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## **"You're calling me a racist?" The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism**

Presuming innocence, each of us is consistently surprised when we are viewed by other women as agents of oppression.  
—Fellows and Razack 1994, 1048

**R**age, tears, and confusion often follow even the most tentative discussions of racism and explorations of antiracism. Feminist scholars in particular have observed that antiracist challenges in feminist organizations and classrooms can elicit emotional responses from white feminists (Anzaldúa 1990; Friedman 1995; Fellows and Razack 1998). Ruth Frankenberg's well-known research on whiteness, for example, stemmed from her own "despair" over white feminists' "limited repertoire" of emotional responses to charges of racism (1993, 2). It becomes clear that while emotional aspects of solidarity have always been vital to building progressive communities of feminists and other activists, they are also the unsteady foundations on which antiracist change falters. However, there have been few sustained observations of how and why these emotional responses have been able to block, defuse, and distract from change in feminist, pedagogical, and social movement sites. I should emphasize that my aim is not to critique or dismiss the range of excellent antiracist work that has been undertaken by both white and nonwhite activists, and most notably by feminists, but rather to explore the subtle and not-so-subtle resistance to this work as well as the pitfalls of well-meaning efforts. While some might suggest that resistance to antiracism is a minor or temporary blot in the history of social movements rather than an ongoing phenomenon, we must acknowledge that there is ample evidence to the contrary (hooks 1983; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Dua and Robertson 1999).

How do we explain these kinds of emotional and resistant responses

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to antiracism? Elsewhere I have shown that problematic emotional responses during discussions of racism are cultivated in feminist organizations by histories of consciousness-raising, feminist therapy, and feminist theories of emotion (Srivastava, forthcoming). In this article I suggest that if we look again at these emotional debates and volatile exchanges over racism we can also hear their moral undertones, undertones with roots in feminist community, imperial history, and national imaginings. It is these narratives of morality that help to undergird inequitable relations of race in social movement sites such as feminist organizations. My own research in Canadian feminist organizations over the past two decades shows that in the face of antiracist challenges many white feminists may feel that it is their self-image—as good, implicitly nonracist people—and particularly their shared moral identity as feminists that is under siege. In other words, we can see that the typical pattern of emotional responses to antiracist challenges—anger, fear, and tears—is in part produced by implied challenges to what counts as a good feminist, a good person, a good woman, and a good national citizen.

Writers such as Mariana Valverde (1991), Ann Laura Stoler (1995), and Richard Dyer (1997) provide an important beginning to my analysis, showing that colonial and contemporary representations of virtue, honesty, and benevolence have been a historical foundation of whiteness, bourgeois respectability, and femininity. My contribution is to show further that the history of Western feminist movements adds another layer of moral imperative to these historical constructions of racial innocence. Many authors have already elaborated on the state as a regulator of gendered and racialized systems of morality and social control (Corrigan 1981; Little 1999). However, we must recognize that social movement organizations have also been important in promoting values that support state moral regulation and nation building (Valverde and Weir 1988, 32; Valverde 1991, 17). At the same time, social movement organizations are also active in creating their own social spaces, or “heterotopia” (Foucault 1986; Hetherington 1997), with local codes of morality that may counter state aims. So social movements may be both implicated in state multiculturalism policy and influenced by alternative discourses of equity and antiracism. My own study attends to these unique characteristics of contemporary social movement organizations—as well as to their historical particularity in the past two decades of feminist organizing. I argue that within social movements such as feminism, and in nations such as Canada, we can discern distinct moral accounts of self that disallow open discussions of what it might mean to be antiracist.

In undertaking this analysis, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing

historical shifts in the moral narratives shared by many white feminists. Over the past two decades, as Western feminist practice has gradually integrated antiracist thought, it seems that ideas about what makes a good feminist have also shifted. My analysis finds, however, that as some white feminists move toward new ideals of antiracist feminism, they often move toward deeper self-examination rather than toward organizational change. These findings suggest that some of the deadlocks of antiracist efforts are linked to these preoccupations with morality and self.

### **Method and methodology**

The analysis here is based on semistructured interviews with feminists involved in antiracism, on the published reflections of feminists, and on observations of organizational efforts. I conducted twenty-one confidential interviews with fifteen feminists involved in antiracist efforts in eighteen women's organizations based in Toronto, Canada, including drop-in centers, shelters, feminist advocacy groups, and feminist publications and publishers.<sup>1</sup> Two-thirds of those interviewed identified themselves as women of color; one-third identified themselves as white. All those interviewed had been involved in antiracist efforts within at least one community or social movement organization. Some of the women were interviewed more than once, as several had been involved in antiracist efforts in more than one organization. I also draw on observations of twelve antiracist workshops or workshop series as well as on numerous organizational meetings in a variety of sites, including feminist, environmental, social justice, and popular educational organizations and an aboriginal youth conference. In five of these workshop series I was either participant or facilitator. While my interest is in the practice of antiracism within organizations, I do not focus on the structure, goals, or work of these organizations. While detailed interview accounts of personal reflections

<sup>1</sup> To protect confidentiality, individuals are identified only by pseudonyms, and the interview transcripts are not identified by organization. The women interviewed worked in the following organizations: Sistering, a women's center and drop-in program; Women's Counselling Referral and Education Centre; Nellie's Hostel; National Action Committee on the Status of Women; Women in Transition shelter; Common Ground women's center; Central Neighbourhood House; International Women's Day/March 8th Coalition; Women's Network on Health and Environment; Greenpeace; *Fireweed*, a feminist journal; Toronto Women's Press; Oasis, a francophone women's counseling service; New Directions, a service organization for widowed and divorced women; the Disabled Women's Network; Foodshare; Canadian Women's Foundation; and Metro Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children.

and debates among activists are central to this study, I do not attempt to do a detailed analysis of or make proposals about interpersonal communication and individual motivation. Rather, I use these accounts by and about individual activists to understand better how discourses and practices of antiracism in organizations are shaped by broader historical relations of gender, race, and nation.<sup>2</sup>

I begin by tracing historical representations of white, innocent femininity and feminism and then show how these are conjoined with the moral conventions of the contemporary feminist community. I then turn to the observations and reminiscences of nonwhite and white antiracist feminists to illustrate these links in the context of antiracist debates.

### **Morality, whiteness, and women**

A number of scholars have investigated the making of the white subject and its place in constructions of culture, nation, and empire. These studies provide the foundation for interpreting the racial and moral politics of antiracist debate between white and nonwhite feminists today.<sup>3</sup>

That representations of morality are racialized is well demonstrated. David Goldberg has argued that moral reason itself has been racialized by “constituting racial others outside the scope of morality” (1993, 39). Dyer (1997) demonstrates this racialization of morality in his close study of visual representations of white people in Western culture, showing that the moral symbolism of the color white is in turn reflected in the repetitive association of white skin with virtue. Tracing visual and literary representations from Renaissance painting to Hollywood film, Dyer argues that the equation of whiteness with goodness underlies all representations of white and nonwhite people. He concludes, “To be white is to be at once of the white race and ‘honourable’ and ‘square-dealing’” (65).

Representations of morality have also been historically gendered. Dyer, for example, traces the historic tendency of visual depictions of white women to draw on images of the glowingly angelic. But the image of the good, caring woman has been further shaped by imperialism (Enloe 1989; Valverde 1991; Ware 1992). Stoler’s work in particular shows that nineteenth-century imperialist discourses cast white women as the “custodians” of bourgeois morality (1995, 130). The protection of white women

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Pringle’s study of secretaries and bosses, *Secretaries Talk* (1989), and Frankenberg’s study of whiteness, *White Women, Race Matters* (1993), use similar approaches to integrating interview material into sociological analysis.

<sup>3</sup> See Goldberg 1993; Stoler 1995; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1997.

from the supposed immoral passions of men of color in the colonies, for example, was justified by gendered and racialized representations of virtue. The White Women's Protection Ordinance of Papua New Guinea is but one piece of colonial legislation that cemented these constructions (Stoler 1995). Furthermore, in their roles as missionaries and teachers, European women in colonial settings often styled themselves as the overseers of black souls and "guardian of white morals" (Ware 1992, 120).

However, not only feminine but also feminist moral identity has been historically focused on benevolence and innocence. Research has shown that these historical representations of the benevolent Anglo-Saxon bourgeois woman as a standard of moral and racial purity have also played an enduring part in first-wave feminist discourse (Valverde 1992), not only in colonial settings but also in U.S. and Canadian movements. Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century maternal feminism, for example, reproduced images of women as keepers of morality in the family and the nation (Valverde 1992). Valverde (1992) shows how discourses of whiteness, light, and purity in the turn-of-the-century Canadian maternal feminist movement produced an image of vote-deserving women as the cultural, moral, and biological "mothers of the race," a position clearly inhabitable only by some white women. Vron Ware (1992) and Paula Giddings (1984) have made similar observations about the suffragist movements in Britain and in the United States.

The turn-of-the-century moral reform movement in North America, closely linked to first-wave feminism, echoed these constructions of femininity and gendered morality. By rescuing or studying immigrant, "feeble-minded," or poor women, middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestant women thereby emphasized their own supposed benevolence, superiority, and innocence (Valverde 1991, 62). Similarly, the ideals of women's liberation that U.S. women brought to their work as missionaries in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were bolstered by their belief that their superior domestic, cultural, and religious position must be adopted by supposedly "down-trodden" Indian women (Flemming 1992, 192). In other words, the role of moral leader, reformer, and expert allowed some white women to attain respectability and status (Valverde 1991; Fellows and Razack 1998).

### **Contemporary feminism: Threads of heterotopia, history, and nation**

How, then, are these histories expressed in contemporary sites? While discussions of racism continue to be shaped by imperialist histories, these preoccupations with innocence and morality have a more contemporary

and more complex expression. Specific to Western second-wave feminist organizations are the ways that these historical and gendered representations of racial innocence and superiority come together with two other threads: feminist ideals of justice and egalitarian community and national discourses of tolerance, benevolence, and nonracism.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of social movement organizations—and that which is most relevant here—is that most contemporary social movements have focused not only on changing society “out there” but also on developing practices for looking inward, with the aim of shaping community and self. Using implicit guidelines for conduct as well as alternative moral standards, language, and practices, social movements such as feminism work at constructing imagined egalitarian communities and ethical selves—preoccupations that were not part of first-wave feminist movements.

The concept of heterotopia, used by Michel Foucault (1986) to refer to alternative moral orders or spaces, is useful in focusing on the moral dimensions of the social movement as imagined community.<sup>4</sup> Kevin Hetherington’s (1997) historical discussion of heterotopia is helpful here; his study of the Freemasons of eighteenth-century England shows how an organization or movement can create spaces of social solidarity, or alternative community, that symbolize a new moral order. In particular, Hetherington argues, the Freemasons saw their organization as an alternative moral space, a “good place” characterized by humanistic ideals of fraternity, individual freedom, charity, and tolerance (12). Of course, as an exclusive men’s social organization, freemasonry represents quite a different moral order from those of contemporary social movement organizations. However, we can see that Hetherington’s description of heterotopia as an “other” social space shaped by the desire of Freemasons for a new moral order, or good place, is similar in form to the imagined, alternative community created by the feminist movement. To extend Hetherington’s analysis, the alternative social movement community, like freemasonry, is also envisioned as a good place. In other words, social movements require a vision not only of a community of individuals but also of shared ideas, morals, and ethics.

For example, feminism’s ideal of a global sorority of women (Morgan 1984) shares with freemasonry’s ideal of fraternity a vision of an imagined family with shared commitments, values, or experiences. Although many

<sup>4</sup> The phrase *imagined community* was conceived by Benedict Anderson (1992) to describe the development of “nationness” and nationalism.

feminists have criticized the particular notion of a global sisterhood, it is clear that feminist movements are often imagined as social, political, and moral communities—albeit recreated and re-visioned in a variety of physical and imagined spaces. In their discussion of “moral politics,” Valverde and Lorna Weir argue that feminism provides an “alternative moral system” (1988, 33). In particular, feminist and “alternative” spaces are commonly associated with ethical practices distinct from mainstream institutions—including antioppressive practices and lifestyle, an ethic of care, emotional self-expression, and egalitarianism.<sup>5</sup> For example, some feminists have expressed the need to start “at home” by fighting racism “within our own community” (Broadside Collective 1986, 2).

However, even as they produce distinct ethical practices and moral communities, second-wave feminist efforts are also overlaid with the contemporary national discourses of tolerance, multiculturalism, or nonracism common to Western nations such as Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United States. Here, I use the term *nonracist* to refer to a liberal discourse of equality that denies the systemic nature of racism and its presence in our everyday language and practices.<sup>6</sup> In Canada, the “national story” of benevolence and generosity toward outsiders is particularly powerful (Ng 1992; Razack 2000). In Carol Schick’s study of Canadian student teachers’ reflections on racism, Canada was described as a “lovable,” “not evil” place where everyone receives equitable treatment (1998, 310). Not surprisingly, Schick found that the teachers’ claims to their own innocence concerning racism drew on this national discourse of tolerance and benevolence. Similarly, in the Netherlands, writes Philomena Essed (1991), the reluctance of citizens to acknowledge racist acts is tied to the national self-image of tolerance and non-discrimination. In Frankenberg’s interviews with white women in the United States, a similar “color-evasive” and “power-evasive” repertoire was predominant (1993, 14). In New Zealand, Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (1992) outline similar discursive strategies of denial that New Zealanders use to avoid being seen as prejudiced. As many have

<sup>5</sup> In her study of a health organization, Sherryl Kleinman uses the term *alternative* to refer to an identity based in egalitarianism and in challenging conventional authority (1996, 5). Although a variety of labels is used and the specific attributes are varied, many social movement identities, including feminist ones, share these traits (see Carroll and Ratner 1996), and it is in this general sense that I use the term *alternative*.

<sup>6</sup> This term was suggested to me by Roxana Ng, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Donna Baines (1998) has used Ng’s term in her study of progressive social workers she interviewed.



argued, these kinds of liberal and “color-blind” representations have been central not only to the denial but also to the perpetuation of racism and exclusion (see, e.g., Razack 2000).<sup>7</sup>

These discourses have been influential in feminist politics as well, although here nonracism has been joined by antiracism, a political philosophy and practice committed to challenging racism as systemic in institutions and everyday life. As a historically humanist project, feminism, like liberal democratic nations, has often been imagined as inherently egalitarian and inherently nonracist. In other words, nonracist feminist discourse expresses concerns about racism not as an active political project but as an impediment to an otherwise inherent egalitarianism. Within feminist organizations, however, this broader liberal discourse is joined with a feminist vision of radical democracy and revolution. Ware argues that this implicit progressive egalitarianism was a tenet of British feminism in the 1980s, one that stood in the way of antiracist activism: “To begin with, there was almost an assumption among many women that as feminism was a progressive, even revolutionary force, it contained within it an automatic anti-racism position” (Ware 1992, 18). Lynda Hurst’s *Toronto Star* article about racial conflict among feminists in Canada suggests rhetorically, “Surely feminism, a movement based on equality, has always been implicitly anti-racist?” (1992, D1). Feminism, in this representation, is a place of just practices, egalitarian relations, revolutionary goals, and good individuals.

These three threads—imperial representations of innocence, imagined egalitarian communities, and national discourses of tolerance—can become intertwined in contemporary women’s feminist, service, and professional work. A number of writers have made links between the historical foundations of gendered and racialized morality and contemporary discussions of racism or oppression in feminist forums (Enloe 1989; Ware 1992; Fellows and Razack 1998). As Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack suggest, in contemporary feminist debates women whose dominance is contested often respond with an “emotional attachment to innocence” (1998, 343). Fellows and Razack argue that this attachment to innocence can be linked to colonial representations of white, innocent femininity. In other words, just as first-wave feminism was shaped by the backdrop of imperialism and nation building, contemporary feminist communities have been similarly shaped by representations of morality rooted

<sup>7</sup> Frankenberg uses the more accurate terms *color-evasive* and *power-evasive* in preference to *color blindness* because the former refers to the strategies people use to avoid acknowledging racism rather than to their supposed inability to see racism.

in racist and imperial histories. Other scholars have convincingly demonstrated that these nineteenth-century representations continue to structure many contemporary white women's motivations in feminist psychotherapy (Roger 1998) and international development (Heron 1999). Barbara Heron shows that the desire of white Canadian women to do development work in Africa is inextricable from the "enduring legacy of . . . middle-class women's moral role" (1999, 86). The women she interviewed, for example, typically said that their motivation to work in Africa was to "make myself better by doing something for someone somewhere" (1999, 102). However, in the context of the feminist movement or "progressive" communities, historical representations of white innocence are also joined by the newly theorized ideals of social justice and of the political integrity of an egalitarian community. Images of benevolence and nonracism remain meaningful, but they are also tied to profound moral visions of social justice and commitments to activism. For example, Heron quotes the white development workers she interviewed as wanting to "do something to improve the state of the world" (1999, 107). Heron argues that although these statements can be read as an expression of "white bourgeois subjects seeking to situate themselves in a global context," they may also be read as "a determined resistance to both racism and injustice" (107).

Links among these three threads may also be visible in the ways that national ideals of liberal democracy, freedom, and equality have been significant in some feminist and popular discourse on sexism and racism and in some feminist and antiracist appeals to the state. We might suggest, for example, that representations of women in Afghanistan and Iraq as oppressed have not only been important in justifying "liberation" by the U.S. military but have also reinforced implicit images of women of color as needing liberation from men of color and of third-world women as more oppressed than first-world women, assumptions that have been prominent in some feminist commentary on female genital surgery, the veil, and violence against women (see, e.g., Uma Narayan's 1997 essay contrasting the ways in which violence against women in the United States and in India are framed).

These links among discourses of nation, femininity, and feminism are clearly demonstrated in some of the responses to antiracist challenges within feminist organizations. With these challenges, the assertion of the good, white woman easily becomes a spectacle within and outside feminist organizations. A well-known Toronto example is the antiracist challenge raised by women of color working at Nellie's Hostel, a shelter for battered women. At a turbulent Nellie's board meeting in 1990, staff member Joan

Johnson read aloud a letter outlining concerns of racism. However, the chair of the board, prominent Canadian philanthropist June Callwood, was quick to remind Johnson of what she owed to white women at Nellie's—years earlier, Johnson had been sheltered at Nellie's Hostel while seeking legal immigration status. "Are you the same Joan Johnson all these women helped?" the chair demanded. Johnson understood the meaning of Callwood's reproach. She replied, "You want me on my knees forever" (interview transcripts, May 1996; Dewar 1993, 37). Any discussion of racism in the organization was stopped short by a reminder of the good women who had helped a needy woman of color years before. In this exchange, Callwood questions the gratitude of a woman who would raise the specter of racism against her rescuers. However, the woman's response—"You want me on my knees forever"—is an explicit political challenge to the historical representation of the benevolent, white, middle-class helper of the "less fortunate," to what has been called the "Lady Bountiful" image (Harper 1995). Furthermore, the vociferous public and organizational defense of Callwood, recipient of the Order of Canada, centered around familiar images not only of the good woman and philanthropist but also of the good nation.<sup>8</sup> However, Callwood's defenders were not only other prominent Canadians but also some other feminists, showing how the projection of innocence is crucial both to national self-image and to the white feminist political project. In other words, the defense of Callwood demonstrates a morality founded on representations of innocent femininity, the tolerant nation, and an egalitarian and nonracist feminism.

### Moral identity

A liberal nonracist discourse projects innocence not only onto the tolerant and benevolent nation but also onto the individual, by defining racism as acts done by bad or ignorant individuals and ameliorated by education. Because the heterotopias, or imagined moral communities, of social movement organizations are concerned not only with the production of ethical

<sup>8</sup> Extensive newspaper coverage included a full-page spread in the national newspaper *Globe and Mail* (Rose 1992); a *Globe and Mail* editorial, "A Question of the Pot Calling the Kettle White" (Thorsell 1992); "If Callwood Is a Racist Then So Are We All" (Berton 1992); and "Unsaid Words on Racism" (Paris 1992). Magazine coverage included the now-infamous "Wrongful Dismissal" (Dewar 1993); a cover story in *Quota*, a lesbian monthly, "Checking In: June Callwood Talks about Her Feelings, Her Faults, and the Failing of Feminist Groups Struggling with Issues of Racism" (Douglas 1993); and Adele Freedman's (1993) "White Woman's Burden" in *Saturday Night*.

practices and values but also with the production of ethical selves, this notion of nonracism can have particular strength and unique manifestations. As Hetherington (1997) notes, the making of the good place is about creating a space for the perfection not only of society but also of the individual within it. Ethical practices, or the ways that we monitor and make ethical selves, are, in other words, of particular interest in understanding social movements and organizations that hope to change conduct and codes of morality.<sup>9</sup> In freemasonry, Hetherington suggests, the ethical practices of trust, tolerance, and fraternity transformed ethical selves and collective identities “from isolated stranger to trustworthy brother” (97). The phrase “the personal is political,” for example, gives us the sense that we might create a more just world through the practice of ethical self-regulation. This used to be referred to in activist circles as “politically correct,” or behavior that “adheres to a movement’s morality and hastens its goals” (Dimen 1984, 139).<sup>10</sup>

Sherryl Kleinman uses the term *moral identity* to refer to “an identity that people invest with moral significance; our belief in ourselves as good people depends on whether we think our actions and reactions are consistent with that identity” (1996, 5). In social movements—or those social spaces that are organized around alternative social justice—distinct organizational rituals, discourses, and shared values can produce specific moral identities. These may be labeled variously as “activist,” “feminist,” “progressive,” and so on, depending on the local social movement context; all moral identities, as Margaret Walker says, are “produced by and in these histories of specific relationship” (1997, 69).

However, not all measure up to these moral identities or participate equally in the moral community. Benedict Anderson (1992) reminds us that the making of nation or community requires not only imagining sameness and communion but also forgetting difference and oppression. The ideas of community are conjured, Anderson says, because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (1992, 7). The forgetting of difference has similarly been a central problem for social movements. It has been possible to imagine solidarity and sisterhood

<sup>9</sup> Valverde’s (1999) study of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, shows that the organization’s primary practices can be described as ethical techniques—practices aimed at changing the self, one’s own desires and habits—as opposed to medical or psychological techniques.

<sup>10</sup> In the past decade, this meaning of *politically correct* has been caricatured and remade by many conservative writers. For a discussion of this “anti-PC” discourse, see Richer and Weir 1995.

among all women only because relations of power and anger among women have been “forgotten.” Imagining the good feminist requires similar omissions. We need to ask new questions about the ethical subject of feminism: Who is “good,” or seen as good? Does *good feminist* mean good, white feminist? Does *good feminist* imply a nonracism that glides over inequitable relations of race?

My interview with Yasmin, a young Muslim woman active in making an antiracist challenge at a feminist agency, demonstrates that feminist moral identity has indeed been shaped by race and class relations and that not everyone therefore measures up to the community’s moral scrutiny. Yasmin described “my fear of being seen as not feminist”; she was continually aware that she was constantly judged by coworkers on whether her lifestyle was “alternative” enough (interview transcripts). She highlights the omissions in the imagining of the just, “alternative” identity and world, suggesting that these are premised on racialized and classed conceptions of justice and gender: “Everything they embodied was this alternative way of being. ‘I’m not going to drink tap water,’ ‘I’m going to send my child to an alternative school.’ And it went on and on. . . . So in some ways, it prevented certain people from feeling comfortable here too” (interview transcripts, April 1996). Yasmin is neither invited to imagine nor desires to imagine the moral community and alternative identity that her coworkers imagine.

Similarly, the implicit nonracism that has been present in some feminist communities or discussions absents the antiracist concerns of Yasmin and other women of color and shapes talk and behavior on these concerns. Here *nonracist* may be used to refer both to those who do “not see” racial inequality as well as to those who acknowledge racism as a concern “out there” but deny that they, their organizations, movements, or nations are implicated in racist practices or discourses. My interviews and my review of feminist media suggest that many white feminists see nonracism or antiracism as integral not only to their identity as tolerant Canadians but also, and primarily, to their identity as feminists, as people working toward a more just world. As Frankenberg observes about her own growing awareness of antiracist feminism, “Because we were basically well-meaning individuals, the idea of being part of the problem of racism was genuinely shocking to us” (1993, 3). The incident at Nellie’s Hostel, for example, reinforces the notion that if one is generous and committed to social change, the taint of racism is unthinkable.

The struggle by some white feminists and feminist organizations to maintain an ethical nonracist feminist identity can then become an impediment to meaningful antiracist analysis and change. Kleinman’s (1996)

study of moral identity confirms that the struggle to maintain an “alternative” identity can ironically hamper social change. In the alternative health organization Kleinman studied, the members’ sense of self-worth was dependent on their belief that they were “doing something different” (5), that they were truly alternative. However, Kleinman says, their deep investment in this alternative moral identity “kept them from seeing how their behaviours contradicted their ideals” when they perpetuated inequalities inside their organization (1996, 11). Kleinman argues that “we become so invested in our beliefs as radicals or ‘good people’ that we cannot see the reactionary or hurtful consequences of our behaviours” (11). In other words, an alternative moral identity can both foster and impede social change.

#### **“You’re calling me a racist?”: Emotion and morality**

The political context of alternative moral identities also explains why being seen as nonracist or antiracist is more likely to be a highly emotional concern for feminists and other activists or community workers and more likely to be crucial to their moral identity or sense of self. This political and ethical climate means that there is a great deal at stake—not only one’s sense of goodness and sense of self but also one’s political identity, one’s career as activist or worker in a feminist organization. The effort to maintain an ethical, innocent, and nonracist face often produces an emotional resistance to antiracism, typified in my interviews by the incredulous or tearful phrase, “You’re calling me a racist?” An understanding of the individual and psychic aspects of moral regulation gives us new insight into the emotional resistance to antiracism in feminist communities. We need to acknowledge that experiments in creating a new social order, a social movement, create not only spaces of new ethics but also new emotions. Historical analyses of the ethical and emotional climate of fraternity have some parallels to that of sisterhood: “Fraternity had a very strong emotional content, uniting something like the sentiments of kinship, friendship and love. . . . Hence—as in freemasonry—it also had a very strong ethical content” (Hobsbawm 1975, 472).

Similarly, new social movements produce moral climates that become emotional spaces for the production of ethical selves. In Kleinman’s (1996) study, members of an alternative health organization used emotional rituals to reinforce their alternative moral community and identity. Rituals of emotional expression and personal experience have also been important in building feminist moral identity, particularly in organizations that draw on consciousness-raising and feminist therapy models. The U.S. National

Lesbian Conference in 1991 had several “vibes watchers”—women whose job it was to monitor the emotional climate and advise the participants when to take a deep breath, take a moment of silence, or scream (Taylor 1995). Staff at a feminist health clinic studied by Sandra Morgen (1995) had regular “feelings meetings” to air out the emotional “fallout” of their work and to deal with interpersonal conflicts: a typical comment might be, for example, “I’m getting hurt by your personal style” (245). There is a clear link between ethical and emotional practices in shaping the imagined feminist community.

So what happens when nonracist feminist discourses and identities are challenged? It is these discourses and rituals of emotion that have helped to maintain and defend the nonracist heterotopia and moral identities of the feminist movement. When this imagined nonracism is challenged by antiracist feminists, the denials and defense often are not only couched in personal ethical terms but also can be highly emotional. My interviews show that antiracist efforts are often met with emotional resistance by white women—with anger, even tears. According to my interviews about antiracist discussions, white participants may speak in an emotional manner about their commitment, hope, solidarity, complicity, guilt, lack of complicity, failure to understand, disbelief, hurt, and anger that they have been accused; tears are the most commonly described reaction. The problem, as the antiracist activists interviewed point out, is not that emotional expression is inherently negative; the problem is that discussions about personnel, decision making, or programming become derailed by emotional protestations that one is not a racist and by efforts to take care of colleagues upset by antiracist challenges. In other words, it is the effects and the racialized power relations of this emotional expression that are problematic rather than emotion itself.

One of the most common angry and indignant reactions described in my interviews was “How can you call me racist?” (interview transcripts, December 1996). Lynn describes the emotional aftermath after one particularly acrimonious board meeting: “And [one of the board members] was bawling her eyes out and saying that she wasn’t going to apologize for anything that she had done” (interview transcripts, May 1996). Vijaya, one of the activists I interviewed, echoed a common sentiment that white women’s tears flow more openly in these discussions: “White women cry all the fucking time, and women of color never cry” (interview transcripts, December 1996). Rayna’s description notes that anger, indignation—“You’re calling me a racist?”—and tears are typical responses of whites to organizational discussions of racism: “The indignant response, anger, the

rage that turns into tears, the foot stomping, temper tantrums, which are very typical responses. Every single organization that I have been in, every single one. So I realized that it wasn't about me . . . after a while [laughter]" (interview transcripts, April 1996).

If one's identity as feminist, as woman, as Canadian, as liberal rests on being tolerant and just, then antiracist challenges profoundly unsettle that foundation. Here, as elsewhere, some whites may direct anger and defensiveness at those who have disturbed that imagined identity. For example, the defensive reactions that accompanied antiracist change in a local feminist community organization are described by Samantha, a white manager whom I interviewed: "Oh, lots of defensiveness, definitely—'That's not racism,' or 'I can't believe you think that.' Or, 'She didn't mean that.' Or, 'I'm not racist.' You certainly heard that a lot" (interview transcripts, December 1996). In my interviews this is a strikingly common description. Catherine, a white executive director of a women's agency, describes the kinds of reactions she sees as she begins to broach antiracism as an organizational issue: "'I'm not prejudiced,' 'I've never discriminated against anybody in my life'" (interview transcripts, December 1996).

Other white feminists respond with fear and terror that their moral accounts of self will be challenged. Minnie Bruce Pratt speaks of the "clutch of fear around my heart," the "terror" she feels on being "found out" as a white person who has "wronged others" and is about to be "punished" (1984, 17). Frankenberg's story of confronting antiracist feminism echoes these feelings: "And the issue was also terrifying, in the sense that we constantly felt that at any second we might err again with respect to racism, that we didn't know the rules" (1993, 3). She and her white feminist friends were terrified, she says, of "not being able to 'get it right'" (4).

### **Empathy**

According to interview accounts, some white women openly demonstrate their remorse and empathy when they come face to face with the everyday meaning of racism for women of color. Samantha, a white woman involved in antiracist change in her organization, reflected on her own tearful reaction, saying, "One horrible incident makes me want to cry, when I hear about it" (interview transcripts, December 1996). We can see that, like anger, expressions of empathy and care help to construct and maintain a self-image of the good feminist. In feminist moral philosophy, displaying empathy and care for the other is generally characterized as a desirable expression of the caring and political connection among women, as well



as of egalitarian relations. In fact, feminist philosophers have argued for the importance of empathy in working across difference, as it is seen as central to moral judgment about oppression (Bartky 1997; Meyers 1997).

Ironically, this is precisely why the expression of empathy and sympathy can become problematic in organizational settings: empathic expressions often revolve around an individual's moral self-image rather than organizational change. In the context of feminist psychotherapy Kerstin Roger (1998) argues that empathy reinforces the notion of the universally kind, helping white woman. For example, Nina tells the story of her organization, one in turmoil over accusations of racism. One of the white board members showed up at the women of color caucus meeting to voice her support but instead spoke about herself and cried. Nina recalls: "She came to the women of color caucus, and then she just talked about herself. . . . And she started crying, she was bawling her eyes out in fact, and saying, 'It's terrible, I don't know how you guys stand it'" (interview transcripts, December 1996). This white board member clearly sought out a space to publicly display her revulsion of racism, even as the same self-preoccupation left her unwilling to actually do anything to support antiracist change. Her public display of revulsion—"I don't know how you guys stand it"—was also a necessary display of her inherent antiracism, inherent goodness.

Himani Bannerji, in her recollections of antiracist feminist discussions, writes that "claims about sharing 'experience,' having empathy" are meant to show that white feminists are "doing good" to feminists of color (1992, 10). Thus it is empathy "rather than questions, criticisms and politics" that emanates from these women: "Why" she asks, "do they . . . only talk about racism as understanding us, doing good to 'us?'" (11).

Contrary to the arguments of many feminist philosophers, these displays of empathy are clearly not helpful but offensive. Here we see that empathy about racism implies that the problem belongs to women of color and requires only the sympathetic feelings of white women—it emphasizes, in other words, the unequal relations of power. In the context of feminist discussions of racism, displays of empathetic feelings also reinforce the "goodness" in being a feminist—they show that one is highly sensitive to injustice.

### ***Innocence and sin***

As I have suggested, the defensive, angry, tearful, and empathic responses to antiracist challenges may be traced in part to the struggle to maintain a good, innocent, and egalitarian moral identity. When it comes to discussing racism, the moral terrain of the feminist movement can take on

a dramatic tenor: the nonracist must be not just good but also innocent and pure. That desire for innocence underlies many conflicts about social difference in feminist forums. Fellows and Razack (1998) describe several feminist roundtables in which they were participants and show how the presumption of innocence—this “deeply felt belief that each of us, as women, is not implicated in the subordination” of others—underlies the deep fracture that opens when feminists talk about race (364). These contemporary relations between white and nonwhite feminists have been shaped by an imperial history of respectability and benevolence on the part of white women—an image of benevolence that becomes difficult to maintain when women of color begin to highlight racism or to criticize efforts to make the movement more inclusive (Grewal 1996; Fellows and Razack 1998).

My interviews with Ginny, a woman of color active in antiracist struggles, echo Fellows and Razack’s analysis. Reflecting on some of the common reactions to antiracism that she has experienced in women’s organizations, Ginny notes that the resistance comes from a deep incredulity that women feel about being implicated in any oppressive practice: “I think a lot of time the white women that are in power, they don’t actually think of themselves as having power, they think of themselves as victims, as women, so that when they’re told that they’ve done something to hurt somebody, they just can’t believe it. ‘Me? But I’m the one who’s been a victim all my life. I went through . . . ’ de da de da de . . . ” (interview transcripts, April 1996).

As I have argued, this profound belief in noncomplicity can be linked to the broader moral climate of feminist politics. Ellen Rooney (1989) argues that the very concept of sisterhood expresses a “longing for innocence” (233). Her reference to the longing for innocence and the “interest each of us has in her own innocence” (233) suggests a key critique of the moral climate of feminist politics. As the fiction of women’s unity has been challenged, the women’s movement has become a place where the nonracist image of goodness has been severely shaken. Kiké Roach, a young black feminist, argues that these investments shaped politics at the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), an umbrella advocacy group and Canada’s largest women’s organization: “I think that most white women think, ‘Accept me as I am, I’m a good person, I’m involved in this social justice issue’” (Roach and Rebick 1996, 112). So the emotional reactions of some white feminists to antiracist challenges rest on attempts to recuperate a just feminist identity and community.

Not surprisingly, emotional and resistant responses to organizational

change efforts are often couched in terms of good versus evil—the good person versus the evil racist. *Racist* is seen not as a political analysis, organizational problem, or even as an insult but as a definition of character, one in conflict with a movement’s and an individual’s moral and political identity—“How can you call *me* racist?” Here *racist* is seen as an attack on goodness—a framing that is supported by a liberal, nonracist discourse that sees racism as bad acts done by individuals rather than as systemic. As Catherine, the white director of a feminist agency says, the personal defense can supersede a political analysis: “And so to get to the *analytical* understanding of racism, there’s a lot of resistance. There’s people who say, ‘I’m feeling attacked’” (interview transcripts, December 1996). Ginny reflects on the typical reaction to antiracist challenges in organizations where she has worked: “So, it goes to the core of themselves, ‘I am bad [if] you are calling me racist; how can you?—I have a vision of myself as good.’ Well, no one is saying you’re bad. This is something that needs changing” (interview transcripts, April 1996). Samantha, as a white woman active in antiracist efforts, elaborates on the good-versus-evil framework of responses to antiracist change in her organization: “People are so afraid, that people are going to get sued, or you’re going to be labeled racist, and therefore evil, and you can never change” (interview transcripts, December 1996). The possibility of being touched by the “evil” associated with some imagined racist identity also calls up deep emotions—fear, anger, despair.

In both of the interview excerpts above, ironic references to the immutability of a racist identity are notable. One woman notes that suggestions of racism “go to the core” of a woman’s identity; Samantha says it is assumed that “you can never change.” It is clear that racism is seen by many as being an internal, fixed quality. Frankenberg’s study of race in white women’s lives found similar references to racism as a personal sin, or “original sin” (1993, 173). While the possibility of redemption seems unlikely, redemption is at the same time the only source of salvation. Because *racist* is described as a personal trait rather than as a practice or relation of power, the possibility for change is also located within the individual.

### **Strategic innocence**

In turn, protestations of innocence and expressions of empathy appear to be used as a way of tempering white women’s feelings of desolation and of protecting them from anger and criticism by women of color. For example, Yasmin describes a typical reaction by some white women who were challenged for not having contributed to an antiracist workshop

exercise. That, Yasmin says, “just led to tears on the part of the white women . . . and blah, blah . . . things like, ‘I’ve tried really hard to see where I’ve come from, and who I’ve oppressed as a white woman’” (interview transcripts, May 1996). One can hear these women’s anxiety that their endeavors to be good antiracist feminists should be recognized; they remain anxious to present themselves as good feminists with good intentions.

There can be no clearer illustration of “innocence” as protection and strategic response than in the racial tensions documented by Métis writer Maria Campbell and white actor Linda Griffiths in the writing of their award-winning feminist play *Jessica*, based on Campbell’s Métis ancestry and performed by Griffiths.<sup>11</sup> In reflecting on their difficult collaboration, Campbell explains that it was Griffiths’s innocent facade, her smile, her “Virgin face” that both infuriated Campbell and compelled her to give Griffiths what she wanted—the painful details of her experience and history as a Métis woman (Griffiths and Campbell 1999, 70). As Griffiths admits, “It was the only way I could protect myself, with innocence, niceness. I just couldn’t figure out why anyone would want to get mad at someone who was trying so hard. . . . My only protection was my innocence, my little white hand on your arm—‘Maria, why are you angry? Why don’t you like me?’—hating myself for the smile on my face” (Griffiths and Campbell 1999, 71). Griffiths’s “innocence” protects her against Campbell’s anger—anger at Griffiths’s privilege and presumption. Like the women in Yasmin’s organization who proclaimed, “I’ve tried really hard to see where I’ve come from as a white woman,” Griffiths deliberately uses her innocent face to portray herself as “someone who was trying so hard”—a strategy she uses to not only shield herself but also to obtain the information she needs.

### **Trauma**

Recent theorizations of the trauma people experience on learning about racism and violence are helpful in explaining resistance to antiracist change. Deborah Britzman (1998) argues that the trauma of learning “difficult knowledge” (117)—knowledge of ethnic hatred and social violence—leads to a crisis of the self. This crisis of the self, Britzman shows, also leads to a profound resistance to learning. She uses the term *passion for ignorance* for the refusal to learn from these traumatic moments, a passion we have certainly seen in accounts of some white feminists’ angry and

<sup>11</sup> *Jessica* had successful runs across Canada in the mid-1980s and won a number of awards, including the 1986 Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play.

tearful diversions. Shoshana Felman's (1992) psychoanalytic take on the trauma her students experience on hearing Holocaust stories is similarly helpful in understanding the intensity and limits of white feminists' emotional responses. Her descriptions of her students' panic, anxiety, anger, and tremendous "need to talk" (49) echo the reactions of white women on confronting the details of racism in women's lives and confronting their own complicity. The pedagogy of confronting antiracism has clear parallels to Felman's classroom; the trauma of facing questions of morality, complicity, or oppression is surely common to both pedagogical encounters. As I have suggested earlier, the refusals of some feminists to confront concerns about racism may also stem from a refusal to face certain questions of morality and complicity. These theorizations of trauma are relevant to understanding the responses of people when they confront the difficult knowledge that their self-image or moral identity as just activists, good feminists, alternative folks, and tolerant Canadians may be suspect; as we have seen, they may display a similar passion for ignorance and emotional and verbal expression.

The resulting emotional reactions are echoed in Dori Laub's (1992) analysis of trauma. He outlines the kinds of defensive emotions that people use to fend off the upheaval—the pedagogical opportunity—of confronting the difficult knowledge of genocide: "a sense of total paralysis . . . a sense of outrage and anger unwittingly directed at the victim . . . a flood of awe and fear; we endow the survivor with a kind of sanctity, both to pay our tribute to him and to keep him at a distance, to avoid the intimacy entailed in knowing . . . hyperemotionality which superficially looks like compassion and caring. The testifier is simply flooded, drowned and lost in the listener's defensive affectivity" (Laub 1992, 72). As we have seen, the resistance to learning about racism is suffused with similar refusals. Recall Nina's fellow board member who comes to the women of color caucus to "bawl her eyes out" and "just talk about herself" and the pain she feels. We might suggest that she has experienced the trauma both of learning about racism from the perspective of women of color and of having her moral identity challenged. She is feeling, as Felman and Laub predict, a tremendous need to talk, a hyperemotionality that helps her deal with that upheaval. Here Judith Butler's (1997) use of Sigmund Freud's concept of melancholia or mourning also aptly describes this co-worker's tearful focus on herself. Melancholia or mourning is defined as the sorrow at the loss of a person or ideal—here, the loss of the ideal of a just, nonracist feminist community and identity. One of the expressions of this loss is the "shameless voicing of self-beratement in front of others" (181), a form of narcissism in which "I revile myself and rehabilitate the

other. . . . I refuse to speak to or of the other, but I speak voluminously about myself” (183).

It is important to extend these theorizations of trauma by reiterating that these preoccupations are also shaped by the unique history of feminist contexts, including imagined feminist heterotopia, feminist practices of emotional disclosure, and even colonial histories of white femininity. As Butler (1997) argues in her attempt to break down the categories of “inner” psychic life versus “exterior” social life, these psychic dramas are structured by social relations. For example, in feminist organizations, forms of social power emerge that regulate which losses can and cannot be grieved and who is allowed to grieve for which losses. In other words, the crisis of self that Britzman, Felman, and Laub discuss is colored by the unique heterotopic, emotional, and historic undertones of feminist organizations. In discussions of racial privilege in feminist organizations, white women’s expressions of grief or loss are sometimes facilitated and are even respectable. Many feminist contexts have provided the political climate that allowed Nina’s coworker to openly display her empathy and to receive care and understanding for her emotionality.

#### **Shifts in moral identity, steps toward antiracism**

At the same time, this social context of feminism, nonracism, and anti-racism has been continually shifting in ways that continue to shape emotional and organizational responses to antiracist challenges. Neither moral community nor identity maintains a static and homogeneous nonracist frame. As Walker points out, “Communities of people who hold each other morally accountable reconfigure over time [their] shared understandings” (1997, 71). Over the past two decades an antiracist ethical discourse has evolved after years of challenges and writing by women of color, who argued for an integrative antiracist perspective (Dua 1999). There have been accompanying shifts in the imagined moral community and in what makes a good feminist.

For example, a new ethical practice that grew out of early shifts was the prefacing of commentary with a statement of social location: “I am a white, middle-class heterosexual urban woman.”<sup>12</sup> Within social movements such as feminism, antiracism has similarly often been interpreted as personalized ethical practice requiring the self-examination, declara-

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of the history of this practice, see Mary Louise Adams, who argues that “together we ascribed a moral significance to our individual litanies of oppression” (1989, 22).

tion, and regulation of an individual's racist beliefs. For example, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (Srivastava 1996), many antiracist workshops use knowledge of the individual and self-knowledge to teach whites about and to challenge racism. In this model, antiracist practice is seen in part as providing a key to the self. We might call this a personalized antiracist ethic.

As Foucault has suggested, the historical development of techniques such as confession and psychotherapy means that modern ethical practices have become focused primarily on self-examination, "self-decipherment," and "salvation," with the goal being "transformations" of the self (Foucault 1985, 29). In other words, techniques of self-examination have become important in determining "how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject" (Foucault 1983, 238). These ethical practices of self-decipherment also describe the route of some white feminists moving toward antiracism.

This route has been influenced by the evocative accounts of many white feminists who in the 1980s began writing self-reflective accounts of their racial histories and antiracist journeys. Two of the best known of these is Pratt's 1984 essay "Identity: Skin/Blood/Heart" and Mab Segrest's 1985 *My Mama's Dead Squirrel*. Pratt, for example, argues that to regain the self-respect lost in becoming aware of racial privilege, "we need to find new ways to be *in* the world, those very actions a way of creating a positive self" (1984, 42). More broadly, the powerful discourse that "the personal is political" has also been influential in encouraging feminists to make these links between their personal lives and political change. In Frankenberg's 1993 study, the "race-cognizant" (159) white feminists focused on their personal identity, practices, and behaviors when asked about race. For many of them, the idea of "practising your antiracism" (168)—in other words, "the personal is political"—had become an ethical yardstick. This focus on self-examination and personal "process" is apparent when one of these white feminists talks about confronting the racism expressed by her old friends but remarks, "I think it's someone's own process to go through" (Frankenberg 1993, 166).

Unfortunately, as my interviews show, some women may become mired in self-examination and stuck in deliberations on morality and salvation. Not surprisingly, this ethical self-transformation is still framed by the poles of good versus evil, newly interpreted as the fraudulent nonracist versus the authentic antiracist. A number of the white feminists I interviewed, newly involved in antiracism, clearly struggle with their own place on this moral and political trajectory. Having started with a nonracist image of feminism and self, as they move toward a more systemic understanding

of racism they find they also need to shift their understandings of moral community and self. Look again at Catherine's full description of some of the other white women in her organization: "There's people who say, 'I'm feeling attacked. Why am I being attacked? I'm not racist, I'm not prejudiced. . . . I've never discriminated against anybody in my life.' *So you're at that stage*" (interview transcripts, December 1996).

Catherine's reference to "that stage" highlights the variability of responses to antiracism over time. It also signals the extended and predictable stages many white feminists move through as they learn about antiracism. As a closer examination of both interview transcripts and feminist literature will show, we may characterize the stages in this discourse of moral progression as follows: first, being color-blind, being unaware of color and race; second, becoming aware that racism is a problem and being committed to your own nonracism; third, becoming aware of your own racism and feeling terrible about it; and finally, being able to accept and live with the fact that you might be racist rather than fearing it.

Segrest (1985) uses much the same language of moral progression to speak about the disorienting process of finding a new basis for her identity as a white, Southern woman. She also describes the process as having four stages—beginning with total unawareness of privilege and moving, finally, toward connection with other women:

First, I am so racist, class-privileged, Christian that I don't even realize it, but assume that I am naturally wonderful. . . . Then I begin to see the false status that I get from my race and class and Christian privilege. And as soon as I do, I begin to see lies everywhere, and everywhere my own responsibility, my own complicity. . . . As I begin to feel what slavery did to Black people, I look up and see—God, we killed the Indians too. Then I hit the third stage of intense self-hatred. . . . I think the reason why white women avoid their racism . . . and can act so weird around women of color is because deep down we are afraid that this third level is all that there is. . . . That we will end up stuck in despair. . . . But I believe that underneath there is another level, a self that longs for wholeness and connection. (Segrest 1985, 171)

Contained within these stages of moral progression are both the nonracist ethic and personalized antiracist ethic.

Yet the movement between these stages is neither smooth nor linear. These are unsettled and discontinuous states, for both individuals and organizations. Britzman's discussion of the pedagogy of "difficult knowl-



edge” as an inconstant process is helpful: “The psychic time of learning [is] one in which the confronted self vacillates, sometimes violently, sometimes passively, sometimes imperceptibly and sometimes shockingly, between resistance as symptom and the working through of resistance” (1998, 119). It is important to remember that for feminist activists, this learning is going on within a social movement and organizational context. As feminist activists learn about racial privilege, the context of a changing feminist moral order adds another unsettled layer. Since the mid-1980s the broader climate of feminist politics has shifted away from nonracism, and the imagined moral community is increasingly fragmented. Thus for those in the process of shifting their ethical self-image, the nonracist self-image no longer makes sense to them, but the antiracist ethic is still hazy within the larger feminist community. As the political and moral climate of an organization and a movement shifts, individuals also move slowly and erratically between these apparent poles. Not surprisingly, women hover between two unattainable poles, between two cloudy and unreachable spaces of purity—nonracist and antiracist.

If we follow Samantha, a white senior manager working on antiracist change, we can see that the movement from nonracist to antiracist ethical self-image is both ambivalent and highly personalized. Looking more closely at her reflections, we can trace not only her evolving emotional responses but also the shift in how she thinks about herself in relation to women of color and racism: “I can’t imagine what it is like. I can hear people’s stories that tell me a bit of what it’s like. But I’m not dealing with it. Because one horrible incident makes me want to cry, when I hear about it. But, then think about it, if you had a life like that, each incident is just the accumulation of that experience—I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like to be in that place” (interview transcripts, December 1996).

As Samantha struggles toward understanding the daily experience of racism, she falls into the expected tearful empathetic response common in this initial nonracist stage of ethical practice. Empathy is often the first step in dealing with difficult knowledge of others, suggests Britzman: “Initially the learner attaches to the experience of the other by way of wondering what she or he would have done had such an event occurred in her or his own life” (1998, 118). However, like the antiracist activists I have interviewed, Britzman notes that “this experiment in empathy” can not only provoke resistance but also “impedes an understanding of the differences between the learner’s knowledge and the knowledge of the other” (118). Interestingly, even as Samantha expresses her empathy, she also appears to acknowledge the disjuncture of knowledges that Britzman

highlights, recognizing the difference between hearing or crying about racism and experiencing racism day to day.

However, Samantha's journey is still expressed as a personal moral progression. Even when Samantha discusses her organization, she describes progress on antiracism in terms of the individuals' ethical shifts: "I think that we got to the place where . . . we were working on discussions, and 'let's just talk about racism, what does it look like here,' getting to the point where we could sit at a table anywhere in the agency and say *racism* and people wouldn't run. . . . I think that is a really big step. And it is hard to acknowledge. And it's critical" (interview transcripts, December 1996). On the one hand, we can see how, within the four-step model of moral progression, getting individuals to talk openly about racism is indeed "a big step." In contrast, however, feminists of color to whom I spoke generally identify this stage—"let's just talk about racism"—as stagnation, even a frustrating full stop.

Samantha's own movement through these four stages, and her shift from seeing *racist* as anathema to seeing *racist* as part of her feminist identity, highlights not only her ambivalence but also the inadequacy of this framework for antiracism: "Throughout the agency . . . I think there was real fear of being called 'racist.' . . . It is hard for me to reflect back on where I was then, but I am sure that's where I was too. I was more afraid of being called 'racist' than anything else. And now, if someone were to say that, I would say, 'you're probably right'" (interview transcripts, December 1996). The four-stage moral progression traps Samantha between two unsatisfactory stages: if she were to say with complete ease "I am racist" to her colleagues or to the woman of color interviewing her, she risks criticisms that she is complacent or glib about racism. If she were to outright deny being racist, she knows she would be stuck in an unacceptable ethical position. Samantha's discomfort suggests that problematic narratives of purity and impurity remain from nonracist discourse.

Instead of innocent versus racist, however, the poles of purity versus impurity in commentaries such as Samantha's are more likely to signify knowledge versus ignorance, the antiracist feminist versus other unenlightened feminists. Samantha indicates that she has reached a more advanced understanding of racism than her colleagues. Similarly, when Catherine, another white senior manager, explains how routine practice can perpetuate racism, she says, "And even I—'even I'—after a lot of years of experience, I can find myself doing things a certain way, just because they've always been done that way" (interview transcripts, December 1996). With her phrase "even I," Catherine, like Samantha, gestures to

her higher level of awareness in comparison to other women in her organization. Both Samantha's and Catherine's commentary shows that a personalized antiracist ethical discourse contains a new yardstick for measuring other feminists: it is the self-made antiracist white feminist who is good, other white feminists who are not good enough. Catherine even catches herself perpetuating this dichotomy; repeating "even I" in an ironic aside, she mocks herself and her tendency to present herself as morally superior. Yet her slip shows that this dichotomy, between thinking of herself as "pure" and others as racist, ironically underlies her transition toward antiracism.

This discourse of moral progression and self-examination is further supported by feminist discourses of emotional self-care and therapy. In explaining why it is important to examine oneself in antiracist discussion, Samantha highlights the emotional benefits: "It's like doing any of your own work—it's really scary to look at the ghosts in your own closet. But if you know that by looking at them you're going to feel better, then you are more likely to look at them than just trying to keep the door shut" (interview transcripts, December 1996). In other words, we attempt to extirpate our racist beliefs because we will know ourselves better and "feel better"—therapeutic sentiments that are further shaped by a desire for ethical self-transformation. By remaining focused on the self rather than on organizational practice, these individualized discourses of therapy and moral progression make a broader antiracist analysis difficult.

### Salvation

Despite the ambiguity of her position, Samantha's commentary shows that the focus on self-examination of one's personal antiracist practice leads ultimately to a "once was lost, now am found" narrative. As in "Amazing Grace," the slave trader's song from which this phrase is drawn, Samantha's redemption comes from a turning point of personal salvation.

In this muddy arena of moral uncertainty, antiracist caucuses, task forces, experts, facilitators, and antiracist policy can take on particular moral significance and moral authority. If one is failing in the task of self-contemplation, one may look to another person or policy to provide an easier route to salvation. Samantha reflects on the deference staff and board members have toward the new antiracist task force in her organization: "Like if someone says, 'the [anti-racist] task force says this,' people go, 'Ohhh.' . . . I think partly it's that we don't really know all the answers. So, if someone thinks they know the answers, *that's great*" (interview transcripts, December 1996).

In Yasmin's organization, women's desire for moral guidance and salvation is even more strikingly expressed in their awe of a well-known black antiracist consultant from the United States whom her coworkers want to hire:

She's seen as an expert, and . . . people take her word as the goddess's word. . . . There was this awe surrounding her. There would be this hesitation, by all three women, to even phone her. There was this reverence about her—"What are we going to say to her?" . . . I just really thought that was bizarre, that people were all tongue-tied at the thought of her. . . . Phone her up, she's charging us \$1,000 a day, you can damn well think of something to say!

It was like suddenly, she was this catalyst of change, just as Martin Luther King was. You could make that parallel: this great woman was going to make change for us. And I think that was the problem, that there was this dependence on her already, before they even phoned her.

*Author:* She was going to make things right.

Right. (Interview transcripts, May 1996)

Both goddess and godsend, the antiracist consultant appears to inspire the emotional and religious reverence of a spiritual leader, of a great civil rights leader. Without a clear moral guide to antiracist behavior, people look for guidance, even a savior. Yasmin's description of lost sheep looking for moral guidance suggests a moral community in transition, uncertain of its new parameters, ethical practices, and language, and preferring to follow rather than to act. People then pin impossible expectations for solving the problem on a brief visit by an antiracist facilitator and expert.

Yasmin's language also recalls Laub's (1992) description of the self-protective awe, fear, and sanctity with which people endow the recounter of genocide. Laub suggests this response allows people to put distance between themselves and difficult knowledge. In Yasmin's organization, by constructing a sacred image of moral superiority, those struggling with a new understanding of racism can distance themselves from their own responsibility for ethical decisions and organizational action.

### **Conclusions and Alternatives**

Like the heterotopia of which Hetherington (1997) writes, feminism as a modern humanist project has produced a new ethical subject and social order. However, antiracist feminist challenges have highlighted the inter-

locking relations of race and gender that are implicated in the construction of this moral community. As we have seen in the rocky history of antiracism in the feminist movement, a crisis arises when people realize that the imagined utopic community, or the “transparent community of beautiful souls,” is neither possible nor universally desired.<sup>13</sup>

One reaction to this crisis has been to reassert and refine feminism’s moral boundaries. Wendy Brown’s discussion of social movements facing the loss of universal visions is apt: “It is when the telos of the good vanishes but the yearning for it remains that morality appears to dissolve into moralism in politics” (2001, 28). We can see that this attempt to recuperate the vision of the just, nonracist feminist continues within organizations today. In tracing the narratives of white feminists in various stages of refusal, it becomes clear that not only imperial histories of innocent white femininity but also historical constructions of a just feminist community underlie some feminists’ emotional protestations of innocence.

Of course, not all white feminists coming face-to-face with antiracist challenges react to the difficult knowledge of racial privilege with emotional refusals. Those active in antiracist work also struggle to find their own place in it. Yet in their desire to leave the nonracist ethic behind, they may still become trapped in attempts to construct a personalized antiracist ethic that implicitly relies on a discourse of moral progression, one that requires either self-examination, utterances of purification, or salvation by others. As the political and moral climate of their movement shifts toward antiracism, these individuals, and often the organizations they run, can become stalled as they vacillate between these apparent moral poles.

Yet why not be introspective about racialized ideas and practices and thereby become a “better person”? Frankenberg believes that this approach, expressed only in her interviews with white feminists, is important (1993, 159). According to Samantha, this approach did allow her organization to draft an antiracist policy and create an antiracist committee.

However, personal accounts of ethical practices that are framed around poles of purity and impurity in turn shape and limit the kinds of antiracist organizational debates and actions that are possible. Samantha recognizes that the “big step” her organization took when members acknowledged their own racism was also a resting place where organizational structure was not addressed. Says Samantha: “So, we got to that place. But what happened was that nothing happened because we weren’t working on the structural stuff” (interview transcripts, December 1996). In other words,

<sup>13</sup> Valverde, e-mail communication, March 2002.

practices of self-examination and self-improvement may shift the moral and ethical climate or facilitate antiracist initiatives but lead to limited organizational change. A liberalist discourse that frames racism as done by ignorant or bad people and extirpated by confession dictates an individual solution. In social movements, these broader discourses are interpreted within moral communities that tie the personal to the political, nonracism to political goodness, and therapy and emotional expression to social change.

Is there a way to shift the centrality of this moral preoccupation? Does racism inevitably raise questions of individual morality and personal ethics? Tracing the construction and conflicts of imagined moral communities within feminist politics opens the possibility that we may move beyond the seesaw of purity versus corruption that appears currently to structure responses to antiracist critique. These preoccupations may seem unavoidable in social movements directed by a moral code to not oppress others—to act, in fact, to challenge oppression. Yet certainly many white feminists do not frame antiracism as a question of innocence versus sin, and some openly criticize this approach. Frankenberg (1993) found that this is particularly true of older feminists involved in early antiracist struggles, from the 1940s on. Frankenberg shows that the historical context of race blindness, which necessitated white women's soul-searching in the first place, has not shaped older activists' responses. One of the younger white feminist activists whom Frankenberg interviewed perhaps provides an example of how a moral framework may move outside the poles of complicity versus noncomplicity. This woman reflects that it is important to finally admit, "Well, yeah, our hearts are in the right place, but it's still not coming together" and to discuss why (1993, 175). It seems that she too sees this as a moral obligation, yet her response to her feelings of guilt differs from earlier examples. She is more interested in why antiracist change is not happening and less interested in her own moral acceptability.

Many workshop and consciousness-raising approaches have taught us to "know better," "feel better," and be better people. Yet in addition to knowing more and feeling better, we might want to think better and do better. A comprehensive discussion of alternative strategies is beyond the scope of this article, but we must continue to investigate an alternative to these moral preoccupations—a third way that starts with the goal of systemic antiracist change yet still acknowledges the individual preoccupations that may impede that work. Could we not imagine discussions of racism as collective political and social analyses rather than as individual preoccupations with morality? For example, in one feminist collective, two women of color, fed up with the personalized focus of the antiracist work-

shops and facilitator, intervened by gathering data on the racialized division of labor among collective members and demonstrated that women of color carried a far greater burden of administrative and behind-the-scenes work.

Beginning with this kind of focus on political analysis and action rather than with nostalgic moral visions of a united community or attempts at ethical self-transformation might better avoid the pitfalls we have seen here. Bartky (1997) suggests that antiracist feminist change aims at a transformation of self. I would argue, rather, that an antiracist feminism might aim at an unbalancing of historical links between racism and the poles of innocence versus evil, knowledge versus ignorance.

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