

SHE SAID IT

"Something which we think is impossible now is not impossible in another decade."

Constance Baker Motley

Media Glance



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In Remembrance of Mary Daly: Lessons for the Movement

by Adriene Sere

*"There is, then, an extremely rich, complex Diversity among women and within each individual. But there is also above, beyond, beneath all this a Cosmic Commonality, a tapestry of connectedness..."*¹ —Mary Daly

*"This universal religion of phallocracy is the basis of the sexual caste system, and under its rapist reign women of all nations, races, and classes on this planet are touchable..."*²—Mary Daly

When I heard the news that Mary Daly died on Jan 3, 2010, I felt a colossal sense of loss that surprised me. An entire generation had gone by since I had read the eye-opening pages of *Gyn/Ecology* and *Pure Lust*. The last time I read one of her books was in 1992, when her autobiography *Outercourse* was newly published. I must have taken comfort in simply knowing that she was there – to figure out and write the really brave stuff, the out-of-the-box, over-the edge analyses, what no one else quite has it in them to write.

I admit that some of her writing made me uneasy, but so many of her fearless insights helped me, and countless other women, to see with "Other Eyes," through the deceptions of patriarchy. Through her books we've learned about atrocities committed in a world in which females are systematically treated as "derivative beings." At the same time, she pointed us toward possibilities for uncompromised female selfhood. She verbally wove for women a ground to walk on, a "womansland," where there is yet none. She pounded out powerful Labryses to take on the "drones," the "fixers," the "plug-uglies" and the "snools" that get in our path, rendering them energetically impotent through mere descriptive accuracy. She created a feminist base camp that a woman could carry with her, in her mind, even years after reading her work.

There was another aspect to the great sense of loss I felt – beyond the realization that there would be no more books by Mary Daly – as I wondered: what might have been? What books might Daly have written, how might her life have been better, how would the feminist movement be different right now if it had responded to her work in a fair and respectful way?

For years now, many women's studies classes have taught only a specific fragment of her work as an

example of white ethnocentricity.³ Many influential feminists have dismissed her writing out of hand, deeming her brilliant work unworthy of reading.⁴ In 1999, the discussions that arose on various listserves after Boston College succeeded in forcing Daly to retire included posts that characterized her as a “racist” for having taken an ethnocentric approach to the writing of *Gyn/Ecology*, published 21 years earlier.

The “racism” accusation that hounds Daly’s reputation to this day all began with Audre Lorde’s influential “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” which was written in 1979 and published in *Sister Outsider* in 1984. In this letter, Lorde graciously thanked Daly for sending her a copy of the newly published *Gyn/Ecology*, and added that so much of the book is “full of import, useful, generative, and provoking.”

She then took Daly to task for presenting an analysis of the global oppression of women, but including empowering images only from the European tradition, leaving out non-European images of female strength and power. “Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa?” Non-European women, Lorde pointed out, were dealt with “only as victims and preyers-upon each other,” which distorted women of color’s heritage.

She questioned why the only quotations from Black women, including an excerpt from a poem by Lorde, were used to introduce the chapter on female genital mutilation in Africa.⁵ She said she felt Daly’s use of this excerpt made her “testify against myself as a woman of Color.” She added, “So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women?”⁶

Lorde’s “Open Letter” taught many white women over the years about the problem of white ethnocentricity and the importance of recognizing difference and diversity. It articulated for women of color the experience of erasure that they themselves had been dealing with in the women’s movement. But it also led to the widespread framing of Daly as a racist, for making the mistakes that others learned from.

Many feminists have analyzed *Gyn/Ecology* in light of Lorde’s criticism. To my knowledge, no one has turned a critical eye on “Open Letter” itself, outside of Alexis de Veaux’s informative biography of Lorde, *Warrior Poet*, which brought forth previously unknown information from Lorde’s personal papers.⁷ I find three main problems with “Open Letter,” which I present here in an effort to shed some light on Daly’s work, as well as on a larger dynamic in the women’s movement that I believe parallels the problems with the published letter:

One, Lorde could have written just as effectively about white ethnocentricity in an essay that incorporated her analysis of *Gyn/Ecology*, along with other examples of the pervasive problem. This would have allowed readers to see Daly’s work in the context of the larger problem, rather than singling her out as a representative of it. The approach Lorde took led to exactly what happened: Daly’s unique and valuable work was largely discounted by the movement, and her name was associated with racism thereafter.

Two, Lorde prefaced the published letter with a claim that Daly did not respond to her letter. In *Outercourse*, Daly claimed that she initiated a meeting with Lorde several months after receiving the letter to discuss it.⁸ De Veaux’s biography of Lorde confirmed Daly’s claim, and includes an excerpt from a letter written by Daly to Lorde in which she acknowledges the rightness of some of Lorde’s criticism.⁹

The implications of Lorde’s published claim that Daly didn’t respond at all to the letter are extremely troubling. Did she aim to destroy the standing of Daly among feminists? Was she making a public objection to racism as a way to get personal revenge, or to take down a “rival”? If so, why did she feel entitled to use the vehicle of anti-racism in such a destructive way? The important and valuable points Lorde made in “Open Letter” should not lead readers to minimize the ramifications of its errors.

Three, according to De Veaux’s biography, Lorde travelled to Africa in 1974 searching for “women’s

legends,” for an “ancestral female self” that up until then she knew nothing about. Only at the very end of a month long trip did Lorde discover the female deities that she criticizes Daly for failing to mention in *Gyn/Ecology*, which was written around the same period.¹⁰ Yet Lorde implied in “Open Letter” that the information couldn’t be found if one reads only “white women’s words.”

Given the fact that imagery of powerful African women was mostly invisible at that time, even to Lorde, it seems possible that Daly prefaced her chapter on FGM with excerpts of Lorde’s and Pat Parker’s poems to provide those needed examples of strong Black women expressing resistance to violence or oppression.

Inarguably, Daly could have included empowering female imagery from non-European cultures which were accessible at the time. And she didn’t address in *Gyn/Ecology* the differences in the oppression of women as a result of combined forces of racism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. It should also be noted that while Lorde underlined differences in experience of oppression between Daly and herself, she failed to acknowledge the vast differences between the relative safety and freedom both she and Daly experienced in the U.S. and the oppressive violence against millions of African girls subjected to genital mutilation and, subsequently, a lifetime of pain and constraint.

Feminists learn from our foremothers’ mistakes as well as their wisdom. We’ve certainly learned from Daly’s mistakes. The feminist movement could also learn from Lorde’s mistakes — in the context of all of her valuable work. There is no need to define either of these great feminists primarily in terms of their mistakes.

To its credit, the feminist movement has, over the years, addressed and incorporated much of what was most solution-oriented about “Open Letter.” Unfortunately, it also replicated and amplified the letter’s worst aspects, including its unnecessary knives, the scapegoating approach of singling out one person and putting her “guilt” on trial, and the hint of oppression competitiveness. Certainly the movement did not move in this direction as a result of the publication of this letter, but I believe “Open Letter” reflected, and probably influenced to some degree, the dynamic to come.

The rise in the social influence of postmodernism¹¹, and of an identity politics which ranked the importance of sexism very low in comparison with other isms, especially racism, along with the women’s movement’s vulnerability to the divisive accusations of racism and classism wielded by both white leftist men and men of color¹², marginalized what had been the power center of the feminist movement in the 70s, reflected in both Daly’s and Lorde’s work: what some call “radical feminism,” what others derisively dismiss as “cultural feminism,” and what I will describe here as a movement for woman-identified empowerment which does not subordinate the problem of sexism to other issues.

Under these larger, negative influences, a spirit of misogyny was allowed free reign. Women who organized around women-specific issues were often dismissed as “bourgeois.” Activist groups began turning individual women into effigies of racism. While great strides were made toward diversity consciousness, the accusation of racism, a potent weapon, was also being rampantly used in manipulative ways, for purposes unrelated to the need to end racism. This damaged the efforts that many were making to combat bigotry — in all its forms — and create safer space for all women.

I believe the women’s movement held the potential for transformative power had it sincerely challenged bigotry, within and without, while refusing to tolerate misogyny — any sense of entitlement to woman-bash in the guise of combating bigotry. The movement’s potential for power through countering bigotry was instead torn by a dysfunctional approach to confronting it, and by the spirit of bigotry itself that used the “righteousness” of the cause to project and replicate the problem.

The first time I witnessed this dynamic was in Santa Fe in 1992. A Women’s Action Coalition (WAC) chapter was newly formed, part of a network of groups springing up around the country. Dozens of women, including successful artists and leaders in the community, were showing up at meetings. The prospects for action seemed exciting.

As I remember it, the issue of race was put on the front-burner from the beginning: it was one of the

main issues that WAC as a group wanted to take on, both internally and in organized actions. Women spoke out from their many diverse, personal perspectives at the large, unwieldy group meetings, loosely guided by Robert's Rules.

The concerns that were raised turned into conflict early on, with one of the first actions proposed. A few energetic, creative, white, self-defined "queer" women in their late teens and early twenties, only one a native of Santa Fe, proposed an action to raise awareness around issues of safe sex and homophobia in the local public schools. They wanted to wear "fun" (to some offensive) costumes and pass out condoms and dental dams, along with explicit information and photos to the students. Not surprisingly, a middle-aged Hispanic woman, a leader in the regional Hispanic community, strongly objected, calling the proposed action culturally insensitive. She didn't object to the effort to raise awareness around these issues in the public schools, just to the way the women wanted to do that.

The white women ignored her objections and carried out the action as planned. The Hispanic woman decided she no longer wanted to be associated with this group that would now likely be thought of as offensive by her community.

The conflict threatened the cohesion of the local WAC, and was discussed primarily in terms of racism. The young women's decision to go ahead with the action did seem extremely insensitive and short-sighted. But was it racism? Cultural insensitivity was obviously part of the equation. Also likely at play were the dynamics of young people rebelling against elders telling them "no", "sex positives" rebelling against what they viewed as sexual repression, "big city" transient residents imposing their values on long-time residents, and the young organizers' lack of experience with political consequences. It is easy to imagine a similar conflict happening (at least back in the 90s when "pro-sex" was considered edgy) in a small, mostly white city in the Midwest, if such a town had a large influx of liberal newcomers from the big coastal cities.

But nuance was not at hand, as members focused mostly on racism as the problem. The fault lines for the upcoming quakes were thus laid out, not by the real problem of racism, but by a predetermined way of understanding and dealing with racism in the context of feminist organizing.

Soon after this conflict, a white woman proposed another action: WAC could initiate a multicultural celebration of Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, in coalition with other organizations of the community. Accusations of racism flew at the woman. "Stick to your own culture!" one member shouted.

She didn't. She went on to organize a successful celebration without WAC. No one outside of WAC accused her of racism for doing so. But the experience of being publicly treated this way by other feminists must have been devastating, the injury lasting.

As I would see in years to come, what turned out to be unusual about that pillaging was that at the following meeting, the group processed what happened as wrong, and briefly talked about the importance of preventing it in the future. However, the group disintegrated soon afterward, as did WAC groups around the country. The media portrayed this disintegration exactly as those wielding accusations would have wanted them to: as a result of the racism in feminist organizations. I believe that the disintegration resulted more from the destructive dynamic allowed to take place in the name of anti-racism.

Many feminist groups did not disintegrate because of this dynamic. Instead they accommodated it, accepting the scapegoating frenzies as a necessary part of the process in making things truly diverse, and in raising race-consciousness in the feminist movement. Many crucial shifts toward diversity and race-consciousness did take place, but I believe the dysfunction involved was unnecessary, and its cost was high, not only to individual women but also to woman-specific interests, and to the power of the women's movement as a whole.

A principled, comprehensive opposition to bigotry would have been at least as effective, and far less destructive, than the approach taken which —under the umbrella of "identity politics"— was anything

but consistent or comprehensive. Instead it was based on an overall acceptance of the hierarchical values that our society ascribes to different marginalized (albeit overlapping) groups. This hierarchical value system (which is, ironically, the very essence of bigotry) creates double standards in people's understanding of the severity and wrongness of different forms of bigotry. Within this established framework of double standards, woman-bashing in the name of anti-bigotry makes sense.

In larger society, the double standard is by and large accepted and acted upon, rather than argued. Once in a while, however, it is openly articulated — in order to justify attitudes and actions based on it. After Hillary Clinton lost the democratic nomination in the 2008 presidential campaign, for example, *New Yorker* writer Hendrik Hertzberg argued that Hillary Clinton and her supporters had no grounds to point to sexism as a factor in her defeat, since sexism just isn't a big deal when compared to racism. "[I]t does not belittle the oppressions of gender to suggest that in America the oppressions of race have cut deeper," he writes. He then measures one oppression against the other — or rather, the acknowledged oppression of women, summed up as women being denied the right to vote, against the acknowledged oppression of Blacks (really, Black men; no need for complicated realities of gender and race here), including the systematic violence directed against them.¹³

As a white man, Hertzberg writes confidently and with an assumption of authority on the subject. Certainly he writes with personal interests at stake. Consider, for instance: how would things change for men, how would their identities shift, if equal status, equal power, and equal rights between women and men quickly became a reality?¹⁴ Hertzberg knows he is safe even from public refutation when making such an argument. He knows how widely accepted the double standard is, and how effective it is in influencing people's political and social behavior.

The argument, however, is counterfeit, and demonstrates how double standards work to set one oppression against the other. Ironically, it is those who challenge the double standards who are often accused of creating and participating in a competition between oppressions. But those who challenge the double standards are the ones who are insisting on the recognition of the inherent equality of all people, including between men and women, and between people of all races.

The feminist movement has articulated a sophisticated understanding of "intersection" — the combined effect of simultaneous oppressions based on, for example, racism and sexism — but it has refused to systematically challenge the double standards which underlie the oppressions involved. Yet it is the double standard that creates a dynamic in which one form of oppression is used to justify, trivialize, or otherwise perpetuate a less acknowledged form of oppression. Feminist efforts to fight oppression based on an understanding of intersection can only be undermined by an acceptance of this bigoted value system, especially in the long term. When a double standard is enforced, it is certain those advantaged by the double standard will not willingly allow the undoing of the less prioritized form of oppression. The effort to end oppression through an understanding of intersection cannot move far beyond feminist circles so long as the double standard is ensconced.

It is also important to challenge the double standard in order to encourage a more constructive approach to dealing with racism within the movement. In a social context that sees sexism as damaging as racism, and women as being inherently valuable and worthy of respect, the issue of racism would less likely be used as a weapon, or as a platform for misogyny, or for unrelated personal reasons, since the context that has made that so easy would disappear. Both issues of racism and sexism would be treated with more care — with a problem-solving, rather than a demon-chasing approach — and that should render better results all around.

In this same vein, distinctions could be more carefully made in evaluating what is racism within the movement, and what are for the most part the consequences of organizing in a racist society. There are some circumstances the women's movement cannot make disappear, except through its own contribution toward the glacial movement of progress. The historical segregation between the races, and the ongoing connection between class and race, for example, directly influence who attends events such as lectures, readings, rallies, even when feminist organizers try to make the events accessible and appealing to women across race and class. When I went to a reading by Mary Daly in

Minneapolis in the mid-80s – brought by a roommate who told me she was very impressed by this feminist I had never heard of — the huge audience that filled the downtown Unitarian church was almost all white, and Daly was taken to task during Q and A for this. Ten years later, in the mid-90s, I went to a talk by Alice Walker in downtown Seattle. The audience was three times larger, and proportionately almost as white. No one, of course, took Walker or the organizers of the event to task during Q and A for this imbalance. Was racism a factor in one but not the other? Facile interpretations of racism can be another form of finger-pointing, and can portray guilt when there might not be any. Issues of diversity and racial equality always need to be a top priority in organizing, but factors such as demographics in an audience need to be evaluated within society's larger context.

It is also crucial when challenging racism in the women's movement to make distinctions between an individual's or group's racist intentions (whether conscious or not), and the ignorance, and privileged assumptions that inevitably arise from the ugly fact that all women were born and live in a society that is still in many ways racist. Probably all feminists, of all races and ethnicities, are guilty to some degree of ignorant or privileged assumptions based on what they've learned in a racist society. Many — perhaps the vast majority — of problems that arise from this could be effectively challenged through respectful communication. It is those who attach to and protect racism — for instance, by defending their perceptions (through words or actions) of hierarchical values of women, or by defending negative stereotyping, or group vilification, or disdain, while ignoring those who respectfully communicate the problem — who could accurately be identified as racist.

The accusation of racism needs to be treated carefully, rather than thrown at people like sticks of dynamite. I think most feminists already treat both the important issue of racism and the well-intentioned people involved in social activism with the respect they deserve. At the collective level, however, the feminist movement's compliance and complicity with those who don't allows misogynistic attitudes and personal destruction within the movement to take place.

The dynamite-throwers, when they are tolerated, or even treated as "leaders" on the issue, manage to generate a climate of fear and disparagement that crushes female-identified empowerment — just as racism itself does. Such a climate also inhibits honest connections between women, allows a sexist disdain to be directed toward women who aren't oppressed by class or race, and legitimizes a finger-pointing that might coercively yield results but is not necessary to making real and deep change.

Ignorance and privileged assumptions and disparity in power among women of all races and ethnicities and classes within the feminist movement will be problems that must be grappled with as long as the society that women live in is racist and classist. But they can be effectively grappled with in a way that does not replicate the harm of the combated bigotry. A more respectful, functional, truly anti-bigoted approach to these problems could emerge from a collective perception that women, and the issues of both sexism and racism, should be treated with respect. This would strengthen the entire feminist movement, and its efforts to oppose bigotry in all its forms.

As we remember the life and contributions of Mary Daly, as we recognize both the great gifts she offered and the mistakes she made, let's also begin the struggle to learn from the movement's mistakes that unfairly beset her. Hopefully she had faith during her life that this would happen after she moved on to other worlds.

notes

1. Mary Daly, *Pure Lust* (Boston: Beacon 1994), 26-27

2. *Ibid.*, 240

3. See Daly, *Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage*

4. See Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Marilyn Frye, ed., "Introduction," *Feminist Interpretations of Mary*

Daly (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2000), 1-25

5. Alexis De Veaux points out in her biography of Audre Lorde that Daly did in fact use a quote from a Pat Parker poem in a non-racial context in *Gyn/Ecology*. See *Warrior Poet: A biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 2004), 236

6. Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1998), 66-71

7. *Warrior Poet: A biography of Audre Lorde*, 234-238, 246-248, 251-253

8. *Outercourse*, 232

9. *Warrior Poet*, 246. In the letter to Lorde dated September 22, 1979, Daly wrote, "I wrote *Gyn/Ecology* out of the insights and materials most accessible to me at the time. When I dealt with myth I used commonly available sources to find what were the controlling myths and symbols behind judeo-christian myth... You have made your point very strongly and you most definitely have a point." Mary Daly published this letter in full (retrieved from Lorde's papers and forwarded to her by De Veaux in 2003) in her final book, *Amazon Grace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 25-26.

10. *Ibid*, 142-151

11. For a feminist analysis of postmodernism, see Catharine MacKinnon, "Postmodernism and Human Rights," *Are Women Human?* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2006), 44-63

12. Amber L. Katherine describes this dynamic in her reconstruction of the social-historical context of the feminist movement in the US in the 1970s, in "A Two-Early Morning: Audre Lorde's "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" and Daly's Decision Not to Respond in Kind," *Feminists Interpretations of Mary Daly*, 266 – 297.

13. "Exhilaration" by Hendrik Hertzberg, *The New Yorker*, June 23, 2009 http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2008/06/23/080623taco_talk_hertzberg

14. The loss that Hertzberg and other white men would face at the arrival of a universal gender equality would indeed "cut (them) deeper" than the arrival of a racial equality among men who lorded over women.



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