

TALKING BACK

thinking feminist•thinking black



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on self-recovery

Often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate. Their presence changes the direction and shape of our words. Language is also a place of struggle. I was just a girl coming slowly into womanhood when I read Adrienne Rich's words: "This is the oppressor's language, yet I need to talk to you." This language that enabled me to finish graduate school, to write a dissertation, to talk at job interviews, carries the scent of oppression. The Australian aborigines say: "The smell of the white man is killing us." I remember the smells of my childhood: hot water cornbread, turnip greens, fried pies. I remember the way we talked to one another, our words thickly accented black southern speech. We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will take us away from the boundaries of domination, a language that will not fence you in, bind you, or hold you. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to read ourselves—to reunite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

Lately, I struggle to be a woman of my word. Black woman poet Mari Evans urges us, "Speak truth to the people." The academic setting, the academic discourse I work in, is not a known site for truth-telling. It is not a place where the oppressed gather to talk our way out of bondage, to write our way into freedom, publishing articles and books that do more than inform, that testify, bearing witness to the primacy of struggle, to our collective effort to transform. Yet this is our most urgent need, the most important of our work—the work of liberation. Trapped as we often are in a cultural context that defines freedom solely in terms of learning the oppressor's language (language as culture; learning to live the oppressor's culture, what Baba, my grandmother, what Native American Indians before her called "learning the white man's ways"); assimilating however slowly into the dominant hegemony, into the mainstream. It has been extremely difficult to move beyond this shallow, empty version of what we can do, mere imitators of our oppressors, toward a liberatory vision—one that transforms our consciousness, our very being.

The most important of our work—the work of liberation—demands of us that we make a new language, that we create the oppositional discourse, the liberatory voice. Fundamentally, the oppressed person who has moved from object to subject speaks to us in a new way. This speech, this liberatory voice, emerges only when the oppressed experience self-recovery. Paolo Freire asserts in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects." The act of becoming subject is yet another way to speak the process of self-recovery.

Reflecting on the Vietnam War in the early 1970s—on protests and resistance—Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh spoke in conversation with Daniel Berrigan about the way forces of domination fragment, estrange, and assault our innermost beings, breaking us apart. He spoke about the need to restore the self to a condition of wholeness: "In French they have the word *recueillement* to describe the attitude of someone trying to be himself or herself, not to be dispersed, one member of the body here, another there. One tries to recover, to be once more in good shape, to become whole again." His words were especially moving to me, as I came to them at a time in life when I had not fully developed critical consciousness, when I was lost yet still seeking, trying to understand myself and the world around me. These words lingered in my consciousness:

In the Buddhist tradition, people used to speak of 'enlightenment' as a kind of returning home. The three worlds—the worlds of form, of non-form, of desire—are not your homes. These are places where you wander around for many existences, alienated from your own nature. So enlightenment is the way to get back. And they speak about efforts to go back—described in terms of the recovery of oneself, of one's integrity.

Nhat Hanh's words placed in my consciousness the idea of self-recovery. Though speaking to a political issue, anti-war protest, he talks about self-recovery in spiritual terms (which also has deep meaning for me). In my thinking, I linked self-recovery again and again with the overall effort of the oppressed, the dominated, to develop awareness of those forces which exploit and oppress; with efforts to educate for critical consciousness, to create effective and meaningful resistance, to make revolutionary transformation. Toni Cade Bambara, editor of the anthology *The Black Woman*, in her groundbreaking essay, "On the Issue of Roles," emphasizes "revolution begins with the self and in the self." Heeding her words, I became all the more vigilant in my effort to practice sustained, rigorous, critical self-examination. As I moved beyond the boundaries of our small, segregated southern black community into the university, into the larger world, I realized (and it was a painful and potentially devastating realization) that I did not understand fully what it meant to be a black woman in the United States, the politics of our reality. I began to search desperately for the understanding. That search ultimately led me to Women's Studies classes, to feminist writing, places where I then did not find what I needed to nourish my spirit. It was then that I began writing *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, although it was not published until years later, when a space was created within feminist movement in the United States wherein the voices of black women could be acknowledged and heard.

Now I say, "*Ain't I a Woman* is the book of my self-recovery, the expression of my awakening to critical consciousness." I say, "It is the book of my heart, that I will not write such a book again." I say this now. Then it was experienced, and felt, as a private joy—then I had no language to speak this joy in political terms. Writing this book, I was compelled to confront black women's reality, our denied and buried history, our present circumstances. The thinking, the writing, was an act of reclamation, enabling me to recover myself, to be whole.

I call this experience "self-recovery." Still, I had to live with this term to think it through critically. I was particularly uncertain about the words "self-recovery," the insistence in them that a wholeness of being—named here the self—is present, possible, that we have experienced it, that it is a state to which we can return. I wanted to know in my heart if this was true for the oppressed, the dominated, the dehumanized, that the conditions for wholeness, that the whole self existed prior to exploitation and oppression, a self that could indeed be restored, recovered.

Discarding the notion that the self exists in opposition to an other that must be destroyed, annihilated (for when I left the segregated world of home and moved in and among white people, and their ways of knowing, I learned this way of understanding the social construction of self). I evoked the way of knowing I had learned from unschooled southern black folks. We learned that the self existed in relation, was dependent for its

very being on the lives and experiences of everyone, the self not as signifier of one "I" but the coming together of many "I"s, the self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and community. Social construction of the self in relation would mean, then, that we would know the voices that speak in and to us from the past, that we would be in touch with what Paule Marshall calls "our ancient properties"—our history. Yet it is precisely these voices that are silenced, suppressed, when we are dominated. It is this collective voice we struggle to recover. Domination and colonization attempt to destroy our capacity to know the self, to know who we are. We oppose this violation, this dehumanization, when we seek self-recovery, when we work to reunite fragments of being, to recover our history. This process of self-recovery enables us to see ourselves as if for the first time, for our field of vision is no longer shaped and determined solely by the condition of domination. In Carol Stack's recent work on black folks leaving the North to return South, Joella, the black woman who speaks in a subject-to-subject way to a white woman for the first time, says of this speaking, "It was like a voice came out of me that I did not know was there. And I was hearing this voice for the first time. I was speaking with my own voice." Years ago, I did not feel the need to tell the story of my self-recovery, how this work, the research, its revelations, gave me a sense of being, a grounding, because no framework existed in the United States privileging this confrontation with reality. Now I understand that the process by which the colonized, the oppressed, sever our ties, our complicity with the colonizer, the oppressor, constitutes a liberatory model for social change, a strategy of resistance that must be shared, that must be talked about.

Within radical political movements in the United States, this process of self-recovery, of education for critical consciousness, remains in many ways an unacknowledged process. Unlike revolutionary struggles globally, where it is deemed essential to the process of radicalization, models of radical social change in the U.S. often de-emphasize focus on the ways individuals develop political consciousness. There are no literacy programs here that also educate for critical consciousness. Concurrently, it is often assumed that those who have the privilege of university education do not need education for critical consciousness. This is a grave mistake. No radical change, no revolutionary transformation will occur in this society—in this culture of domination—if we refuse to acknowledge the necessity for radicalizing consciousness in conjunction with collective political resistance. When I speak about radicalizing consciousness, I think of the word *concientizacion*, which implies much more than the mere adoption of politically correct slogans or support for politically correct causes.

We must envision the university as a central site for revolutionary struggle, a site where we can work to educate for critical consciousness, where we can have a pedagogy of liberation. Yet how can we transform others if our habits of being reinforce and perpetuate domination in all its

forms: racism, sexism, class exploitation? This returns us to the issue of self-recovery, extending it to include models of personal transformation that address both the oppressor and oppressed. In Nancy Hartsock's recent work on creating new epistemologies, she recalls the work of Albert Memmi and his insistence that both colonizer and colonized are dehumanized, albeit in different and very distinct ways within a culture of domination. Therefore, if domination is to end, there must be personal transformation on both sides. For those of us who oppose and resist domination, whether we be dominated or dominators, there is the shared longing for personal transformation, for the remaking and reconstituting of ourselves so that we can be radical.

It is crucial that we not ignore the self nor the longing people have to transform the self, that we make the conditions for wholeness such that they are mirrored both in our own beings and in social and political reality.

Using contemporary feminist movement as an example, we can look at ways feminist activists try to educate for critical consciousness. Within contemporary feminist movement, the process of consciousness-raising was at one time a central framework for the development of critical consciousness. Yet often the focus was solely one of naming one's oppressor, naming the pain. That powerful slogan, "the personal is political," addresses the connection between the self and political reality. Yet it was often interpreted as meaning that to name one's personal pain in relation to structures of domination was not just a beginning stage in the process of coming to political consciousness, to awareness, but all that was necessary. In most cases, naming one's personal pain was not sufficiently linked to overall education for critical consciousness of collective political resistance. Focussing on the personal in a framework that did not compel acknowledgement of the complexity of structures of domination could easily lead to misnaming, to the creation of yet another sophisticated level of non- or distorted awareness. This often happens in a feminist context when race and/or class are not seen as factors determining the social construction of one's gendered reality and most importantly, the extent to which one will suffer exploitation and domination.

Naming the pain or uncovering the pain in a context where it is not linked to strategies for resistance and transformation created for many women the conditions for even greater estrangement, alienation, isolation, and at times grave despair. Rather than aiding the process for self-recovery, many women felt a sense of disintegration as though their lives were becoming all the more fragmented and broken (those women who name the pain engendered by sexism and gendered oppression, who went on to emulate males and to work at assimilation into the culture of patriarchy, the culture of domination, were able to experience a sense of fulfillment denied those of us who were seeking transformation both of the self and the world around us). Longing for self-recovery, not simply the description of one's woundedness, one's victimization, or repeated discussion of the

problems, many women simply became disillusioned and disinterested in feminism, uncertain about whether feminism was really a radical movement.

A complete vision of self-recovery, of the process by which the dominated and exploited individual would experience a new and different relationship to the world, was lacking. Without a doubt, contemporary feminist movement has enabled women to become more aware of the impact of sexist domination and sexist oppression in our lives. This awareness has not led masses of women to commit themselves to feminist struggle, precisely because it is not fully linked to education for critical consciousness, to collective resistance.

Awakening women to the need for change without providing substantive models and strategies for change frustrates, creates a situation where women are left with unfulfilled longings for transformation. We may know that we need transformation, we may crave transformation, but lack a sense that these desires can be addressed by feminist politics or radical politics. It is this space of longing that has come to be filled by a variety of self-help books, which offer models for personal change applicable to everyday life. Books like *Do I Think I'm Nothing Without a Man?*, *The Cinderella Complex*, *Men Are Just Desserts*, *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*, and the most important, the all-time favorite, *Women Who Love Too Much*.

Feminist thinking and analysis about gender roles was the radical framework legitimizing and privileging women's right to articulate problems related to gender. It provided a stimulus, a push that has unfortunately compelled many women to grasp at solutions wherever they may be found. Ironically, these very books which purport to offer the models for self-recovery that feminist work does not offer, retard and undermine both the growth of women's political consciousness and the progress of feminist movement. Within the new self-help books for women, patriarchy and male domination are rarely identified as forces that lead to the oppression, exploitation, and domination of women. Instead, these books suggest that individual relationships between men and women can be changed solely by women making the right choices. At their very core, many of these books are woman-hating. They all posit a world view in which women can be liberated solely by making right choices. This is especially true of *Women Who Love Too Much*.

This book is unique in that it is read by masses of women across race, class, and sexual preference lines. Norwood's book is appealing precisely because it addresses in an essential way the longing for self-recovery. She uses this phrase not in a radical political sense but in the way it is used in mental health circles to identify individuals working to cope with various addictions. She speaks to the pain and anguish many women feel in personal relationships, particularly the pain heterosexual women feel in relationships with men. Yet she in no way acknowledges political realities,

the oppression and domination of women. Words like "male domination," "feminism," or "women's liberation" are never used, and even though she can share with readers that her husband did housework while she was writing, she shares this as though many men and most importantly, the right men, automatically assume such tasks, nurturing while women do creative work.

Just as Nancy Hartsock's new work urges us to question why we are being asked to surrender a concern with the subject at this historical moment, when women have been struggling to move from object to subject, we must ask why it is women are being seduced by models of individual change that imply that no change has to occur in larger political and social realities. We must ask ourselves why this is so appealing. Why are women willing to return to old patterns, to narratives that suggest we are responsible for male domination? As feminist activists, as feminist theorists, we must acknowledge our failure to create adequate models for radical change in everyday life that would have meaning and significance to masses of women. Until we construct and unless we construct such models, feminist movement will not have revolutionary impact transforming self and society.