

Preface to the Second Edition

SEEING THE LIGHT

Visionary Feminism

Feminist movement continues to be one of the most powerful struggles for social justice taking place in the world today. I finished the first draft of my first feminist book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, when I was nineteen. It was published almost ten years later. In those ten years I became more and more involved in creating feminist theory. Often when individuals talk or write about contemporary feminist movement they make it seem as though there was a set body of feminist principles and beliefs that served as a foundation from the very beginning. In actuality when feminist uprising began to occur in the late '60s, it manifested itself in diverse settings among women who often had no knowledge of one another's existence. There was no clearly defined platform.

While Betty Friedan was writing about "the problem that has no name," addressing the way sexist discrimination affected highly educated white women with class privilege, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ann Moody, along with individual black women across the nation, were challenging the sexism within black civil rights movement. Appropriating the vernacular of black liberation, white women called their resistance to sexism women's liberation.

We do not know who "first" used the term "women's liberation." That is not important. Significantly what we know from charting the history of contemporary feminist movement is that individual women were rebelling against sexism all over the place. When those women began to meet and talk together, that collective rebellion

came to be known as women's liberation and would later evolve into feminist movement. Feminist struggle takes place anytime anywhere any female or male resists sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Feminist movement happens when groups of people come together with an organized strategy to take action to eliminate patriarchy.

I came to feminist consciousness in the patriarchal household of my upbringing. And launched feminist rebellion by choosing higher education against the patriarchal beliefs of my father and the fears of my mother that too much education would leave me "unfit" to be a real woman. I joined feminist movement my sophomore year in college. On campuses everywhere young women engaged in radical politics (black liberation struggle, socialism, anti-war, and environmental rights) were concentrating our attention on gender. Drawing upon the work of the activists who had launched women's liberation, creating manifestos and position papers, female students everywhere were encouraged to examine the past, to find and uncover our hidden stories, our feminist legacies. And while that work was happening, another field of woman-centered scholarship was coming into being—feminist theory.

Unlike the feminist scholarship that was focusing on recovering past history, forgotten heroines, writers, etc., or the work that was about documenting from a social science perspective the current realities of women's lives, initially feminist theory was the site for the critical interrogation and re-imagining of sexist gender roles. It was to provide a revolutionary blueprint for the movement—one that when followed would lead us in the direction of transforming patriarchal culture. By the late '70s feminist thinkers were already engaging in dialectical critique of the feminist thinking that had emerged from late '60s radicalism. That critique formed the basis of re-visionist feminist theory.

Feminist thought and practice were fundamentally altered when radical women of color and white women allies began to rigorously challenge the notion that "gender" was the primary factor determining a woman's fate. I can still recall how it upset everyone in the first women's studies class I attended—a class where everyone except me was white and female and mostly from privileged class back-

grounds—when I interrupted a discussion about the origins of domination in which it was argued that when a child is coming out of the womb the factor deemed most important is gender. I stated that when the child of two black parents is coming out of the womb the factor that is considered first is skin color, then gender, because race and gender will determine that child's fate. Looking at the interlocking nature of gender, race, and class was the perspective that changed the direction of feminist thought.

Early on in feminist movement we found that it was easier to accept the reality that gender, race, and class combined determined female destiny, and much more difficult to understand how this should concretely shape and inform feminist practice. While feminists talked often about the necessity of building a mass-based feminist movement, there was no sound foundation on which to structure this movement. The women's liberation movement has not only been structured on a narrow platform, it primarily called attention to issues relevant primarily to women (mostly white) with class privilege. We needed theory mapping thought and strategy for a mass-based movement, theory that would examine our culture from a feminist standpoint rooted in an understanding of gender, race, and class. In response to that need I wrote *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*.

Nowadays it has become so commonplace for individuals doing feminist work to evoke gender, race, and class, it is often forgotten that initially most feminist thinkers, many of whom were white and from privileged class backgrounds, were hostile to adopting this perspective. Radical/revolutionary feminist thinkers who wanted to talk about gender from a race-sex-class perspective were accused of being traitors, destroying the movement, shifting the focus. Often our work was ignored or ruthlessly critiqued, deemed not scholarly enough or too polemical. In those days black women/women of color were often encouraged by white comrades to talk about race while our ideas about all other aspects of feminist movement were ignored. We effectively protested this ghettoization of our perspectives, sharing our commitment to creating feminist theory that would address a wide range of feminist concerns. That commitment is the ethical foundation of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*.

One of the most affirming aspects of feminist movement has been the formation of an intellectual environment where there has been sustained dialectical critique and exchange. Hearing the voices of radical thinkers (among them the voices of women of color), the face of feminist theory and practice changed. Many unenlightened white women broke down the wall of denial and began to examine anew how they had talked and written about gender in the past. There has been no other movement for social justice in our society that has been as self-critical as feminist movement. Feminist willingness to change direction when needed has been a major source of strength and vitality in feminist struggle. That internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation. Just as our lives are not fixed or static but always changing, our theory must remain fluid, open, responsive to new information.

When *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* was first published, it was welcomed and praised by feminist thinkers who wanted a new vision. Even so, individual readers found the theory offered "provocative," "unsettling." Words like "merciless dissection" were used by reviewers describing the book. At that time mainstream feminists simply ignored this work and any other feminist theory that was perceived as "too critical" or "too radical." As a visionary work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* was presented to a feminist world that was not yet ready for it. Slowly, as more feminist thinkers (particularly white women) accepted looking at gender from the perspective of race, sex, and class, this work began to receive the attention it merited. It took its place among other visionary texts that were altering in a positive and constructive way contemporary feminist thought.

The blueprint for feminist movement presented in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* is amazingly sound. As relevant to our current situation as it was years ago, it offers guidelines on which to build the mass-based feminist movement we still desperately need. Written in a language that is far more accessible than much current feminist theory, it embodies the feminist hope that we can find common languages to spread the word. Since it was first published, feminist scholarship and theory has become far removed from the lives of most people in this society. And it is this distance that makes fem-

inist thinking appear rarified and irrelevant to most people. In the book I emphasize that we need feminist writing that speaks to everyone; that without it feminist education for critical consciousness cannot happen.

Feminist movement has created profound positive changes in the lives of girls and boys, women and men, living in our society, in a political system of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. And even though trashing feminism has become commonplace, the reality remains: everyone has benefited from the cultural revolutions put in place by contemporary feminist movement. It has changed how we see work, how we work, and how we love. And yet feminist movement has not created sustained feminist revolution. It has not ended patriarchy, eradicating sexism and sexist exploitation and oppression. And as a consequence feminist gains are always at risk.

We are already witnessing powerful losses in the arena of reproductive rights. Violence against females is escalating. The work force is daily re-instating gender biases. Harsh critics of feminism blame family violence on the movement, urging women and men to turn their backs on feminist thinking and return to sexist-defined gender roles. Patriarchal mass media either trashes feminism or tells the public it is an unnecessary, dead movement. Opportunistic women applaud feminist success, then tell us the movement is no longer needed, as "all women have improved their lives" in a world where women are fast becoming the majority of our nation's poor, where single mothers are pathologized, where no state aid is available to help the needy and indigent, where most females of all ages have no access to basic health care. Yet given these dire realities, visionary feminist discourse is increasingly only talked about in the corridors of the educated elite. If it remains there the feminist message will not be heard, and ultimately feminist movement will end.

To begin feminist struggle anew, to ensure that we are moving into feminist futures, we still need feminist theory that speaks to everyone, that lets everyone know that feminist movement can change their lives for the better. This theory, like the analysis offered in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, will always challenge, shake us up, provoke, shift our paradigms, change the way we think, turn

us around. That's what revolution does. And feminist revolution is needed if we are to live in a world without sexism; where peace, freedom, and justice prevail; where there is no domination. If we follow a feminist path, this is where it leads. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* will continue to be a guiding light.

New York City
January 2000