Here, men and women are seen as whole groups with *already constituted* experiences as groups, and questions of history, conflict, and difference are formulated from what can only be this privileged location of knowledge.

I am bothered, then, by the fact that Morgan can see contemporary imperialism only in terms of a "patriarchal mentality" which is enforced by men as a group. Women across class, race, and national boundaries are participants to the extent that we are "caught up in political webs not of our making which we are powerless to unravel" (p. 25). Since women as a unified group are seen as unimplicated in the process of history and contemporary imperialism, the logical strategic response for Morgan appears to be political transcendence: "To fight back in solidarity, however, as a real political force requires that women transcend the patriarchal barriers of class and race, and furthermore, transcend even the solutions the Big Brothers propose to the problems they themselves created" (p. 18). Morgan's emphasis on women's transcendence is evident in her discussions of 1) women's deep opposition to nationalism as practised in patriarchal society, and 2) women's involvement in peace and disarmament movements across the world, because, in her opinion, they desire peace (as opposed to men who cause war). Thus, the concrete reality of women's involvement in peace movements is substituted by an abstract "desire" for peace which is supposed to transcend race, class, and national conflicts among women. Tangible responsibility and credit for organizing peace movements is replaced by an essentialist and psychological unifying desire. The problem is that in this case women are not seen as political agents; they are merely allowed to be well intentioned. Although Morgan does offer some specific suggestions for political strategy which require resisting "the system," her fundamental suggestion is that women transcend the left, the right, and the centre, the law of the father, God, and the system. Since women have been analytically constituted outside real politics or history, progress for them can only be seen in terms of transcendence.

The *experience* of struggle is thus defined as both personal and ahistorical. In other words, the political is *limited to* the personal and all conflicts among and within women are flattened. If sisterhood itself is defined on the basis of personal intentions, attitudes, or desires, conflict is also automatically constructed on only the psychological level. Experience is thus written in as simultaneously individual (that is, located in the individual body/psyche of woman) and general (located in women as a preconstituted collective). There seem to be two problems with this definition. First, experience is seen as being immediately accessible, understood and named. The complex relationships between behaviour and its representation are either ignored or made irrelevant; experience is collapsed into discourse and vice-versa. Second, since experience has a fundamentally psychological status, questions of history and collectivity are formulated on the level of attitude and intention. In effect, the sociality of collective struggles is understood in terms of something like individual-group relations, relations which are common-sensically seen as detached from history. If the assumption of the *sameness* of experience is what ties woman (individual) to women (group), regardless of class, race, nation, and sexualities, the notion of experience is anchored firmly in the notion of the individual self, a determined and specifiable constituent of European modernity. However, this notion of the individual needs to be self-consciously historicized if as feminists we wish to go beyond the limited bourgeois ideology of individualism, especially as we attempt to understand what cross-cultural sisterhood might be made to mean. ...

Universal sisterhood, defined as the transcendence of the "male" world, thus ends up being a middle-class, psychologized notion which effectively erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women, especially between First and Third World women (and, paradoxically, removes us all as actors from history and politics). It is in this erasure of difference as inequality and dependence that the privilege of Morgan's political "location" might be visible. Ultimately in this reductive utopian vision, men *participate* in politics while women can only hope to *transcend* them. Morgan's notion of universal sisterhood *does* construct a unity. However, for me, the real challenge arises in being able to craft a notion of political unity without relying on the logic of appropriation and incorporation and, just as significantly, a denial of *agency*. For me the unity of women is best understood not as *given*, on the basis of a natural/psychological commonality; it is something that has to be worked for, struggled towards—in *history*. What we need to do is articulate ways in which the historical forms of oppression relate to the category "women," and not to try to deduce one from the other. In other words, it is Morgan's formulation of the relation of synchronous, alternative histories (herstories) to a diachronic, dominant historical narrative (History) that is problematic. One of the tasks of feminist analysis is uncovering alternative, non-identical histories which challenge and disrupt the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic history. However, sometimes attempts to uncover and locate alternative histories code these very histories as either totally dependent on and deter-

mined by a dominant narrative, or as isolated and autonomous narratives, untouched in their essence by the dominant figurations. In these rewritings, what is lost is the recognition that it is the very co-implication of histories with History which helps us situate and understand oppositional agency. In Morgan's text, it is the move to characterize alternative herstories as separate and different from history that results in a denial of feminist agency. And it is this potential repositioning of the relation of oppositional histories/spaces to a dominant historical narrative that I find valuable in Bernice Reagon's discussion of coalition politics.

### "It Ain't Home No More": Rethinking Unity

While Morgan uses the notion of sisterhood to construct a cross-cultural unity of women and speaks of "planetary feminism as the politics of the 21st century," Bernice Johnson Reagon uses *coalition* as the basis to talk about the cross-cultural commonality of struggles, identifying *survival*, rather than *shared oppression*, as the ground for coalition. She begins with this valuable political reminder: "You don't go into coalition because you *like* it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive" (p. 357).

The governing metaphor Reagon uses to speak of coalition, difference and struggle is that of a "barred room." However, whereas Morgan's barred room might be owned and controlled by the Big Brothers in different countries, Reagon's internal critique of the contemporary left focuses on the barred rooms constructed by oppositional political movements such as feminist, civil rights, gay and lesbian, and chicano political organizations. She maintains that these barred rooms may provide a "nurturing space" for a little while, but they ultimately provide an illusion of community based on isolation and the freezing of difference. Thus, while sameness of experience, oppression, culture, et cetera. may be adequate to construct this space, the moment we "get ready to clean house" this very sameness in community is exposed as having been built on a debilitating ossification of difference.

Reagon is concerned with differences *within* political struggles, and the negative effects, in the long run, of a nurturing, "nationalist" perspective: "At a certain stage nationalism is crucial to a people if you are going to ever impact as a group in your own interest. Nationalism at another point becomes reactionary because it is totally inadequate for surviving in the world with many peoples" (p. 358). This is similar to Gramsci's analysis of oppositional political strategy in terms of the difference between wars of manoeuvre (separation and consolidation) and wars of position (re-entry into the mainstream in order to challenge it on its own terms). Reagon's insistence on breaking out of barred rooms and struggling for coalition is a recognition of the importance—indeed the inevitable necessity—of wars of position. It is based, I think, on a recognition of the need to resist the imperatives of an expansionist U.S. state, and of imperial History. It is also, however, a recognition of the limits of identity politics. For once you open the door and let others in, "the room don't feel like the room no more. And it ain't home no more" (p. 359).

The relation of coalition to home is a central metaphor for Reagon. She speaks of coalition as opposed, by definition, to home.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the confusion of home with coalition is what concerns her as an urgent problem, and it is here that the status of experience in her text becomes clear. She criticizes the idea of enforcing "women-only" or "woman-identified" space by using an "in-house" definition of woman. What concerns her is not a sameness which allows us to identify with each other as women, but the exclusions particular normative definitions of "woman" enforce. It is the exercise of violence in creating a legitimate *inside* and an illegitimate *outside* in the name of identity that is significant to her—or, in other words, the exercise of violence when unity or coalition is confused with home and used to enforce a premature sisterhood or solidarity. According to her this "comes from taking a word like 'women' and using it as a code" (p. 360). The experience of being woman can create an illusory unity, for it is not the experience of being woman, but the meanings attached to gender, race, class, and age at various historical moments that is of strategic significance.

Thus, by calling into question the term "woman" as the automatic basis of unity, Bernice Reagon would want to splinter the notion of experience suggested by Robin Morgan. Her critique of nationalist and culturalist positions, which after an initial necessary period of consolidation work in harmful and exclusionary ways, provides us with a fundamentally political analytic space for an understanding of experience. By always insisting on an analysis of the operations and effects of power in our attempts to create alternative communities, Reagon foregrounds our *strategic* locations and positionings. Instead of separating experience and politics and basing the latter on the former, she emphasizes the politics that always define and inform experience (in particular, in left, anti-racist and feminist communities). By examining the differences and potential divisions *within* political subjects as well as collectives, Reagon offers an implicit critique of totalizing theories of history and social change. She underscores the significance of the traditions of political struggle, what she calls an "old-age perspective"—and this is, I would add, a global perspective. What is significant, however, is that the global is forged on the basis of memories and counter-narratives, not on an ahistorical universalism. For Reagon, global, old-age perspectives are founded on humility, the gradual chipping away of our assumed, often ethnocentric centres of self/other definitions.

Thus, her particular location and political priorities lead her to emphasize a politics of engagement (a war of position), and to interrogate totalizing notions of difference and the identification of exclusive spaces as "homes." Perhaps it is partly also her insistence on the urgency and difficult nature of political struggle that leads Reagon to talk about difference in terms of racism, while Morgan often formulates difference in terms of cultural pluralism. This is Bernice Reagon's way of "throwing yourself into the next century":

Most of us think that the space we live in is the most important space there is, and that the condition we find ourselves in is the condition that must be changed or else. That is only partially the case. If you analyse the situation properly, you will know that there

might be a few things you can do in your personal, individual interest so that you can experience and enjoy change. But most of the things that you do, if you do them right, are for people who live long after you are forgotten. That will happen if you give it away. . . . The only way you can take yourself seriously is if you can throw yourself into the next period beyond your little meager human-body-mouth talking all the time. (p. 365)

...I have looked at two recent feminist texts and argued that feminist discourse must be self-conscious in its production of notions of experience and difference. The rationale for staging an encounter between the two texts, written by a white and black activist respectively, was not to identify "good" and "bad" feminist texts. Instead, I was interested in foregrounding questions of cross-cultural analysis which permeate "movement" or popular (not just academic) feminist texts, and in indicating the significance of a politics of location in the U.S. of the 1980s and the 1990s. Instead of privileging a certain limited version of identity politics, it is the current *intersection* of anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and gay and lesbian struggles which we need to understand to map the ground for feminist political strategy and critical analysis.<sup>9</sup> A reading of these texts also opens up for me a temporality of *struggle*, which disrupts and challenges the logic of linearity, development, and progress which are the hallmarks of European modernity.

But why focus on a temporality of struggle? And how do I define *my* place on the map? For me, the notion of a temporality of struggle defies and subverts the logic of European modernity and the "law of identical temporality." It suggests an insistent, simultaneous, non-synchronous process characterized by multiple locations, rather than a search for origins and endings which, as Adrienne Rich says, 'seems a way of stopping time in its tracks.'<sup>10</sup> The year 2000 is the end of the Christian millennium, and Christianity is certainly an indelible part of post-colonial history. But we cannot afford to forget those alternative, resistant spaces occupied by oppositional histories and memories. By not insisting on *a* history or *a* geography but focusing on a temporality of struggle, I create the historical ground from which I can define myself in the U.S.A. of the 1990s, a place from which I can speak to the future—not the end of an era but the promise of many.

The U.S.A. of the 1990s: a geopolitical power seemingly unbounded in its effects, peopled with "natives" struggling for land and legal rights, and "immigrants" with their own histories and memories. Alicia Dujovne Ortiz writes about Buenos Aires as "the very image of expansiveness."<sup>11</sup> This is also how I visualize the U.S.A. of the 1990s. Ortiz writes of Buenos Aires:

A city without doors. Or rather, a port city, a gateway which never closes. I have always been astonished by those great cities of the world which have such precise boundaries that one can say exactly where they end. Buenos Aires has no end. One wants to ring it with a beltway, as if to point an index finger, trembling with uncertainty, and say: "You end there. Up to this point you are you. Beyond that, God alone knows!"... a city that is impossible to limit with the eye or the mind. So, what does it mean to say that one is a native of Buenos Aires? To belong to Buenos Aires, to be *Porteno*—to come from this

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Port? What does this mean? What or who can we hang onto? Usually we cling to history or geography. In this case, what are we to do? Here geography is merely an abstract line that marks the separation of the earth and sky.<sup>12</sup>

If the logic of imperialism and the logic of modernity share a notion of time, they also share a notion of space as territory. In the North America of the 1990s geography seems more and more like "an abstract line that marks the separation of the earth and sky." Witness the contemporary struggle for control over oil in the name of "democracy and freedom" in Saudi Arabia. Even the boundaries between space and outer space are not binding any more. In this expansive and expanding continent, how does one locate oneself? And what does location as I have inherited it have to do with self-conscious, strategic location as I choose it now?

A National Public Radio news broadcast announces that all immigrants to the United States now have to undergo mandatory AIDS testing. I am reminded very sharply of my immigrant status in this country, of my plastic identification card which is proof of my legitimate location in the U.S. But location, for feminists, necessarily implies self- as well as collective definition, since meanings of the self are inextricably bound up with our understanding of collectives as social agents. For me, a comparative reading of Morgan's and Reagan's documents of activism precipitates the recognition that experience of the self, which is often discontinuous and fragmented, must be historicized before it can be generalized into a collective vision. In other words, experience must be historically interpreted and theorized if it is to become the basis of feminist solidarity and struggle, and it is at this moment that an understanding of the politics of location proves crucial.

In this country I am, for instance, subject to a number of legal/political definitions: "post-colonial," "immigrant," "Third World." These definitions, while in no way comprehensive, do trace an analytic and political space from which I can insist on a temporality of struggle. Movement *between* cultures, languages, and complex configurations of meaning and power have always been the territory of the colonized. It is this *process*, what Caren Kaplan in her discussion of the reading and writing of home/exile has called "a continual reterritorialization, with the proviso that one moves on,"<sup>13</sup> that I am calling a temporality of struggle. It is this process, this reterritorialization through struggle, that allows me a paradoxical continuity of self, mapping and transforming my political location. It suggests a particular notion of political agency, since my location forces and enables specific modes of reading and knowing the dominant. The struggles I choose to engage in are then an intensification of these modes of knowing—an engagement on a different level of knowledge. There is, quite simply, no transcendental location possible in the U.S.A. of the 1990s.

I have argued for a politics of engagement rather than a politics of transcendence, for the present and the future. I *know*—in my own non-synchronous temporality—that by the year 2000 apartheid will be discussed as a nightmarish chapter in black South Africa's history, the resistance to and victory over the efforts of the U.S. government and multinational mining conglomerates to relocate the Navajo and

Hopi reservations from Big Mountain, Arizona, will be written into elementary-school textbooks, and the Palestinian homeland will no longer be referred to as the "Middle East question"—it will be a reality. But that is my preferred history: what I hope and struggle for, I garner as *my* knowledge, create it as the place from where I seek to know. After all, it is the way in which I understand, define and engage in feminist, anti-imperialist and anti-racist collectives and movements that anchors my belief in the future and in the efficacy of struggles for social change.

### Notes

1. I am indebted to Adrienne Rich's essay, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" (1984), for the notion of the "politics of location" (in her *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* [W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1986], pp. 210–31). In a number of essays in this collection, Rich writes eloquently and provocatively about the politics of her own location as a white, Jewish, lesbian feminist in North America. See especially "North American Tunnel Vision" (1983) and "Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet" (1984). While I attempt to modify and extend Rich's notion, I share her sense of urgency as she asks feminists to re-examine the politics of our location in North America:

A natural extension of all this seemed to me the need to examine not only racial and ethnic identity, but location in the United States of North America. As a feminist in the United States it seemed necessary to examine how we participate in mainstream North American cultural chauvinism, the sometimes unconscious belief that white North Americans possess a superior right to judge, select, and ransack other cultures, that we are more "advanced" than other peoples of this hemisphere... It was not enough to say "As a woman I have no country; as a woman my country is the whole world." Magnificent as that vision may be, we can't explode into breadth without a conscious grasp on the particular and concrete meaning of our location here and now, in the United States of America. ("North American Tunnel Vision," p. 162)

2. I address one version of this, the management of race and cultural pluralism in the U.S. academy, in some depth in my essay "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s," *Cultural Critique*, 14 (1989–90), pp. 179–208.
3. Two recent essays develop the point I am trying to suggest here. Jenny Bourne identifies the problems with most forms of contemporary identity politics which equalize notions of oppression, thereby writing out of the picture any analysis of structural exploitation or domination. See her "Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics," *Race and Class*, XXIX (1987), pp. 1–24.

In a similar vein, S.P. Mohanty uses the opposition between "History" and "histories" to criticize an implicit assumption in contemporary cultural theory that pluralism is an adequate substitute for political analyses of dependent relationships and larger historical configurations. For Mohanty, the ultimate target is the cultural and historical *relativism* which he identifies as the unexamined philosophical "dogma" underlying political celebrations of pure difference. This is how he characterizes the initial issues involved:

Plurality [is] thus a political ideal as much as it [is] a methodological slogan. But... a nagging question [remains]: How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover our commonality, not the humanist myth of our shared human attributes which are meant to distinguish us all from animals, but, more significantly, the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, material resources? It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences. But could we afford to leave unexamined the question of how our differences are intertwined and indeed hierarchically organized? Could we, in other words, really afford to have *entirely different histories, to see ourselves as living—and having lived—in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?*

See his "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2 (1989), pp. 1-31; p. 13.

4. For instance, some of the questions which arise in feminist analyses and politics which are situated at the juncture of studies of race, colonialism, and Third World political economy pertain to the systemic production, constitution, operation and reproduction of the institutional manifestations of power. How does power operate in the constitution of gendered and racial subjects? How do we talk about contemporary political praxis, collective consciousness and collective struggle in the context of an analysis of power? Other questions concern the discursive codification of sexual politics and the corresponding feminist political strategies these codifications engender. Why is sexual politics defined around particular issues? One might examine the cultural and historical processes and conditions under which sexuality is constructed during conditions of war. One might also ask under what historical conditions sexuality is defined as sexual violence, and investigate the emergence of gay and lesbian sexual identities. The discursive organization of these questions is significant because they help to chart and shape collective resistance. Some of these questions are addressed by contributors in a collection of essays I have co-edited with Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, entitled *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind., and Indianapolis, 1991).
5. Robin Morgan, "Planetary Feminism: The Politics of the 21st Century," in her *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, 1984), pp. 1-37; I also refer to the "Prefatory Note and Methodology" section (pp. xiii-xxiii) of *Sisterhood Is Global* in this essay. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in Barbara Smith (ed.), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, New York, 1983), pp. 356-68.
6. Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," p. 212.
7. Elsewhere I have attempted a detailed analysis of some recent western feminist social science texts about the Third World. Focusing on works which have appeared in an influential series published by Zed Press of London, I examine this discursive construction of women in the Third World and the resultant western feminist self-representations. See "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988), pp. 61-88.
8. For an extensive discussion of the appeal and contradictions of notions of home and identity in contemporary feminist politics, see Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do With It?" in de Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, pp. 191-212.
9. For a rich and informative account of contemporary racial politics in the U.S., see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York and London, 1986). Surprisingly, this text erases gender and gay politics altogether, leading me to wonder how we can talk about the "racial state" without addressing questions of gender and sexual politics. A good companion text which in fact emphasizes such questions is G. Anzaldúa and Moraga (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, New York, 1983). Another, more contemporary text which continues some of the discussions in *This Bridge*, also edited by Gloria Anzaldúa, is entitled *Making Face, Making Soul, Haciendo Caras, Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women Color* (Aunt Lute, San Francisco, 1990).
10. Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," p. 227.
11. Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, "Buenos Aires (an excerpt)," *Discourse*, 8 (1986-7), pp. 73-83; p. 76.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
13. Caren Kaplan, "The Poetics of Displacement in Buenos Aires," *Discourse*, 8 (1986-87), pp. 94-102; p. 98.