

OUR LIVES

CANADA'S FIRST BLACK WOMEN'S NEWSPAPER

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Amnesty For Black Women Workers

There are a lot of Black women out there whose status in Canada is up in the air and who are living underground for fear of being deported. We work in the most low paying jobs, babysitting, house work, factory work, and general help and get no benefits or protection from rip off employers. Yet we pay taxes and receive wages sometimes way below minimum wage. We are not allowed to have UIC, even though we pay into it, and cannot have OHIP even though we're willing to pay. We can't get welfare and any way that's not what we came here for and our children can't legally go to school. The government probably knows all about Black Women living underground yet to appease white Canada they have to keep up the propaganda about illegal immigrants causing unemployment and illegal immigrants and refugees living better than Canadians. Well as every Black woman living underground knows, that is a lie.

Many women work for \$100-\$120 per week out of which rent has to be paid and money sent to feed children or other family back home. And, living underground is tough, don't let anyone say different. We're not talking about workers who have work permits on the domestic scheme or who have applied as refugees. We're talking about living underground - no social insurance card and looking over your shoulder day in and day out for the immigration officer or the police when it really gets rough. You can lose your mind living underground. The stress of working at hard labour and being constantly afraid can change you. You have to be careful who you talk to about your business, you have to be careful what you say, you are too scared to confide in anyone and sometimes you have to change your name so that you can't be found out. You have to become invisible.

If you are a Black woman, you do all this for your children because you are all that they have and you want them to live better so you take what you can get and you scrape a living off the cold earth in Canada.

Sisters Like Us

Elsie is fifty three years old. She's got twelve children. Her husband died from hard work. She had sisters in Canada and they helped her to come up from St Vincent in 1975. She lived with one sister who promised to help her look after her papers, but time passed



and nothing was ever done. Elsie didn't know her way around the city or the system. She did babysitting for her sisters until she decided that they couldn't or wouldn't help her, so she went out and found a live in job. For the past 11 years Elsie has lived underground, sending money home to her children-two of them have joined her here - and dodging the authorities. She has hardly any friends because friends are a liability. She doesn't go to the movies or to parties because she can't afford it, and she works at least twelve hours a day at her live-in. She wonders what will happen to her in ten years when she may not be as fit as she is now.

Carmen is thirty, she's got three kids back home. She was pregnant when she came to Toronto two years ago. She's got a two year old little girl who was born here 'illegally'. There is no birth certificate, so her little girl does not exist. Carmen doesn't exist either, she's illegal. She works babysitting and house cleaning. Her employer allows her to bring her little girl to work, but sometimes she leaves her at home alone. Carmen is pregnant again. The man she's pregnant for is not straight here either. Several weeks ago he hit her so hard, she lost consciousness for a few minutes. She couldn't call the police on

him because then they would find out that she's illegal. The man threatens her all the time about telling immigration on her. Carmen has only been here two years and you have to be here at least three years for your application to be looked at seriously. Carmen can't go back home, she would be going empty handed and going back to the same situation she tried to escape in coming. Five kids and no food on the table. She has bad times and is on anti-depressants.

Off Our Backs

These are only two examples, some are more extreme than others but there is no doubt that living underground leaves you defenseless against any number of injustices from battering to sexual assault to up rip offs by individuals and employees. It is clear that the immigration department and the Government of Canada know about the situation. They also know full well that we are here. In fact the truth is that Black women are "allowed" to come to Canada illegally so that we can be a ready source of the cheapest and most hardworking labour in the country. Can you imagine how it benefits the Canadian economy to have its kitchens cleaned, its houses kept, its children brought up or doing piece work in factories or working for less than minimum wage?

Those are the benefits that illegal immigration brings to Canada and don't let anybody fool you. A lot of profit is made off the backs of those of us who live underground. Well it's time we expose the scam that keeps Black women underground and exploited. We deserve to be legal in this country and to enjoy the benefits of our labour.

Support Networks

Women underground need support from their sisters and the community at large to fight for citizenship rights. Black organisations and women's organisations should rally to the support of women underground. Whether you belong to an organisation or as an individual there's a way to help.

Organisations should write to the Minister of Immigration calling for amnesty for illegal immigrants.

Sisters who know other sisters underground should nurture them. We know its rough all around but we should be there if sisters underground want someone to talk to, or help to get around the system whether it is to rent a room, or find a doctor, or deal with an abusive situation. Form groups of perhaps two women to support every sister underground. Let us create safe houses for our sisters. We could start small and build a movement to free our sisters. If you're doing some of this already Our Lives would like to know about it, we'd like to get together and figure out how to work it. Write to us.

Inside

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Womantalk Women Of What Color

When I heard the term 'women of color' in Boston about five years ago it was used by a Latina sister who was talking about a coalition formed with Black women. She told me I was welcome into their Latino home as a woman who had experienced similar oppression. She told me that they met with a Black women's group about once a week and they were forming a solid base of mutual respect and understanding of their different cultures and figuring out what issues they could work on together. I was very pleased with the fact they accepted me and had gathered so much information about Black culture through their coalition.

On reading the London, England based Spare Rib in 1983, I again saw the term women of color where Black, South Asian, Arabic and Lebanese women were meeting to form coalitions similar to those women I had met in Boston.

Recently I met women who were, South Asian and Black but who referred to themselves as Women of Color. When asked where they were from, they named various places like Jamaica, India, South Africa. When asked what races they were, they said Women of Color. I backed off a bit because I know there is no such race and why would these women not identify their racial/national background which, very often is a woman's cultural and historical identity. These women were, are, individuals who do not represent any race because they do not acknowledge any race or culture. They deny, I feel not only their own but their mothers' triumphs and struggles before them, perhaps because it seems easier to not deal with the pain or struggle of being called down racially or slandered culturally.

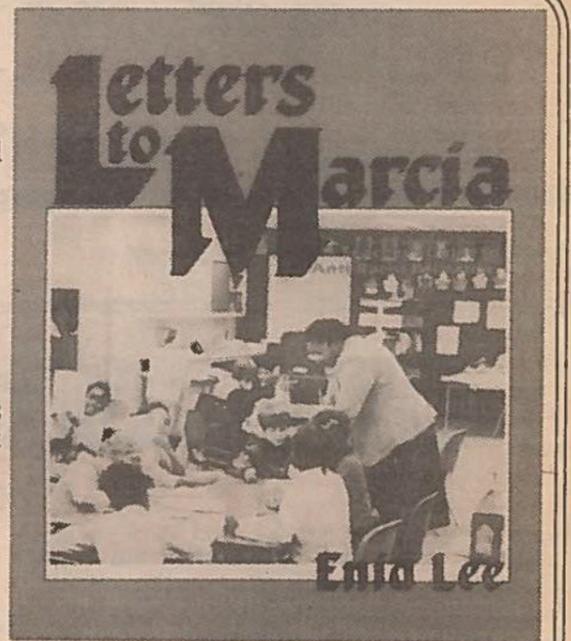
Being specific about our identities is very important to Black women because it is only then that we remember our history. In an attempt to make coalitions it would be counterproductive to lose our identities. Yet that seems to be what's happening among some groups these days. It seems that an honest desire for coalition building among women who share the oppression of racism and discrimination is being turned into a watering down of the issues. White women too have taken a fancy to calling Black, South Asian, Latina women and women from countries in the third world, women of colour. I often wonder at the motives involved. This seems to be the new way of dumping us all into one amorphous pot and to avoid saying uncomfortable words, especially the dreaded word 'Black'. Well I think that Black people fought too long, and too hard against being named by other people. I remember how the term Black evolved. The 1960's Black liberation politics added Black and Proud to our vocabulary and I still like it.

The fact of the matter is, I do not like women calling me or my Black sisters women of color, and I'll tell you why. I have lived my whole total life being recognized as a Black woman, I have fought physically, emotionally and mentally as a Black woman, as have all Black people. We fought to find a Black history, a Black culture and a Black pride and when I found those gifts, I found them precious. I aim to keep them. I aim to keep that identity that we as a people searched for, for so long.

It's not that I mind forming coalitions and the possibilities of forming a women of colour

Great Black Women

Education is and has historically been a battleground where many sisters have succeeded in improving the educational standards for our young Black children. Enid has been the key person in making the issues known in North York where she works 16 to 18 hour days as Race Relations Supervisor. She studied at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education to pursue her unrelenting commitment to establishing total equality and justice for our people in educational institutions and community organizations. She is a foremost expert in education and has written guides and published books on anti-racist education. Her book *Letters to Marcia* which everyone should read gives information on understanding cultural awareness. North York Board of Education has become the leader in Multicultural studies and activities through her efforts. We applaud your work Sister Enid Lee.



Great Black Woman Enid Lee (*Our Future lies with our children*)

OUR LIVES is a Black Women's Collective and Our Lives Group publication.

The sisters are:

Faith Nolan
Beatrice Bailey, Carol Allain, Donna Barker,
Dionne Brand, Grace Channer, Afua Cooper
Marie Dennis, Debbie Douglas, Patricia Hayes
and Sky Stollmeyer.

If you would like to join the Our Lives
Group call Dionne at 967-6104.
We need Black woman hands!
As only we know how to handle
money time energy hardship
much love,
Call.



coalition is a great idea. But in any coalition, I want to know who I'm joining with. I want to know the specifics, the politics, the racial cultural and social identities that are in the room with me. How else are we going to coalesce and why in hell would we be coalescing anyway unless we knew those things.

Woman of colour is not a biological thing. No one that I know of is born a woman of colour. It's not a country or a race or even a religion. It has the hope of being a certain kind of politics - coalition politics. But you have to make that. We are born Black, Native, Indian, Pakistani etc. and it is those exact experiences that we have to use in our struggle.

Faith Nolan

LETTERS

A Letter To Grace:

Glad and tickled to hear from you! Thanx for the issues of *Our Lives!* Wonderful to see Sisters are getting Words out, ideas public, graphics visible.... Our silence is painful to me though I am quite a -ware of what it takes to get our Works OUT THERE. Whew! the only force NOT against us is our own insistence.Vol. I&II of *Our Lives* will get copied and passed to the Sisters I know: Terra Williams & Cooke Gant here in Lansing; Diane Sudler in Florida; Alex Kelly in Kentucky; Gina Rhodes in NYC.... These women will spread the word... for ALL of us.

After reading #1 of *Our Lives*,.... after absorbing ONCE AGAIN the same statements... made since forever (!!!) to white Feminists (women committed to change), I felt the need to gorge myself with food. My instant response to frustration and weariness. I came out in the late 70's decided to WRITE about my insanity & Let white women know without apology what is going on in the heads of some of us Black women--that we are not ALL vegetarians or interested in tofu, that we cannot all afford festivals, white Lesbian culture (record albums, jewelry, novels....) or openness about our Lesbianism.... that Holly Near is not our "darling" & that Sojourner Truth is not the only Black Woman who fought for freedom.... Your #1 was powerful & excellent. I have no doubts where you are coming from.(smile). I knew it before you spoke it. I'm glad you made it only 4 pp., too. Too often women publishers become over jealous in their pursuits & live a short publication life as a result. I believe that staying small in the beginning can prolong life. Be conservative. Don't push for gloss & 4 colours. Be known for content instead of shine. Shine later when you have the money. Lord have mercy! (smile)

No.2 of *Our Lives*

is exquisite. Should have the articles in an anthology somewhere & force - read to those who refuse to listen. Each story touched my own life & made me realize AGAIN ('coz I do forget!) how much other Black women are family to me. You have a GOOD newspaper, lady. A GOOD one. I wish you success in the future. All praises to the women in the Collective.

Stay in touch!
Once a year would be fine
BIG Black Women! Thanx, BE WELL!
Terri Jewell

Housing Women

Debbie Douglas

During the Spring of 1983, I attended a Poor People's Conference in Ottawa which was organized by several Tenant Groups from throughout Canada. The goals of this conference were to build solidarity of Poor people on a national level and to compile a list of issues and resolutions to be presented to the Federal Government.

The Regent Park Residents Association, the organizations that I was representing at this conference, gave its delegates a list of issues to put forward to the National Body. At the top of the list was "Empty Nesting".

Empty Nesting is a term coined by tenants groups to describe the housing process whereby tenants are moved out of subsidized housing once the youngest child reaches age 18 years of age. There was a great outcry from tenant groups throughout Metro Toronto once this regulation was discovered. The Government responded by building single subsidized units for "childless" individuals. As with most Government programs, the supply did not come close to meeting the demand. What this shortage of affordable housing resulted in was that a vast number of people were left homeless due to the high rents of private sector housing.

At a time when available housing is less than 1%, affordable housing is non-existent. This has a detrimental effect on all poor people, but especially on single women with children. Some of these women end up in

hostels, others in poorly kept, very expensive rooming houses.

With welfare payments well below the poverty line, a significant number of these women pay as much as 70% of their monthly income in rental fees. This leaves very little for other necessities such as food, warm clothing, and transportation, and no money for entertainment and other just plain human activities. Little money and non-permanent housing results in instability which causes these women to be in a constant economic struggle. We know these women, they are our mothers, our aunts and some of these are us.

There are groups in Toronto which have come together in the last year to lobby governments for an increase in affordable housing. These groups need the help of individuals and community organisations because the governments - municipal, provincial and federal need to know that affordable housing is a right we're all ready to fight for. The power of numbers may be what is needed to get our governments building safe, affordable housing.



Song For My Mother

by Linda Goss

My mother was no Harriet Tubman
My mother was no Sojourner Truth

She was a mother to Ten sisters and Brothers
She was a mother to my brother and me
She was a wife to my father
she was a teacher to the whole community

She had no time for fun or foolishness
She had no time sometimes to take a rest
She had no time to complain or weep
She was a storyteller who rocked me to sleep.

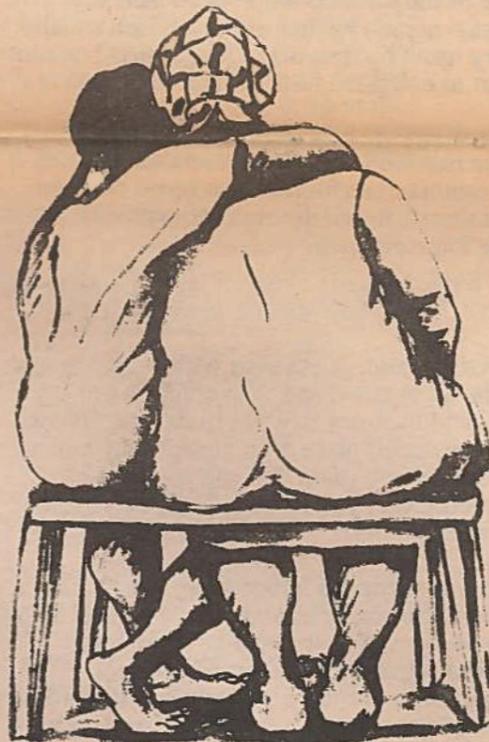
She was a midwife to my Aunt Sally
She was a preacher to little Willie Jones.

My mother was no Harriet Tubman
My mother was no Sojourner Truth.

She was a woman who cared and suffered
She was a woman Black and strong
She was a mother who kept the lights burning
So her lost children could find the way home.

You won't find her in the history pages
Yet she has lived down through the ages
Their will be no T.V. special

There is no mother's day card
About the mother I am speaking of
About the woman who has been through it all.



She has lost babies in the womb
She has lost babies to the hanging tree
She has lost babies to the battle fields
She has lost babies to drugs and pills.

Yet she gave birth to the Harriet Tubmans
Yet she gave birth to the Martin Luther Kings
Yet she gave birth to the Langston Hughes'
Yet she gave birth to Kings and Queens

She is the mother of her people
She is the mother of the earth.

This ia a song for my mother
This ia a song for my mother

Oh,Black Woman of Ethiopia
Black mother of Nelson Mandela
Black mother of Emmett Till
Black woman born in Brazil

We hear your Story.
We feel your pain
We see the Blood
Pouring like rain
And if thy will be done
To South Africa freedom will come.

This ia a song for my mother
This ia a song for my mother.

Calling all women in the Soviet Union
Calling all wome in the People's Republic
Calling all women in the Middle East
Let's come together for World Peace.

ALL SHALL NOT BE LOST.
IF WE SAVE OURSELVES.
FROM NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST.

This a prayer for my mother
This a prayer for my mother
This a prayer for my mother

AND FOR ALL LIVING CREATURES
AROUND THE WORLD

copyright 1985.

Linda Goss is a storyteller. She is a native of Tennessee and a leader in the field of contemporary storytelling. She is the co-founder of the National Festival of Black Storytelling, serves as president of the Association of Black Storytellers and has been named the official the Official Storyteller of Philadelphia where she currently resides. Linda tells original Afro-American, African and international folk tales.

OUR LIVES is a non-profit newspaper run for, by and about Black Women.

If you are a Black woman, you've got something to say. Say it Here! Send stories, articles, poems, letters, reviews and ideas.

OUR LIVES invites submissions from Black women living all over Canada.



Bea On Feminism

This is my friend, I mean he's no bosom buddy, but we have heart to hearts about racial and cultural happenings and events and about relationships. When I mess up a job he helps me straighten things out. I work with twenty-six men and he is the only one I feel is human enough to admit to weaknesses, so I trust him in ways I don't trust the others. Last Monday around 12:30 pm, during lunch and one of our many discourses, one thing led to another and before I knew it we were talking about the movie "The Woman in Red".

He turned to me and said, "You women are all alike". I started to get angry because this sentence had a familiar ring to it, but I decided to let him continue so I could know what he was talking about. I asked, "What do you mean by that and what does that have to do with the movie?"

"Well, all you women want it (meaning sex), but you all want to be forced."

I was stunned, this is 1986 - where had this man been! What happened to all the women's movement information? This one missed it all. How could he believe this shit, let alone say it out loud to me? I mean we've talked about relationships, about the human race, about everything and nothing. So I thought he understood more about the human condition than the rest of the men in the shop.

"Come on" he said, "Tell the truth. Women want men to be persistent, to pursue them, to force themselves on them."

What could I say. I've seen it so many times on T.V., read it in the newspaper, magazines and novels. Women are slapped around then kissed. They struggle a little then give in with ecstasy. This movie, this myth created and perpetuated by males. This movie was written and directed by males and this man, my friend, says that this portrayal of woman is true. Here I am defending whether or not women, me, want forced sex, rape, - because that's what it is, RAPE.

I was angry, but most of all, hurt, ..way inside my gut. I wasn't going to let him get away with it.

My first comeback was, "I'm a grown woman, I know what my needs are and I know the difference between yes and no."

His response, "You know, the way men and women relate, say for instance, I was to have sex with you, I would have to play a game - date you etc., before you would ... and even then I would have to persist until we are in a

private place where you might give in. If I came up to you the first day and said 'let's have sex', you would turn me down."

By this time I was irrational, but I was not going to let him accuse me of being a hysterical woman. Most of our lunch time discussions come from the newspaper and one of the most common news items is sexual assault against children. He's usually very upset by this. So I thought that I would start to enlighten him through this area.

"Tell me, do you think that in some of the case that we've read of fathers, stepfathers, or mothers' boyfriends who raped children, did they feel that the children wanted them to use force on them?"

"Stop" he said, "I'm not talking about sick guys, I'm talking about normal adult sex."

"OK" I said, "Let's start with a woman who is being pursued and who continues to say 'no' and then one day she finds herself alone in a secluded place with her friendly pursuer and he is of a mind that she wants to be forced. Don't you think he is going to force himself on her?"

He was silent. So I continued, "She would give in for many reasons..some of which are no one would hear if she screamed; she would probably be ashamed and feel responsible for her predicament. Also women live under a hell of a lot of stress and at a particular time, she might give in, as you say, because she wants this particular stress to end.....especially women who must put out sex to keep their jobs. I can't speak for all women, and maybe there are those who play the game you are talking about, but I don't think that most women do."

He then volunteered a story that a woman had confided in him. She was alone with a trusted male friend and he raped her. The story was that he persisted and she gave in. Her life was literally ruined. It took two years of therapy for her to function in a normal way again.

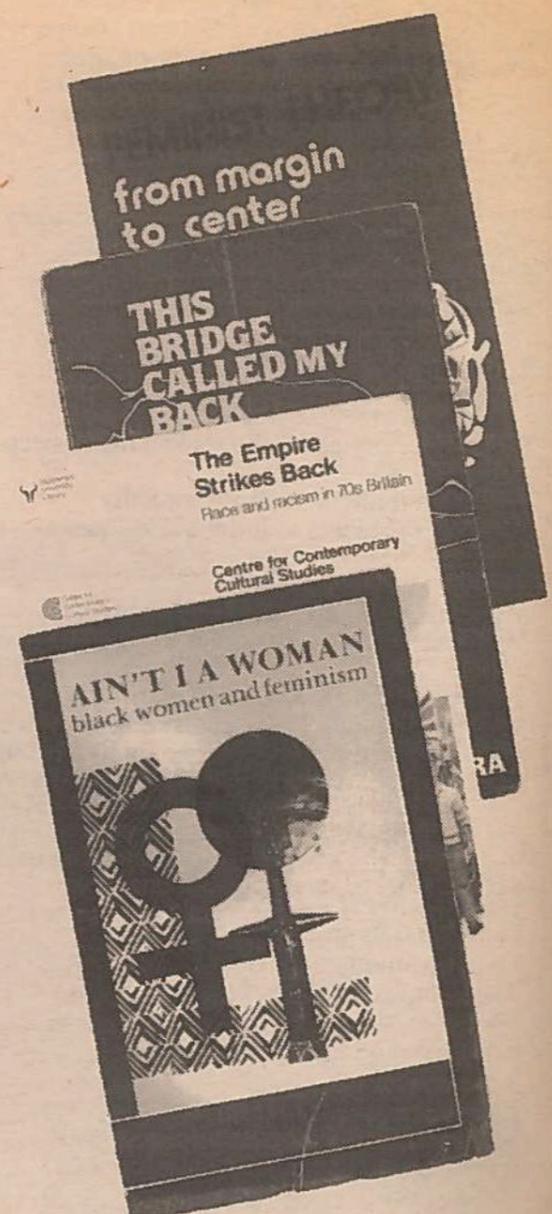
I asked him, "How could you have such a story locked inside your head and then say that women are the same and they want to be forced?!"

After he left, and I calmed down, I had time to think. Why should I be surprised at this man's opinion. He is the same man who said to me several months ago around the equal pay for work of equal value, "Oh, my god!, there will be no controlling you women

anymore. It won't be a pant and a frock in the house...it will be two pants ruling the house."

I think that we (meaning women) have a hell of a lot of work to do. We can't isolate ourselves and work only on our own consciousness. We live in a male dominated society where male power is law. Somehow we have to work with them. We have to let them know what we know and feel or all women will continue to feel the brunt of male misconception of what we are.

by Beatrice Bailey





There's Such a Thing Called Black Feminism

I am a feminist and a Black woman. I want to make that clear from the beginning. In a nutshell, feminism means for me, self determination, women's self determination. Because generally speaking, women are oppressed simply because they are women. For us this is compounded by race, class, nationality and so on.

The object of feminism is the ultimate liberation of women. Of course this is a very general and broadbased objective. I have been speaking of feminism in general, as a movement that has the potential to encompass all the women of the world. But is there such a thing as Black feminism?

I would say, yes. Black women's lives are shaped by forces, historical and otherwise, that are different from those of say, white women. One result is that our approach to feminism and liberating strategies are markedly different from those of, say, white women.

What attracted me to Feminism? As a child growing up, I had several examples of women who were in charge of their lives. They lived the way they wanted to. Most of these women were in marriage situations but this did not prevent them from asserting themselves. These women did not call themselves 'feminists', perhaps they did not even know the word but their lives and actions pointed very much to the fact that they were. Consciously or unconsciously, they made an impression on me. I grew up in a family that considered education the key to opening many doors. Girls were encouraged as much as boys, (the girls were in the majority) and intellectually were more successful. In my high school years, "Women's Lib" was very much in vogue and of course we soaked up much of it. I remember debates at our school on the 'natural superiority of women', 'is woman inferior to man' etc. By the time that I had my first man we were setting guidelines on how to live. There would be no 'head', we'd be partners. So when I came to Canada,

I was a firm believer in Women's Liberation and was not uncomfortable to call myself a feminist. Feminism for me did not come with a light suddenly going on in my head. It was a part of my life, my growth.

Many Black women who have the qualities of 'good feminists do not see themselves as such. Why is this so? I will not pretend that I know all the answers to this question, but I will attempt to answer it any way. Unfortunately feminism has been associated with media images of bra-burning-manshating-women and the community image that it is a white women's thing. Unfortunately because neither of these are true. Many women Black and white feel alienated from feminism because of these stereotypes created by the media and patriarchal paranoia. But freedom from oppression is a thing close to all Black people so it should be no surprise that Black women should take it up in their interest as women and, freedom from sexism certainly is not the preserve of white women.

Feminists themselves have to assume some of the blame for the alienation from feminism. For one thing, the feminist that are in the limelight and forefront are usually university educated and therefore speak and think in a particular manner. The books they write are written in a language that the ordinary woman might find hard to understand. One has to ask whether their objective is to share information and ideas or whether it is to keep them. Professional feminists claim that they are writing and speaking for their oppressed sisters, yet more often than not the oppressed are unable to understand the language used to express that oppression and frankly it becomes meaningless. Obviously we need more that gender commonality to bring women together.

Another thing is, the kind of issues that mainstream feminists seek to give priority. Issues such as nuclear disarmament and abortion are of course important and I support them wholeheartedly. But for many Black and poor women (of any race) food and shelter are more important, immediate and imperative. Many Black women want to be able to have the choice to reproduce and nuclear disarmament is not foremost in their minds because they are already living the nightmare of nuclear holocaust in ghettos and bantustans. They are hungry and indigent due to white exploitation and capitalism, so much so that if the bomb should go off, it would not make much of a difference in their lives.

So mainstream feminism is largely ethnocentric and come to think of it classcentric since even among Black feminists, the university graduates predominate and if we are not careful, then given the oppressive aspects of such an education we too will alienate our sisters.

This is a real concern of mine. How to spread the word, how to do outreach in the Black women's communities. We need to do serious outreach and we need to share information. How do we get women out.

Recently I was informed of a women's conference to be held at the University of Toronto in the spring of 1987. I expressed my skepticism by saying that I expect the same old crowd to be there. I told my informant that everyday we talk about working class and Black women yet we do nothing to bring them out. This conference is also being held in a university environment. This alone can scare women off and these are the very same women that we presume to attract. But I should be more optimistic, perhaps I'll help with the publicity.

Finally, as Black feminists we need to take the bull by the horn. We need to go into areas where a lot of Black women live and arrange rap sessions. We need more mobilising around racism, sexism employment etc. We need to get our message out there if we really believe in ourselves and feminism* as a humanistic and liberating tool.

(* Some activists like the author Alice Walker prefer to use the term 'womanism' and 'womanist'. She thinks that it's more in keeping with Black tradition)

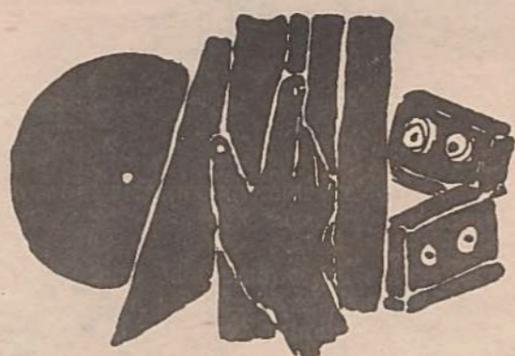
by Afua Cooper

Suggested Readings

Ain't I a Woman
black women and feminism by Bell Hooks
(1981)
Feminist Theory
From Margin to Center by Bell Hooks
(1984)

*Only the BLACK WOMAN can say
"when and where I enter, in the quiet,
undisputed dignity of my womanhood,
without violence and without suing or
special patronage, then and there
the whole . . . race enters with me"*

—ANNA JULIA COOPER, 1892



Sisterwrite by Patricia Hayes

Do's and Don't's

One - **Do** go to the next Grace Channer art show. The show was mainly of her charcoal drawings, with a couple of large oils in bright colours, and, beautifully carved painted, wooden boxes.

My favourite drawings were those of Black women with 'real' figures, if you know where I'm coming from - full rounded hips, thighs and breasts. In a lot of cases Black artists have had to compromise shape form and substance in order to have their work shown in the world at large - the white world that is. However, in knowing Sister Grace's dedication to expressing our true souls, her work will explode those barriers.

Don't run (you can walk slowly) to see "She's Gotta Have It" - a total Black movie that received a lot of hype and rave reviews. It was done on a shoe string budget by a young Black man who produced, directed and starred in the movie. Although it was good to see a sister dole out the brothers' own medicine - having more than one relationship at the same time, (she had three going), I am not too sure what the point was when all involved are losers in the long run, especially for the woman.

Do read "Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo" by Ntozake Shange. It was published in 1982

by the author. The characters are three sisters, a weaver, dancer and a 'child of the spirits' and their mother living in South Carolina. Anyone of the women could be you, your sister, the sister you see get on the bus everyday, an aunt, your best friend and even the sister you do not get along with. You get a warm right at home feeling as you follow these women through the trials and tribulations of living and striving; those that any Black woman will encounter no matter where she comes from. Besides the enjoyment of a good novel, there is an added bonus of there being some good ol' southern recipes strewn throughout.

Rivers Have Sources,

Trees Have Roots

Speaking of Racism

by

Dionne Brand

Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta

Yeah! We finally have a book by us and about us, in our own words. **Rivers Have Sources Trees Have Roots** contains the experiences of Native, Black, Chinese and South Asian peoples in Canada. About one hundred individuals account in their own words clearly and at times painfully moving their personal everyday life, family, work and educational experiences of racism within Canada from teens to senior citizens. The book gives a historical as well as contemporary look at racism. Unlike most books of this nature this book can be read quite easily as the people interviewed use the language of everyday. This is the first book to address the situation which so many of us Black, Chinese, Native and South Asian have felt so deeply.

As we live through experiences of the people in the book, we remember our own situations and those of our families and friends. I grew to a clearer acknowledgement of how hard it must



have been for my father after reading about the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first Black railway workers union; how they didn't sleep while away from home for days on end, weren't promoted until they joined together to struggle for promotion and fair treatment as Black workers. The authors worked for two years to complete this first time ever book and it is a must reading for every one interested in equality, justice and anti-racist networking.

Dionne Brand has for nearly seventeen years in Toronto and has been an activist and feminist in the civil rights movement. She has had five books of poetry published by Williams-Wallace as well as dozens of newspaper and

magazine articles. She is one of the most prolific writers of today. Her longtime commitment and experience in the Black community have given her the tools and knowledge which gives this book an honest first hand perspective on racism and the ability to fit together smoothly the experiences of so many different peoples.

Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta born in Sri Lanka has published two books of poetry and publishes The Lanka Review. He has read throughout Toronto and recently produced work for A Space performance series, Six of 1001 Nights. He too works around racism in the workplace and continues organizing for Wei Fu Committee and John Persaud Support Committee.

Dionne Brand Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta

**Rivers Have Sources,
Trees Have Roots**

SPEAKING OF RACISM





Shelter Whitewash

all future staff at the shelter to have a second language. This proposal would in effect limit if not count out completely Black/West Indian women applying for jobs as counsellors.

A group of Black women, including sisters from the **Black Women's Collective/Our Lives** and other long term Black women activists, sprang into action forming an ad hoc committee on services for Black women. They requested a meeting with the Shelter Task Force to discuss Silvera's firing, the second language issue and the Shelter's intentions toward Black women who would need the Shelter's service's once it was completed. To make their point, the committee of Black women presented themselves at a meeting of the Shelter Task Force to explain the seriousness of the situation. In a commendable example of solidarity with Black women, women workers from other Shelters, concerned with Silvera's firing, also attended that meeting with a protest petition which was given to the Shelter Task Force.

On October 17th the committee of Black women met with Monica Riutort and Lena Dinicola of the Shelter Task Force. Three key points were agreed upon. The Black women felt that representation of the Board of Shirley Samaroo was extremely important for Black women, if our interests were to be truly represented. They argued that there should be 'at least' two Black women on the Board and not only one who would be left to battle alone the racism which we all know would surface. Just as no one woman should be the only representative of all women on a male dominated board, the same holds true for Black women. The Shelter Task Force agreed with this point and invited the Black women to nominate two women for the board which was to be chosen on September 25th. The committee also argued that since the Shelter Task Force had no Black woman on it, and, since Makeda Silvera, the only Black woman's voice, had been fired, the Shelter Task Force was in no position to make personnel decisions regarding our community. And so it would be important that a woman from our community be on the hiring committee. The Task Force agreed. The committee of Black women also got assurances from the Task Force that a fair settlement would be reached with Makeda Silvera.

In the meantime the Task Force's offer of a settlement to Makeda Silvera was unsatisfactory - they had offered less than a month's salary - and a few individuals acting for the Shelter Task Force, had scrapped the Sept 25th meeting behind the backs of the committee of Black women. Instead they organised an exclusive meeting for the 29th of Sept. where several WASP women were invited to form a protem executive for the Shirley Samaroo House.

It seems that rather than face the just demands of Black women these individuals, in the Task Force's name, would rather turn the Shelter over to WASP women who didn't have a clue about the needs of immigrant women. That is called cutting off your nose to spite your face because the irony of it was that this Shelter which was started by immigrant women for immigrant women was now being handed over to non-immigrant white women whose first thought from what **Our Lives** has heard, was to change the

focus of the Shelter away from immigrant women. Obviously those individuals in the Task Force felt that they had more in common with WASP women than with Black women. What did they have in common? was it race? was it class? We suspect a little of both.

At the meeting of the 29th, to which the committee of Black women was not invited (in fact the committee was never even informed that the 25th meeting was cancelled) an 'election' was cooked up and with one single exception all WASP women were 'elected' to "protem executive". Seventeen women attended the meeting. Save for a few, most did not know that there were to be elections or what had transpired in the past. So they cannot be blamed for being party to what the organisers that night were overheard to call a "coup". It is rumoured that the major funders, Metro Social Services, were only too happy at this development.

Supposedly they never liked the idea of a shelter with special services for immigrant women (god knows why because this city is over half immigrant tax payers) and didn't want to hear about women working in a collective situation as had been the plan for shelter workers. So the gov't is happy and those who sold out the Shelter are happy but with this it looks like the classic **white wash**. The white wash that the new group has been running is that immigrant women can't manage a shelter, never mind that it was immigrant women who worked for two years to see the Shelter completed by November. The work was on schedule and the Shelter should have been opened by Nov. 1st. But this group sneaked in to steal the fruits of our labour (with help from the inside, mind you) and are using stereotypes of incompetence to get the funders' ears.

In an attempt to save the Shelter, several deeply concerned community agencies working in the Portuguese, Italian, Hispanic, South Asian, Chinese, and Black communities met on the 14th of Oct. to work out strategies. That meeting agreed that any Board of the Shirley Samaroo House had to be representative (Staff and board) of the communities which it served. A committee was formed which has been working steadily to retrieve the shelter. It includes Black, Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, South Asian and white women. As we go to press, because of the pressure exerted by these groups and individual women, the 'pro-tem' group has surrendered the keys to the rightful owners.

What made the takeover happen in the first place needs analysis. Whether you're born Black in this country or whether you immigrate here you're always seen as an outsider because of your race. White immigrants to this country can assimilate economically as well as visually in less than a generation.. Is this the time that we are cut loose from the solidarity of the discriminated? As white immigrants rise on the socio-economic ladder perhaps they think that they do not need us anymore to get that multicultural funding.

This whole situation should certainly give Black women pause and food for thought on how we should organize, who we should organize with and when. We've been told by the powers that be, and some of us genuinely believed, that we should organize in multicultural settings. But sometimes one wonders if we're being set up for a multicultural double cross. In Toronto there are Black women who are Canadian born as well as immigrant and we have the same row to hoe. Because of the sexism and racism which we suffer our needs in terms of services are urgent and specific. Perhaps we need to organize our own Shelters, our own, counselling, our own anti-sexist struggle.

Josina N. Wells

In our May-June 86' issue, Debbie Douglas' article 'Danger at Home' looked at the accessibility of battered women's shelters to Black women in the city. The story emphasised the need for specialised services to Black women. Given the racism and sexism in Toronto, when Black women are battered it is treated lightly by the police and the general community. Racism already dictates the brutalising of Black people as a whole by police and government and in the case of Black women, it produces a deadly brand of sexism which sees Black women battered with nothing done about it. There are countless cases of Black women being battered and the police treat our complaints with mocking disrespect.

Well it seems as if this attitude is also shared by some who we do the honor of calling our sisters. Not all of them mind you but a surprising number. This is how **Our Lives** found out.

The Shirley Samaroo Shelter, which is being built to help immigrant women in need, has shown a poor record on women who are not 'white' immigrants. In February, the Shelter, two years in the planning and construction and run by the Immigrant Women's Shelter Task Force, fired two women, one, Filipina-Canadian, the other Korean-Canadian without due process. Tina Conlon had been working with the Shelter for a year and a half when she was given her first job evaluation which recommended her firing. Hilda Chang was employed for six months, given a positive evaluation and dismissed. In late September the last original member of the staff, Makeda Silvera, well known Black sister, was also fired without due process. In fact Makeda had gone on vacation for two weeks after receiving a positive evaluation of her work (she'd been outreach and development co-ordinator for the two years of the development of the shelter) and a recommendation that her employment continue. On the last day of her vacation she received a letter by courier telling her not to return to work.

Silvera had weathered several attempts to undermine her at the Shelter and had fought for four months against a proposal requiring

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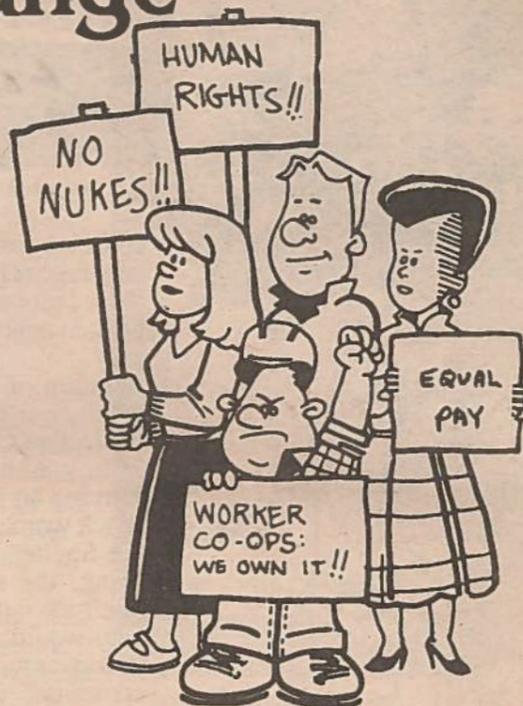
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