Female Solidarity Through Multiple Consciousness and Feminist Politics[1]

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Women comprise half of the world's population, and although middle-class women from developed countries believe they are better off than women who live in developing or Third World countries, two feminist researchers graphically point out that everywhere the lot of women is worse off than that of men. That is, compared to men, "women have less power, less autonomy, more work, less money, and more responsibility" (Seager and Olson 1986, 7).

This world atlas of women clearly states that for women, there are no developed countries. There are no countries where women are allowed freedom of choice or are accorded equal opportunity in education and employment. In a 1980 statement regarding the economic status of women, the United Nations said, "women perform nearly two-thirds of its [the world's] work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property." As to legal status, "nowhere in the world do women have the same legal or constitutional rights as men" (Seager and Olson 1986, 101).

In our country, the existence of feminist organizations such as N.O.W. (National Organization for Women) and N.W.P.A.L. (National Women's Political Action League) are indications that women are more willing today than they were thirty years ago to assert their rights through their local legislatures and the Congress. These and other

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organizations have made clear that women are able to empower themselves and strengthen their causes by joining together and acting in concert. However, the philosophies of these organizations have not attracted working-class women of Native Hawaiian, Asian and other Pacific Island backgrounds.

While the importance of female solidarity is clear, it is also clear to those of us who are women of color that the focus of the women's movement has not necessarily nor often been on our needs and concerns. While my experience in and knowledge of the Black and Hispanic communities of this country is somewhat limited, from reading and personal experience I see that the women of those groups share my concern in this matter. In any case, I will address the concerns of Asian, Pacific and Native Hawaiian women.

As a woman of color in Hawai'i I have long felt the melting pot theory of American culture to be a myth, although when it is applied to persons from southern and eastern Europe it appears to have validity. Certainly it is true that a Niedjielski or Ferarri, a Dvorak or Steinberg can disappear into mainstream America, especially if they call themselves Needham or Smith, Denver or Stone. Even if they don't change their names, their acceptance by and assimilation into the WASP cultural pot is nearly possible today, assuming they want that to happen. However, for those of us with a strikingly different genetic makeup from that of mainstream White America, there is no possibility of passing, at least, not in our own generation.

Consider my experience. Here I am, a native-born American citizen, educated in the public schools and universities of this country, nurtured in the writings of the

English graveyard poets, holding degrees in English and French, and entertaining myself by playing Bach, Beethoven, Schumann and Chopin on the piano. I am even a Protestant! Yet, more times than I can remember, I have been asked, *Where did you learn to speak English so well?*

It is easy for me to relate to the character, Hari Kumar, in the Masterpiece Theater series, "The Jewel in the Crown," based on Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*. Hari Kumar is a Hindu who was taken to England as a child and given an upper-class education in an English public school. When his father dies, he is forced to return to India. There he discovers himself to be a stranger in his own land. He had become English...except to the English in India. They know, simply by seeing the color of his skin that he is an imposter. Through his education he may have become culturally upper-class English, but to the English in India, no matter what their class, he barely exists.

In Hawai'i, most of the women of color of my generation didn't have any illusions about their place in society. Most are from working-class backgrounds. They grew up on the sugar and pineapple plantations or in the nearby communities. Their parents were often little more than indentured workers – the terms of their employment modified sufficiently to fit the requirements of the Thirteenth Amendment.

The only Whites we came into contact with were of the professional and managerial class, the plantation doctors and nurses, the school teachers and plantations managers, supervisors and their families. We grew up thinking all Whites were like these people – very much in the upper and upper-middle classes. We had no

knowledge of White farmers and sharecroppers, of White barbers and janitors, or of White panhandlers and derelicts.

Then there was World War II, and the real world of America descended on us. Suddenly we were engulfed in a flood of working-class Americans. There were certainly skilled and clerical workers among them, but also the semi-skilled and those who were simply called laborers. My mother, who supplemented the family income during the war years by cleaning the dormitories of these so-called defense workers, came home one day with the astonishing news that a White man had asked her to write a letter to his home because he was illiterate. Imagine, a White man who could neither read nor write!

You might guess our illusions about White Americans were shattered by these types of experiences. Indeed, they were. But that made no difference to our place in society. We remained where we had been – at the lowest rung on the ladder.

I feel this background is necessary to be able to focus on the problem that faces those who would create female solidarity in the total American society. This movement is led, without question, by White women who come largely from a middle-class background. This is true, I suspect, for all of the country. I know it to be true for Hawai'i. As a consequence, the women's movement in Hawai'i has had little impact on women of color. It is not that those who lead the movement are deliberately excluding women of color; rather, since the language expressing the movement's directions and goals seems so alien to so many working-class women of color in Hawai'i, the movement is not as visible and strong as it could be.

These women of Hawaiian, Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Samoan, Vietnamese and other backgrounds have cultural value orientations that differ widely from those who have been leading the movement. Their attitudes about extended families, respect for the clan, family affiliation and so on, make it difficult for them to see any relevance in the independent and radical lifestyles of the modern American women who are often college-educated and are of the middle-class. Their day-to-day concerns have to do with survival – holding two jobs, practicing severe frugality and maintaining a strong allegiance to the so-called traditional family concept.

In the sphere of the larger America, where Whites make up such a large part of the population, the needs of women of color have often been ignored. I suspect the Black women of Atlanta and countless other American communities and the Hispanics and Asians have made it known that they do not want to be ignored. In the case of Hawaii, though, it is simply self-destructive for the women's movement to take that posture since women of color constitute a majority of women in our state. According to the 1980 U.S. Census, Caucasians are 34% of the population while Filipinos are 14%, Japanese 25%, Hawaiians 12%, and Other 15%. Together, non-Caucasians constitute 66%, a majority of Hawai'i's population. A viable women's movement in Hawai'i must reach out to women in all of the ethnic groups in the society. It has not yet done so.

Forty years ago the working class Japanese and Filipinos on the sugar plantations of Hawai'i gave us an example of solidarity that the women of today might well follow. For decades the plantation bosses had pitted one ethnic group against the other whenever the specter of a union appeared. When the Japanese organized to ask for

decent wages and working conditions, the plantation bosses would give the Filipinos and other groups special incentives to stay on the job and to break the strike. On other occasions the roles would be reversed. Always, the bosses would keep the groups apart. They were required to live in separate camps with separate social centers. On my plantation the bosses named the camps by the ethnic group: we had a Japanese Camp, a Filipino Camp, a Korean Camp, and a Spanish Camp. There were club houses for the largest groups, the most elegant of which was called the Haole clubhouse (haole being the Hawaiian language word for stranger that has been applied to Whites in Hawai'i to this day).

Then, as World War II came to an end and military rule through martial law was ended, a radical labor union began organizing on the sugar and pineapple plantations of Hawai'i. While many Islanders have argued for years about the real motivation of the leadership of the I.L.W.U. (Harry Bridges, the Australian-born head of the union and Jack Hall, the Hawai'i Regional Director were accused of being communists and were prosecuted for this), there were very few who lived and worked on the plantations who did not credit the union with solving the long-standing problem of ethnic dissension.

Beginning with the organization for the 1946 sugar industry strike and continuing to this day, the I.L.W.U. leadership has insisted that all ethnic groups within its membership share all levels of responsibility and benefit from the work of the union. It was like a good affirmative action program not necessarily a quota system, but no groups were left out. I should also point out that although workers in sugar, pineapple and stevedoring were mostly men, women workers, spouses and other family members

were given very significant roles in the various strike committee. It is very clear today this tactic was an outstanding success for the workers and their union.

I see in the plantation experience a parallel for the women's movement in Hawai'i. Unless and until the women of color in Hawai'i are brought into the movement in as careful and forceful a way as this, the movement has little chance of success. This has not happened because of cultural differences and the failure of women of color to understand and appreciate the language of the women's movement.

In my association for more than twenty years with the women's movement I have been aware that many in leadership roles take the position that the responsibility for clearing up these misunderstandings belongs to those who do not understand. There is a feeling among the leaders of the movement that they have brought to the working-class women of color the message and all these women need do is to throw off the shackles of their own cultures to be accepted into the sisterhood. This sounds like the message of colonizers or, more precisely, William Howard Taft.

Filipinos remember William Howard Taft as the American proconsul in the Philippines at the turn of the century who believed he and his fellow Americans were bringing democracy and freedom to what he called his little brown brothers and sisters. Taft was completely unaware, as are most Americans even today, that the Philippine War of Independence began as soon as the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century and continued without interruption from Spanish occupation through that of the Americans.

What those who lead the women's movement in Hawai'i need to do is learn more about the cultures and the social class of the majority of women. They must surely do so if they want to include these women in their membership.

For example, Filipino women, despite what the middle-class White women who lead the movement may think, have had an ancient tradition of leadership in their society (Infante 1975). Americans, with their European cultural background, tend to dismiss the Philippines as a traditional Spanish machismo society. That is really not true. Cory Aquino is not an aberration, nor are the nuns who helped put her into power. It is true that an important part of President Aquino's problem today is in overcoming the attitude among some Filipino men that women do not belong in positions of authority. But this attitude is not held universally and is more an individual expression of bias than a cultural characteristic.

Filipino women have always been powerful in Philippine society. It is important for Filipino-American women in Hawaii, who are mostly Ilokanos from northern Luzon, to know about one of our heroines a Cory Aquino of an earlier day.

In 1762 five years after her marriage to an Ilokano revolutionary named Diego Silang, Maria Josefa Gabriela, a rich young widow, left her life of ease to accompany Silang to the battlefields against the Spanish. A few months later, Silang was assassinated by one of his company who had sold out to the Spanish. For six months after the assassination, Gabriela continued Silang's war with the help of her uncle. They fought several battles, winning the early ones but finally being captured and executed.

Gabriela gave her life in the Philippine War of Independence in 1763, more than a decade before the American Declaration of Independence (Zaide 1949, 359-360).

It was fitting that this Ilokano patriot was honored, in 1984, by Filipino women organized to oppose the repressive rule of Ferdinand Marcos. On International Women's Day, March 11, 1984, sixty-three women's groups in the Philippines joined together in an umbrella organization called GABRIELA, an acronym for General Assembly Binding Women for Reform, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action (Ordona 1986, 5).

Of course, not every Ilokano woman is a Joan of Arc, riding off to battle against the oppressor. But, and this is what is important to those who need to understand the minds of these women, it is the general characteristic of Filipino women to stand up and speak out. Despite 400 years of Spanish rule, machismo is not really the way of life for Filipinos. The traditional pre-Christian equality between males and females could not be completely eradicated by Spanish and American colonization. Unfortunately, what the Spanish could not do over such a long period of time is taking place today among Filipino-Americans under the cultural tutelage of the dominant group. Before this spirit disappears entirely, women's organizations in Hawai'i and those West Coast communities with large Filipino communities should make contact with this important group.

The other groups making up the non-White part of Hawai'i's society have their own cultural traditions which, if recognized and accounted for by those who lead the women's movement, could help to increase our numbers. The responsibility for

learning these things is with the leadership. It makes no sense for us to say that those outside the movement must educate themselves and come to us for admission. If the women's movement is to transcend ethnic, class and gender lines, it must make the move itself. If it does not, then the movement will not reach the end that is sought.

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