

ous times in their lives, they wanted to be like the oppressor. They wanted to be white or American to reconcile their dissatisfaction with being racially different. One said:

All through my childhood, I wanted to be, you know, white, and I'd look in the mirror and try to see ways of looking at myself as more white. . . . I think it really started when guy-girl relationships began. It was weird to see all my friends who were white have these girls that started liking them and stuff, and I was, it doesn't seem that anyone likes me, I wonder why that's so? Maybe if I was white that would solve my problems.

The desire to be white was often linked to a desire to distance themselves from Asians who reminded them of negative stereotypes. Students worried that others would see them as "nerdy" or too Asian (i.e., speaking with an accent), and took steps to ensure that such associations with the stereotype would not happen. One woman said:

Some people, it's like they're so into school, well like computer-brain people, that's how I picture some people. I don't know the word to describe it, kinda like nerdy, whatever. And that's just not my type of person.

Finally, internalized racism can lead people of color to feel embarrassed or ashamed of themselves or others in their group. These feelings make it difficult to develop close and supportive relationships with members in the group. For Asian American students, this was particularly evident in relations within the family. Students often felt ashamed of their Asian parents because they reminded them of stereotypical images they were trying to avoid. This is seen in the following quote:

I remember it was always in the back of my head, "Gee, I hope somebody doesn't bring up the fact that I look different, that I'm Japanese". . . . It just made my whole head feel hot, and I felt like crawling somewhere, and I also remember I was embarrassed, I was embarrassed of my father. . . . The experience that stands out the most clearly in my mind was, my father used to take us to hockey games when we were little . . . and after the game we pulled up to a McDonald's and I saw there were a lot of kids my age in there. . . . I remember sitting there saying "C'mon Dad let's not go in there, it's gonna take too long to get food." Tom was saying the same thing . . . my brother and I both somehow knew the reason why we didn't want to go in there is because we didn't want all these people to see, to see my Oriental father.

## Conclusion

The voices of Asian American students are painfully familiar. Like them, there have been times when I wondered if a seemingly innocent glance or comment carried racial implications. There have been moments when internal voices try to tell

me I don't belong or that I'm not American. . . . Like the students, I've wondered if there is something wrong with me, or if I did something wrong to bring mistreatment my way.

The concept of internalized racism is tremendously useful in quelling such fears and doubts for it addresses dimensions of racism that fall outside the purview of conventional theories. It recognizes and names racism's lingering effects, even when no obvious instances of discrimination are taking place, or when the lives of individuals seem far removed from larger, structural manifestations of racism. It helps people to see that their questions and uncertainties are not the product of oversensitive imaginations, but are intricately connected to the way racism pervades society, accumulates in one's experiences, and gets internalized. In these ways, understanding internalized racism counters the self-blame and criticism that often limit people of color, and frees them to devote time and attention to other matters. Conflicts and divisions within groups can also be eased, as people understand them as effects of internalized racism. These are just some of the reasons the concept of internalized oppression should be included as an analytic tool in the effort to combat racism.

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## SMELLS LIKE RACISM

Rita Chaudhry Sethi

When I started my first job after college, Steve Riley, an African American activist, asked me: "So, how do you feel being black?" I confessed, "I am not black." "In America," Steve responded, "if you're not white, you're black."

From Karin Aguilar-San Juan, ed., *The State of Asian America*. Copyright © 1994. Reprinted by permission of South End Press.

U.S. discourse on racism is generally framed in these simplistic terms: the stark polarity of black/white conflict. As it is propagated, it embraces none of the true complexities of racist behavior. Media sensationalism, political expedience, intellectual laziness, and legal constraints conspire to narrow the scope of cognizable racism. What remains is a pared-down image of racism, one that delimits the definition of its forms, its perpetrators, and, especially, its victims. Divergent experiences are only included in the hierarchy of racial crimes when they sufficiently resemble the caricature. Race-based offenses that do not conform to this model are permitted to exist and fester without remedy by legal recourse, collective retribution, or even moral indignation.

Asians' experiences exist in the penumbra of actionable racial affronts. Our cultural, linguistic, religious, national, and color differences do not, as one might imagine, form the basis for a modified paradigm of racism; rather, they exist on the periphery of offensiveness. The racial insults we suffer are usually trivialized; our reactions are dismissed as hypersensitivity or regarded as a source of amusement. The response to a scene where a Korean-owned store is being destroyed with a bat in the 1993 film *Falling Down* (a xenophobic and racist diatribe on urban life)<sup>1</sup> reflects how mainstream America/American culture responds to the phenomenon of anti-Asian violence:

There was, in the theater where I saw the film, a good deal of appreciative laughter and a smattering of applause during this scene, which of course flunks the most obvious test of comparative racism: imagine a black or an Orthodox Jew, say, in that Korean's place and you imagine the theater's screen being tipped from the walls. Asians, like Arabs, remain safe targets for the movies' casual racism.<sup>2</sup>

The perpetuation of the caricature of racism is attributable to several complex and symbiotic causes. First, Asians often do not ascribe racist motivation to the discrimination they suffer, or they have felt that they could suffer the injustice of racial intolerance, in return for being later compensated by the fruits of economic success. Second, many Asians do not identify with other people of color. Sucheta Mazumdar posits that South Asians exclude themselves from efforts at political mobilization because of their rigid self-perception as Aryan, not as people of color.<sup>3</sup>

The final and most determinative factor, however, is the perspective that excludes the experiences of Asians (and other people of color) from the rubric of racism. Whites would deny us our right to speak out against majority prejudice, partially because it tarnishes their image of Asians as "model" minorities; other people of color would deny us the same because of monopolistic sentiments that they alone endure real racism.

For example, a poll conducted by *The Wall Street Journal* and NBC News revealed that "most American voters thought that Asian Americans did not suffer discrimination" but in fact received too many "special advantages."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, when crimes against Asians were on the rise in housing projects in San Francisco, the

Housing Authority was loathe to label the crimes as racially motivated, despite the clear racial bias involved.<sup>5</sup> The deputy director of the Oakland Housing Authority's response to the issue was: "There may be some issues of race in it, but it's largely an issue of people who don't speak English feeling very isolated and not having a support structure to deal with what's happening to them."<sup>6</sup>

Other minorities reject Asian claims of racial victimization by pointing to economic privilege or perceived whiteness.<sup>7</sup> Such rejections even occur among different Asian groups. Chinese Americans in San Francisco attempted to classify Indians as white for the purposes of the California Minority Business Enterprise Statute: "If you are a white, male buyer in the City, all else being equal, would you buy from another Caucasian [i.e., Indian] or from a person of the Mongolian race?"<sup>8</sup>

The perspective of some people of color that there is a monopoly on oppression is debilitating to an effort at cross-ethnic coalition building. Our experiences are truly distinct, and our battles will in turn be unique; but if we are to achieve a community, we must begin to educate ourselves about our common denominator as well as our different histories and struggles. Ranking and diminishing relative subjugation and discrimination will only subvert our goal of unity. Naheed Islam expresses this sentiment in part of a poem addressed to African American women:

Ah Sister! What have they done to us! Separated, segregated, unable to love one another, to cross the color line. I am not trying to cash in on your chains. I have my own. The rape, plunder, pain of dislocation is not yours alone. We have different histories, different voices, different ways of expressing our anger, but they used the same bullets to reach us all.<sup>9</sup>

The combination of white America refusing to acknowledge anti-Asian discrimination, and minority America minimizing anti-Asian discrimination, foists a formidable burden upon Asians: to combat our own internalized racial alienation, and to fight extrinsic racial classifications by both whites and other minority groups. It also renders overly simplistic those suggestions that if South Asians simply became "sufficiently politicized" they could overcome fragmentation in the struggle by people of color.<sup>10</sup>

As activists, a narrow-minded construct of racism impairs our political initiatives to use racism as a banner that unites all people of color in a common struggle.<sup>11</sup> The mainstream use of the word "racism" does not embrace Asian experiences, and we are not able to include ourselves in a definition that minimizes our encounters with racism. Participation in an antiracism campaign, therefore, is necessarily limited to those involved in a battle against racism that fits within the confines of the black/white paradigm, and conversely relegates anti-Asian racism to a lesser realm in terms of both exposure and horribleness.

We need to be more sophisticated in our analysis of racism, and less equivocal in our condemnation. In doing so, we will expand the base of opposition against anti-Asian racism, and forge an alliance against all its myriad forms. The first step

in this process is for Asians to apply a racial analysis to our lives. This involves developing a greater understanding of how racism has operated socially and institutionally in this country against ourselves and other people of color, as well as acknowledging our own complicity; and secondly, accepting ourselves as people of color, with a shared history of being targeted as visibly Other. Only then can we act in solidarity with other efforts at ending racism.

### Anti-Asian Racism: Fashioning a More Inclusive Paradigm

Racism takes on manifold creative and insidious expressions. Intra-racism, racism among different racial communities, and internalized racism all complicate an easy understanding of the phenomenon. My project here is to uncover shrouded racism perpetrated against Asians, particularly South Asians, in an attempt to broaden the use of the term.

### Accent

It is only since 1992 that the Courts have begun to realize the legitimacy of discrimination based upon accent.<sup>12</sup> Immigrants, primarily those not of European descent,<sup>13</sup> suffer heightened racism because of their accents, including job discrimination and perpetual taunting and caricaturization. This is a severe and pervasive form of racism that is often not acknowledged as racist, or even offensive. Even among Asians there is a high degree of denial about the accent discrimination that is attributable to race. In a letter to the *New York Times*, an Asian man blithely encouraged immigrants to maintain their accents, without acknowledging the potential discrimination that we face, though he personally was "linguistically gifted" with an "American accent." The man wrote, "Fellow immigrants, don't worry about the way you speak until Peter Jennings eliminates his Canadian accent."<sup>14</sup>

Accent discrimination is linked directly to American jingoism, and its accompanying virulently anti-immigrant undertones. In the aforementioned movie *Falling Down*, the protagonist has the following exchange with a Korean grocer:

Mr. Lee: Drink eighty-five cent. You pay or go.

Foster: This "fe," I don't understand a "fe." There's a "v" in the word. It's "fe-va-h." You don't got "v's" in China?

Mr. Lee: Not Chinese. I'm Korean.

Foster: Whatever. You come to my country, you take my money, you don't even have the grace to learn my language?<sup>15</sup>

A person's accent is yet another symbol of otherness, but it is one that even U.S.-born minorities do not regard as a target for race-based discrimination. Language is implicitly linked with race, and must be treated as such.

### Subversive Stereotyping

The myths that are built based on the commonality of race are meant to depersonalize and simplify people. To many, the Indian persona is that of a greedy, unethical, cheap immigrant. This stereotype is reflected in popular culture, where its appearance gives it credibility, thereby reinforcing the image. In the television comedy *The Simpsons*, a purportedly politically sensitive program, one of the characters is a South Asian owner of a convenience store. In one episode, in an effort to make a sale, he says, "I'll sell you expired baby food for a nickel off." Similarly, in the program *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, an alien race called the Firengi (Hindi for foreigner) are proprietors and sleazy entrepreneurs who take advantage of any opportunity for wealth, regardless of the moral cost.<sup>16</sup>

These constructs are reified in everyday life as people respond to Indians as if they have certain inherent qualities. Indian physicians, for example, are perceived as shoddy practitioners, who are greedy and disinterested in the health of their patients. In successful medical malpractice suits, Indian doctors are routinely required to pay higher penalties.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in the now-famous "East Side Butcher" case, where an Indian doctor was convicted of performing illegal abortions, there was no racial analysis despite the fact that no one had been prosecuted for that crime in New York State since the early 1980s despite the fact that hundreds of illegal abortions are performed annually.<sup>18</sup> Another Indian doctor, less than two weeks later, was found guilty of violations in her mammography practice and fined the largest amount in New York State history in such a case. One can not help but wonder if these convictions were, at least in part, motivated by the stereotype of the Indian immigrant.<sup>19</sup>

### The Onus

A white, liberal woman once asked my friend Ritu if she wasn't being overly sensitive for taking offense when people put their feet near her face (a high insult in Indian culture), when she could not fairly expect people to understand her culture. The onus is always on us, as outsiders, to explain and justify our culture while also being expected to know and understand majority culture.<sup>20</sup> Constant cultural slights about cows, bindis, and Gandhi are deemed appropriate by the majority while we are expected to subjugate expression of our culture to an understanding and acceptance of American culture. As another example, the swastika is an extremely common, ancient Hindu symbol. However, Hindus cannot wear or display the swastika in America because of Hitler's appropriation of it, and the expectation that we suppress our cultural symbols in an attempt to understand the affront to

Jewish Americans. The assumption that it is our normative responsibility to make our culture secondary is racist because it suggests that one culture should be more free to express itself than another.

## Religious Fanaticism

Eastern religions are commonly perceived as fraudulent, cultish, and fanatical; they are rarely perceived as equally legitimate as the spiritual doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The story of immaculate conception is accepted as plausible, while the multarmed, multheaded God is an impossible fantasy. Hinduism is portrayed as Hare Krishnas chanting with shaved heads and orange robes; and Islam is characterized as a rigid, violent, military religion. These hyperbolic characterizations are responsible for the fear of religion that causes local communities to refuse to permit places of worship in their neighborhoods.<sup>21</sup>

Western appropriation of Hindu terms reflects the perception of religion as charlatanical; the words have been reshaped through their use in the English language with an edge of irreverence or disbelief.

	Hindi Meaning	English Use
1. Guru	Religious teacher	Purported head; self-designated leader
2. Nirvana	Freedom from endless cycle of rebirth	Psychedelic ecstasy; drug-induced high
3. Pundit	Religious scholar	One with claimed knowledge
4. Mantra	A meditative tool; repetition of word or phrase	Mindless chant

Similarly, during times of political crisis (the 1991 Persian Gulf War; the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing), Islam has been the object of derision as a dangerous and destructive religion. After the suspects from the World Trade Center bombing were identified as Muslims, the media, the FBI, and mainstream America responded with gross anti-Muslim rhetoric. A professor in Virginia pointed out the ignorant conflation of the entire Muslim population into one extremist monolith:

Not all Islamic revivalists are Islamic fundamentalists, and not all Islamic fundamentalists are political activists, and not all Islamic political activists are radical and prone to violence.<sup>22</sup>

Muslims have linked these characterizations of their religion to racial demonization.<sup>23</sup> The *New York Post* carried a headline entitled "The Face of Hate" with the face of a dark-skinned, bearded man of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent

(the accused bomber). Similarly, the *New York Times* described the work of courtroom artists: "the defendant's beakish nose, hollow cheeks, cropped beard and the sideways tilt of his head."<sup>24</sup> In an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times*, one Muslim responded to this description: "Such racial stereotyping serves nothing except to feed an existing hate and fear."<sup>25</sup>

## Indicia of Culturalness

Indicia that identify us as Other are generally used as vehicles for discrimination; with East Asians, eye-shape provides the target for racial harassment. South Asians' unique attributes are warped for use as racist artillery: attire (we are towel heads and wear loin cloths and sheets); costume (we are dot-heads); and odor (we are unclean and smelly). Nila Gupta has written about the power of smell, and its identification of South Asians as targets for racist behavior:<sup>26</sup>

it is spring  
she walks a strong walk  
but they are waiting  
for her in the air  
they can't smell curry and oil poori and dahl for breakfast  
scents they are trained to hate  
confusion  
like hunting dogs after prey  
enraged  
thrown off the scent  
by a river  
enraged  
was she trying to pass?

Gupta's poem recounts a moment of racial discrimination as it is manifested in the degradation of cultural characteristics. When we explore racism, and its effect upon different ethnic and cultural groups, we must also examine the unique ways that specific groups experience racism, and the more neutral proxies and buzzwords used to signify race.

## Class Conflicts/Economic Envy

Racism and economic tension are inextricable because race discrimination against Asians has often been manifested as class competition, and vice versa. Since the early 1800s, when Asians became a source of cheap labor for the railroads, we have been an economic threat. As Asians have more recently been portrayed as the prosperous minority, the favored child of America, there has inevitably been sibling rivalry. When auto workers beat up Vincent Chin, was it Japanese competition in the auto

industry or unbridled racism that motivated the murderers? When African Americans targeted Korean-owned stores in the riots in Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict, was it the economic hardship of the inner city and perceived Asian advantages or was it simply racism? The answer is that race and class are inseparable because of the inherent difficulty in identifying the primary or motivating factor; any racial analysis must consider economic scapegoating as an avenue for racial harassment and racial victimization as an excuse for expressing economic tensions.

## Conceptual and Perspective Differences

When an immigrant perspective clashes with a white American perspective, the conflict should be considered a racial one. Values such as individuality, privacy, confrontation, competition, and challenging the status quo are considered positive and healthy; however, these components of the liberal state are not necessarily virtues elsewhere. When Hawaiian children do not respond to competitive models of teaching, but thrive in group activities; and when Punjabi children defer to authority, rather than challenge their teachers out of intellectual "curiosity," they are harmed by their inability to function in an essentially and uniquely "American" world. Identifying the differences in perspective and lifestyle between Asian immigrants and Americans will help in recognizing arenas in which we will be at a cultural/racial disadvantage.<sup>27</sup>

## A Case Study in Anti-Asian Racism: The Dobbusters of Jersey City

In early fall of 1986, Asian Indians in New Jersey were the targets of racial terrorism. Houses and businesses were vandalized, and graffitied with racial slurs, women had their saris pulled, Indians on the street were harassed and assaulted, and a 28-year-old man was beaten into a coma. The *Jersey Journal* received and printed a letter from a group calling themselves the Dobbusters threatening all Asian Indians in Jersey City, and promising to drive them out of Jersey City. Teenagers in Dickinson High School were found with Dobbuster IDs. In spite of the obvious danger to the community, the police were unresponsive and denied that any Indians should truly be concerned.

The most heinous incident was the murder of Navroze Mody, a 30-year-old Citicorp executive. Navroze was bludgeoned to death with bricks by a group of young Latinos. Long after he had lost consciousness, he was repeatedly propped up and beaten further. His white companion was not touched. Four of the eleven attackers were indicted for manslaughter; two of the indicted were also accused of assaulting two Indian students two weeks before killing Navroze.

Despite the context in which the murder occurred, the incident was not generally perceived as racist in motive by the mainstream, the press, or the Indian community. The ways that Indians were targeted made it convenient to try to find other names for their encounters with racism. Their experiences were unrecognized

able as the caricature of racism, and there was a collective refusal to be expansive and open-minded in interpreting what was happening.

The tone for the general characterization of the crime as not racially motivated was set by Hudson County prosecutor Paul DePascale, assigned to Mody's case. Although he conceded that: "There was no apparent motive for the assault other than the fact that the victim was an Asian American,"<sup>28</sup> he refused to pursue criminal charges for racial bias.<sup>29</sup>

The press, a reflection of mainstream sentiment, was reluctant to label the crime as racial in nature. Even *The Village Voice*, a liberal newspaper, carried a story asking above the headline: "Was his [Navroze Mody's] murder racially motivated?"<sup>30</sup> One newspaper accepted the racial motive by qualifying it as a "new" racism/"new" bigotry. The defendants' supporters saw no racial animus against Indians in the crime, inquiring instead: "Do you think there would be justice if it was the other way around? If the Indian were alive and the Puerto Rican dead?"<sup>31</sup> Indians-at-large were mystified about the source of the anti-Asian wave of violence and found it difficult to accept as pure racism. People looked for other potential justifications and alternative labels.<sup>32</sup> One community leader remarked, "We pay our taxes," and characterized the Indian community as "faultless immigrants" in an effort to distinguish Asian Indians from African Americans and Latinos.<sup>33</sup> A second-generation Indian lawyer characterized such attacks as "national origin" discrimination, rather than racism.<sup>34</sup> Such denial prevented Asian Indians from making the obvious connection to other groups victimized because of their race.

The uncommonness of the anti-Indian discrimination obfuscated the real racism that rested at its core. Economic envy was the most obvious nonracial analysis proffered for escalating crimes against Asians. One Jersey City resident commented: "I've been in this country all my life and they come here and plop down \$200,000 for a house."<sup>35</sup> Part of the infamous Dobbuster letter contained similar comments to journalist Ronald Leir: "You say that Indians are good businessmen. Well I suppose if I had 15 people living in my apartment I'd be able to save money too."<sup>36</sup>

Another major source of attack was traditional Indian attire. According to one community leader: "The number two factor for racism is that we look different."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the hate group, the Dobbusters, takes its name from the cosmetic dot, or bindi, worn by many Indian women on their foreheads.

Finally, Indian languages and residential clustering create a sense of exclusive cohesiveness that threatens Jersey City's non-Asian communities. Anything that represented the insular-seeming culture was the object of harassment and hatred. Indian religion and cuisine were mocked, and Indians were repeatedly characterized as smelly (due to the lingering scents of cooking spice).

Despite the heinousness of the crime, the Mody case, and anti-Indian violence, did not receive sufficient public attention or outrage. During the same time that the case was being tried, the Howard Beach case<sup>38</sup> was in the headlines of all major newspapers. Of the four Howard Beach attackers, three received manslaughter

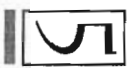
convictions; of the eleven attackers in the Mody case, three were convicted of aggravated assault, and one of simple assault. Perhaps it was because Asian Indians did not know how to employ the political system that the verdicts returned did not fit the crimes committed. Perhaps it was because the attackers were also minorities. But the main reason why justice was not served was because the racism that Indians were enduring did not fit the neat, American paradigm for racial violence.

In 1993, we can no longer see the world in black and white, where "those who don't fit the color scheme become shadows."<sup>29</sup> Lessons from our battles with bigotry should convince us that our understanding of it and the machinery we have built to fight it are hopelessly obsolete. Denying the richness of our community of people of color ultimately undermines the objective of unity, and hampers our political work combating racism. During the late '80s, the left fought to find a common ground for people of color to coalesce; however, it is now the time to refine our collective mission to truly encompass the range of diversity among us. Any movement forged upon the principles of equality and tolerance can only be legitimate if it represents its margins.

## NOTES

1. While the film generated much debate about the possible ironic intent of its stereotyping, the reactions of moviegoers showed that the irony was lost on most audiences.
2. Godfrey Cheshire, complete citation for article not available.
3. Mazumdar, Sucheta, "Race and Racism: South Asians in the United States," *Frontiers of Asian American Studies*.
4. Polner, Murray, "Asian-Americans Say They Are Treated Like Foreigners," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1993, Section B, p. 1.
5. Racial slurs were rampant (including "Go home, Chinaman" and accent harassment) and tension between the Asian and African American community was worsening. The fact that the perpetrators were African American might have contributed to the general reluctance to characterize these crimes as racially motivated. Again, this reflects an inability, or an unwillingness, to intellectually digest racism between non-white races, as it falls outside of the narrow black/white paradigm.
6. Chin, Steven A., "Asians Terrorized in Housing Projects," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 17, 1993, p. B1.
7. Witness this morsel of divisiveness: In Miami, where large Latino and African American populations coexist, a Cuban woman was sworn in as State Attorney General. Many in the African American community were dismayed by this decision, and responded by stripping Cubans of their "rank" as a minority. One black lawyer commented: "Cubans are really 'white people whose native language is Spanish'" and others agreed that Cuban Americans should be "disqualified because they have higher income levels than other minorities." Certainly there is complexity in this conflict; however, the net result is that people who could be in alliance based on race are divided. Rohrer, Larry, "Black-Cuban Rift Extends to Florida Law School," *The New York Times*, March 19, 1993, p. B16f.
8. Transcript of San Francisco Board of Supervisors Special Session of Economic and Social Policy Committee, April 30, 1991.
9. Islam, Naheed, "Untitled," from *Smell This*, an official publication of The Center for Racial Education, Berkeley, CA, 1991.
10. Mazumdar, *supra* at p. 36.
11. Here, and throughout this chapter, I am operating within the constructs of our existing political reality. I am not addressing the normative question of whether people of color should be in coalition against racism, but given that it has been our primary organizing principle, how can we be more effective and inclusive?
12. Interestingly, the case was brought by the EEOC while under the tenure of Joy Cherman, a naturalized Indian. The Commission's 1980 guidelines covering this type of discrimination were written by an Indian, and the case was brought by an Indian plaintiff. Is that what it takes to obtain recognition of the racism that we experience?
13. The Executive Assistant for the Commissioner noted: "If an employer has an applicant who speaks with a French accent . . . or with an English accent, they say, 'How cute.' But if he speaks with a Hispanic accent they say, 'What's wrong with this guy?'"
14. Letter to the editor from Yan Hong Krompacky, "Immigrants, Don't Be in Such a Hurry to Shed Your Accents," *The New York Times*, March 4, 1993.
15. Foster then proceeds to demolish Mr. Lee's grocery store with a bat, in much the same way that Japanese cars were hatefully demolished just before Vincent Chin's death.
16. That such stereotypes exist in two programs that are perceived as being among the more progressive on television is itself indicative of the continuing denial that anti-Asian racism exists.
17. According to several medical malpractice attorneys.
18. This was exacerbated further by the fact that Dr. Hayat's sentence was so severe that even the District Attorney's Office had expected less and was "pleasantly surprised." Perez-Pena, Richard, "Prison Term for Doctor Convicted in Abortions," *The New York Times*, June 15, 1993, p. B1.
19. These stereotypes find expression everywhere. I was haggling for a pair of earrings in Times Square, and the vendor asked me if I was Indian. When I replied that I was, he responded, "Oh, I should have guessed. Indians don't want to take anything out of their pockets."
20. In an effort to better integrate into American culture, and mend relations with ethnic groups in New York City, Korean grocers are taking seminars to learn to smile more frequently, supposedly rare in their culture. *The New York Times*, March 22, 1993.
21. "It's the Hindus! Circle the Zoning Laws." Viewpoint by Bob Weiner, *Newsday*, April 26, 1993, p. 40.
22. Steinfield, Peter, "Many Varieties of Fundamentalism," *The New York Times*, no date. An even better response was: [the World Trade bomber suspect's] "variety of fundamentalism was not any more representative of Islam than the people in Waco are representative of [mainstream] Christianity." *Id.*
23. Op Ed Letter to Editor, "Don't Let Trade Center Blast Ignite Witch Hunt," March 23, 1993.
24. "Surprises in a Crowded Courtroom," Moustafa Bayarni, March 5, 1993.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Gupta, Nila, "So She Could Walk," from *The Best of Fireweed*, Women's Press, Canada (1986).
27. Many Asians find themselves in low-ranking jobs in the corporate world because their skills have little application in the old boy cultural network. This is due in part to different concepts of authority and competition, as much as it is pure racial bigotry. My point is that the two should be viewed together to truly understand the full flourish of racism.

28. Vicente, Raul Jr., "Cops Arrest Two as Dobusters," *Gold Coast*, March 24—March 31, 1988, p. 4.
29. His failure to label this as a racially motivated crime may in fact be racially motivated. In March of 1988 there was opposition by the Inter Departmental Minority Police Action Council in Jersey City to his appointment as the city's acting police director because of alleged discrimination against a black woman officer. "Minority Cops Blast Director," *Gold Coast*, March 31, 1988, p. 7.
30. "Racial Terror on The Gold Coast," *The Village Voice*, January 26, 1988.
31. *Jersey Journal*, March 1, 1988.
32. The collective denial precluded group solutions. Around the same time in Elmhurst 25 African American and Indian families were "preyed" upon in Queens. However, Indians were uninterested in forging an alliance with the African American community to fight on-going racial harassment. Pais, Arthur, "Long Island Families Were Apathetic and Tearful When Harassed," *India Abroad*, July 31, 1987, p. 1.
33. Walt, Vivienne, "A New Racism Gets Violent in New Jersey," *Newsday*, April 6, 1988, p. 5.
34. Spoken at the Strategy Session for the case of Dr. Kaushal Sharan, March 28, 1993, by a representative of the *Indian American Magazine*.
35. Walt, Vivienne, "A New Racism Gets Violent in New Jersey," *Newsday*, April 6, 1988, p. 5.
36. Letter to *Jersey Journal* on August 5, 1987.
37. Walt, Vivienne, "A New Racism Gets Violent in New Jersey," *Newsday*, April 6, 1988, p. 5.
38. A 1986 attack by white youths in Queens where a group of African Americans were stranded; one person died when he was chased onto a highway by the mob.
39. Zia, Helen, "Another American Racism," *The New York Times*, letter to the editor.



## OPPRESSION

Marilyn Frye

It is a fundamental claim of feminism that women are oppressed. The word "oppression" is a strong word. It repels and attracts. It is dangerous and dangerously fashionable and endangered. It is much misused, and sometimes not innocently.

The statement that women are oppressed is frequently met with the claim that men are oppressed too. We hear that oppressing is oppressive to those who oppress

as well as to those they oppress. Some men cite as evidence of their oppression their much-advertised inability to cry. It is tough, we are told, to be masculine. When the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word "oppression" is being stretched to meaninglessness; it is treated as though its scope includes any and all human experience of limitation or suffering, no matter the cause, degree or consequence. Once such usage has been put over on us, then if ever we deny that any person or group is oppressed, we seem to imply that we think they never suffer and have no feelings. We are accused of insensitivity, even of bigotry. For women, such accusation is particularly intimidating, since sensitivity is one of the few virtues that has been assigned to us. If we are found insensitive, we may fear we have no redeeming traits at all and perhaps are not real women. Thus are we silenced before we begin: the name of our situation drained of meaning and our guilt mechanisms tripped.

But this is nonsense. Human beings can be miserable without being oppressed, and it is perfectly consistent to deny that a person or group is oppressed without denying that they have feelings or that they suffer.

We need to think clearly about oppression, and there is much that mitigates against this. I do not want to undertake to prove that women are oppressed (or that men are not), but I want to make clear what is being said when we say it. We need this word, this concept, and we need it to be sharp and sure.

The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press." *The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button.* Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce.

The mundane experience of the oppressed provides another clue. One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation. For example, it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found "difficult" or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one's livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder. One can only choose to risk one's preferred form and rate of annihilation.

Another example: It is common in the United States that women, especially younger women, are in a bind where neither sexual activity nor sexual inactivity is all right. If she is heterosexually active, a woman is open to censure and punishment for being loose, unprincipled or a whore. The "punishment" comes in the