

# And When We Speak...

## – on political solidarity between Black and white women<sup>1</sup>

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*and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid  
so it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive (Lorde 1982)*

The days are gone when feminists spoke of ‘we’ in a manner that indicated all women. Smaller groups are often indicated nowadays, like ‘we Black feminists’ as in the above quote, or ‘we socialist feminists’. This is a consequence of the realization that women do not have common origins or live under the same circumstances, as previously was claimed by essentialist feminists. In the same vein another observation can be made: that sometimes women have competing interests, even from other feminists. This leaves us with a situation in which women sometimes work together; sometimes try, but do not succeed; sometimes separate themselves from other groups of women in their political struggles... There is nothing new about all of this.

The present theoretical focus on the concept of ‘women’ instead of ‘woman’ can be related to the observation that the political demands that are made in the name of ‘women’ are maybe not as clear as they used to be. This does not always have to create problems, but on a certain theoretical as well as practical level obviously does. A focus on the political cooperation between Black and white feminists highlights this problem.<sup>2</sup> The Black feminist critique of white feminist analysis is that racism is just as important as sexism in the analysis of women in society. White feminist analysis is said to not always take this as a serious consideration (hooks 1984; Parmar 1989).

I take as a starting point the political activities of Black feminists in Europe and will describe some of the structural aspects of the political activities of Black feminists, as well as some of the attempts at cooperation between Black and white feminists. As cooperation between Black and white women is an

important political issue within the women's movement, we will focus on how political solidarity is carried out in practice.

### 1. Never Seen? Never Heard?

Black women choose to fight for their political issues both within the Black liberation movement, within the women's movement and autonomously, finding allies in both movements. In spite of this political activity, Black women are often not visible in the mainstream political debates of Europe. This is partly due to the constraints that are put upon women's political activity in general on both an EU as well as a national level. Restrictions which in terms of Black feminist organizing have certain specific characteristics.

There are several foci possible in terms of our discussion of political solidarity

(1) One focus is a discussion of the issues that are raised as important to feminists. Is racism for example considered important? When concepts like 'work' or 'citizenship' come up, are the issues of Black women taken into consideration?

(2) Another focus is the implications of strategic considerations for the solidarity and cooperation between feminists within the women's movement.

(3) A third focus could be a discussion of the characteristics of the academic and political actors who formulate feminist issues or make strategic decisions.

The first discussion will only indirectly be touched upon here as our concern will mainly be with aspects of the second and third points.

There are two political arena's that can be identified when discussing the political activities of Black women in Europe, the arena of party politics and the arena of (women's) organizations, both in a national as well as a European context.

#### 1.1 The Legal Status of Women

We will start out with party politics, an arena which knows hardly any Black women at all. This stands in sharp contrast to the activities of Black women within interest organizations.

The constraints on party political activity can first of all be said to be due to matters of citizenship. Without full citizenship it is impossible to vote or be elected for any parliament or position of political influence at either the national or the European level. Post-colonialism has influenced the legislation on citizenship rights in many European countries, although not always in the same or even in a consistent manner. The rights of migrant women, who may or may not be Black, are also of interest here. In many countries, among these Germany, migrant women do not have a legal status which gives them political rights. As a consequence these women are not represented in the political parties. The constraints that migrant women face overlap with those of Black women with full citizenship rights. Even when they have full citizenship, as is

the case with many citizens from former colonies in either the first (as in the United Kingdom) or the second generation (as in France), it can still be problematic to get on the list of party candidates. Issues of qualification, which are familiar to many women, also show up here, combined with a presumed everyday level of racism.

Ever since the time of the suffrage movement the topic of citizenship has received a lot of attention by feminists (Okin 1989). The classical conception of citizenship, according to Marshall (1950), includes not only formal political rights but also civil and social rights. Feminists argue that such a conception is blind to the ways in which women are excluded from acquiring full citizenship. In addition it is criticized by Black feminists because of the ways in which ethnicity and racialization function to exclude access to full citizenship (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992).

Migrant women's legal status is often characterized as rather weak. Civil rights are concerned with rights necessary for individual freedom, for example industrial rights, which include the right to belong to a trade union (Layton-Henry 1990). Migrant women's access to rights concerning working permits is often dependent on their husbands or other male relatives. They are not seen as independent subjects, but are supposed to migrate according to the rules of family reunification (European Community document COM (88) 743 final; European Parliament 1995).

Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have shown that immigration and nationality law differentiates between men and women and casts women as dependents of men. Under British immigration law women have tended to be seen only as mothers and wives. Successive immigration acts have also failed to give women the right to confer citizenship on their children or pass on patriality to their husbands (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992).

Black women have protested against the legal status which casts women as dependents to male relatives rather than as independent subjects in their own right.<sup>3</sup> The issue of citizenship rights in terms of a legal status in a country of residence, but also in terms of the European Union, influences the possibilities for the political organizing of Black women. The way concepts of gender, race and class have informed the legal status of women in immigration and naturalization laws, as wives and daughters, mothers and workers, has been of great importance to the role Black women have been allowed to conduct in society in general. Black women have pointed out that the effects of these laws on Black women, either as migrants or as Black women without a 'foreign' citizenship status, in terms of the racist assumptions of Black women's womanhood often is similar in society in general.

## 1.2 The European Union

The possibilities of acquiring full citizenship rights are dependent on the legislation of the different European countries. There is considerable variation in immigration and naturalization policies. Since the EU functions as an interna-

tional regime for migration at a regional level, citizenship rights are dependent also on EU legislation (Hollifield 1992).

EU legislation influences Black and migrant women's lives also in terms of 'the four freedoms', of which the freedom of movement of labor is one, the others being of goods, capital and services. These freedoms apply only to EU-citizens, not to citizens from outside its borders. A third country national, having a right of residence in one country, thereby being ensured of being entitled to housing, health care, pensions, etc., but having a nationality from outside the EU, cannot count on any political or social rights when moving to another country, as he or she will not be able to transfer these rights the way EU-citizens can. Living under a racialized division of citizenship, the third country national lives as a so called denizen, a second rate citizen of the European Union (Brah 1993).<sup>4</sup>

A country's electoral system can promote different candidates before others, influencing not only the procedure of proposals for candidates, but also who gets to be elected from the list of candidates. In that sense the British example, with one candidate representing a local district in competition with one other local party-candidate is supposed to be disadvantages for women in general. However, a usual comment from British members of the European Parliament is that this system also makes representation of for example Black people more secured, as a local constituency of primarily Black citizens can vote away a candidate if it does not feel properly represented. On the other hand, there are electoral systems with national lists of parties competing with each other, and candidates that can be brought forward out of political reasons. Women seem in general to be benefiting from this system at some level. Black and migrant women on the other hand do not (Vallance and Davies 1986; Layton-Henry 1992).

The European Parliament is but one of the institutions of the EU, and although its power has increased since the Maastricht Treaty, it is still not comparable to the power and influence of the parliament of a democratic nation-state (Council of the European Communities and Commission of the European Communities 1992). It is on the other hand one of the few channels through which citizens of the European Union can influence their situation on a European level, and to a certain extent control what the other institutions of the EU are doing (Vallance and Davies 1986; Hoskyns 1996). The influence of Black women upon the EP is related to the earlier discussions on legal rights.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this in terms of EU-legislation is that when Black as well as migrant women are perceived of as 'migrants', the insecure legal status that these women have in relationship to their husbands is ignored. When they are perceived of as 'women' the differences in political circumstances between white and Black women become invisible. Issues related to the combination of 'migrant' and 'women', of race and gender, in the context of EU-legislation are therefore hardly dealt with.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3 Interest Organizations

The grass roots activities of Black women and the degree of separate organization, apart from white women, in different European countries depend upon several aspects (all described in European Parliament 1995). One aspect is whether there are many women as well as men coming from one specific country? When there are many people, the probability of an organization to exist becomes higher. The wider networks with the countries of origin can also play a role, as well as the reasons for migration and settlement. Also the policies of integration and assimilation of the new country are of importance. The Netherlands has many both local and national migrant groups based on nationality and ethnic origin, organization is encouraged because it is not seen as a challenge to and undermining of Dutch society. In France, on the contrary, the building of such groups is seen as a challenge to French identity, particularly when pursued by the Muslim cultures which remind of the war with Algeria. This is therefore also reflected in the organizational thinking, which is aimed at assimilation. The degree of racism, xenophobia and sexism within a country influences the possibility of organizing in a more indirect way. Another important aspect is whether women are unemployed or employed, because possibilities to organize are often related to work and to qualifications that stem from the work situation. Totally apart from tasks like combining work and children, supporting an unemployed partner or keeping together the family against racist and sexist attacks.

The institutional barriers to organizing are also apparent when discussing the legal status and rights of Black women in the country. In Greece for example, the state level protection for migrant women's rights is minimal. Problems concerning these rights are then addressed by interest organizations of Black women. But when many women are undocumented the fear of getting on a name-list can be a problem, as this increases the possibility of getting caught and deported. The circumstances under which these organizations work are rather poor and their activities more or less underground. Southern European countries like Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, but also Ireland, have a tradition of emigration combined with a less developed structure of rights for migrant communities. There are very few Black women organizations in these countries and the possibilities of support or funding are minimal.

The northern countries, such as Britain and the Netherlands, have more established Black women organizations. This is due to a combination of a different history of emigration, different legal status, length of stay in the country, integrationist policies and a more established framework of rights, such as the British race legislation. In the Netherlands, funding is much more related to central or local government programmes, which is reflected into well-structured local, regional and national tiers. Transnational networks are more common here than in other parts of Europe. The organizations that work here might still be marginalized, but are visible in a totally different way and work with a whole different set of opportunities than similar organizations in Southern European countries.

Funding is one of the key factors which dictate the scope of activities of an organization. It can mean the difference between limiting the activity to counseling, immigration advice, work on welfare rights and domestic violence, or extending it to also including campaigning activities. It can mean the difference between relying solely on volunteers or having a staff with salaries. Funding also determines whether an organization will be accessible and have a permanent office or whether it will have to move around and rely on temporary arrangements. In Britain and the Netherlands membership funding is often the largest source of income. Obstacles to obtaining funds can include lack of access to information and networks, lack of knowledge about the political process of lobbying and lack of an appropriate level of financial support.

Although there are big differences between the possibilities of Black feminist organizing in the countries of Europe, also a number of European wide networks have emerged, especially during the 1990's. Most of these networks are based in Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium.

In sum, whereas Black women seldom are found within party politics, the second alternative, of interest organizations, often leaves Black women better options. Problems still arise particularly in cases when there are no links between the two arenas. This means that issues raised by Black women through grassroots channels are not taken up within party politics, because hardly any Black women are present in party politics and the white women who are presumptive allies choose not to take up issues of race and gender.

Cooperation between women is obviously lacking, otherwise the situation would look different for especially Black women. What makes it so difficult to cooperate? After all, as bell hooks has stated, the feminist movement is the one political location where bonding between Black women and white women has been raised as an important political issue (hooks 1995). I would suggest that it has to do with amongst others two things, the situation in which priorities are made, as well as the images women have of each other. The next section of the paper deals specifically with the cooperation between Black and white feminists.

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## 2. Encountering Subjects

Black women's organizing has both inside the Black movement, as well as in an autonomous manner or inside the women's movement, often been concentrated around the interrelationship between issues of 'race' and gender. The relationship between Black and white feminists has, also because of this, been rather stressed. White feminists have seemed embarrassed by the topic of racism in general and uncomfortable in discussions on racism within the women's movement. Both European and American Black feminists have therefore expressed their disappointment about relations with white feminists and have described them as at best patchy, at worst non-existent, as was the conclusion of the 'Confronting the Fortress' report (European Parliament 1995).

In terms of the troublesome cooperation between Black and white feminists two levels of understanding can be suggested. One being on a societal level, the other being on an individual level. On a societal level we could see that interest organizations were more accessible as an arena for political activity for Black women. The links between political parties and interest organizations are of importance. One of the problems that occur in terms of the cooperation between Black and white feminists could be said to be strategic decisions on what to bring up in what fora and on what grounds. Here problems concerning priorities occur. An interesting example in this context is the European Women's Lobby (EWL).

## 2.1 Priorities

Since 1990 the European Women's Lobby is working 'to promote the interests of women living in the European Community Member States including immigrants, ethnic minorities, vulnerable and marginalized social groups, within the framework of a united and democratic Europe' (European Women's Lobby 1993 a). Their fundamental aim is the achievement of equal rights and opportunities between women and men.

The Lobby is an international organization of non-governmental women's organizations. Its activities are mainly directed towards the EU. The Lobby draws primarily on EU-legislation and action programmes<sup>6</sup>, but also on UN declarations like the 'Forward Looking Strategies of the Advancement of Women' from the Nairobi women's conference of 1985, as well as other international agreements establishing the equality between women and men (European Women's Lobby 1993a).

The EWL was set up on a meeting in Brussels in September 1990 by 40 women, all representing non-governmental women's organizations. Soon after the lobby's formation a proposal was presented to the lobby by members of the European Forum of Left Feminists (EFLF or Forum), which were members of the EWL. They were concerned with the fact that there were apparently no Black women represented among the women who set up the lobby. At the time issues concerning Black women were due to be debated at the EC-level but there were no Black women present there either. Also the EC policies on women's rights, after all the context of the lobby's actions, lacked specific programmes for Black women. If EC policy making seemed distanced from women's organizations in general, this was certainly true concerning organizations of Black women (European Parliament 1995).

Therefore Forum members proposed that in the lobby's first work programme priority should be given to a project which would first identify contacts and organizations among Black and migrant women and second look at the existing barriers to greater visibility and representation of Black and migrant women at the European level. This was adopted and resulted in a Black and Migrant Women's Project, co-ordinated by the Forum.

Although the project was carried out and the report finished, and although motions regarding Black and migrant women and racism are accepted, the

members of EWL are not always in agreement, not even in the condemnation of racism. The issue at stake seems to be whether or not to bring up immigration issues on the agenda (European Women's Lobby 1993 b; Hoskyns 1996).

## 2.2 Solidarity as Hard Work

What to prioritize is not only difficult but also a sensitive decision. For Black women the solution can sometimes be found in rather organizing separately. A problem around priorities will then not occur in the same manner (Black women are after all neither all the same), and the possibility of making one's voice heard without interference will change. For example the Southhall Black Sisters (SBS) came to this conclusion. Pragna Patel describes how the SBS, who works within a predominantly Black, Asian community in Britain, were a challenge to both the feminist movement as well as to the anti-racist movement when they started in 1979. Whereas the feminist movement was devoid of an understanding of race and racism, the anti-racist movement refused to accept a gendered analysis of race. This left the SBS with the task of defining themselves. Cooperation is still of interest. In 1992 Pragna Patel's call is for "A new thinking..., one that moves us away from uniting on a basis of common origins, to uniting on the basis of a common agenda for the future" (Patel 1992).

The desire to cooperate with different women's organizations and to resolve the problems related to it have in the Netherlands lead to the formation of the Multi Etnisch Vrouwenoverleg (Multi Ethnic Women's Talks). This is a national initiative of women from Black, migrant, refugee and white women organizations, primarily aiming at stimulating the practical cooperation between Black and white women. Out of the conviction that everybody agrees upon the necessities of cooperation, after which nothing usually happens, several publications and seminars have been initiated since 1988 (Multi Etnish Vrouwenoverleg 1992). One of these publications is the highly interesting 'Böndgenoten?' ('Allies?'), in which one of the contributors, Leila Jaffar, has come up with a number of factors which highly influence the cooperation between Black, migrant- and white women (Jaffar 1992).

In her work as course director Leila Jaffar has noted as troublesome the expectations upon a natural solidarity between women. She claims that in practice there is a competition between issues of race and gender in terms of both positive action and fundraising, as well as of the pressure upon Black women to join both Black or migrant organizations as well as women's organizations in their political struggle.

A point Jaffar raises that seems widely known and recognized is the situation that the goals of groups of women might be the same, but the means to obtain these goals and the priorities made on the way, might not be. International women conferences are perfect examples of occasions in which this happens. What issues should be raised and who raises them are questions I would like to suggest should come up in this context.

Stereotypes about how white people as well as how Black people are, play an important role here, often emanating from a colonial history as in the case



of the Netherlands. All groups of women have ideas about other groups of women, often telling us more about themselves than about each other. For example the view that Black women are in need of help. An attitude among white women that they should give and also want to give, in spite of a lack of time, without expecting anything substantial back in return is such an example. A long tradition of women's organizations in other countries, successfully working in their own way, is often unrecognized by white women. For many Black women, according to Jaffar, receiving support or help from colonial white people that have this attitude is often irritating and not very appealing. It leaves Black women with long explanations of Black women's own situation, stressing at the same time that support is welcome, but that an attitude of pity is not. When Black women do not fit into this stereotypical picture of helplessness that has been created for them, it leaves white women confused, wondering where they have gone wrong? Black women are seen as aggressive and both parties doubt the good intentions of the other. Jaffar stresses the importance that white women acknowledge that they belong to a dominant group, in spite of how unusual it is for white women to perceive themselves in that way.

### 2.3 Solutions?

A possible strategy for white women is one of self reflection and self education. Knowledge about the impacts and mechanisms of racism both on an individual as well as a societal level are crucial. Acknowledgment of one's own position in itself does at the same time not lead to a better cooperation between Black and white women.

American Black feminist bell hooks has stated in this matter that:

When individual black and white females attempt to build bonds without divesting of (a) will to compete, there is usually a rupture of closeness. Competition fosters distrust. But the moment white and black females refuse to compete with one another an important intervention happens: the existing sexist/racist structure is disrupted. If that will to compete is replaced with a longing to know one another, a context for bonding can emerge (hooks 1995).

According to Judit Moschkovich bonding should not be done by means of an attitude of 'teach me everything you know', but rather by one of reading and listening, after which there might be something to share. How difficult this is becomes clear when she addresses themes of non-duty of the oppressed to educate the oppressor, the problems of being a resource person, and of tokenism (Moschkovich 1981, sec. ed. 1983).

Lack of connection between Black and white women still seems a major issue. According to bell hooks, at first the issue was one of lack of connection between the groups. When more Black women joined the movement, the recognition of such a lack of connection was given more serious attention. After twenty years of active engagement she now finds the major barrier to be that individual white women tend to be unaware of the way racism over history has institutionalized structures of racial apartheid and determined patterns of social relations. Hooks, like Jaffar, also addresses the tendency among white

women to look for a way to 'please' Black women, when these have allowed themselves to open up and express the legacy of hostility and rage towards white women as a result of their complicity with white supremacy. 'Pleasing' not being the issue here. Rather a relationship from a position of awareness and respect is looked for (hooks 1995).

An attempt to do this is exemplified by a recent Dutch project on a common celebration of international women's day organized by Black and white feminists. The project ran on a regional level as a cooperation between 28 women's organizations and involved amongst other issues a training in cooperation. Both the concreteness of the project as well as the fact that Black women were involved at the idea stage, when nothing was decided yet, were important pre-conditions for the project. According to co-organizer Shirley Dewkinandan from the Surinam umbrella organization Un Doro are Black women far too often asked to cooperate when everything already is decided, this project was a good break in that pattern (van Hooft 1992).

We can conclude that successful cooperation between Black and white feminists is hard to find. In the previous section we saw that Black women are not passive or helpless in spite of the images or stereotypes that are created around them. White women at the same time have a task of acknowledging this.

While white women can and must assume a major voice speaking to and about anti-racist struggle to other white women, it is equally important that they learn to speak with and, if need be, make it necessary to speak for women of color in ways that do not reinscribe and perpetuate white supremacy...

...This can only be done in critical engagement and dialectical exchange with non-white peers...(hooks 1995)

### Ask Yourself...

To look at the concept of 'women' in the light of political solidarity, rather than common origins, gives a different angle to the ways in which concepts of gender and race overlap. It shows different as well as common tasks for Black and white women. It is within the women's movement that the arguments are made and will have to be made for the issues women want to raise as important and to find solutions that make sense to women.

Women as political actors can be seen as attempting to find ways of describing common interests, issues and arguments around which we can unite. This includes being self critical within the movement while still attempting to find common grounds to struggle from. This way of describing 'women', mainly as feminists and as political actors fighting common causes, sometimes with other women, sometimes with men, ends exactly there and should in my view be separated from a description of 'women' targeted at solving specific problems of specific groups of women in different societies.

When looking at the different organizational settings, like in the European Parliament, it obviously is a problem that Black women can rarely represent themselves and that they have to rely on others, often white women, to influ-

ence the policies that concern them. Several aspects of this reliance work to the disadvantage of Black women, such as white women's (and men's) lack of knowledge about Black feminist issues and/or real or presumed lack of interest in obtaining this information, the distance between the Parliament and its voters, combined with the prioritizing of other issues than those of Black women, identified as more central to 'women in Europe', etc. In all of the above discussed organizational and institutional settings do strategic considerations play in. Strategies that also can be changed.

The possibilities for Black and white women to cooperate and make links between the political institutions and the interest organizations seem rare, considering the nature of the constraints and the structure of the institutions. It could therefore be seen as one of the main tasks for both Black and white women within the women's movement to reveal and question the structures that keep women from having channels of representation and information between different political arenas.

## Notes

1. A longer version of this article was presented at the conference 'A World in Transition – Feminist Perspectives on International Relations – an Interdisciplinary Conference', June 1996, Lund, Sweden, at the workshop on 'Resistances to Gendering and Gendered Resistances'. I would like to thank the participants of this workshop for their comments.

2. In this paper I will use the terminology Black and white feminists. This brings up the question of what is meant by 'Black' and 'white' in this context. First of all can it be stated that there is no common terminology around the issue of 'Black' and 'white'. The word 'Black' has a linked but also separate and distinct history when one compares its use and the politics around it in the USA and in Britain. I will be using the British definition in which it signifies the entangled racialised colonial histories of 'Black' settlers of African, Asian and Carribean descent. It affirms a politics of solidarity against racism centered around colour. Within this discourse and in spite of the diversity of origin and variation in geographical, historical etc. reference points, 'non-whiteness' is a common theme, which entails certain commonalities of experiences in terms of con-

fronting racist practices. These commonalities formed conditions for a politics of solidarity. The politics of 'Black' thereby also subverted the logic of the dichotomy 'white/non-white'. The unity of Black women as Black feminists can also be seen as a political phenomenon, that seeks a coherent and coordinated opposition against the varied manifestations of oppression. Black feminism and white feminism are therefore not essentialist notions. They make in the context of this article only sense as a dichotomy to highlight certain issues. Both are historically contingent, relational discursive practices, rather than fixed sets of positionalities. Their agendas both overlap and can be articulated separately. (see also Brah 1996)

3. In the Netherlands exists the *Komitee Zelfstandig Verblijfsrecht voor Migranten vrouwen*, the Committee for Individual Residence Rights for Migrant Women.

4. The term 'denizen' was introduced by Tomas Hammar and refers to a division in three gates at the entrance of many Western European states. The first describing the entrance of temporary foreign visitors and guestworkers with little or no citizenship rights. The second describing the regulation of status as denizen, granting permanent work and residence permits as well as full

social and legal rights, although usually not full political rights. The third describing naturalisation, meaning the granting of full citizenship including political rights. (Hammar 1990).

5. The possibilities for Black women of changing this situation themselves are rather harsh. This must also be seen against the background of EU politics and the Schengen Agreement (see Meijers et al, 1991; Bhavnani 1993; Miles and Thränhardt (eds) 1995; Standing Committee 1993).

6. Action programmes are policy programmes drawn up by the Commission of the European Union. The Commission recommends the member countries to follow the policy without having the authority to impose punishments if they are not followed.

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