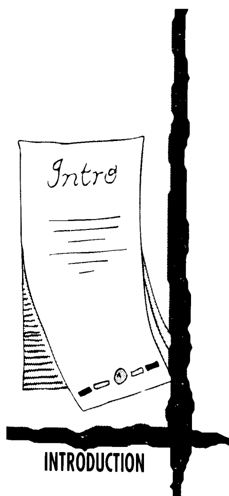

South African feminism, race and racism

CHERYL DE LA REY critically discusses the shifting understandings of race and difference. She frames the possibility that even if anti-racism is made central to feminism, the idea of unity may be misplaced

The difference debate ruptured many of the ideal notions of the times

‘The difference debate is one of the hottest issues in the broader context of gender discussions right now...’ (Agenda, 1993:2)

So declared the editorial of *Agenda* No 19, 1993. Besides sexuality (No 28, 1996) and sexual politics (No 11, 1991), the ‘Women and difference’ issue has been one of the most talked about issues of *Agenda*. While the difference debate has many meanings in international feminist writings and discussions, in South Africa it has been primarily deployed to refer to race and racism, specifically the relations between black and white women involved in gender activism.

This debate first became public when black feminists interrupted the proceedings of the ‘Women and gender in southern Africa’ conference in January 1991, to note concerns about the dominance of white women's voices. It was a landmark event in many respects, some unintended and unplanned by the conference organising committee. For *Agenda*, too, it was a landmark event for it was in this forum that Kedibone Letlaka-Rennert publicly criticised *Agenda* for its white dominance. Kedibone's critique acted as a catalyst for changes in the composition of the editorial collective. Soon after this conference, I, among others, was invited to join the *Agenda* Collective. In planning this issue, I invited Kedibone to submit a paper on her work on race-gender identity[1] and during that conversation we reminisced about the debates we had in the black caucus at that Conference. I was pleased too, that she had observed that *Agenda* had changed over the years since 1991 – our record has improved, but it must get better!

But what of the debate about race, racism and feminism, what has shifted since 1991? In the introduction to this issue, in broad terms, I cover some theoretical and political shifts and some of my own responses to this debate.

Theoretical shifts

One of the questions I as a black feminist pondered in 1991 was: why were the white sisters so shocked, hurt and defensive when black women voiced our anger, hurt and pain? I have seen these responses many times since – in the Natal Women's and Gender Studies Network in 1992, in the Africa Gender Institute colloquia in 1996. It was one of the questions that I invited Michelle Friedman and Jane Bennet to address in their *in brief* (see page 49), published in this issue.

The emergence of the difference debate ruptured many of the ideal notions of the times – the ideal called non-racialism and the ideal of a shared universal sisterhood. The debate struck the very centre of a then dominant feminist understanding that men and women have fundamentally different experiences and gender is the primary social category of analysis. The difference debate introduced not only race into feminist theory, but other categories of social relations as well – class, sexual orientation, ethnicity

among others. Race and class were two that had assumed greater visibility in South African feminist writings and debate. These debates tested the notion of triple oppression which basically postulated an additive or accumulative model of oppression – race plus class plus gender. Of course, the relative significance of each of these forms of oppression was contested. Which of these is more oppressive, what should the sequence be?

I recall thinking in many a forum: why is it that when black women raise issues of race, white women typically respond with the rejoinder 'But what about class?' It became predictable. But then in several black forums when gender was placed on the agenda, someone (often male) would also ask 'What about class?' In retrospect, these responses pointed to limitations in our theories. Being a woman is not distinct from being either black or working–class or heterosexual. We cannot partial out gender from the rest of who we are – for we are simultaneously classed, raced and gendered. Hence, we cannot talk about my experience of being a woman without talking about my race and my class for how I experience the social world and others' responses to me are inextricably tied to all these axes of difference. In academic circles, the triple oppression model came to be seen as limited – it is now seen by many to be a positivist view of human experience in the sense that it objectifies dimensions of social experience by seeing categories in isolation from one another and apart from the total context.

Diversity of experience

This acknowledgement of difference of experience contributed to a significant theoretical shift not only in feminism, but in the social sciences in general. Within feminist theory, it led to a rejection of the essentialism of gender – the idea that women and men are different (not necessarily biologically but socially and culturally) and all women have a shared experience of patriarchy. And this has had consequences for political organisation, research and theory.

The acknowledgement of the diversity of experience among women connected with another aspect of the debate which emerged at the 1991 Conference – the debate on representation simplistically phrased as 'Can white women represent black?' on the cover of *Agenda* No 19. In this issue, various authors explored this debate in relation to research, teaching and the women's movement. Debating representation opened up the space for feminist standpoint theory which argues for knowledge production situated in social positioning and location. At its most simplistic and superficial level we saw this translated into one or two sentences at the beginning of a research paper that typically read 'as a white middle–class women...' but frequently that's where the consciousness ended.

At present, it seems that post–structuralism is a dominant theoretical framework. The new talk is about multiple identities, multiple truths, relativism, subjectivities, voices and so on. Some argue that it opens up new spaces for thought and action, others see it as a shift towards depoliticisation and many just say it's all very confusing. While there are various disagreements among post–structuralist theories, there seems to be consensus on the rejection of:

- the certainties offered by grand theories such as marxism which attempt to cover the totality of social experience;

We are simultaneously classed, raced and gendered

AGENDA NO 19

Audre Lourde on the cover of Agenda No 19 challenged women to work and struggle together with those we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals.

- a sharp distinction between the world of objects and the work of intellect, emotion and politics as a basis for knowledge;
- the idea of an absolute truth in favour of multiple truths;
- a view of humanity as rational, unitary and fixed;
- a separation between the individual and the social, the psychological and the political, the external and the internal.

Spheres of experience which were traditionally seen as split and distinct are, instead, seen as continuous, changing and mutually constitutive. The very premises of western modernist thinking were challenged.

A window on subjectivity

With the development of post-structuralism as a theoretical framework, there has been a spate of research on subjectivities - some excellent, others not. Amina Mama's work on black women's subjectivities (see Zine Magubane page 17) is one of the excellent books to be published in this field. Mama (1995) quotes Weedon (1987:32–3) to explain the concept of subjectivity:

> *'Subjectivity' is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world... (P)ost-structuralism proposes a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being constituted in discourse each time we think or speak.*

More often, subjectivity goes by the name identity. Mama believes that the use of the term identity is too suggestive of theories which treat the psychological and social as separate spheres. Identity studies, especially those in psychology, do frequently tend towards an endorsement of an apolitical individualism. Apart from the academic debates about the nuances of terminology, the 1990s has been witness to the growth of identity politics, in very broad terms, political organisation on the basis of identification with a social category. Lesbian and gay organisations are an example, but in the recent past, particularly in the Western Cape, we have seen evidence of new formations in identity politics and race: there was the launch of the 1 December movement last year as well as several other initiatives on coloured identity in South Africa.

Naming or identity extends beyond the individual to a historical and collective project

Concerns have been expressed about the political effects of identity politics, especially in relation to what this means for a mass-based women's movement. Himani Bannerji (1995:20), however, makes a significant observation in relation to the issue of identity politics:

> *that people who are most exercised about the issue of identity in terms of political and personal power relations are all people who have been repressed and marginalized.*

She goes on to argue that the naming or identity for such people extends beyond the individual to a historical and collective project and therefore, 'writing history becomes their key project' (1995:20). Hence, the significance of the contribution by historian Yvette Abrahams (see page 34) in this issue. In this period of national transition, acts of re-naming, re-claiming and gaining voice are politically crucial.

Racism and feminism

While I have given a broad sweep of theoretical shifts pertinent to the theme of this issue, racist practices in feminist circles cannot go unmentioned. It is unfortunate that, given the way this issue turned out, there is very little coverage of this. It must be said: racism is alive and continuing in many feminist groupings in South Africa. I have recently had direct experience of racism from some white 'sisters'. Many white South African women (and men) seem to naively believe that having been active in anti-apartheid movements distances them from racism and hence they respond with apparent incredulity when there is any suggestion that their behaviour could be

racist. In psychology texts, a distinction is typically made between subtle and overt racism. I am ambivalent about the usefulness of this distinction. Racist practices are offensive even when they are seemingly benign. I often laugh at my some of my recent experiences, for example, how often white people choose the adjective 'articulate' to describe me – is this my most distinguishing feature? Would they call me articulate if I were white, I wonder? I have a memory–bank full of accounts – many of my stories are less benign and I don't find them amusing!

Philomena Essed (1991) wrote a book based on her research on everyday racism in the Netherlands. More recently, Bannerji (1995) describes commonsense racism. Both authors draw our attention to similar practices – familiar everyday events and practices which may not appear to be racist at a first glance: such as a white woman in a supermarket queue holding her handbag more tightly when she notices a black man standing behind her. Bannerji argues that many of us may have dealt with some aspects of our racism, but because racism is 'the very principle of self–definition of European/western societies' (Bannerji, 1995:46) it is almost impossible to be not racist in totality. Racism is far more complex than a set of attitudes and behaviours that we can unlearn in a workshop or two. Engaging in anti–racism requires a re–examination and a re–organisation of our subjectivities – our ways of being and doing. And this is a political project germane to us all – black and white. Amina Mama in reporting on her work with the Black Women's Group in Britain, examined the ways in which tensions between women in the group could be connected to differences in skin colour, hair and the interpretative meanings thereof.

Any South African feminism that ignores the centrality of race will run the risk of making it invisible, and it will be a limited feminism. Incorporating race and racism under the label 'difference' is an example of the risk of invisibility. The concept of difference needs to be problematised. In a very recent publication, Mary Maynard (1996) alerts us to the dangers of an unproblematic acceptance of the use of 'difference' to describe all forms of heterogeneity in experience – class, religion, sexuality, age, disability.... We need to avoid the notion that all forms of difference are equivalent. She suggests that in western women's studies writings, the unproblematic usage of the concept difference has led to liberal pluralism – the idea that the social world is simply made up of a number of differing groups and individuals. We need to name racism appropriately so that we can engage its specific historical forms and practices of domination and the ways in which this specificity intersects with other forms of oppression.

We need to name racism appropriately so that we can engage its specific historical forms

Anti-racist feminism

But beyond naming the problem, reworking our theory and our research, what does an anti–racist feminism mean for what we do – in our organisations and in our daily activities? What can we do is an oft–asked question; it is frequently posed by white women when black women speak out about racism in feminism. However, this time it came from both a black woman and a white woman who reviewed the first draft of this *introduction.*`Write about how to do anti–racism, what the steps are' they requested. 'I don't know what we should do, I don't have the answers' was my immediate response. Being on the receiving end of years of apartheid does not make me an expert. Neither does speaking out and writing about racism. Yet if we are serious about social change, we must deal with the question of doing and undoing that which may be taken for granted; that which is both familiar and unfamiliar.

In workshops, colloquia and in other public forums the need for communication is often endorsed. 'It is important that we talk about difference, that black women and white women talk to one another about

these issues' – these are sentiments that I have heard after many workshops and meetings. What is the fantasy behind these seemingly simplistic sentiments, I wonder? Is it that race will disappear, that we will reach consensus, that we will return to an unproblematic notion of sisterhood? Mere talking is far too simplistic a solution to the complexities of racism. Feminist writers in other national contexts have alerted us to the difficulties of communication: Felly Nkweto Simmonds (1992:51) asks:

> *How will such communication occur? In whose language? What discourse? What registers? Who will speak, and for whom?*

We may have to accept that there are times when no common ground exists whatsoever

Racism is complex and changing. There is no singular way to deal with it. Direct, sometimes confrontational talk maybe one of many strategies. Many South African women have posited other strategies: these have included a women's movement with black women in central and key positions, separate organisations with strategic alliances, coalition politics and the development of black feminist theory.

A question to think about though, is what will an anti-racist feminism be? Surely it cannot be feminism as we currently know it? After all, we have contested the meaning of its fundamental category, women. Ien Ang (1995) argues that in response to the debates about difference, western feminism has acted like a nation which embraces multiculturalism; it has wanted to absorb difference into a pre-defined space. After pointing out the limitations of a such a feminism, she offers a thought-provoking argument for a feminism which has a self-conscious politics of partiality and furthermore, accepts that it is a limited political home which cannot absorb difference. Ang (1995:60) explains that instead of hoping for a false unity, we may have to accept that there are times when no common ground exists whatsoever (just as there are times when commonalities exist), but these moments:

> *should not be encountered with regret, but rather should be accepted as the starting point...*

Thought-provoking ideas which should stimulate us to debate more vigorously.

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FOOTNOTE

1 Kedibone Letlaka-Rennert was unable to submit her work on race-gender identity for this issue due to ill health. However, we look forward to reading it in a forthcoming issue of *Agenda*.

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