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# RADICAL AMERIKA

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**The  
Sexual  
Politics of  
Women's  
Blues**

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**Challenging  
Gender & Race Myths**  
**Remembering DeBeauvoir**  
**Filipino Left-  
Cuban Film**

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Drawing of Ma Rainey by Nick Thorkelson.

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# RADICAL AMERICA

VOL. 20, NO. 4

1986

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# INTRODUCTION

Black female sexuality enters public consciousness directly through movies like *The Color Purple* and *She's Gotta Have It*, or indirectly, through policy discussions of teen pregnancy, the "vanishing" black family and the feminization of poverty. The policy discussions, in particular, evoke myths about black female sexuality, so that the "epidemic" of teen pregnancy, for example, conjures images of young black women's sexuality as "out of control." Striking in all these contexts is the absence of autonomous black women's or black feminist voices. Several articles in this issue raise the question of who has defined black women's desire. They reveal a diversity of black feminist concerns.

In a cultural context in which black female sexuality is the "silent presence" in public discussions, Hazel Carby's article, "The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" emphasizes that the issue is not only the exclusion of black women's voices. Even when recognized, they are included selectively. Some "traditions" are elevated as representative of the experience of the race, while others are buried. Her recovery and evaluation of the tradition of independent black women's blues of the 1920's recalls another moment of black power, one in which black women became the sexual subject against both male power and the limits of female respectability.

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## NOT READY FOR PRIME-TIME HYSTERIA

With this issue, *RADICAL AMERICA* enters its twentieth year of publication. We enter this anniversary year proud of our work over the past two decades, but mindful of the vastly different political terrain we face. We also enter this year with a (passing) change in our cover masthead and with a wish that the reason for this "protest" was equally as passing. Specifically, we are mimicking the ABC-TV series, "Amerika," which is being broadcast as this issue is mailed. Much has been written about this blatant exercise in xenophobia and Cold War hysteria. Clearly, this movie is a product of its time and a naked capitulation to right wing threats to the nation's commercial media. For those of us who have read the script, the final product certainly lives down to its reputation.

If someone predicted in these pages, as we began publication in the midst of the political and social upsurges of the 1960s, that twenty years hence the number one program on US television would be a black sitcom and that a *different* network would be airing a prime-time, 14½ hour series entitled "Amerika," it would have been dismissed as political-science-fiction. As it is, there was no reason to doubt Gil Scott Heron's admonition back then that "the revolution will not be televised."<sup>1</sup>

Nor is that the only irony in this whole episode, for the creators of this contemporary tower of babble have lifted the title right out of a political/literary protest of the New Left. *Amerika* frequently appeared in posters, poems, and writings of that period (including these pages) to denote a nation, as Todd Gitlin recently wrote,<sup>2</sup> "so deeply evil as to have gone Teutonic." At that time, we selected *our* name to underline efforts to relocate this country's hidden histories of resistance, and to chronicle social sources of radicalism all too frequently lost to popular consciousness. We have continued our challenge of official attempts to rewrite and distort that history. It is interesting to note, then, that one of the many flights of fancy in "Amerika," is the assumption that radical or leftist ideas have no native roots. In the program's mythical US-of-the-future, overrun by the Soviet Union and a UN-like police force, those ideas have only been implanted by the invaders.

As we have discussed in recent issues, "Amerika" is but one aspect of the ideological war being waged to remake people's minds in the mean-spirited, greedy, and vengeful mold of the Reagans, Buchanans, and Falwells. Our collective challenge and protest must continue. That effort must parallel our work to construct a vision of the future that is positive, inclusive, peaceful, and egalitarian. To borrow from another current television program, one that is a much-needed corrective to the likes of "Amerika," we need to keep our "Eyes on the Prize." We offer this protest in that struggle.<sup>3</sup>

John Demeter, for the editors

1. The "Bill Cosby Show" was recently offered as evidence to support another thesis. In a nationally syndicated column (appearing in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* Jan. 1, 1987), right wing ideologue William F. Buckley stated: "It is simply not correct, the evidence of one's senses confirms, that race prejudice is increasing in America. . . . How does one know this? Simple, by the ratings of Bill Cosby's television show and the sale of his books (sic). A nation simply does not idolize members of a race that nation despises." Unfortunately, Buckley's column was not carried in Forsyth County, Georgia.

2. Todd Gitlin, "ABC's Amerika: The Right-Wing Paranoid's Dream," *TIKKUN*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1986. Gitlin also notes the inspiration for *Amerika* in the Franz Kafka book of the same name.

3. An encouraging note here in Boston. Due to the degree of protest and criticism, the local ABC-TV affiliate claims that it will devote significant amounts of news, public affairs and other programming during the series' run to alternative views.

Fran White and Ann Woodhull-McNeal review Ann Fausto-Sterling's book, *Myths of Gender*, an attack on the methods and "rationality" behind scientifically derived notions of sex differences. Fausto-Sterling identifies the myths that shape female biology; she reveals the ways in which ordinary science (not bad science or pseudo-science) deepens these myths by locating them in an unchangeable nature. In their review, White and Woodhull-McNeal extend her critique to reveal the importance of race in the "scientific" construction of woman. In doing so, they expose the myth of the univer-

sal woman and point to the divisions between women which occur as the myths of white, Western women are generalized to represent the "myths of gender."

In emphasizing the divisions among women, they challenge white women to recognize that who they are is completely interdependent with who black women are in the culture, and that feminist theory must recognize this. Black feminism, then, is not only about black women. White/Woodhull draw on the research of historian Sander Gilman to reveal the ways in which black women's sexuality becomes

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synonymous with the bad woman in the virgin/whore dichotomy. Thus, while the myths that haunt black and white women are intimately linked, black women experience a particular dilemma. Socially fixed at one end of the gender continuum, the only option for respectability has often appeared to be the renunciation of desire. Among writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Hazel Carby locates a tradition of middle-class black women who attempt to break with the myths by displacing desire with duty "to the race." For both White/Woodhull-McNeal and Carby, this strategy will ultimately fail. Carby follows the blues singers of the same era in challenging the idea that respect for black women could only be gained by repudiation of desire. She critiques feminist theory, black and white, for privileging the literary traditions of black women over other cultural traditions, such as the blues. In so doing, she emphasizes those theorists follow black middle-class women in assuming their experience is representative of the race.

Finally, Kate Rushin, in her review of *She's Gotta Have It*, explores how black independent filmmaker Spike Lee represents black female desire. She echoes Carby's focus on the marginalization of independent black cultural traditions by the culture industry, while simultaneously challenging whether Spike Lee understands what black women want.

In this issue, we include a tribute to Simone de Beauvoir by Dorothy Kaufman. She identifies Beauvoir's relationship to current feminist discussions in France, where the ambiguous legacy of *The Second Sex* has been the center of many debates. In particular, Kaufman identifies the extent to which Beauvoir's attempt to separate the maternal from "woman" underlies her feminist radicalism.

\* \* \* \* \*

In an internal *contra* document obtained last year and discussed recently in *The Nation*<sup>1</sup>, an adviser to one of the mercenary groups lamented their inability to turn world opinion to their cause. "Culture and art constitute one of the most effective vehicles for international projections," the memo offered, citing the ability of the Nicaraguan Sandinista government to use "these tools effectively." The pro-

posal recommended developing "popular *contra* music," "*contra* art" and concluded that "there is no doubt that a great market exists." The model for the popular cultural expression that the *contras* refer to dates back to revolutionary Cuba of course. A number of us remember the cultural explosion of Cuban posters, art, and music that flowed from the island nation after the revolution of 1959. But as we began our discussions of Dan Georgakas' interview with Cuban filmmaker Guitierrez Tomas Alea, that appears in this issue, we faced a curious block. Several of the members of the editorial board had little exposure to the cinematic tradition and the specific films talked about by Alea. It is an ironic aspect to the US attempt to isolate Cuba that this government is undercutting its own propaganda assertion that Nicaragua is becoming "another Cuba." So complete is the economic, political and cultural blockade that very few people have access to what that actually means. As a Cuban recently commented to one of our editors, "it is not so much an economic blockade, as a blockade on reality."

As the second wave of the New Latin American cinema surfaces now,<sup>2</sup> it is important to locate the political and cultural inspiration and, indeed, a significant amount of the material support, for this resurgence in the 24 year old Cuban cinema. There has been limited release of some Cuban products in this country, usually attended by a great deal of litigation and struggle. But it is more important when discussing the influence on the "collective subjectivity" of Latin culture to consider Cuba more within the interrelationship of cineastes and the filmmakers across Latin and South America, than in its presence within US cultures. The Cuban film community's ability to provide artists with the means to visualize their own cultures and history without the colonizing filter of North America has provoked and nurtured cinematic work now being feted and celebrated worldwide.

In his interview with Georgakas, Alea, perhaps the best known of Cuban directors, discusses his work, the developing regional cinema, and the interesting dialectics between politics and art, and creator and audience that is part of his country's tradition. He speaks of

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the continuing influence of American culture, both in its colonialist legacy and in the presence of US commercial film in Cuba, and offers us a view of socially and politically committed cinema that contrasts with the formulaic shallowness and individualism of most American film work.

For a national cinema less than three decades old, the productivity, variety, and accomplishments of Cuba are impressive. Alea speaks also of the political and personal ground that remains to be broken. Perhaps the most striking example of that lies in the fact that *One Way or Another*, directed by the late Sara Gomez, and which Alea helped complete, remains the only feature ever by a Cuban woman. It was only in the last few years that women have broken into the country's directorial ranks, albeit primarily in the documentary field. Thus while a number of the features by men have provided provocative and agitational attacks on *machismo* and racism, among other problems, they have done so from the eyes of one part of the film community. Alea's comment, in discussing Gomez' work on *One Way*, that he provided the "intellectual" influence to her "emotional" insights, and his dismissal of race awareness as being beyond the province of a particular film reflect that limitation.

But the clearest sense that we get from the discussion with Alea is that of "development," within the film industry specifically and the national culture in general, of a material and ideological growth; still in formation, but nevertheless far from the static nature of most Western and US work. Such a realization only adds to the sorry nature of American policy towards Cuba and the attempts to constrict rather than expand cultural borders.

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On February 2, the Philippine people, in a constitutional plebiscite, ostensibly presented President Corazon Aquino with a massive show of support, approving her proposal by a nearly four to one majority. But as the first anniversary of her ascension to power arrives, the social and political basis of this "mandate" remains very much a debated question. In the week before the vote, right wing military units and backers of deposed dictator Ferdinand

Marcos attempted to inspire a governmental coup in anticipation of their former leader's planned return to the Philippines. The previous week, elements of the Marines and police opened fire on an angry demonstration of peasants seeking to pressure the Aquino government to honor promises of land reform. Eighteen protesters were killed and nearly one hundred wounded. In response to this incident outside the presidential palace, the New People's Army cancelled its ceasefire arrangement with the government and left the capital.

The US media has, as can be expected, offered little information with which to understand the situation in the Philippines in general, and within the Filipino Left in particular. They uniformly view the constitutional vote as a repudiation of extreme Left and Right. But even among many progressive critics of Cory Aquino, forces who have charged that her vaunted "People's Power" campaign has offered little institutionalization of economic and popular democracy, reactions to the constitution were varied.

In this issue we are presenting an interview with Father Edicio dela Torre, a longtime activist, former political prisoner under Marcos, and one of the critical thinkers of the Filipino Left. While the interview, by Michael Bedford, took place late last Fall, we feel that the subsequent events bear out "Father Ed." Dela Torre's description of the dilemma facing the electoral and extralegal Left, and his depiction of the limits to Aquino's program provide further insight into the struggle to revive a progressive restructuring of Philippine political life after 20 years of dictatorship and within a still combative environment. He offers a helpful explanation of the concept of "critical support" and of the maneuvering for democratic space within the Aquino "democracy." His emphasis on the need for a parallel process of grassroots organizing and consciousness raising offers a glimpse of a developmental politics that seeks to build understanding within an empowered base of support. With the shadow of the US still very much over the Philippine landscape, the terrain, as he points out, is fraught with problems. The ability of the Left to avoid political isolation within the post-Marcos restructuring will be critical. If, as dela Torre



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describes it, the Aquino government came to power unprepared, the Left surfaced with an even more restricted presence—following the repression under Marcos and their lack of support even within the anti-Marcos upper classes from which Aquino comes.

Of critical importance for Philippine solidarity activists, and US anti-war and anti-intervention forces, is the degree to which the question of US bases, and the “nuclear-free” provision of the new constitution, provides space for challenging American presence and influence in the Philippines. Such a question can provide the “solidarity link” that Father dela Torre discusses, between the work of activists in the Third World and those within the belly of the monster. His perspective offers us a broader sense of not only what confronts the Left in his nation, but of a way to view the US and its policies through other eyes.

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1. “*Contraprop: The Selling of the F.D.N.*,” Peter Kornbluh, *The Nation*, January 17, 1987, p. 40.

2. “After the Revolutions: The Second Coming of Latin American Cinema,” B. Ruby Rich, *Village Voice*, February 10, 1987.

# OUR NATION IS IN TROUBLE

Arms shipments to Iran, profits funneled to the contras, third-country intermediaries, Swiss bank accounts—our nation is embroiled in a scandal. What can ordinary citizens do in a time of duress?

During the Watergate period, most Americans felt the urge to help their country but *did not know what to do*. And so they sat passively watching the scandal develop, feeling POWERLESS. This scandal, let's do better.

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- Urge the nation's governors to declare Washington, D.C., a National Emergency Zone. This will allow critical supplies of food and credibility to reach government officials.
- Become pen pals with someone implicated in the scandal. Express your feelings about their involvement, and share embarrassing moments from your own life.
- Keep a family scrapbook of souvenirs from the crisis, such as newspaper articles, photographs, and foreign currency from each of the countries involved.
- Emergency personnel such as Constitutional scholars and public relations specialists are urged to head immediately for Washington, D.C. All others are advised to stay out of the vicinity for the duration of the scandal.
- Send a greeting card to the President from time to time. Phone calls and telegrams are discouraged, as they add urgency and pressure to an already tense situation. A simple greeting card suffices, such as "Deepest sympathy to you in this time of national disgrace."
- Do NOT use the scandal to avoid dealing with personal problems or household difficulties.
- Add your own speculation about how the situation will develop. Psychological studies indicate that in times of crisis, guessing and speculation play a vital role in maintaining social equilibrium. A National Speculation Hotline is being set up and an 800 number being secured, as an exercise in participatory democracy. Staff members will compile the speculations for use by the news media.
- Don't "O.D." on the crisis. The Surgeon General suggests a maximum of three hours per day. If you are consistently exceeding this level, or feel you cannot control your scandal intake, you can obtain free supplies of earplugs, post-it notes (to cover the eyes), and science fiction novels at most hospitals and mental health centers.

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# IT JUS BE'S DAT WAY SOMETIME:

## The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues

Hazel V. Carby

This paper considers the sexual politics of women's blues and focuses on black women as cultural producers and performers in the 1920's. Their story is part of a larger history of the production of Afro-American culture within the North American culture industry. My research so far has concentrated almost exclusively on black women intellectuals who were part of developing an Afro-American literate culture and thus it reflects the privileged place we accord to writers in Afro-American Studies.<sup>1</sup> Feminist theory has analyzed the cultural production of black women writers in isolation from other forms of women's culture and cultural presence and has neglected to relate particular texts and issues to a larger discourse of culture and cultural politics. I want to show how the representation of black female sexuality in black women's fiction and in women's blues is clearly different. I will argue that different cultural forms negotiate and resolve very different sets of social contradictions. However, before considering the particularities of black women's sexual representation, we should consider its marginality within a white dominated feminist discourse.

In 1982, at the Barnard conference on the politics of sexuality, Hortense Spillers condemned the serious absence of consideration of black female sexuality from various public

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discourses including white feminist theory. She described black women as "the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb." The sexual experiences of black women, she argued, were rarely depicted by themselves in what she referred to as "empowered texts": discursive feminist texts. Spillers complained of the relative absence of African-American women from the academy and thus from the visionary company of Anglo-American women feminists and their privileged mode of feminist expression.

The collection of the papers from the Barnard conference, the *Pleasure and Danger* anthology, has become one of these empowered feminist theoretical texts and Spillers' essay continues to stand within it as an important black feminist survey of the ways in which the sexuality of black American women has been unacknowledged in the public/critical discourse of feminist thought.<sup>2</sup> Following Spillers' lead black feminists continued to critique the neglect of issues of black female sexuality within feminist theory and, indeed, I as well as others directed many of our criticisms toward the *Pleasure and Danger* anthology itself.<sup>3</sup>

As black women we have provided articulate and politically incisive criticism which is there for the feminist community at large to heed or to ignore—upon that decision lies the future possibility of forging a feminist movement that is not parochial. As the black feminist and educator, Anna Julia Cooper, stated in 1892, a woman's movement should not be based on the narrow concerns of white middle-class women under the name of "women"; neither, she argued, should a woman's movement be formed around the exclusive concerns of either the white woman or the black woman or the red woman but should be able to address the concerns of all the poor and oppressed.<sup>4</sup>

But instead of concentrating upon the domination of a white feminist theoretical discourse which marginalizes non-white women I am going to focus on the production of a discourse of sexuality by black women. By analyzing the sexual and cultural politics of black women who constructed themselves as sexual subjects through song, in particular the blues, I want to assert an empowered presence. First, I am go-

ing to situate the historical moment of the emergence of women dominated blues and establish a theoretical framework of interpretation and then I will consider some aspects of the representation of feminism, sexuality and power in women's blues.

### Movin' On

Before World War I the overwhelming majority of black people lived in the South, although the majority of black intellectuals who purported to represent the interests of "the race" lived in the North. At the turn of the century black intellectuals felt they understood and could give voice to the concerns of the black community as a whole. They were able to position themselves as spokespeople for the "race" because they were at a vast physical and metaphorical distance from the majority of those they represented. The mass migration of blacks to urban areas, especially to the cities of the North, forced these traditional intellectuals to question and revise their imaginary vision of "the people" and directly confront the actual displaced rural workers who were, in large numbers, becoming a black working class in front of their eyes. In turn, the mass of black workers became aware of the range of possibilities for their representation. No longer were the "Talented Tenth," the practitioners of policies of racial uplift, the undisputed "leaders of the race." Intellectuals and their constituencies fragmented, black union organizers, Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, radical black activists, the Sanctified Churches, the National Association of Colored Women, the Harlem creative artists, all offered alternative forms of representation and each strove to establish that the experience of their constituency was representative of the experience of the race.

Within the movement of the Harlem cultural renaissance black women writers established a variety of alternative possibilities for the fictional representation of black female experience. Zora Neale Hurston chose to represent black people as the rural folk; the folk were represented as being both the source of Afro-American cultural and linguistic forms and the means for its continued existence.



Nella Larsen. Carl Van Vechten photo.

Hurston's exploration of sexual and power relations was embedded in this "folk" experience and avoided the cultural transitions and confrontations of the urban displacement. As Hurston is frequently situated as the foremother of contemporary black women writers, the tendency of feminist literary criticism has been to valorize black women as "folk" heroines at the expense of those texts which explored black female sexuality within the context of urban social relations. Put simply, a line of descent is drawn from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to *The Color Purple*. But to establish the black "folk" as representative of the black community at large was and still is a convenient method for ignoring the specific contradictions of an urban existence in which most of us live. The culture industry, through its valorization in print and in film of *The Col-*

*or Purple*, for example, can appear to comfortably address issues of black female sexuality within a past history and rural context while completely avoiding the crucial issues of black sexual and cultural politics that stem from an urban crisis.

**"There's No Earthly Use In Bein Too-ga-tha if it Don't Put Some Joy in Yo Life"**<sup>5</sup>

However, two other women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, did figure an urban class confrontation in their fiction though in distinctly different ways. Jessie Fauset became an ideologue for a new black bourgeoisie; her novels represented the manners and morals that distinguished the emergent middle class from the working class. She wanted public recognition for the existence of a black elite that was urbane, sophisticated and civilized but her representation of this elite implicitly defined its manners against the behavior of the new black proletariat. While it must be acknowledged that Fauset did explore the limitations of a middle-class existence for women, ultimately each of her novels depict independent women who surrender their independence to become suitable wives for the new black professional men.

Nella Larsen, on the other hand, offers us a more sophisticated dissection of the rural/urban confrontation. Larsen was extremely critical of the Harlem intellectuals who glorified the values of a black folk culture while being ashamed of and ridiculing the behavior of the new black migrant to the city. Her novel, *Quicksand* (1928), contains the first explicitly sexual black heroine in black women's fiction. Larsen explores questions of sexuality and power within both a rural and an urban landscape; in both contexts she condemns the ways in which female sexuality is confined and compromised as the object of male desire. In the city Larsen's heroine, Helga, has to recognize the ways in which her sexuality has an exchange value within capitalist social relations while in the country Helga is trapped by the consequences of woman's reproductive capacity. In the final pages of *Quicksand* Helga echoes the plight of the slave woman who could not escape to freedom and the cities of the North because



she could not abandon her children and, at the same time, represents how a woman's life is drained through constant childbirth.

But Larsen also reproduces in her novel the dilemma of a black woman who tries to counter the dominant white cultural definitions of her sexuality: ideologies that define black female sexuality as primitive and exotic. However the response of Larsen's heroine to such objectification is also the response of many black women writers: the denial of desire and the repression of sexuality. Indeed, *Quicksand* is symbolic of the tension in nineteenth and early twentieth-century black women's fiction in which black female sexuality was frequently displaced onto the terrain of the political responsibility of the black woman. The duty of the black heroine toward the black community was made coterminous with her desire as a woman, a desire which was expressed as a dedication to uplift the race. This displacement from female desire to female duty enabled the negotiation of racist constructions of black female sexuality but denied sensuality and in this denial lies the class character of its cultural politics.

It has been a mistake of much black feminist theory to concentrate almost exclusively on the visions of black women as represented by black women writers without indicating the limitations of their middle-class response to black women's sexuality. These writers faced a very real contradiction for they felt that they would publicly compromise themselves if they acknowledged their sexuality and sensuality within a racist sexual discourse thus providing evidence that indeed they were primitive and exotic creatures. But because black feminist theory has concentrated upon the literate forms of black women's intellectual activity the dilemma of the place of sexuality within a literary discourse has appeared as if it were the dilemma of most black women. On the other hand, what a consideration of women's blues allows us to see is an alternative form of representation, an oral and musical women's culture that explicitly addresses the contradictions of feminism, sexuality and power. What has been called the "Classic Blues," the women's blues of the twenties and early thirties, is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over

sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of women's song.

### Testifyin'

Within black culture the figure of the female blues singer has been reconstructed in poetry, drama, fiction and art and used to meditate upon conventional and unconventional sexuality. A variety of narratives both fictional and biographical have mythologized the woman blues singer and these mythologies become texts about sexuality. Women blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual subjects. In Afro-American fiction and poetry the blues singer has a strong physical and sensuous presence. Sherley Anne Williams wrote about Bessie Smith:

the thick triangular  
nose wedged  
in the deep brown  
face nostrils  
flared on a last hummmmmmm.

Bessie singing  
just behind the beat  
that sweet sweet  
voice throwing  
its light on me

I looked in her face  
and seed the woman  
I'd become. A big  
boned face already  
lined and the first line  
in her fo'head was  
black and the next line  
was sex cept I didn't  
know to call it that  
then and the brackets  
round her mouth stood fo  
the chi'ren she teared  
from out her womb. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Williams has argued that the early blues singers and their songs "helped to solidify com-

munity values and heighten community morale in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." The blues singer she says uses song to create reflection and creates an atmosphere for analysis to take place. The blues were certainly a communal expression of black experience which had developed out of the call and response patterns of work songs from the nineteenth century and have been described as a "complex interweaving of the general and the specific" and of individual and group experience. John Coltrane has described how the audience heard "we" even if the singer said

"I". Of course the singers were entertainers but the blues were not an entertainment of escape or fantasy and sometimes directly represented historical events.<sup>7</sup>

Sterling Brown has testified to the physical presence and power of Ma Rainey who would draw crowds from remote rural areas to see her "smilin' gold-toofed smiles" and to feel like participants in her performance which articulated the conditions of their social existence. Brown, in his poem "Ma Rainey," remembers the emotion of her performance of "Backwater Blues" which described the





*Teenaged Bessie Smith, 1920.*

devastation of the Mississippi flood of 1927. Rainey's original performance becomes in Brown's text a vocalization of the popular memory of the flood and Brown's text constructs itself as a part of the popular memory of the "Mother of the Blues."<sup>8</sup>

Ma Rainey never recorded "Backwater Blues," although Bessie Smith did, but local songsters would hear the blues performed in the tent shows or on record and transmit them throughout the community. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were among the first women blues singers to be recorded and with Clara Smith, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Rosa Henderson, Victoria Spivey and Lucille

Hegamin they dominated the blues recording industry throughout the twenties. It has often been asserted that this recording of the blues compromised and adulterated a pure folk form of the blues but the combination of the vaudeville, carnival and minstrel shows and the phonograph meant that the "folk-blues" and the culture industry product were inextricably mixed in the twenties. By 1928 the blues sung by blacks were only secondarily of folk origin and the primary source for the group transmission of the blues was by phonograph which was then joined by the radio.

Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, and the other women blues singers travelled in carnivals and vaudevilles which included acts with animals, acrobats and other circus performers. Often the main carnival played principally for white audiences but would have black sideshows with black entertainers for black audiences. In this way black entertainers reached black audiences in even the remotest rural areas. The records of the women blues singers were likewise directed at a black audience through the establishment of "race records" a section of the recording industry which recorded both religious and secular black singers and black musicians and distributed these recordings through stores in black areas: they were rarely available in white neighborhoods.

### **When A Woman Gets the Blues . . .**

This then is the framework within which I interpret the women blues singers of the twenties. To fully understand the ways in which their performance and their songs were part of a discourse of sexual relations within the black community it is necessary to consider how the social conditions of black women were dramatically affected by migration, for migration had distinctively different meanings for black men and women. The music and song of the women blues singers embodied the social relations and contradictions of black displacement: of rural migration and the urban flux. In this sense, as singers, these women were organic intellectuals; not only were they a part of the community that was the subject of their song but they were also a product of the rural to urban movement.



Migration for women often meant being left behind: "Bye Bye Baby" and "Sorry I can't take you" were the common refrains of male blues. In women's blues the response is complex: regret and pain expressed as "My sweet man done gone and left me dead," or "My daddy left me standing in the door," or "The sound of the train fills my heart with misery." There was also an explicit recognition that if the journey were to be made by women it held particular dangers for them. It was not as easy for women as it was for men to hop freight trains and if money was saved for tickets it was men who were usually sent. And yet the women who were singing the songs had made it North and recorded from the "promised land" of Chicago and New York. So, what the women blues singers were able to articulate were the possibilities of movement for the women who "Have ramblin on their minds" and who intended to "ease on down the line" for they had made it—the power of movement was theirs. The train, which had symbolised freedom and mobility for men in male blues songs became a contested symbol. The sound of the train whistle, a mournful signal of imminent desertion and future loneliness was reclaimed as a sign that women too were on the move. In 1924 both Trixie Smith and Clara Smith recorded "Freight Train Blues." These are the words Clara Smith sang:

I hate to hear that engine blow, boo hoo.  
I hate to hear that engine blow, boo hoo.  
Everytime I hear it blowin, I feel like ridin too.

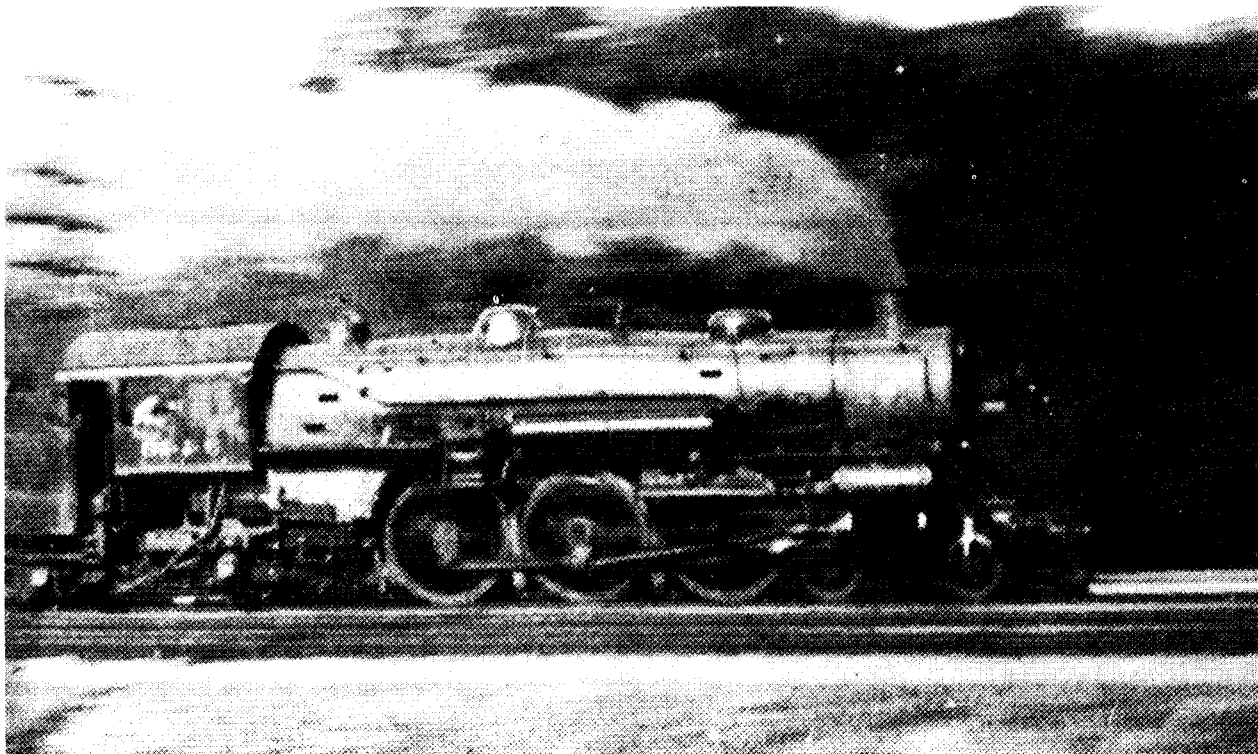
That's the freight train blues, I got box cars on  
my mind.  
I got the freight train blues, I got box cars on  
my mind.  
Gonna leave this town, cause my man is so  
unkind.

I'm goin away just to wear you off my mind.  
I'm goin away just to wear you off my mind.  
And I may be gone for a doggone long long  
time.

I'll ask the brakeman to let me ride the blind.  
I'll ask the brakeman to please let me ride the  
blind.  
The brakeman say, "Clara, you know this train  
ain't mine."

When a woman gets the blues she goes to her  
room and hides.  
When a woman gets the blues she goes to her  
room and hides.  
When a man gets the blues he catch the freight  
train and rides.

The music moves from echoing the moaning, mournful sound of the train whistle to the syncopated activity of the sound of the wheels in movement as Clara Smith determines to ride.



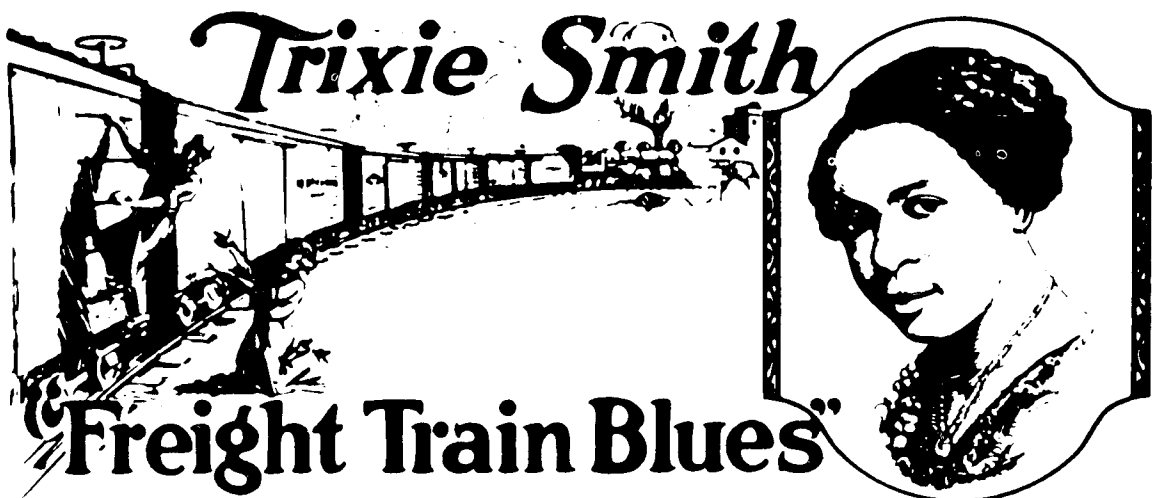
The final opposition between women hiding and men riding is counterpointed by this musical activity and the determination in Clara Smith's voice. "Freight Train Blues" and then "Chicago Bound Blues," which was recorded by Bessie Smith and Ida Cox, were very popular so Paramount and Victor encouraged more "railroad blues." In 1925 Trixie Smith recorded "Railroad Blues" which directly responded to the line "had the blues for Chicago and I just can't be satisfied" from "Chicago Bound Blues." Trixie Smith replied with "If you ride that train it'll satisfy your mind." "Railroad Blues" encapsulated the ambivalent position of the blues singer caught between the contradictory impulses of needing to migrate North and the need to be able to return for the "Railroad Blues" were headed not for the North but for Alabama. Being able to move both North and South, the women blues singer occupied a privileged space: she could speak the desires of rural women to migrate and voice the nostalgic desires of urban women for home which was both a recognition and a warning that the city was not, in fact, the "promised land."

Men's and women's blues shared the language and experience of the railroad and migration but what that meant was different for each sex. The language of the blues carries this conflict of interests and is the cultural terrain in which these differences were fought over

and re-defined. Women's blues were the popular cultural embodiment of the way in which the differing interests of black men and women were a struggle of power relations. The sign of the train is one example of the way in which the blues were a struggle within the language itself to define the differing material conditions of black women and black men.

### Baad Sista

The differing interests of women and men in the domestic sphere was clearly articulated by Bessie Smith in "In House Blues" a popular song for the mid-twenties which she wrote herself but didn't record until 1931. Although the man gets up and leaves, the woman remains, trapped in the house like a caged animal pacing up and down. But at the same time Bessie's voice vibrates with tremendous power which implies the eruption that is to come. The woman in the house is only barely restrained from creating havoc; her capacity for violence has been exercised before and resulted in her arrest. The music, which provides an oppositional counterpoint to Bessie's voice, is a parody of the supposed weakness of women. A vibrating cornet contrasts with the words that ultimately cannot be contained and roll out the front door.



Sitting in the house with everything on my  
mind.

Sitting in the house with everything on my  
mind.

Looking at the clock and can't even tell the  
time.

Walking to my window and looking outa my  
door.

Walking to my window and looking outa my  
door.

Wishin that my man would come home once  
more.

Can't eat, can't sleep, so weak I can't walk  
my floor.

Can't eat, can't sleep, so weak I can't walk  
my floor.

Feel like calling "murder" let the police squad  
get me once more.

They woke me up before day with trouble on  
my mind.

They woke me up before day with trouble on  
my mind.

Wringing my hands and screaming, walking the  
floor hollerin an crying.

\*\*\*\*\* (?), don't let them blues in here.

\*\*\*\*\* (?), don't let them blues in here.

They shakes me in my bed and sits down in my  
chair.

Oh, the blues has got me on the go.

They've got me on the go.

They roll around my house, in and out of my  
front door.<sup>10</sup>



*Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, 1924.*

The way in which Bessie growls "so weak" contradicts the supposed weakness and helplessness of the woman in the song and grants authority to her thoughts of "murder." The rage of women against male infidelity and desertion is evident in many of the blues. Ma Rainey threatened violence when she sang that she was "gonna catch" her man "with his britches down," in the act of infidelity, in "Black Eye Blues." Exacting revenge against mistreatment also appears as taking another lover as in "Oh Papa Blues" or taunting a lover who has been thrown out with "I won't worry when you're gone, another brown has got your water on" in "Titanic Man Blues." But Ma Rainey is perhaps best known for the rejection of a lover

in "Don't Fish in My Sea" which is also a resolution to give up men altogether. She sang:

If you don't like my ocean, don't fish in my  
sea,

If you don't like my ocean, don't fish in my  
sea,

Stay out of my valley, and let my mountain be.

Ain't had no lovin' since God knows when,  
Ain't had no lovin' since God knows when,  
That's the reason I'm through with these no  
good triflin' men.

The total rejection of men as in this blues and in other songs such as "Trust No Man" stand in

direct contrast to the blues that concentrate upon the bewildered, often half-crazed and even paralyzed response of women to male violence.

Sandra Leib has described the masochism of "Sweet Rough Man," in which a man abuses a helpless and passive woman, and she argues that a distinction must be made between reactions to male violence against women in male and female authored blues. "Sweet Rough Man," though recorded by Ma Rainey, was composed by a man and is the most explicit description of sexual brutality in her repertoire. The articulation of the possibility that women could leave a condition of sexual and financial dependency, reject male violence, and end sexual exploitation was embodied in Ma Rainey's recording of "Hustlin Blues," composed jointly by a man and a woman, which narrates the story of a prostitute who ends her brutal treatment by turning in her pimp to a judge. Ma Rainey sang:

I ain't made no money, and he dared me to go home.

Judge, I told him he better leave me alone.

He followed me up and he grabbed me for a fight.

He followed me up and he grabbed me for a fight.

He said, "Girl, do you know you ain't made no money tonight.

Oh Judge, tell him I'm through.

Oh Judge, tell him I'm through.

I'm tired of this life, that's why I brought him to you.

However, Ma Rainey's strongest assertion of female sexual autonomy is a song she composed herself, "Prove It On Me Blues," which isn't technically a blues song but which she sang accompanied by a Tub Jug Washboard Band. "Prove It On Me Blues" was an assertion and an affirmation of lesbianism. Though condemned by society for her sexual preference the singer wants the whole world to know that she chooses women rather than men. The language of "Prove It On Me Blues" engages directly in defining issues of sexual preference as a contradictory struggle of social relations. Both Ma

**"PROVE IT ON ME BLUES"**

by **Ma Rainey**

What's all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of "Ma" Rainey. But look at that cop watching her! What does it all mean? The "Ma" just sings "Prove It On Me" in the great new Paramount Show No. 12648, with a bang-up accompaniment by the Tub Jug Washboard Band. Don't fail to get this record from your dealer, or send to the coupon.

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12654—Honey Bone Stomp and Big Hill Blues, Big Hill and Tenors; Guitar Acc.	12655—Lester's Chilly Blues and Gee That My Curve Is Kape Blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson and His Guitar.
12656—Jimmie Rodgers Blues, Yodel and Way Out On the Mountain, Luke Winder; Guitar Acc.	

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From the Chicago Defender, September 22, 1928.

Rainey and Bessie Smith had lesbian relationships and "Prove It On Me Blues" vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women with a public declaration of lesbianism. The words express a contempt for a society that rejected lesbians. "They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me, They sure got to prove it on me." But at the same time the song is a reclamation of lesbianism as long as the woman publicly names her sexual preference for herself in the repetition of lines about the friends who "must've been women, cause I don't like no men."

But most of the songs that asserted a woman's independence did so in relation to men not women. One of the most joyous is a recording by Ethel Waters in 1925 called "No Man's Mamma Now." It is the celebration of a divorce that ended a marriage defined as a five year "war." Unlike Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters didn't usually growl, although she could, rather her voice which is called "sweet-toned" gained

authority from its stylistic enunciation and the way in which she almost recited the words. As Waters said she tried to be "refined" even when she was being her most outrageous.<sup>12</sup>

You may wonder what's the reason for this crazy smile,  
 Say I haven't been so happy in a long while  
 Got a big load off my mind, here's the papers sealed and signed,  
 And the judge was nice and kind all through the trial.  
 This ends a five year war, I'm sweet Miss was once more.

I can come when I please, I can go when I please.  
 I can flit, fly and flutter like the birds on the trees.  
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now. Hey, hey.

I can say what I like, I can do what I like.  
 I'm a girl who is on a matrimonial strike;  
 Which means, I'm no man's mamma now.

I'm screaming bail  
 I know how a fella feels getting out of jail  
 I got twin beds, I take pleasure in announcing one for sale.

Am I making it plain, I will never again,  
 Drag around another ball and chain.  
 I' through, because I'm no man's mamma now.

I can smile, I can wink, I can go take a drink,  
 And I don't have to worry what my hubby will think.  
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now.

I can spend if I choose, I can play and sing the blues.  
 There's nobody messin with my one's and my twos.  
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now.

You know there was a time,  
 I used to think that men were grand.  
 But no more for mine,  
 I'm gonna label my apartment "No Man's Land."

I got rid of my cat cause the cat's name was Pat(?).  
 Won't even have a male fox in my flat.  
 Because, I'm no man's mamma now.<sup>13</sup>

Waters' sheer exuberance is infectious. The vitality and energy of the performance celebrates the unfettered sexuality of the singer. The self-conscious and self-referential lines "I can play and sing the blues" situates the singer at the center of a subversive and liberatory activity. Many of the men who were married to blues singers disapproved of their careers, some felt threatened, others, like Edith Johnson's husband, eventually applied enough pressure to force her to stop singing. Most, like Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey and Ida Cox did not stop singing the blues but their public presence, their stardom, their overwhelming popularity and their insistence on doing what they wanted caused frequent conflict with the men in their personal lives.

**Funky and Sinful Stuff**

The figure of the woman blues singer has become a cultural embodiment of social and



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 12530-Black Double Dream Blues and Night of Way Blues, Blue Lamma Johnson and Her Chorus.  
 12531-Winey Wine and There'll Come a Day, Blue Lead Tomatoes. Florida Robinson/Piano Acc. by Will East.  
 12532-Flare Day Blues and Gypsy Blues Blues, Ida Cox, Jones Crews at the piano.  
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From the Chicago Defender, October 22, 1927.



sexual conflict from Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private and into the public sphere. For these singers were gorgeous and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as Goddesses, as the high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith as the Empress of the blues. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire.

Bessie Smith wrote about the social criticism that women faced if they broke social convention. "Young Woman's Blues" threads together many of the issues of power and sexuality that have been addressed so far. "Young Woman's Blues" sought possibilities, possibilities that arose from women being on the move and confidently asserting their own sexual desirability.

Woke up this morning when chickens were  
crowing for day.  
Felt on the right side of my pillow, my man  
had gone away.  
On his pillow he left a note, reading I'm sorry  
you got my goat.  
No time to marry, no time to settle down.

I'm a young woman and ain't done running  
around.  
I'm a young woman and ain't done running  
around.

Some people call me a hobo, some call me a  
bum,  
Nobody know my name, nobody knows what  
I've done.  
I'm as good as any woman in your town,  
I ain't no high yella, I'm tequilla brown.

I ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down.  
I'm gonna drink good moonshine and run these  
browns down.  
See that long lonesome road, cause you know  
its got a end.  
And I'm a good woman and I can get plenty  
men.<sup>14</sup>



Clara Smith, Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters (1931), Bessie Smith.

The women blues singers have become our cultural icons of sexual power, but what is often forgotten is that they could be great comic entertainers. In "One Hour Mama" Ida Cox used comedy to intensify an irreverent attack on male sexual prowess. The women blues singers had no respect for sexual taboos, for breaking through the boundaries of respectability and convention. The comic does not mellow the assertive voice, but on the contrary, undermines mythologies of phallic power, and establishes a series of woman-centered heterosexual demands. Many women heard the "we" when Ida Cox said "I."

I've always heard that haste makes waste,  
So I believe in takin my time.  
The highest mountain can't be raced  
It's something you must slowly climb.

I want a slow and easy man;  
He needn't ever take the lead,  
Cause I work on that long time plan  
And I ain't alookin for no speed.

I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa  
Ain't the kind of man for me.  
Set your alarm clock papa, one hour that's  
proper,  
Then love me like I like to be.

I don't want no lame excuses,  
Bout my lovin being so good,  
That you couldn't wait no longer  
Now I hope I'm understood.

I'm a one hour mama so no one minute papa  
Ain't the kind of man for me.

I can't stand no greenhorn lover  
Like a rookie going to war,  
With a load of big artillery,  
But don't know what it's for

He's got to bring me reference  
With a great long pedigree  
And must prove he's got endurance  
Or he don't mean snap to me.

I can't stand no crowing rooster  
What just likes a hit or two  
Action is the only booster  
Of just what my man can do.



*Ida Cox.*

I don't want no imitation,  
My requirements ain't no joke,  
Cause I got pure indignation  
For a guy what's lost his stroke.

I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa  
Ain't the kind of man for me.  
Set your alarm clock papa, one hour that's  
proper,  
Then love me like I like to be.

I may want love for one hour,  
Then decide to make it two.  
Takes an hour fore I get started,  
Maybe three fore I'm through.

I'm a one hour mama, so no one minute papa  
Ain't the kind of man for me.<sup>15</sup>

But this moment of optimism, of the blues as the exercise of power and control over sexuality was short lived. The space occupied by these blues singers was opened up by race records but race records did not survive the depression. Some of these blues women, like Ethel Waters and Hattie McDaniels, broke through the racial

boundaries of Hollywood films and were inserted into a different aspect of the culture industry where they occupied not a privileged but a subordinate space and articulated not the possibilities of black female sexual power but the "Yes, Ma'am's" of the black maid. The power of the blues singer was resurrected in a different moment of black power, re-emerging in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and the woman blues singer remains an important part of our twentieth-century black cultural reconstruction.

Hazel Carby teaches *Afro-American Studies and Women's Studies* at Wesleyan University. She is the author of *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, to be published this year by Oxford University Press.

This paper was originally presented at the keynote speech at a Five College Conference on Sexuality, Mt. Holyoke College, South Hadley Mass., Oct. 25, 1986. The paper was presented along with playing of the songs discussed a number of the cited.

#### FOOTNOTES

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9. Clara Smith, "Freight Train Blues," *Women's Railroad Blues*, Rosetta Records 1980, RR1301.
10. Bessie Smith, "In House Blues," *Bessie Smith: The World's Greatest Blues Singer*, Columbia Records CG33.
11. Ma Rainey, *Ma Rainey*, Milestone Records 1974 M47021; Sandra Leib, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981).
12. Ethel Waters, *His Eye Is On The Sparrow* (NY: Doubleday, 1951).
13. Ethel Waters, "No Man's Mama," *Big Mamas*, Rosetta Records, 1982, RR 1306.
14. Bessie Smith, "Young Woman's Blues," *Nobody's Blues But Mine*, Columbia, 1972, CG 31093.
15. Ida Cox, "One Hour Mama," *Mean Mothers*, Rosetta Records, 1980, RR 1300.

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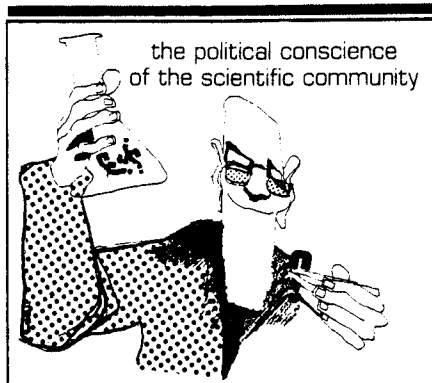
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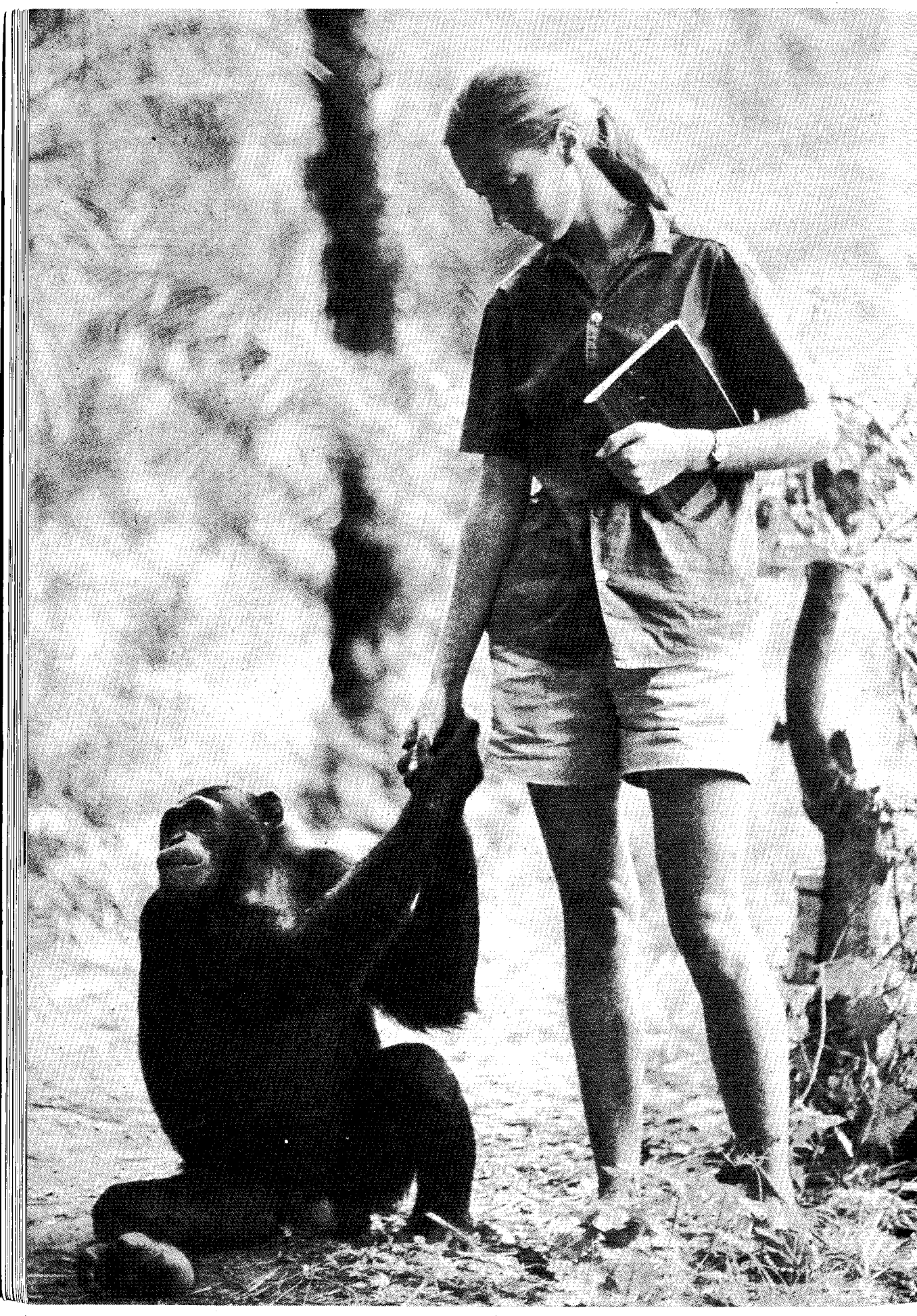
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# CHALLENGING THE SCIENTIFIC MYTHS OF GENDER AND RACE

A review of MYTHS OF GENDER

(New York: Basic Books, 1985)

**E. Frances White and Ann Woodhull-McNeal**

“Researcher Ties Math Sense To Hormones” blared out as the title from the Associated Press coverage of the Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting. The article reported that Dr. Camilla P. Benbow, who acknowledged that her findings might be “unpopular and controversial,” argued that junior high school boys are probably better than girls at math because of their male hormones and not simply because of their upbringing. Of course, work that contradicted these findings, also presented at the meeting, received little attention. Apparently, “Researcher Finds No Significant Difference Between The Sexes In Math Ability” is neither a catchy title nor the opener for an enticing article in today’s papers.

Benbow’s work on hormones and gender has a knack for making the newspaper. Six years ago, it caught the eye of Anne Fausto-Sterling when Benbow’s work with Julian Stanley appeared in the *New York Times* and the journal *Science*, making essentially the same claims. Fortunately Fausto-Sterling has written a book, *Myths of Gender*, that responds to the work of Benbow and other scientists who overlook the complex interaction between physiology and environment, and posit a mythological biology that fits so well with the conservative and repressive climate of today. *Myths of Gender* responds to a backlash phenomenon in which biological theories, masquerading as objective, non-ideological

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theories, act as tools of repression. From its inception, biology as a scientific field involved the racist and sexist attempt to classify human beings into normal and abnormal categories. Particularly during the nineteenth century, scientists became obsessed with the desire to measure and quantify various parts of human anatomy. (Phrenology and craniology appear in hindsight to be absurd attempts to understand human beings but they share roots and many similarities with notions about intelligence that allow IQ tests and their results to be inflicted on young students.) As scientists typed and categorized humans, they provided scientific justifications of a social order that allowed white men to dominate most of the world. Similarly, since the mid-1970s, sociobiology and other determinist theories have supported the efforts of conservative white men to maintain their loosening grasp on the world.

Of course, most scientists do not acknowledge that their work supports the status quo; they simply formulate questions for example in such a way that their answers reinforce rigid categories of gender, race and sexuality. It is average, everyday science (not simply "bad" science or pseudo-science) that enforces cultural norms. Often by the "simple" study of "sex differences" scientists reinforce the cultural message that male and female behavior is wired into our genes and hormones, and thus is unalterable. We are not arguing against the importance of recognizing culturally constructed difference. Quite the contrary, we recognize how claiming cultural difference has been an important base from which communities have mounted political challenges. What we object to is the belief, supported by mainstream science, that biologically based differences tell us anything important about race, gender or sexuality.

Ironically, some people who attack misogyny and heterosexism have turned to biological explanations to support their arguments. Some feminists, such as Alice Rossi, agree that much human behavior is "wired into" our genes. They turn sexist paradigms on their heads, valuing women's "inherent" qualities over men's, such as greater nurturing capacities. At the same time some gay men argue that homosexuality is natural, that they do not

choose to be gay but are born homosexual.<sup>1</sup> Their arguments appear as a misguided attempt to reassure heterosexual society that exposure to homosexuals does not spread homosexuality. Such arguments are costly. In a more repressive society, people with a homosexual "gene" would simply be eliminated. (*Myths of Gender* provides further discussion on the problem of studying genes to understand complex human behavior.) Such arguments are also doomed to failure because, like mainstream science, they accept a scientific practice that assumes that biological differences determine behavior or social arrangements. More deeply, they assume that we can understand our biology separate from the culture that has shaped its meaning. On the contrary, as Fausto-Sterling argues, not only does biology not determine culture, but culture determines how we understand biology.

Myths about sex differences also play a role in constructing images of superior western culture against inferior non-Western cultures. For example, Europeans and Euro-Americans have long looked askance at the role women play in African agriculture. From the vantage-point of Western ideas of women's nature, the tradition of women working in the fields and controlling local markets with their surplus goods seems unnatural, backward and inefficient. Colonial officials, missionaries, aid donors and development experts have all tried to increase male roles in farming as a way of "scientifically" improving African agriculture. It has been left to feminist critics and African women who keep on farming and marketing to expose the narrow basis of these scientifically derived notions of sex differences.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike many other practicing scientists, Fausto-Sterling accepts the verdict of critics of science that scientific theory and observation are influenced by social factors. She argues that scientific research on sex differences is regularly flawed because the results of this research affect the scientists' sense of self. "And what could be more personally significant than our senses of ourselves as male or female? In the study of gender (like sexuality and race) it is inherently impossible for any individual to do unbiased research." [p. 10]

*Myths of Gender* is a broadside attack on the myth that biology is primary in determining

human behavior.

Some scientists and social theorists (myself included) no longer believe in the scientific validity of this framework. Such thinkers reject the search for unique "root causes," arguing instead for a more complex analysis in which an individual's capacities emerge from a web of interactions between the biological being and the social environment. Within this web, connecting threads move in both directions. Biology may in some manner condition behavior, but behavior in turn can alter one's physiology. Furthermore, any particular behavior can have many different causes. This new vision challenges the hunt for fundamental biological causes at its very heart, stating unequivocally that the search itself is based on a false understanding of biology. The question 'What fraction of our behavior is biologically based,' is impossible — even in theory — to answer, and unanswerable questions drop out of the realm of science altogether, entering instead that of philosophy and morality. [pp. 7-8]

### The "Normal" Science of Sex Differences

Fausto-Sterling takes her readers carefully through literature on "sex differences" that has trickled down to non-scientists but whose fundamental flaws are difficult to recognize without help. For example, she examines the areas and the ways in which men and women are said to differ in intellectual ability: the myth of greater male variability; studies of verbal ability; of spatial-visual ability; effects of experiences including childhood play and parental guidance on test scores; brain lateralization (right-brain, left-brain) and the aggressive biologizing of math-test-researcher Camilla Benbow. In all of this she notes that science likes to dichotomize and assign different qualities in order to differentiate groups: men and women, blacks and whites. She notes, e.g., how the hormones testosterone and estrogen are called "male" and "female" hormones, although each is present in both males and females. Similarly, math abilities get assigned to males as a characteristic, although it is clear with any reflection that there are many women who are better than many men at math. Fausto-Sterling consistently asks conventional scientific questions about the evidence presented and generally finds "bad" scientific practice. But she also

goes an important step further by asking feminist questions that lead not only to better scientific practice but also toward a feminist vision of science.

When, for example, she examines the research on menstruation and hormones, she finds both bad science and a flawed analytical framework that fails to produce contextual research. As she notes, the work on premenstrual syndrome (PMS) has dramatically filtered into the public consciousness. The major promoter of the problems of PMS, Dr. Katharina Dalton, has argued that it can cause

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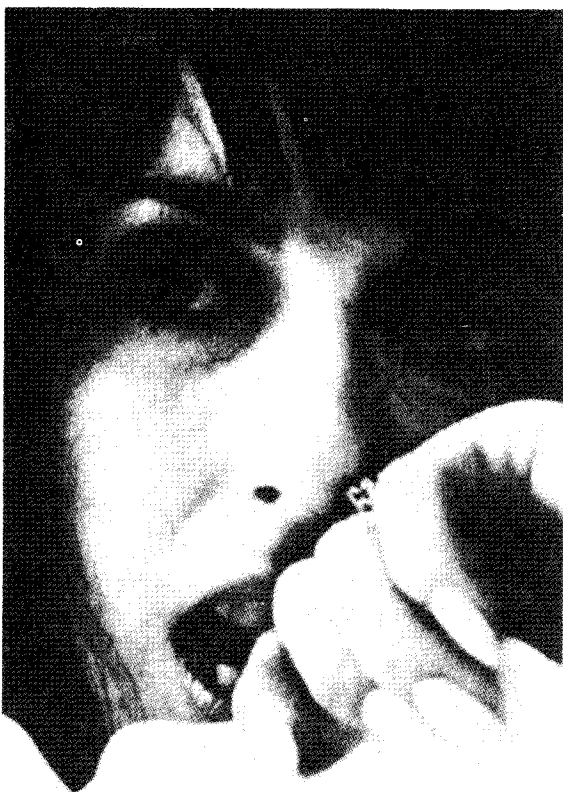


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women to kill, attempt suicide and batter their children as they suffer from up to 150 different symptoms. But as Fausto-Sterling asks just what this syndrome is, her search of the relevant literature reveals inconsistent and conflicting answers. Researchers lump together several phenomena, from glaucoma to severe depression, that may have very different sources. In the few studies that attempted to define the syndrome carefully, the number of women found to have PMS dropped drastically. In general, the studies are sloppily done and do not permit replication or comparison.



## My husband won't live with me five days each month

Fausto-Sterling points out that many highly trained researchers fail to use *double blind experimentation*,\* common in scientific experiments, because they believe so firmly in biological primacy.

One need worry about double blinds only if one remains conscious of the fact that thoughts, mindsets, and emotions can affect one's physiology. Of course most women know this perfectly well, since overexcitement, exhaustion, travel, illness, and stress can alter the timing of one's period, change the number and intensity of premenstrual signals, and influence the presence or absence of the menstrual flow and its degree of discomfort; these are all variations in the physiological expression of the monthly cycle; influenced by one's emotional state. [p. 105]

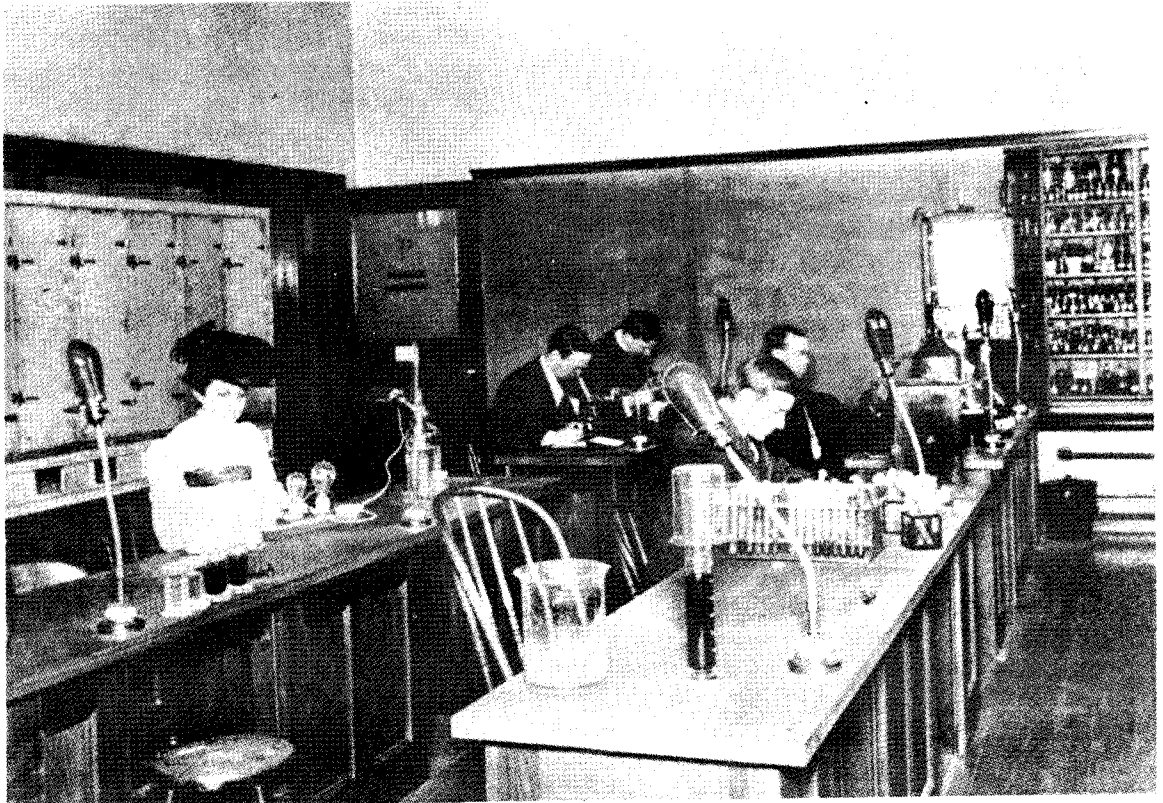
Indeed, the few double blind studies on PMS treatment that have been conducted show that many women respond to placebos, demonstrating that culture and psychology can influence women's premenstrual experiences. [While pointing out the interplay between environment and biology, Fausto-Sterling carefully tries to avoid the conclusion that all premenstrual symptoms are "only in women's heads."] Thus a major flaw in the PMS studies is their conceptual framework that never asks: how do reproductive cycles interact with the environment?

The studies are also flawed because of a thinly veiled medical model that views women as naturally abnormal. (Of course, by implication, the standard of normality is male.) The language choice of PMS researchers exposes this assumption. They suggest that 70 to 90% of all females have premenstrual symptoms. The problematic word "symptom" may suggest that nearly 90% of all women are diseased. If indeed we read "symptom" as "disease" or "abnormality," then we do have a major problem on our hands. On the other hand, if "symptom" means "signs," then PMS is much ado about nothing.

Fausto-Sterling agrees that some women suffer problems associated with premenstrual periods. Yet the use of PMS studies has an an-

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\* "double-blinds" are experiments in which neither the experimenter nor the subject knows what the research is testing.



MIT, 1904.

drocentric and anti-woman bias that supports our sexist social structure. It is old wine in new bottles, building on centuries of Western beliefs that menstruation turns abnormal humans (females) into near monsters. On the research on menstruation, Fausto-Sterling concludes:

That so many scientists have been able for so long to do such poor research attests to both the unconscious social agendas of many researchers and to the theoretical inadequacy of the research framework used in the field as a whole. Once again we encounter the failure of a simple linear model of biological causation, and must struggle instead with a more complex conceptualization in which mind, body, and culture depend so inextricably on one another that allegedly straightforward studies, ones claiming to find single causes for cyclic behavior, must be looked upon with deep suspicion. [p. 101]

### Western Myths and the “Universal Woman”

Fausto-Sterling successfully challenges the myths of white Western society about the “nature of woman” and carefully, scienti-

fically and systematically demolishes the “scientific evidence” that is so commonly used to bolster these myths. Yet, she writes as if there is only one set of myths about gender that apply to all women. Just as women are not a unitary group, so too, are the myths about women complex and mediated by race, class, and culture. Since we have become increasingly aware of the role that science has played in constructing negative images of black women, we hoped that her book would help shed light on this history.

Fausto-Sterling, however, sometimes writes as if women’s experience is not defined and divided by class and culture. When, for example, she suggests that in order for the feminization of poverty to be halted, “women will have to take their share of these higher paying jobs [that come with scientific and technological training (p. 61)],” she seems to bypass the problems of race and class that divide women and keep even many men from having their “share” of high paying jobs. In recognition of the way racism and class may interact with gender to restrict women’s possibilities, we need to ex-

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pand our understanding of what keeps women from learning the math and other skills that they need to qualify for technically skilled jobs.

By showing how scientific studies of gender reflect and reinforce dominant Western myths of womanhood, Fausto-Sterling leads us to the question of the origin of this cultural construction of universal womanhood. We have found the work of medical historian Sander Gilman extremely helpful for bringing into focus how interlocked the construction of race and gender is in Western history. While he has been justly criticized by some feminists for applying the objective gaze of a distanced, male authority to women who were victims of racism and misogyny, his work does offer insight into the way the medical field in the nineteenth century helped create negative images of women. He notes the power of medical icons (representations) to represent both the normal and the abnormal by appearing to be scientific and objective.

Medicine offers an especially interesting source of conventions since we do tend to give medical conventions special 'scientific' status as opposed to the "subjective" status of the aesthetic conventions. But medical icons are no more "real" than "aesthetic" ones. Like aesthetic icons, medical icons may (or may not) be rooted in some observed reality. Like them, they are iconographic in that they represent these realities in a manner determined by the historical position of the observers, their relationship to their own time, and to the history of the conventions which they employ.<sup>4</sup>

Gilman details a fascinating history in which Khoikhoi women from Southern Africa (commonly and derogatorily called Hottentots) came to represent all black women. Further by declaring Khoikhoi women's genitalia as abnormal and diseased, medical practitioners helped place black women in an antithetical position to white women. Doing what scientists do best, doctors examined observable physical differences, assuming that any deviation from a white middle class norm represented pathology. Simultaneously, nineteenth century medicine focused on the white prostitute as the representative of the sexualized woman: passionate but diseased, unclean, out of control and dangerous to white men. Ultimately medical experts began to portray white prostitutes in representations that looked like their racist

icons of Khoikhoi women. Indeed prostitutes' labia were viewed as an atavistic throwback to those of Khoikhoi who, of course, were supposed to be lower on the evolutionary scale than "normal" white women. Gilman argues that some experts claimed that white prostitutes also began to appear more mannish with age; thus the image of lesbians as corrupt and out of control helped to reinforce the image of prostitutes as sexual deviants. Ultimately, however, the amalgamation of black female, white prostitute, and (white ?) lesbian images represented all women as the source of corruption and disease. (p. 231.) Gilman has provided a rich exploration into the dynamic way that icons of black women came to represent not only the sexualized woman but also "womanhood" itself as a source of corruption and disease.

### Gender, Race, and "Evolution"

This kind of analysis, recognizing how entwined race and gender are in Western culture, opens the possibility of breaking down notions of universal womanhood. The study of evolution, another area Fausto-Sterling addresses, opens similar possibilities for exploring how images of race and gender were constructed together to form myths about gender. An examination of the relationship between the development of primatology and myths about gender and Africa where much primatological research is carried out provides fertile ground for such an exploration.

Donna Haraway provocatively points us in the direction of understanding this relationship.<sup>5</sup> She begins by reminding us of the privileged position of apes and monkeys for Westerners as they theorize their history and experiences through the lens of a nature/culture dichotomy. But, she asks, "How and where do people *see* nonhuman primates?" They study them in laboratories and zoos located in the West and, most importantly, experts travel at great expense and institutional backing to the tropics of Asia, Africa and Latin America often returning with films for television nature specials.

Those animals with an almost magical status for late-industrial capitalist people live in a kind of distant dream space produced out of the history of





colonialism, symbolized by the mountain gorilla or the chimpanzee in the heart of Africa . . . To watch wild monkey and apes, to find that particular 'nature' that exists outside 'culture' . . . is to enter in the history of Western expansion and colonialism. Indeed, the special symbolic status of 'wild' animals is part of the history of colonial discourse. The history of wild animals is intimately part of the history of race, sex, and class in a world capitalist system. (pp. 78-9)

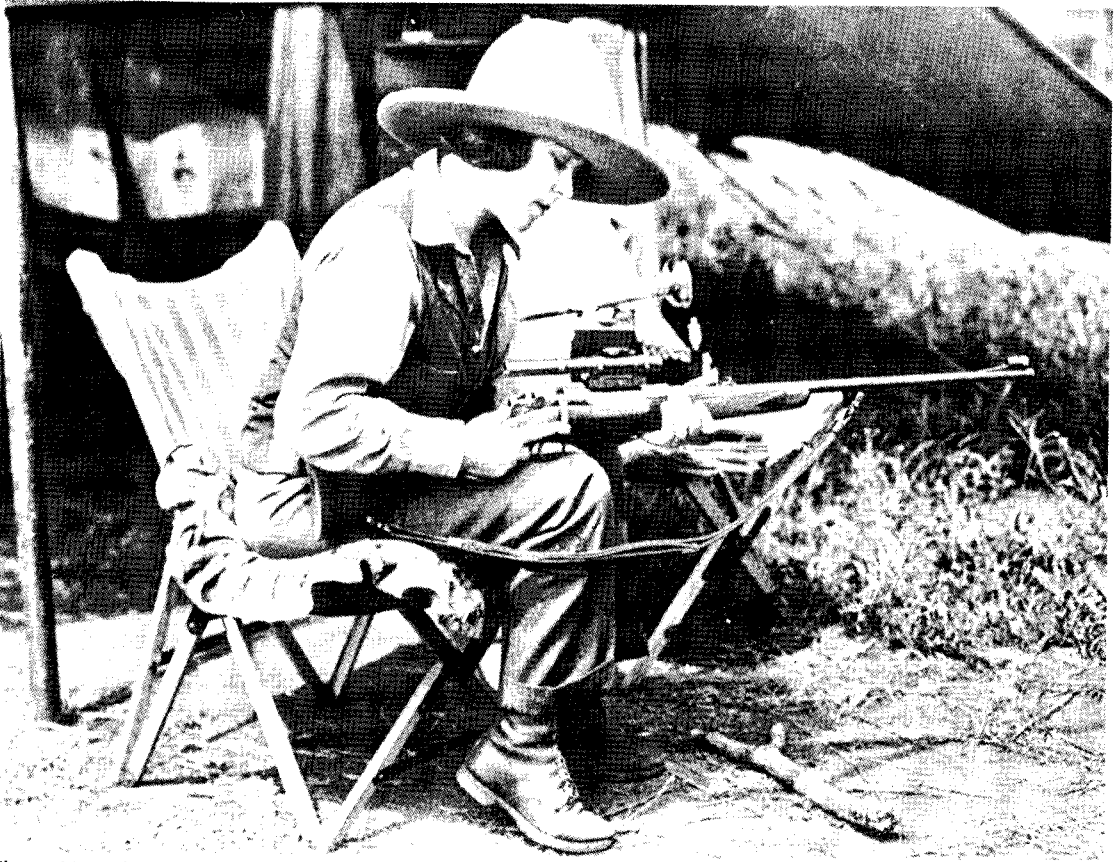
Haraway, then, is concerned about the intersection of feminist and colonial discourses in the effort to establish a distinction between nature and culture. Like Fausto-Sterling, she understands how important the feminist revolution in science is. White feminist primatologists have now gained the authority to speak and change our male/female boundaries. They have clearly offered us a more radical story of what it means to be human—male and female. In one

important way, Haraway goes a step further than Fausto-Sterling. She emphasizes that the new narrative offered by many feminist primatologists/scientists must expose the Western bias in the nature/culture dualism. When feminist primatologists ask "what it means to be female, to be animal, to be other than man," they must identify how traditional notions about women have depended on The Tropical Other and the African "field" where nature remains untamed and where Man lives close to the wild animals.

Haraway's formulation leads us beyond assumptions of universal womanhood. By pointing out that notions about African women are tied to wild animals, whereas white women are seen to be civilized, Haraway emphasizes that the nature/culture dichotomy divides women from women as well as male from female.

By universalizing "women" and their aspirations, Fausto-Sterling often simply omits non-white women from her study about myths. The view of women that she is struggling against (women as weak, non-aggressive, emotional . . . ) is firmly entrenched in a Eurocentric worldview, but is not the same as other cultures' dichotomies of gender. Moreover, as has been noted by black feminists such as bell hooks and Angela Davis, this myth of who "women" are is also not often applied to women of color in the US.<sup>6</sup> In the case of myths Fausto-Sterling is so ably attacking, we must ask again: Is the female gender of her myths—weak, emotional, non-aggressive, non-mathematical, dependent, irritable and negligible after menopause—a universal female, or is she the constructed female of Western culture? And to what extent does this construction apply to all women, regardless of culture and class?

Those who follow Fausto-Sterling's initiative must probe into how myths of gender differ across cultures. She has provided us with tools to challenge science and how it is currently done. By making the methods and results of scientific studies accessible, she invites everyone to take a more active hand in science, not holding it at a distance to be revered or reviled. The activities of scientists are presented as human projects, flawed and usually upholding the status quo in the way most establishment-funded enterprises do.

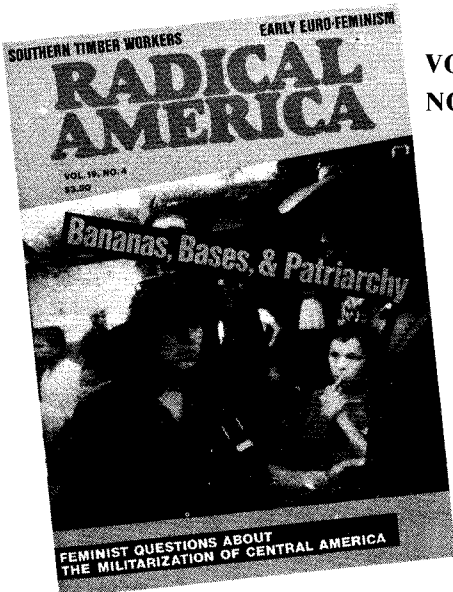


*The making of Congorilla, Zaire, 1930.*

#### FOOTNOTES

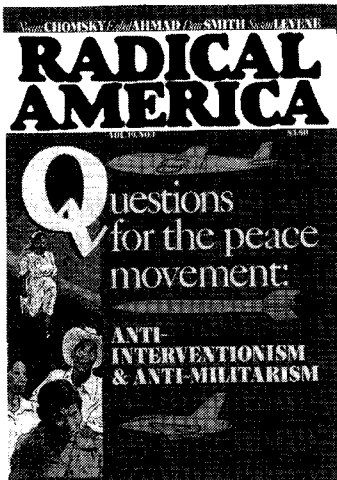
1. The same argument is made by the recent Kinsey Institute study, Alan Bell and Martin Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).
2. See Nici Nelson, *African Women and the Development Process* (London: Frank Cass and Co.) and Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970).
3. See, Anne Fausto-Sterling and Lydia L. English, "Women and Minorities in Science: An Interdisciplinary Course," *Radical Teacher* 30 (January 1986).
4. Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 12, No. 1 (Autumn, 1985).
5. Donna Haraway, "Primatology is politics by other means," Ruth Bleier, ed., *Feminist Approaches to Science* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon, 1986).
6. See, e.g., Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1983) and bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

*Fran White teaches history at Hampshire College and is working on a book, Transformations: Race, Gender, and Sexuality. Ann Woodhull-McNeal teaches biology at Hampshire College and is part of the Women in Science program.*



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# **BREAKING THE BLOCKADE:**

A Conversation with Cuban Filmmaker  
Tomas Alea

**Interview by Dan Georgakas**

Aside from some documentaries made by the Communist Party and occasional films by intellectuals, virtually no films were made in Cuba prior to the triumph of the revolution led by Fidel Castro. The creation of ICAIC (Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry) in 1960 which addressed this cultural underdevelopment was partly due to ideological concerns and partly to circumstances. It was ideological in the sense that Castro had always considered the development of a revolutionary culture and essential element of socialist change. Radio Rebelde had played a major role in the insurrectionary process and Castro thought a Cuban film industry was necessary to break the cultural hegemony of the United States as well as serving as a component of mass communication. The emphasis on film was circumstantial in that one of Castro's long time political associates was Alfredo Guevara (no relation to Che), who had studied filmmaking in Italy and had long dreamed of a national film industry.

The goals set for ICAIC were striking. Just assembling the needed equipment and learning to make films without any previous experience was ambitious enough, but ICAIC strove for much more. On a national level the goal was not only to report on the revolution but to be part of the cutting edge of change by creating films that were deliberately provocative in

## Tomas Alea: A Selected Filmography

**Death of a Bureaucrat (1966):** A model worker dies on the job and is buried, but when the family goes to collect his pension, they are told they need to show the labor card which was buried with him as a mark of honor. They also discover they need the labor card to exhume the body. The family decides to dig up the body and has to hide the decaying corpse as one bureaucratic absurdity follows another. This black comedy frequently has episodes which quote from classic American comedies.

**Memories of Underdevelopment (1968):** Sergio, the main protagonist, is neither a revolutionary nor a counter-revolutionary. He would like to be a writer which he perceives as a vocation devoid of politics. His wife and parents have left for Miami and he lives off payments made by the state for their confiscated property. He can neither enter the new world nor reject it. Asked why Sergio did not become an exile, Alea has answered: For Sergio everything has come either too early or too late and he is incapable of making decisions.

**One Way Or Another, Sara Gomez (1974):** A bus driver and a primary school teacher struggle with the differences in their class origins in a love story set in one of Cuba's first housing developments. The action is frequently punctuated with distancing devices in which the personal becomes political and the political personal in a remarkably inventive manner.

form and content. On an international level, the still infant industry was to provide as much support as possible for radical filmmakers throughout Latin America.

ICAIC proved to be an astonishingly successful initiative. Both its documentary and feature filmmakers created works that addressed revolutionary themes with innovative forms. The stylistic and ideological foundations for these films were spelled out in influential essays that appeared in *Cine Cubano*, an ICAIC publication which enjoyed wide readership among Latin American filmmakers and critics. Although Cuban films began to win international prizes as early as the mid-1960s, the American public was largely unaware of its achievements until the 1973 release of Tomas Guitierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment*, a 1968 film that had already earned international renown as a masterpiece.

Few of the American critics who praised *Memories* informed their public that the US government had systematically discouraged the exhibition of Cuban films in the United States or that Alea had made eight previous films. Alea, a leading figure in the nascent film culture of pre-revolutionary Cuba, had studied filmmaking in Italy just as Guevara had. American critics often speculated that Alea, one of the founders of ICAIC and generally considered its most intellectual director, was

being censored or was in trouble with the authorities. This wholly erroneous notion stemmed from the assumption that the vacillating intellectual in *Memories* was a surrogate for the director. In the interview which follows, Alea deals with the different responses to his films at home and abroad. He proceeds to a discussion of new ideological and industrial trends in Cuban cinema, and concludes with observations on the emerging Latin American cinema, a movement Cuba has had no small part in shaping.

The major international showcase for Latin American films, in fact, has been an annual film festival launched by Cuba in 1979. After humble beginnings, the festival has matured to become a major international event, the one place where distributors, critics, exhibitors, producers, and filmmakers can see all the cinema made in Latin America in the previous year. While prizes are awarded in some categories, the festival screens all films submitted, even if they are works-in-progress. The event has become so prestigious that it has begun to draw Hollywood-associated personalities. In 1985 and 1986 these included Jack Lemmon, Sidney Pollack, Julie Christie, Harry Belafonte, Robert De Niro, Gregory Peck, and Francis Ford Coppola. The 1986 festival served as the official opening of a film school in Cuba which is to serve all of Latin America. Quite



**The Last Supper (1977):** A 1795 slaveowner who sees himself as a devout Christian chooses twelve of his slaves for an Easter ritual which includes his washing their feet and feeding them a sumptuous dinner. Unfolding events reveal his true indifference to humanity. His paternalism and right to ownership of human beings is ultimately rejected by a rebel slave who spits in his master's face.

**Tables Turned (1984):** This is a situation comedy in which the love affair of elders parallels that of their children who are duly shocked. Three generations are involved and a fourth is evoked with a maternity scene that ends the film.

**House for Swap (1984):** This film satirizes the housing shortage in Havana in which people often trade space for location. A complex plot has a dozen people engaged in interconnected swaps which touch all sectors of society. In spite of death, bungling, changes of heart, and a myriad of other problems, the trades are eventually made.

**Up To A Certain Point (1984):** Filmmakers undertake a project in the port of Havana to probe the sexism and other social values of workers. In the course of the project, the scriptwriter, who is married, falls in love with one of the dockworkers and comes into conflict with his director over the content of the film. Eventually he realizes his views are not so dissimilar to the workers he had thought somewhat backward. His view is shared by his lover who opts for a new life in another city.

simply, Cuba now proposes to do for all of Latin America what it had done for itself: create critical, production and distribution facilities entirely free of control by non-Latin American interests.

*The material which follows is an edited version of an interview which was videotaped on the back porch of Alea's home in the Marianao section of Havana during the 1985 Latin American Film Festival. RA Associate Editor Dan Georgakas, who is currently working on a book with Alea, conducted the interview. Pierre Desir and Scott Cooper, who respectively directed the tape and engineered the sound, are both connected with the UCLA film school.*

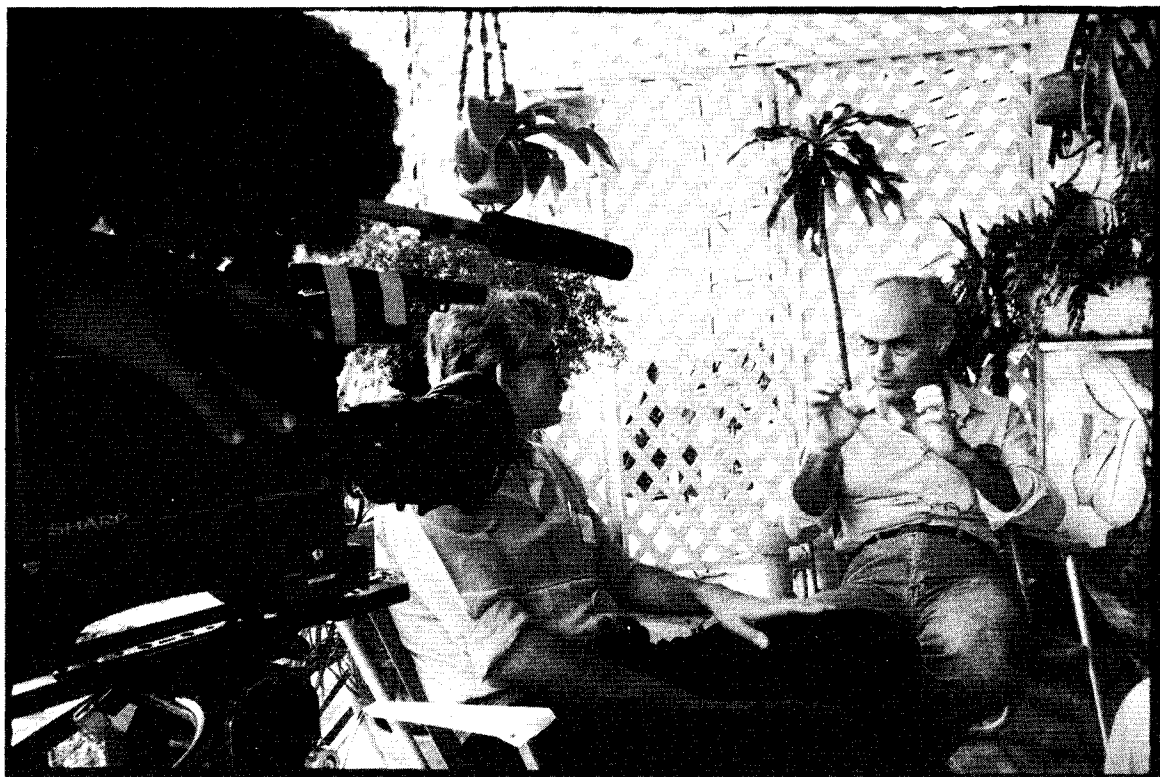
**DG:** In the United States, Sergio, the major character in *Memories of Underdevelopment*, is someone the audience identifies with. Was that the case in Cuba?

**TA:** I can understand why it was very easy to identify with Sergio in the United States. He fits perfectly into the liberal conception. Here, it was different. Here we noticed that people went to see the film more than once, perhaps as many as five times. We haven't seen much of that phenomenon. We have had other films that were more popular, that were more explosive with the popular audience, but people

only went to see those films once. They didn't feel the need to go back. With *Memories* people came out of the cinema very upset. They still had many questions. They had to return to see if they might find an answer. I think that was the best result of that film. It became a sort of critic of the audience, including the filmmakers. We stimulated reflection about our reality, and I think that is very good. When I make a film, I not only want to make a beautiful thing, I want to make something useful. Cinema provides contact with reality, whether we like everything in that reality or not.

**DG:** That's a natural lead to *Death of a Bureaucrat*. Everyone in the world loathes bureaucracy, but when that film was released in the US, the feeling among some reviewers was: well, Alea is on the way out. Soon he will leave Cuba or he'll never be allowed to make another film.

**TA:** My response to that is, *Death of a Bureaucrat* was made in 1966! It was not released in the US until the late 1970s, so that confused reviewers who don't know much about Cuba. For us, it is very obvious that bureaucracy is not the invention of socialism. Bureaucrats are everywhere. At the time I made that film, there was a sort of proliferation of the worst bureaucracy and there was a very



December 1985 interview with Tomas Alea in his home. Left to right: Pierre Desir, Dan Georgakas, Tomas Alea. Photo: Judy Janda.

strong reaction against that; and my film reflects that situation and reaction. We understood that we had to fight bureaucracy at all levels. We continue that fight. I think the film helped that struggle because it gave the audience the confidence to fight back. They could see that bureaucracy was not something you had to accept but something you had to resist.

**DG:** What was the response of the bureaucrats?

**TA:** Their response has always been very upsetting for me, because the bureaucrats don't recognize themselves! They recognize the other bureaucrats only. Anyway, I can tell you that film was very popular in Cuba. The film was not against the revolution or the government or socialism. If we want to improve our condition, to mature as a society, we need to criticize ourselves. That's fundamental. We criticize not to destroy something but to improve it. I imagine our enemies would like it if we did not criticize our reality. Then we would become stagnant. That would be good for our enemies. If we stagnate, they could say we had fallen behind, and they could whisper: that's such an oppressive regime, a regime with no internal

criticism. So we must criticize. Naturally some people are very sensitive about this. They feel injured. But we have to overcome that obstacle through discussion.

**DG:** Is your view widely shared in Cuba?

**TA:** Definitely.

**DG:** Another aspect of *Death of a Bureaucrat* that intrigued us was the many quotations from American films. Did Cubans understand those references?

**TA:** That's hard to respond to exactly. Our film critics recognized what I had done immediately. They are inside the film world. In their writing and speaking, they communicated their understanding to a larger audience. I don't think all of the references were recognized, but many of them were too obvious to miss. All Cubans, for example, know the films of Harold Lloyd. They are shown on television often. Those films never seem to get old.

**DG:** The theater adjacent to ICAIC [the Cuban Film Institute] is named after Charlie Chaplin.

**TA:** Well, Chaplin. Everyone knows Chaplin.

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**DG:** *Memories* was an enormous success in the US as well as Cuba. *Death of a Bureaucrat* was far more successful in Cuba than in the US. Are there any examples of films more successful abroad than at home?

**TA:** *The Last Supper* is such a film, and I have never understood why it was not successful here. When it first opened, the film played at six cinemas as always, our first circuit. One cinema in the center of the city was overcrowded with long queues outside. A truly incredible reception. Judging from that cinema, you would think *The Last Supper* was the most successful film of the year. But the other five cinemas were empty! That just never happens. I don't know the cause. The film was retired from those other cinemas and sent to the second circuit of about half a dozen cinemas. Sometimes I think the film was just badly promoted. Many Cubans thought it was an old film. On the other hand, outside of Cuba, it has been one of the films that opened doors for us. *The Last Supper* was bought by Chile. Can you imagine? Pinochet allowed a Cuban film to be shown officially. That's incredible! I believe it's the only Cuban film ever shown commercially during that regime. For certain, it is the only Cuban film shown commercially in Brazil. And in Venezuela, *The Last Supper* was selected by critics from among 700 films and shown for a full year as the best film of the year. That was incredible for Venezuela where they don't show very many Cuban films.

**DG:** Promotion of a film in Cuba is pretty much standardized, isn't it? Review in the major media, printed posters, and special walls painted with the title and perhaps the star's or director's name?

**TA:** Yes, that's how it is done. Most features are handled in exactly the same way. Only when we have some reason to think we have something special is more attention put to it. In the case of *The Last Supper*, everything seemed to work against the film. Sometimes film posters are not commercial. They can be beautiful as art pieces but fail as promotion.

**DG:** What about media reviewing?

**TA:** At that time there was no television coverage. Now, television is most important. Television promotes not only our films but

every important film being exhibited. They show clips and make a commentary that orients the audience to what kind of film they are going to see. Films open on the first circuit in Havana and then move to other cities and the second circuit depending on response. The only exception is when a film is extraordinarily popular. An example is *Los Pajaros Tirando a la Escopeta* [released in the US as *The Tables Are Turned*]. That's a recent comedy that has been the most successful film in our history. At one time it was playing in ten cinemas simultaneously.

**DG:** Another very successful film here that got limited play in the US is *Se Permuta* [released in the US as *House For Swap*]. I thought it might work well in New York, since we also have a housing shortage, the problem depicted in *Se Permuta*. That film, like *Los Pajaros*, is a broad comedy. Is this a new genre: socialist situation comedy?

**TA:** I think everything can be said or understood with humor. Humor can also be advice. When you laugh *at* something, you mock, you criticize. When you laugh *with* something, you identify. I think humor is something we need to develop more of. The housing problem can be very revealing and, put into a comedy, allows us to reach a large audience. Those two films were incredibly popular in Cuba.

**DG:** I believe *Se Permuta* was a play before being adapted for the screen. Is that a common practice?

**TA:** No. We do not adapt many plays for the screen, and that particular film has an unusual history. Juan Carlos Tabio had directed a number of documentaries, but he had never made a feature. When he first proposed the idea that became *Se Permuta*, I discussed it with him; but when he submitted a script to ICAIC, it was not accepted. I thought we were wrong. I think some were concerned because he did not have experience in features. Perhaps there was some sort of bureaucratic formalist thinking. Well, Tabio was very angry and decided to adapt his idea for the theater. The play he wrote became a spectacular hit. People went to the theater the day before and slept outside to get a ticket. The play was so popular ICAIC was forced to reconsider. So we made a

mistake, but at the same time, things turned out better because Tabio did not return to the first film script. He made another, using the experience he had gained from the play version.

**DG:** Was your behind-the-scenes role in this process something that is common in Cuban filmmaking?

**TA:** We do not have a film school, because we cannot afford one. We also feel that there should be a gradual learning process. We think filmmakers should get a university education and then should gain on-the-job training in various aspects of the craft. We older filmmakers have to assist in that process. Some of us have given considerable time to this kind of work, even at the expense of developing our own projects.

**DG:** You were the major advisor to Sarah Gomez?

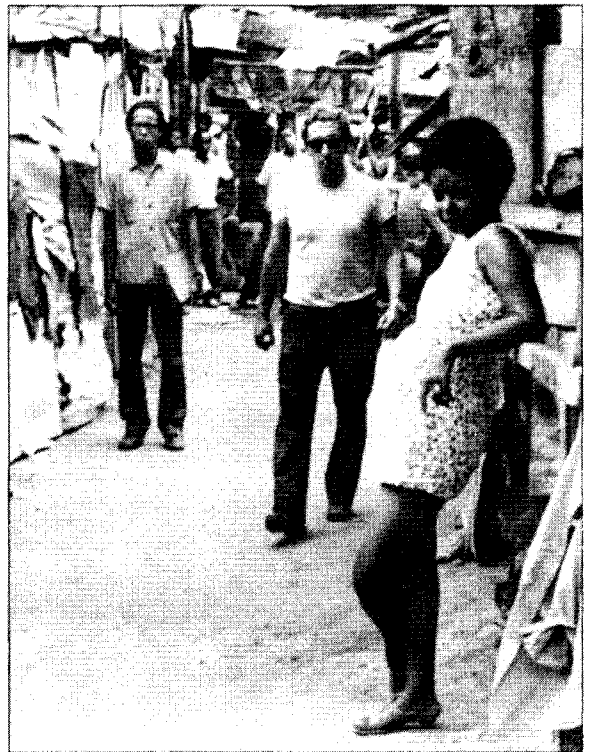
**TA:** Yes, I helped her from the beginning. She was an extraordinarily talented person. We still feel her absence [Gomez died of acute asthma in 1974 at the age of 31, just short of completion of her first feature]. She was just so brilliant. No one has been quite like her.

**DG:** She used very sophisticated stylistic techniques in her work, but in way that was accessible to a popular audience.

**TA:** She was very organic in her thinking. That was not an intellectual process. It was passionate. I served as a kind of balance for her, because I am more intellectual. It has been written that I completed *Da Cierta Manera* [released in the US as *One Way or Another*], but that's not true. Sarah had finished all the shooting and almost all the editing. She had the music. I just finished it off as she had planned. All that was left to complete was the ending. But I knew what she wanted. I did not put anything of myself in it.

**DG:** Your most recent film, *Up To A Certain Point*, got mixed notices here and in the US. The film deals with a group of filmmakers doing a film about dock workers. What struck many of us was the inclusion of video segments within the film, videos supposedly done by the filmmakers shown in the film. What was the idea behind this?

**TA:** We wanted to put ourselves in the same



Sara Gomez on location for "*De Cierta Manera*."

position as that of the characters we were dealing with in the film. We did the things they had to do. We did that to enrich our understanding of the characters and the docks. We took the video cameras and made interviews to know the problems there, the nature of that life, the relations with the administration, the interactions with co-workers and the opposite sex. We had all this material to help us with the script which remained sketchy and continued to change as we were shooting. We finally decided to include the videos we had done as research. Film has a photographic image but video is rough. We were able to show the difference between documentary and fiction by mixing video and film. Our audiences here liked that because it gave our work authenticity. I only regret that we could not have developed that more. Frankly, I had problems with the actor who played the director of the film within the film. He was not convincing.

**DG:** Was that a problem of improvisation?

**TA:** No, I made a mistake in casting. He will never do a character like that well. He is a good actor for other kinds of roles, but he could not fit that particular concept. It was my mistake,

not his. He is a good actor who was miscast.

**DG:** American audiences observed that the dock workers were mainly black and the filmmakers white. Was this an intentional comment on Cuban realities?

**TA:** That's a delicate question. What happened is that when the dock workers go to dance, there is a very popular orchestra playing and the majority of dancers are black. But the dock workers are about the same mixture as our society. In that sense, the dance sequence is misleading, but we could not afford to reshoot the scene and for our own audiences there was no problem. That the intellectuals are mostly white is not misleading, even though that is not something we're satisfied with. That is the consequence of a complex historical process. Pre-revolutionary cultural factors still distort our society. But our film was not dealing with that particular issue. We were looking at the differences between workers and intellectuals, differences that sometimes proved to be a matter of style and candor.



*One Way or Another (De Cierta Manera)*

**DG:** *Se Permuta* has a play within the film and *Up To A Certain Point* has a film within the film and videos. This is media commenting on media. Is this part of a trend toward the use of more distancing devices in Cuban cinema?

**TA:** There is a lot of dogmatism concerning film techniques. There are people who believe in Brechtian distancing or distantiation and turn it into a dogma. They don't allow the audience to identify with the characters. There is another kind of dogmatism too. Eisenstein

worked to achieve an intellectual cinema through pathos and identification. Some people have taken that as another absolute dogma. I think it is important to use both techniques to establish the relationship of audience to film. If you do not identify with the characters, you will lose interest in the story. If you identify in an absolute way, you will lose your critical attitude. That's why I like to go back and forth. I strive to make an identification and then to break that identification in order to get back to self-criticism. That's the richest and most complex and positive thing to do. But you cannot use formulas to achieve this. You have to create new devices. For us, documentary video within the film, the research seen as research, was new. That was another level of understanding reality. The video took you from the fiction and then you went back to the fiction with a reference in actuality. In *Memories* we used different points of view for the same scene. What the audience saw was seen from different characters, from different points of view.

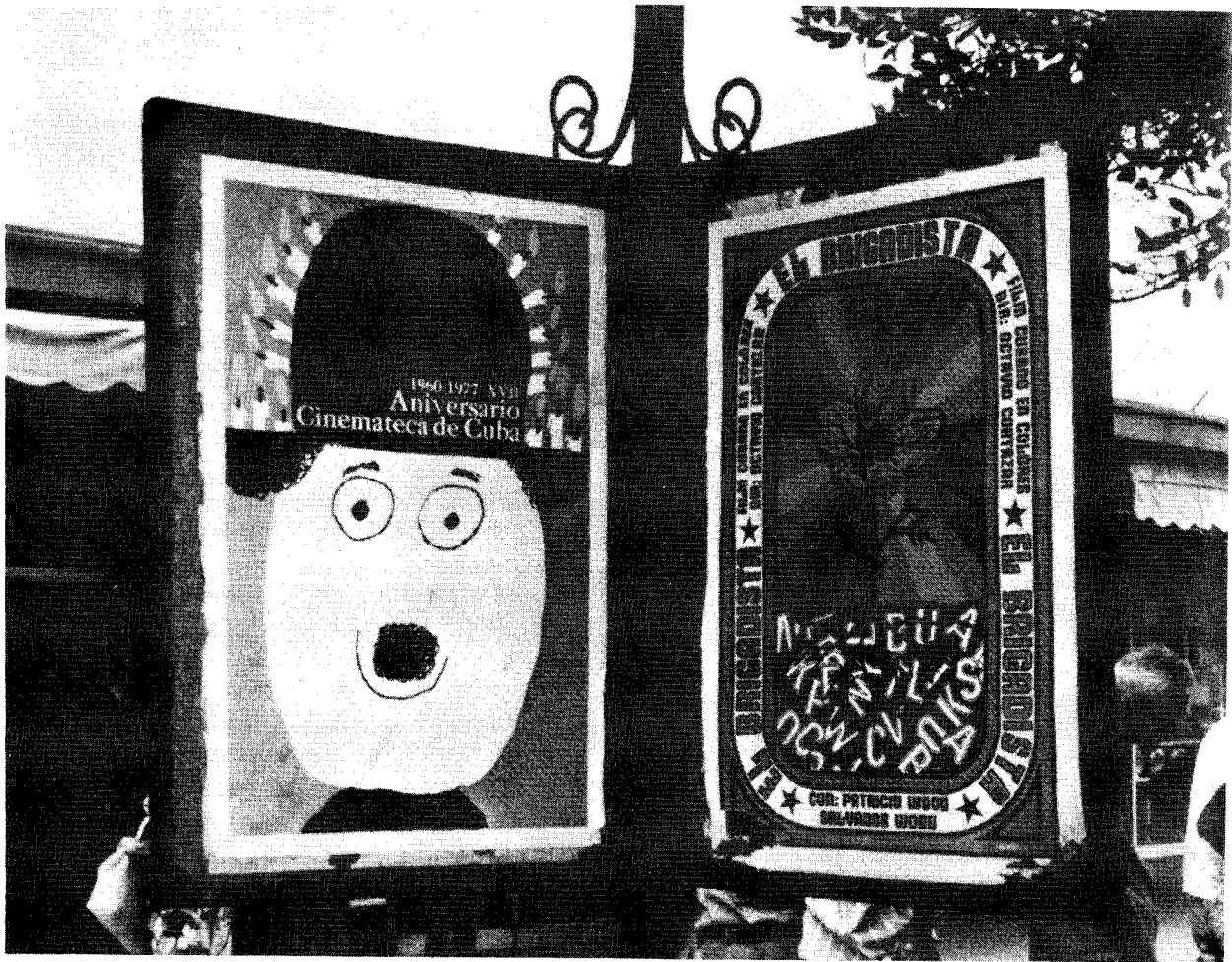
**DG:** I'm still not clear how much of a trend this indicates.

**TA:** We've talked about these things a lot. There are people who think as I do and there are others who are very dogmatic and still others who are not interested. You have all the variations. I think there is a general consciousness about these devices, perhaps not fully, developed but far from uninformed. We also had some films that we not very successful, because they were not very interesting. They were made with so much distancing that the audience was left behind. They distanced the audience out the door.

**DG:** Are there similar discussions among documentary filmmakers?

**TA:** I do not know that area so well. But I find — and I may be wrong and I would like to be wrong — but I find that there is a sort of stagnation in our documentaries. We had a brilliant period when there was real movement, films that were very strong and very new, dynamic films with real personality. Now I find that they are repeating formulas. We need a shock. We need to break that mood.

**DG:** What other discussions are prevalent in film circles?



Film posters, Havana, Cuba. From JumpCut.

**TA:** Something we haven't touched on. Presently our production is restricted to a maximum of twelve features and approximately fifty documentaries per year. We have enough directors to handle that load. We do not want to create more directors if we cannot give them work. So, at this time, we have adopted a policy of putting the emphasis on the industrial aspects of filmmaking. That takes a lot of our time and attention. The contrast is this: Until recently our need was to develop as filmmakers, not only as directors but all aspects. We didn't care how many films we made as long as they were good. Now we have a different challenge. We have to develop an infrastructure that allows us to make films more cheaply, in more quantity, and at a higher technical level. That concern has become paramount.

**DG:** Does that include co-productions?

**TA:** Yes, co-production is extremely important to us. We are currently co-producing with Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, and Nicaragua. In the past we have done co-productions with Spain and France. We will do co-productions with other Latin American countries and I am negotiating for an English co-production. The most fantastic aspect of this process is that we are overcoming our isolation. For all these years we have been a little island with a political system very different from the rest of our hemisphere. Now we can show that this system is not what the US has been saying it is. We don't take the first world—Europe and the United States—as a point of reference for our development. We take the rest of Latin America. There you can see the big differences. More and more Latin Americans look to us as having something they want to be in contact



with.

**DG:** As a model in some areas?

**TA:** Absolutely. And I am proud as a filmmaker to find that films are able to show off our country, to communicate with other nations, to get us closer to other peoples. Co-productions will accelerate that process. I think we can be very optimistic. Let's take this Latin American Film Festival we are hosting. It has grown so fast. When we began seven years ago, the festival was modest. Now it is something very brilliant. All of Latin America is interested in what is happening here because the festival is so important to our mutual knowledge. I think what we are doing deserves the attention of the whole world. Cuban cinema has cast a very long shadow in Latin America. Because of us, others can conceive of a Peruvian cinema or an Uruguayan cinema. Certainly there is a Brazilian cinema and an Argentinian cinema. But most Latin American countries are just beginning. Their development is much more like Cuba's than Europe's. They see Cuba as integral to the whole movement for a new Latin American cinema. This cinema is a new proposal. I think world cinema is in a crisis. World cinema is repeating itself. In Latin America, we have something new. I think the new Latin American cinema will grow and develop strongly.

**DG:** In that regard there is the unprecedented attendance of major American movie stars at this festival: Jack Lemmon, Robert De Niro, Treat Williams, Harry Belafonte, Christopher Walken. Have you been able to do more than just shake hands and drink rum together? Have you been able to say, "Look, De Niro, *The Deer Hunter* has terrible politics?" Have you been able to probe the prospect of Americans acting in films directed by Cubans?

**TA:** First we must break this permanent threat against our government. That is so stupid, so childish. It is incredible that we are still in this situation after more than a quarter of a century. There are many people in the United States who must be very ignorant about Cuba. They believe the misinformation fed to them on television. The presence of these famous North Americans here can radiate information about our reality. That can be very useful. I hope that

some day we will be able to work on joint projects. There are many obstacles because of US laws but we must try to overcome them, and if we try, I think we will succeed.

**DG:** Most Americans would be astounded by all the Hollywood films on your television. Jack Lemmon was mobbed whenever he went into the street and De Niro was treated as if he were the most important film actor in the world. Lemmon said he expected *Missing* to be known here, but he was surprised that *Some Like It Hot* is a long-standing Cuban favorite.

**TA:** The big difference now is that we see the films we want to see, not the films the monopolies impose on us. Before the revolution the North Americans did as they still do wherever they retain their control of exhibition and distribution. They would only sell us a very popular film if we purchased a group of others that were awful. We had to buy the whole package. Some 80-85 per cent of all the films seen in Cuba used to be from the US. Now, because your government will not allow us to buy films, we take what we want. I don't know exactly how it is done, but we only show what



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we want. I think the old system was destructive because people only had the image of one society.

**DG:** What countries made the 15-20 per cent of the non-American films that used to be shown?

**TA:** A very few came from Italy, France, and Argentina. The most were from Mexico. These were aimed at people who could not read subtitles. Once the North Americans — I think it was MGM — tried to take that market too, by dubbing the films in Spanish. But the people rejected dubbing. The situation now is that 50 per cent of our films are from socialist countries and 50 per cent from capitalist countries. We have our own films for the first time, and we show many films from the third world. We have broken the American cultural monopoly. I believe our audiences are more developed than anywhere else in the world. They have all images to consider. They enjoy films from everywhere. For the first time a film made in Cuba or another developing nation can be just as successful or more successful than a North American film. There was a belief that North Americans knew all the factors to make a commercial film and that audiences had been completely conditioned to that taste. That proved to be a myth. You can put Cuban films against very commercial North American films and the Cuban films can outdraw them. *Se Permuta* and *Los Pajaros* are examples of that. At a time when filmmakers in Europe complain that they are being strangled by the monopolies, we have learned to express ourselves more effectively and to reach more and more of our people and people in neighboring nations.

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**Resources:**

*Se Permuta* and *Los Pajaros Tirando a la Escopeta* are available through Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, NYC, 10019, (212) 246-5522. *One Way Or Another* and the films of Alea from: New Yorker Films, 16 W. 61 St., NYC, 10023, (212) 247-6110. Other Cuban films and film information: Center for Cuban Studies, 124 W. 23 St., NYC, 10011, (212) 242-0559. A complete filmography and essays by Alea is available in *Up To This Point: Films and Essays of Tomas Gutierrez Alea*, Smyrna Press (1987), Box 1803-GPO, Brooklyn, NY, 11202.

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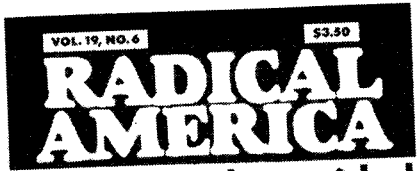
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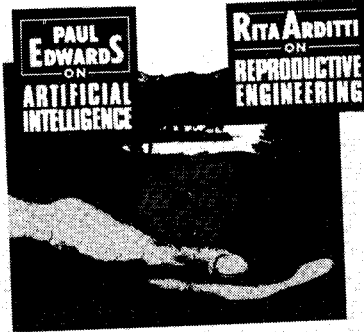
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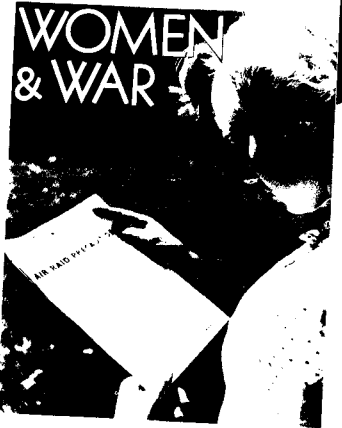


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The Editors



# CONTINUING THE REVOLUTION

Fr. Edicio dela Torre talks about  
Democracy, Coalitions and the Left in  
Today's Philippines

**Interview by Michael Bedford**

With the recently completed vote on the Philippine constitution, the approaching one year anniversary of Corazon Aquino's "People's Power" victory over the US-backed dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and legislative elections this Spring, the reconstituted Philippine democracy faces a year of intense political activity. Despite the large victory for Cory Aquino in the constitutional plebiscite, the situation remains very much in flux. Her margin of victory in the February 2nd vote has bought her time, provided a semblance of political momentum, and offered further democratic trappings to her government. But, as events in the days around the plebiscite demonstrated, it is clear that 1987 will offer a critical test for the Philippines after Marcos.

Father Edicio dela Torre is a Catholic priest in the Society of the Divine Word. Father Ed's involvement in the social and political developments in the Philippines have included being the chaplain of the Federation of Free Farmers in the period before martial law was declared by Marcos in September, 1972, and the founding chairman of the Christians for National Liberation (CNL). After martial law was declared, Father dela Torre went underground, only to be arrested two years later by the Marcos police. The charge against him was conspiracy for heading the Preparatory Committee of the National Democratic Front (NDF). Father dela Torre never faced trial, and spent five years in prison until in 1980, the Vatican intervened and negotiated his release.

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Father dela Torre was rearrested in April, 1982 on the charge of rebellion, and spent another four years in prison. He was released only after the fall of Marcos in February, 1986 under the general amnesty declared by Corazon Aquino.

Today dela Torre works with Volunteers for Democracy and Institute for Popular Democracy, both organizations committed to grassroots involvement in the political process, and to developing grassroots activist leadership. Today, Father Ed told us, he does not spend more than one night in any single location.



*Father Edicio dela Torre.*

Father dela Torre is one of the critical thinkers on the left in the Philippines. The following interview reflects some of the thinking that has occurred with the Philippine Left since the fall of Marcos. Furthermore, Father Ed has shown an uncanny accuracy in predicting the course of events since this interview. As Father dela Torre forecast, Defense Minister Enrile was forced out of the Aquino government, the government had taken a shift to the right, and the ceasefire remains shaky. The interview was conducted on Oct. 29, 1986.

### **The Political Challenges**

**Q.** The Aquino government has been criticized particularly harshly by Minister of Defense [former—ed.] Enrile and Vice President Laurel. Why is this challenge occurring at this time?

**A.** Well there are many reasons. One, which is strictly internal, is when you talk of conservative support for President Aquino you are really thinking of at least three blocs: her own, very distinct bloc of conservatives who were committed to her from the beginning—her brother and certain business people; Vice-President Laurel's group, which was really a last-minute addition and was in a very shaky coalition with Cory Aquino. He would have preferred to have been the presidential candidate himself; and finally Defense Minister Enrile's group as a distinct group which was very closely associated with Marcos and just switched over at the last minute.

The internal reason I referred to is that, in the process of consolidating power, the conservatives of President Aquino are proposing a new political party—which she has so far rejected, so her supporters are calling it a political "movement." Clearly, neither Laurel nor Enrile have a place in any new Aquino political organization. So the division is hardly ideological or on the level of principle. It's simply a question of being shut out of a project that they feel will result in a consolidated hold on power by the president.

This struggle must be seen as distinct from their criticism of the liberals and progressives and the president's policies themselves. This is just a falling out among conservatives. Because of that, a second element comes in, the questioning of policy. And the basic criticism of Minister Enrile in challenging the president's policy is first in dealing with the insurgency. The president, on this particular issue, clearly is taking a liberal approach, saying, "Let's talk first." And even some people in the military, like those who interrogated me, do believe that a political approach is better than a military one. They feel the military didn't succeed [in stopping the insurgency]. But Defense Minister Enrile seriously believes it when he says, "We never really tried the military option. The military is still corrupt. Marcos did not use the military efficiently." And I'm afraid that he just might really believe he can still wipe out the NPA [New People's Army] militarily and wants the president to make it official policy. He doesn't really need the president's go ahead. They already are pursuing the military policy.



It's just that they do not see the government as unified on it.

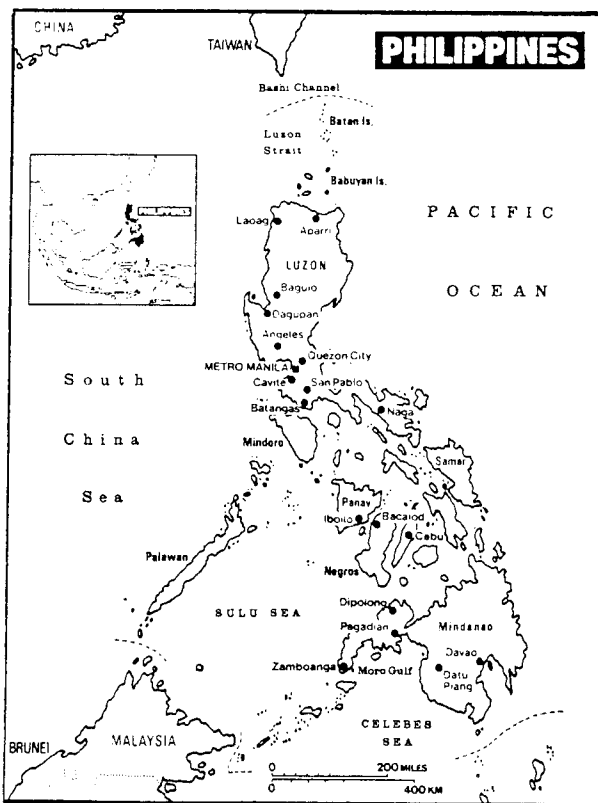
Now interestingly, the brother of the President Aquino, Jose Conjuangco, has told people openly that, whenever Enrile and Laurel speak on policy, he hears the US. He believes that there are things that the US government does not yet find it politically possible to tell the president directly, because she's too popular and she's saying the right things, even from a relatively conservative point of view. And so they're delivering the message through another channel, and that is Minister Enrile and Vice President Laurel.

Finally, other than their own personal fortunes in this debate on insurgency, I think the reason for the reaction of the Right in the Philippines is a genuine fear of the Left coming to power. But I don't think they think of that in terms of the armed insurgency. No one in his right mind, even with all the mathematics exaggerated, believes that the Left is about to seize power militarily. What they are afraid of is that the Left might take democracy seriously and fight openly in the political arena. In fact, I think the main attack on the legal formations of the Left—Partido Ang Bayan [a political party formed by former political prisoners who had been freed by Aquino] and KMU [the left trade union movement, Kilusang Mayo Uno or May First Movement] has happened for two reasons: they are really in a position to win some seats, especially in local government, but I think more importantly, they might break through the historical pattern of legal excommunication of the Left. While the Left has its own heroes, martyrs and romantic image, so long as you are excluded from the legal discourse that is a weakness, because who likes illegal politics? In the end we all want to be legal and legitimate and for a long, long while there was no such legitimate legal left voice. And it's clear the Left has been holding its own in this public debate and the Right would like to deprive the Left of that forum. Therefore they accuse Cory, the liberals and others of being too soft and of coddling the Left. They are not coddling. They simply are committed to genuine democracy, saying, "Let's allow space for all kinds of voices."

The second reason for this growing division

is that the conservatives, and especially Vice-President Laurel, have been left out or been shortchanged in the division of spoils. Traditional patronage politics in the Philippines means that the top leader must be able to satisfy his or her followers, saying "We have our own share." And Laurel has got very little. For Defense Minister Enrile, it's not as much of a problem, as he has his own power base in the northern province of Cagayan.

A key question now is how large are Enrile's ambitions. People are evenly divided in the Philippines on that. Some say his appetite has grown and he thinks that before he goes he should make a bid for power because if he waits until after six years he'll be too old. The others say, no, he's basically an insecure person. He's not really out for power as such, but he's just doing all these things because he feels he might lose even the limited power he's got—which is not at all a fantasy, because some liberals in government really want him out. In fact, the president wanted him out. I mean as far as we know, as early as three months after February a very close confidant of the Malacanang [the



Presidential Palace] officials told us that there are two people whom the president personally dislikes: Minister Enrile and Vice President Laurel.

So it's not a simply one answer. This is also the inevitable shaking up of any coalition. The coalition is too broad, given the February events [the military rebellion and eventual departure of Marcos from the presidency]. It cannot hold together from a very thinly disguised right to left-liberal. That is too broad a coalition. For it to be stable, you would need to have either only ultra-right and conservatives and token liberals; or liberals, conservatives loyal to Cory and maybe a token Left. But to have this broad spectrum, it's inevitable that something's got to give. The crisis could perhaps be postponed by effective diplomacy, political skills, and maybe a broader political outlook of various partners, but our elite politicians have never been known to be strategic thinkers. They look out for their immediate interest and to hell with the ruling

system.

**Q.** So there's nothing significant happening now? With Laurel saying he will not back Cory in a new election and Minister Enrile standing in front of Marcos supporters at Luneta Park [in the center of Manila, a favorite political rallying spot]?

**A.** It is significant because the legal and organizational consolidation of Cory's rule will happen decisively next year with the ratification of the constitution and the elections. Now is the period where things are still in flux legally and even organizationally. So if they want to challenge, they must challenge now.

Then there is the astrology factor. You never know. In the Philippines, Enrile might really take astrological advice seriously. He has a personal astrology. And he reads that another astrologer, who has read the stars and said that after November Enrile is astrologically insignificant. Those irrational factors in history sometimes make the biggest difference.



*Human Rights Day, December 10, 1985. 15,000 gathered to protest human rights violations.*

## The Left's Response

**Q.** There seems equal divisions among the Left about how to respond to Aquino:

**A.** Well, I think we should divide it into two stages. Immediately after February there was a degree of confusion with this sudden opening of democratic space, and the boycott decision [the Left opted to boycott the Marcos-called elections in January, 1985] which marginalized a big portion of the Left from the post-Marcos political debate. The debate was thus primarily among the legal Left only, using the new democratic space to stake out an oppositionist role. This role meant not being hostile by trying to overthrow the government or challenging its legitimacy, but simply staking out an independent program to say, "Hey, look, if you want to continue the revolution this is where we should go."

The question still remains. Should the Left take a position (which I personally also advocate) of critical support—meaning you still challenge the government but you enter into a unity relationship, not only for psychological impact, but also because the government, or at least its progressive leadership, need a political base which it is in no position to build overnight and which the Left has built over many long years of organizing?

That debate was basically finished after three months. The whole Left, except a very, very small minority said, "Sure, let's have critical support." Clearly the Left was not going to be in an oppositionist role. So the oppositionist force turned out to be the ultra-right, Marcos and others.

Now, the second round of discussions are more complex, because the ceasefire issue came up. Many thought, "Hey, look, let the underground, the illegal and armed struggle question settle itself according to its own pace," because there you are not dealing with a coalition government strictly. You are dealing with the same military [as under Marcos] running after the NPA, there are very few liberal governors or mayors to monitor any ceasefire, and the president herself was not in effective command of the government's insurgency policy. So I said, "Let them continue fighting. We worry about the legal sphere." But of course that can-

not be maintained forever. And so when the President announced the policy of negotiations toward a ceasefire and the NDF responded quickly, the only internal debate within the National Democratic Front was whether they could reach a political settlement, or whether a ceasefire would just hold for an initial short period.



*Rally to support left boycott of presidential elections, December 10, 1985.*

When the ceasefire option was presented, the debate shifted to a more fundamental question, "Where does the main danger lie in Philippine politics?" Does it lie in the fact that if the Left continues its support, it might just become a popular base for what is essentially a conservative consolidation by Aquino's conservatives? This would be unacceptable to the Left, but would be acceptable temporarily if it had to be done to preserve the newly won democratic space from an urgent and imminent threat to Cory's leadership from the ultra-right. And that is still a raging debate—where does the danger lie? From the ultra-right or from the conservatives? And I really find it difficult to judge that in absolute terms. Before I left, I was being swayed to the position that most likely there will be a more and more conservative consolidation. But I still believe that there will not be an absolutely conservative consolidation so long as Cory retains the liberals in government,

and that we should provide these liberals and progressives with a mass base because they don't have a party base. They have a limited bureaucratic base. And we can live with that for a transition. Others say "No, we should just uncritically commit ourselves to Cory because we should not underestimate the irrationality of the ultra-right," while others say "Well, this thing will collapse one way or the other, by either the ultra-right or the conservatives. So why don't we now prepare our forces for either repression or an oppositionist role?" People on the Left I have talked to, mainly in Manila and other urban centers, think they should still adopt the second position, which is to provide progressive support to liberals in the government and to Cory herself for two reasons: to fend off a more imminent challenge from the Right, and to provide a leverage in the process of consolidation so that the Left can prevent a totally conservative government. That is a very calculated position and in the Philippines it's identified as the position of the Popular Democrats—which is identified with me and a few others. At this stage it is a platform of the Left in tactical unity with Cory Aquino and liberals in government. But tactical unity can last three months, or it can be three years. All you are saying is this will not be forever. Who said that? Keynes? "In the long run we're all dead anyway."

Strategic alternatives continue to exist in the Philippines with the National Democracy or Social Democracy or even Socialism, but I think the maximum progressive possibility of this current situation would be a coalition government that would include the Left in a

minority capacity and there's nothing wrong with that.

### Where Does Aquino Stand?

**Q.** In reading about President Aquino's programs, it sounds very much like she's trying to keep all sides happy. She's talking about land reform, and at the same time calling in more agribusiness. She's talking about profit-sharing with the workers and at the same time calling for increased foreign investment in the country. What is happening programmatically within her administration?

**A.** To put it bluntly—I went direct to the top (well, not to Cory herself, but to her key lieutenants), and put it in left language—I said, "What is Cory's political line?" They said . . . they couldn't even speak. They hemmed and hawed. So I said, "OK, who's trying to define it for her?" If a leader does not have things clear in her head, at least staff should present memoranda in competing positions. And they mentioned a whole range of people. She says, "Whatever the people ask." But who are the people? It seems all kinds—from people who are close to her, to the unorganized, to organized groups.

Right now the only thing that is clear about Cory is that she's determined to be what she promised during her campaign—the exact opposite of Marcos. That has its good side, it has its bad side. The good side is that she will not compromise, I think, on the question of dictatorship and authoritarianism. That's why the break with Enrile is inevitable. She will not accommodate *that* far. The weak point of it is she

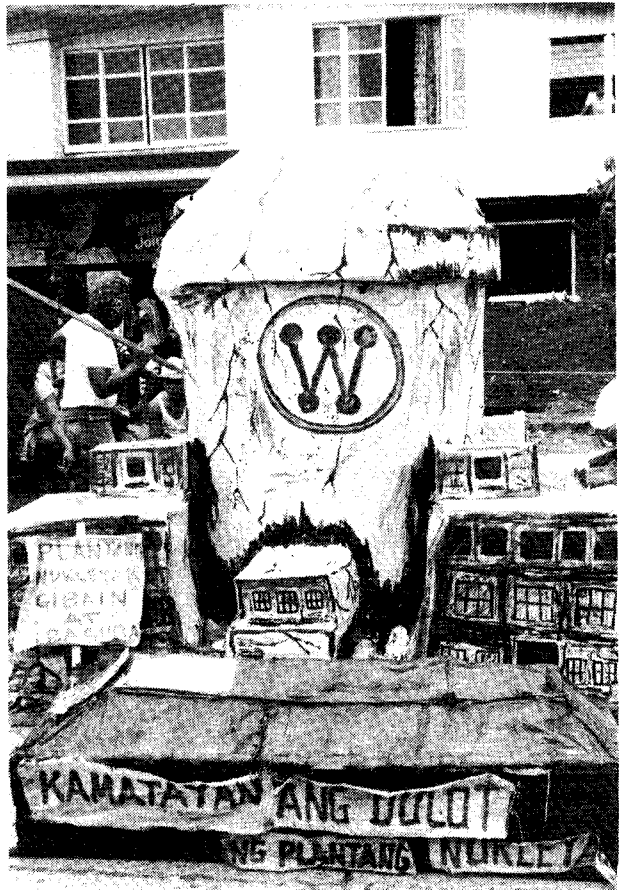


*US intervention in the Philippines, 1898-1900, current military maneuvers from the US bases on the Philippines.*

does not want to exercise power vigorously even though people want her to.

Let me give you an example, on the land reform code. On paper there is already a draft that is more progressive than anything ever drafted before by government. She could simply issue that as a decree. But she doesn't want to issue presidential decrees, because that is what Marcos did. So she says, "I'll exercise my power only when the constraints are there—the constitution is written and the legislature is in place." Can you imagine that? How can you have a progressive land reform code with a legislature filled with landlords? People might call her naive on that point, but I can imagine the trauma she might have had to using an authoritarian exercise like Marcos did. But land reform is one issue where the staff work has been done. And we've read the drafts. They're good. Not just the big program, but also the incremental step-by-step expansion of areas.

Cory Aquino did not come to the presidency with a clear program and there are many competing voices for the government's programs. For the conservatives, the program is mainly a power agenda of how to consolidate party patronage. For the liberals and progressives, the power agenda and the programmatic agenda are not very clear, because if you look at the range of her cabinet there is no single development-oriented person there. There are lawyers and politicians. This is one of those accidental factors where personalities *do* play a key role. And people and various popular organizations have given proposals, but obviously the key staff work would have to be done by government lawyers close to Aquino



*Model of nuclear power plant constructed by anti-nuclear activists who halted construction just prior to plant opening.*

herself. In the key ministries you see a lack of any program.

In essence, the problem is what they said: "We came to power unprepared." That is true. Preparedness is not the ability simply to take power and hold office. They have done that. But it is also to have a program and personnel to implement those programs. On those two points, I think what you are going to get this next year will always be an approximation, ad hoc type of government, responding to whoever has the loudest voice. This is too bad because I think Aquino still retains enough moral authority and there's still enough popular expectations for her to take bold initiatives. But there is this strange uneasiness about wielding power in a decisive way, which I think is a hangover of the Marcos era. It does not derive from her being a woman or her being a liberal. It's not that; it's just that she really wants to be opposite to Marcos. I want to say, "Not *that* opposite!"





Philippine President Corazon Aquino

*Aquino as woman of the year in US media.*



**Q.** And will the new constitution change that?

**A.** No. For a lot of politicians the constitution is simply the starting gun so they can run for elections. And also there is the legacy of the Marcos regime. I was surprised at the relative apathy of even activist groups over the constitution. I can trace it to two factors: Traditionally the constitution used to be a very weighted document. Governments usually change the constitution rarely, so when you move for an amendment, it causes extensive debate. But Marcos used to amend it so often, he devalued the whole idea of a constitution. So a lot of people say, "Oh well, with the next president they can just change the constitution again." So there is a lessening of its importance in people's mind. While the constitution and law in

general is the basic political culture of our elite, for the middle and the lower classes, politics has become—all because of the Marcos years—more closely tied to more concrete and more specific issues. Constitutional language and issues are framed in such abstract terms that it does not excite us much.

There is a debate in the Philippines about the importance of the constitution in relation to the consolidation of power. If it is superimportant, the fact that it has some very bad provisions [the proposed constitution fails to address the critical problems of land reform, industrial policy, or the US bases in the Philippines. It also contains anti-feminist and weak minority rights provisions.] should make any left person oppose it. But others are saying, "Come on, we are falling into the culture of the elite." And in



a sense it is a kind of an idealist saying: "It's not the paper that will determine anything, but it is the spaces and the relative stability the constitution creates, so that at least we will know where to fight." And that's why its ratification is generally going to be presented by the Left in those terms: do you want to stabilize Cory's leadership or not?

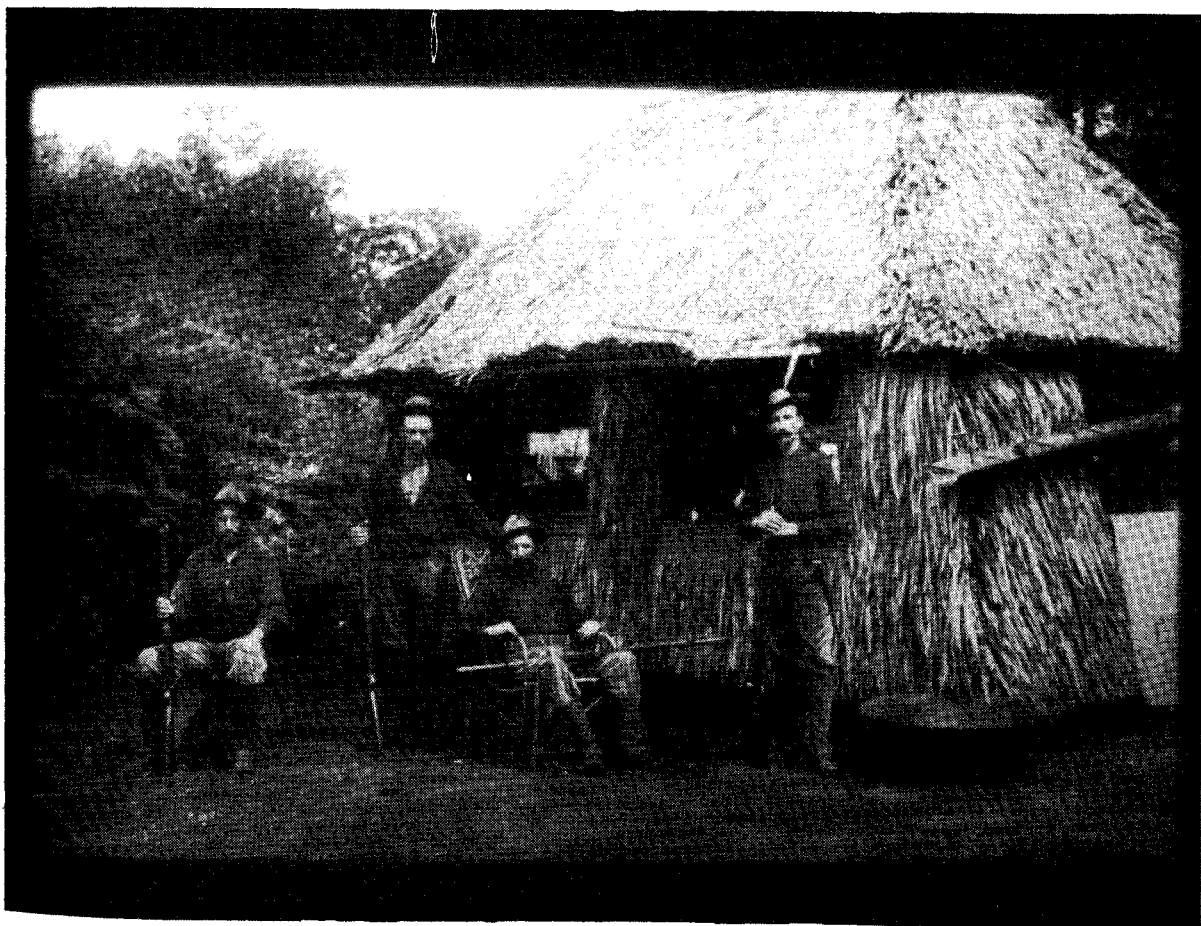
A dominant section of the Left said, "OK, we work for its ratification without any illusions." But some others on the Left are saying "Sure, it will be ratified, but shouldn't some voices be clear in the process, by simply saying, 'We are not going to force you to vote our way, but our conscience tells us that this constitution is bad in these provisions.'"

So you will have a "vote no" campaign waged, not vigorously enough to make too many people vote no, but simply as a conscience vote.

I think one of the lessons of the Left's decision to boycott the Marcos-called [February, 1986] election is that principles, strategies and all are fine, but you must understand concretely the level of political conscience of people, and they may consider something more important

than these broad principles. That is, their perception of Cory's stability. This will be a long debate, meaning it's not so much immediately a question of whether you vote "yes" or "no," but rather "why." Marcos' people are going to vote "no" just to destabilize Cory. It's very difficult for a left person to say, "Now, vote no" and be identified with them. On the other hand, to simply vote yes and say, "Rah, rah, Cory" would mean abdicating any responsibility. So I think there will be an educational discussion, and then people will simply vote their conscience, saying, "I vote this but I understand you for voting that." That is how it has become.

Looking at the bright side of it, there are some provisions in the constitution that are very good. For example, from the point of view of popular democracy, the constitution formalizes popular intervention in government affairs through recall initiatives and referendums, although it's supposed to happen only after the first five years. Also the nuclear-free provision, although it has a qualification in the international interest, is progressive enough. [This



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qualification, a major loophole, states the Philippines will be a nuclear-free state “consistent with national interest.”] At least the negative reaction of some senators here in the US should tell us that. It’s not so bad.

### **The Philippines and El Salvador**

**Q.** At times, Secretary of State Shultz and Senator Robert Dole have seen the El Salvadoran-Duarte model as ideal in the Philippines, with a weakened president and a very strong military seeking a military solution to the insurgency.

**A.** There was a fairly well-circulated study in the Philippines of the parallel between the Philippines and El Salvador. It was done under a pseudonym, by the chairman of the National Democratic Front on the southern island of Mindanao. It said one finds in the Philippines today something vaguely approximate to the liberal situation in 1979 in El Salvador where after removing the dictatorial general, they were able to bring in at least two sections of the oppositionist party—the Christian Democrats, represented by Duarte, and a section of Social Democracy, represented by Ungo. Then, eventually, the coalition broke up. Duarte now is the president of a basically military regime and Ungo has become the democratic personality heading an alliance of democrats and revolutionaries. And the report asked at the end, “Will Cory be a Duarte or an Ungo?”

Of course there are no strict parallels. But rather than simply a Duarte, you should see both possibilities. Of course, Cory will simply be Cory. That’s another thing altogether. But will she accommodate to the point where even if Enrile were to go, basically he will have succeeded in making her adopt a policy that is conservative, hard line—maybe represented by more professional people, such as Armed Forces chief Ramos—and will just release the military on the insurgency but also send out death squads to eliminate the legal opposition. There are variations in being a Duarte of course, but that would be the extreme.

Or the other question is whether she could be an Ungo in power or an Ungo out of power? As an Ungo in power, she would exclude the ultra-Right from the coalition and bring in a section

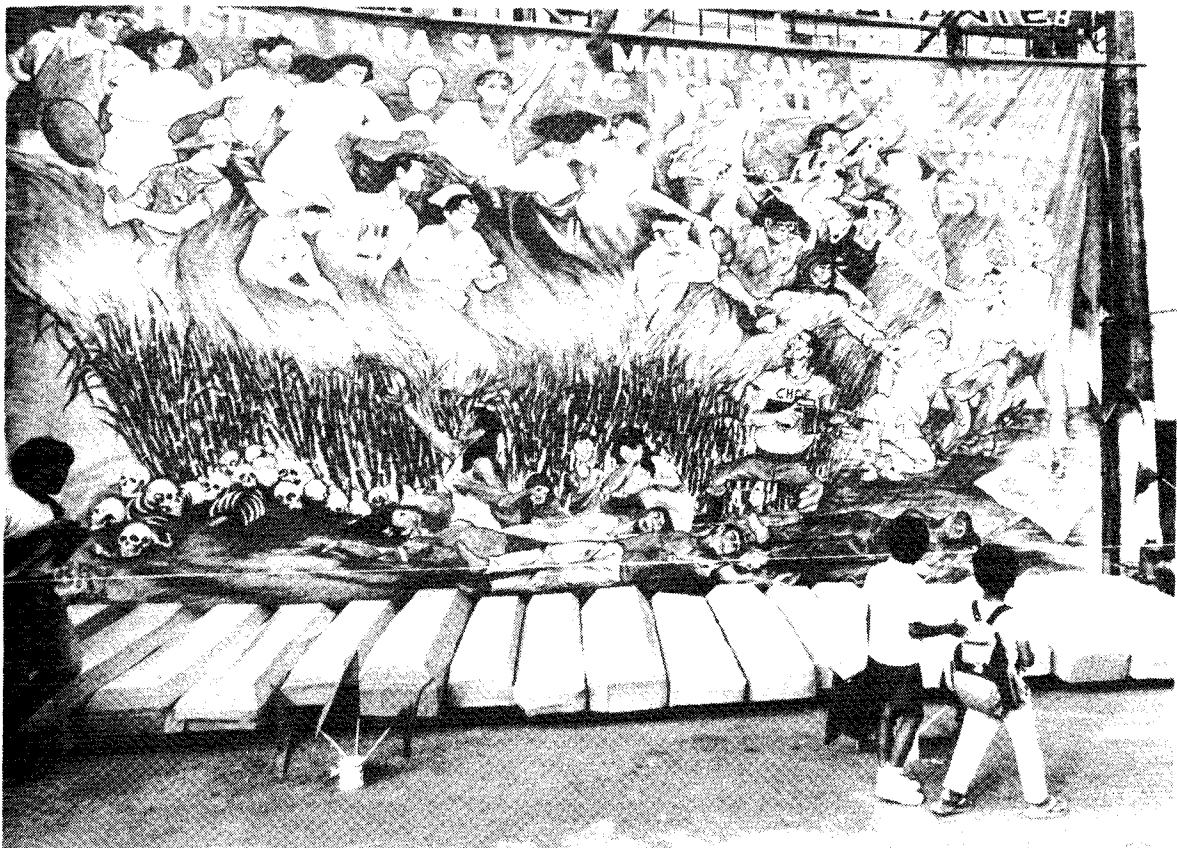
of the Left. And it would mean a continuing role for the popular movement where National Democrats can play a greater role. Or will she simply have to step down, be eased out in the face of another—a would-be Duarte-type military regime—and she becomes an oppositionist leader of a broader coalition of left and center, the Ungo.

I, obviously from the point of view of the Left, see Ungo as the better option, and preferably in power. I mean, who wants to be in opposition forever? And I remember this discussion I had with this New People’s Army guerrilla, who said, “Yeah, why not? If we enter into a ceasefire and she starts negotiating—even if we haven’t forged an agreement—and the right really panics, violates the law, makes a premature move against Aquino, then together with the loyal troops of the Armed Forces of the Philippines opposing a coup, the NPA could lend its hand. In a successful fending off of the ultra-right attack, the new government would be reconstituted and then we will have a new coalition of the center and a bit of the Right and a bit of the Left.” I mean what an interesting fantasy! But I would say if that happens, the Philippines will really blow the mind of all political analysts.

Clearly Cory, with all her limitations, is a distinct political asset and force. In terms of self-interest, that is why neither the US nor the bulk of the conservatives in the Philippines military will support a simple bid for power by Enrile to knock out Cory. The preferred arrangement is for Aquino to adopt the military’s policy but remain president and lend her popularity to that anti-popular move.

But even if she never opens to the Left beyond her present liberal tendencies, any mature Left force in the Philippines should not underestimate the progressive potential of a coalition. Not Left-led at all, more dominantly led by a combination of liberals and conservatives, but which would include and accommodate the Left. Especially during this period of recovery, with the careful development of a legal progressive movement, that would be of tremendous importance.

And that’s why I’m still committed to that publicly, and in the internal debates I’ve said, “Let’s support Cory, but not just support her



*Symbolic coffins used to protest state terrorism and the mass murders in Escalante.*

for supporting's sake but so that we continue to offer a more progressive base, an alternative so that her options remain more flexible." I think that's crucial.

### **The Left's Political Vision**

**Q.** There was a lot of play given in this country, and I understand also in the Philippines, on the Ross Munroe article in *Commentary* (December, 1985) calling the New People's Army the new Khmer Rouge of Asia. How would you describe the vision of the future of the Philippines from a Left perspective?

**A.** A short or a medium term view of things would have at the maximum, on the government level, a coalition government that has the Left as a significant partner, but not the Left as the dominant partner. This is a view shared by a substantial number of left thinkers and fighters. This is calculating not merely the growth of the Left in abstract, but also

evaluating people's consciousness about the Left, Filipino fears of communism, and the role of the United States.

So at the government level the burden of proof for designing this coalition relationship is on us because coalitions rarely have worked in history. We simply have to work at it and not be burdened by this legacy that all coalitions tend to be fractious and break up anyway. We have to learn how to develop a coalition government and, more important, how to be able to work in a coalition that we do not dominate—which I think is the best preparation for leading a coalition later. It's always easy to talk of a coalition but when you lead you have the temptation to just clean it up and simplify it. But if you have been on the receiving end of another leader in a coalition maybe you know better how these things work.

So that is a key factor, of knowing how to work in a coalition, while being a minority in a coalition. In the short-term, this is the only

realistic government we can have that is progressive. Of course if the government polarizes into an authoritarian regime, the only alternative after a prolonged warfare will be a left-led, but still hopefully a coalition government in reality.

That's why one of the approaches here at the current level is just to get people from various traditions—National Democrat, Social Democrat, Socialist, Liberal—to have some form of working relationship. It's not something you can succeed in building overnight, but given the legacy of sectarianism and unnecessary conflicts I think what we have achieved these past seven or eight months is good. I mean the good will, personal contacts and all that.

And that's the whole reason why I want this democratic space to continue. It's very hard to build that while in the underground. The underground provides tension. It's very difficult to get people talking, especially when they still disagree on many things. But openly and legally, you have time and space. We can quarrel, debate and still come back again.

At the social program level there is a much broader consensus within the Left and the middle than on the whole question of power-sharing and forms of rule. On agrarian reform, right down the line everyone agrees. And everyone agrees that it is first of all primarily a question of psychological, social and political liberation of the peasant, meaning "organize them first." Not a government saying, "I will liberate you" and transferring the land to the peasants, who will then transfer their dependence from the landlord to the government. Secondly, agrarian reform cannot be pursued as a program separately from some form of industrialization policy, because if you want to rehabilitate a big portion of your landlord class, or at least transfer their capital, you will have to provide alternative enterprises where they can transfer their skill and their capital. In a more socialist model, clearly they would not be the dominant industrial power, but in our capitalist model they might be. But that is secondary to the point that agrarian reform will not succeed without some industrialization program.



*Escalating protests against nuclear weapons basing in the Philippines.*

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So those two factors are clear. Then clearly a degree of control or limitation of multinational capital will have to come in. But again, that has a whole range of models, from strictly buying out corporations to restricting areas of operation. Given our starting point, we could hardly do worse with some degree of control. That is at the economic policy level, with a mixture of planning and market. Everyone kind of accepts that—some a bit more planning, others less.

In foreign policy—I hate to say this, but theoretically at least Marcos had a broader conception of foreign policy than Cory, because Marcos, for his own reasons, tried a multi-lateral policy. In practice, though, it was strongly dependent on the US. The problem I feel with the president now, or her advisors more properly—and especially Vice President Laurel who is also the Foreign Minister—is that they have a very strong bilateral relationship with the US and, secondarily, with Japan. They have not really explored another path. . . . I like very much to quote—I don't know who said it but it was from the Nicaraguans—that the way to independence from this exclusive bilateral dependence is through the "diversification of dependence." I like that! You know, they're all dependent relation, but if you can diversify it at least you have not only the trilateral option of Japan, the US and Western Europe, but also the Socialist bloc. And then some degree of the South to South option—but while it's nice and romantic to talk of that, realistically a lot of trade and investment relations there would be secondary to the diversification of dependence internationally to the developed capitalist nations and the developed socialist nations.

I think on those three points there is a broad consensus on the Left. For the rest, my own personal view is that whether dominantly capitalist or socialist, I believe that popular democracy is going to be a key element against any attempts at bureaucratism and a one-sided emphasis on party platforms and government. The biggest potential of any nation—and especially Third World nations that are capital-starved or technologically starved—are its people. But it's easy to say people are a resource. They'll not move unless they're organized. They need to be, to have various degrees of

popular education. They need various levels of leadership. These things will not happen unless you see organizing as an end in itself and not just a means. These are permanent features of any future society, even though they are also means towards transforming societies, and supporting political parties and new governments.

I feel there is a very strong streak of populism and anarchism in Christian radicalism—when Christians turn radical they also turn anarcho-populist at the beginning. Now you must discipline that, because that perspective will not succeed, but it does not mean you have to give up what is valid in that tradition, with its stress on the role of smaller groups and popular movements. That is a bit of a personal vision, but a few more others share it.

**Q.** The whole cause-oriented groups [sectoral groups that developed in opposition to the repression and economic problems of the Marcos regime] seem a reflection of this.

**A.** Yes, there is an unevenness of understanding. Some groups will think of disbanding themselves after the revolution, saying, "Ah well, we've done our work. We will go home now." Or else, "Let's run things from the point of view of government now. We're in power." I say, "No, your best leaders should be distributed down the line." You don't put them all at the base. That's an anarchist vision. You should put them also on top, but you should not put them all on top. There should be some at the base, otherwise there will be, you might call it, almost an inbuilt dynamic of looking down or dominating. A degree of tension is I think the permanent condition for progress.

### **A Personal View**

**Q:** One final question about you personally. You had nine years in prison and a number of people I talked to the other night when you were speaking were struck by your clarity, your vision, your spirit and your poetry, your use of words. How did that experience of being in opposition affect the way you are today?

**A:** I think being in prison became a political capital, meaning no one doubts my radicalism. I can get away with *appearing* not radical. If

you are not yet proven to be radical you tend to try to overstress your being a radical. And I don't mean that psychologically in terms of need. Politics, you know, is always communication and you get affected by your audience. If they react, they may have different expectations. Part of my distinct role I feel has been to stress many aspects of radicalism that have been stereotyped as contrary to radicalism—cracking jokes, being human, being flexible. These stereotypes, unfortunately, tend to be reinforced by certain radicals either because of their own personal insecurity or because they think it is not the correct time to say these things.

So that is one result of being in prison for so long. I would have preferred that I not earn my credentials this way. Imagine what a lousy political career it is to be identified primarily as a former prisoner. It is better to be someone in the underground, a fighter and all that. But anyway it's there and I think I've tried to turn this experience into an advantage. People tell me I can get away with more things than others.

But more positively I think prison did two things to me. First, it gave me time, too much time, much more time than I needed, but at least clearly enough time to reflect strategically and indepth, which therefore allows for flexibility. Second, it gave me time to review my life and sort out the complex strains that go into any radical commitment. It's not so simple as just one factor or another factor. From this, I feel I have a more sensitive understanding of the turmoil and complexities of other people when they commit themselves. I always worry personally about what I call our "time bombs" in people who make quick political decisions, did not sort out other things. They reach a wall, a conflict or defeat, a failure or shortcoming, and then a time-bomb explodes inside. In a situation like the Philippines where people are confronted by literal bombs—being killed, and all that—I would rather that they come to that with a basic sense of wholeness, which will not happen if you don't examine your life and accept it in its complexity.

Very closely related to that, it was my privilege even while being in prison to never lose touch with a variety of people. Some people tease me that it was only in prison that they

could reach me, because when I'm out of prison they don't know where to get hold of me. But prison is supposed to isolate you, narrow you down, you wallow in self-pity or self-reflection. In my case I had some periods of isolation, but correspondence, just verbal words, some letters and all entered my life in a sufficient richness that it helped me to preserve not only my wholeness and my bearing, but has even enriched my understanding of what it takes to win and to fight and understand the wide variety of people.

In a special way I first realized the importance of the international solidarity movement—I first realized it in prison. You know when you're outside prison you're stuck with your work and in the Philippines this whole understanding of the international dimensions in the struggle among activists really started getting clear only in 1980 or so. But in the 1970s, because prisoners are always beneficiaries of international solidarity, I got in touch with more and more people from abroad. Thinking this through and then during my first release in 1980, I started appreciating the two-way exchange: that I am both the recipient and also offer something. So that I already look at myself not merely as an activist for Philippine liberation but also helping in other movements.

*Michael Bedford works with Third World Reports, and has lived in the Philippines for over five years. Recently he led two fact-finding missions to the Philippines to assess the changes after the removal of Marcos and the rise of Corazon Aquino.*



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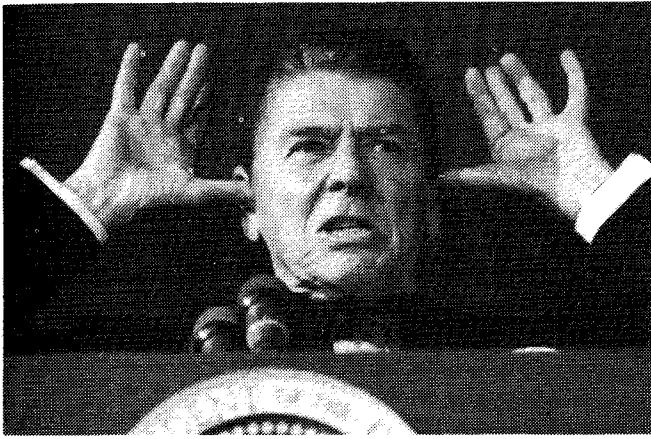
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*Simone de Beauvoir in her room on Bucherie Street, 1948, behind her the reproduction of a Picasso painting.*

# BY HERSELF:

## Reflections on Simone de Beauvoir

Dorothy Kaufmann

I first encountered the name Simone de Beauvoir when I was an adolescent in the mid-1950s. Browsing through the local Queens bookstore, I came upon a volume mysteriously titled *The Second Sex*. As I looked through its pages, I found myself uncomfortable and vaguely threatened by the idea that someone could write so many pages just about women, as if they were a special problem. I remember thinking: I'm not a "woman," I'm me. Perhaps it was precisely because I was feeling a constant bewilderment of sexual identity that I would not read the book. The fact of its existence was troubling enough.

It took me over a decade to come to the astonishing recognition that "me" happens to be a woman, an identity through which others define me, quite apart from my own sense of myself. In 1969 I was a Lecturer in French at Cornell University, married and pregnant with a child I very much wanted to have. What I did not want was the sudden change I felt in others' perceptions of me, the sense of being reified by male colleagues and their wives (there were few women faculty in 1969) into the category of a proper woman. It was at that point, during my seventh month of pregnancy, that I first read *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir's most famous and controversial postulate in *The Second Sex* (first published in

France in 1949) that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" underlines her view of women's Otherness as fabricated, imposed by culture rather than biology. Along with so many women coming of age in the fifties and sixties, I began to be aware of that Otherness through the contradictions of the civil rights and the anti-war movements. For the women participating in those struggles, it became apparent that our leftist brothers, despite their rhetorical desire to change society, were not changing their power relation to women. Radical discourse notwithstanding, they were merely acting out new forms of the old sexual division of labor and the old sexual exploitation.

In France, the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) emerged from an analogous perception, following the revolutionary euphoria of May 1968. From the outset there was a fundamental division in the French women's movement between diverse groups of *feminists*, whose praxis took Beauvoir's

ideology of equality as their point of departure, and a group called *Psychoanalyse et Politique*, influenced by theories of the feminine and profoundly hostile to Beauvoir. The fundamental opposition between the two ideologies can best be understood through the opposing values each assigns to the notion of difference. For the feminists, the argument of biological difference is a political tool that has been used to mask and justify a history of exploitation in which women, defined as the Other, have been prevented from leading lives as autonomous individuals. In refuting essentialism and the decrees of patriarchal history the feminists argue, following Beauvoir, that women must claim their right to the full range of human possibilities, including those that until now have been considered masculine. In contrast to the feminists, theorists of the feminine in France see woman's difference as the source of her potential liberation. They are less concerned with the historical oppression of women than with the misogynist unconscious of



*Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre at Mrs. Morel's house in Juan-les-Pins, 1935.*

patriarchy that has successfully repressed the feminine in the libidinal economy of culture.

Within this controversy, Beauvoir herself has often been attacked by the theorists of the feminine as a collaborator of patriarchy and even as a misogynist. Such accusations confuse two issues: Beauvoir's hostility to the maternal and her commitment to women. The anti-maternal bias of *The Second Sex* is unmistakable but needs to be interpreted through the mediations of both her historical and her personal situation. In the late forties, France was still emerging from the trauma of Occupation and the Vichy regime. Although French women had finally obtained the right to vote (1944), legislated in part in reaction to the policies of Vichy and in recognition of women's active participation in the Resistance, male rejection of Vichy propaganda did not go so far as to consider women's right to control their bodies. Not only did abortion continue to be outlawed, but even the sale of contraceptives remained illegal until 1967.

Another factor in Beauvoir's hostility to the maternal is her adoption of Sartrean existentialism with its rejection of the natural as immanence and anti-value, in opposition to the transcendence of freely chosen projects. Beauvoir's childhood history makes her attraction to Sartrean assumptions more comprehensible. As a dutiful daughter in the early part of the century, she grew up with the traditional family structure and expectations of the time. Her mother took care of her moral welfare and day-to-day needs while her father was the authority figure who embodied the Law and worldly knowledge. Françoise de Beauvoir, as evoked by her daughter, was a pious woman who accepted without question her prescribed duties as wife and mother, renouncing any self-expression outside those roles. She became for her daughter a warning, the image of what she wanted her own life not to be. Maternity always looked to Beauvoir like a trap in which women lose their autonomy and their happiness.

Beauvoir's commitment to women's rights comes out of that same history. To the extent that any woman can be singled out as inspiring the real changes in women's situation in the past decades, Beauvoir should be the one. *The Second Sex* is where contemporary feminism



*Beauvoir at her desk at home, Paris, 1967.*

begins. Its totalizing theory, however problematic, allowed for translation into a political praxis to which it gave philosophical support. Beauvoir's understanding of the term "feminism" has always been political; she therefore never considered *The Second Sex* a feminist work. It was only in 1972 that she publicly declared she had "become a feminist" according to her own definition: those women fighting to change women's condition, linked to the class struggle but nevertheless outside it.

In 1971 she signed and collected signatures for the Manifesto of 343 writers and celebrities who declared that they were among those one million French women each year who had been forced to have recourse to dangerous and illegal abortions. Throughout the decade of militant activism that followed May '68, feminists knew they could count on Beauvoir's support. And after the election of Mitterand in 1981, Yvette Roudy's Ministry of Women's Rights (now dismantled by Mitterand's right-wing "co-habitor," Prime Minister Jacques Chirac) was explicitly inspired by Beauvoir's feminism.

Although Simone de Beauvoir is best known for *The Second Sex*, her literary production was also considerable. Her four-volume autobiography, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *The Prime of Life*, *Force of Circumstance*, and *All Said and Done*, is a major

*Beauvoir after her return from China, 1955.*



document of French social history as well as the story of an extraordinary life. She wrote a number of novels, including *She Came to Stay*, the fictionalized narrative of her disastrous experiment living out Sartre's idea of the "trio"; *The Blood of Others*, a novel of the Resistance; and *The Mandarins*, an account of the tortuous relationship of left-wing Parisian intellectuals with the Communists after World War II and also an evocation of Beauvoir's love affair with the American novelist Nelson Algren. Her philosophical essays *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* are arguably a better and certainly a more complex introduction to existentialism than Sartre's much better known *Existentialism is a Humanism*. In *La Vieillesse*, misleadingly translated as *Coming of Age*, Beauvoir attempts, not quite successfully I think, to confront the issues of old age through the methodology she brought to *The Second Sex*. The recently published and controversial *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre* gives a clinically detailed account of her last ten years with Sartre, until his death in 1980.

Beauvoir's most moving literary writing can be found in two short works that are beginning to be more widely read in this country. In *A Very Easy Death*, she tells of her mother's dying of cancer, letting go, at least in a few unguarded spaces, of the rationalist control that marks so much of Beauvoir's writing. *The Woman Destroyed* is a novella, the fictional diary of a middle-aged woman who has lived entirely through husband and children, like so many women of a certain class and generation, only to find herself utterly lost when her husband falls in love with another woman. Somewhat to my surprise, the story has been a passionate favorite among my undergraduate women students, who find it not at all dated in its perceptions.

The most paradoxical legacy of Simone de Beauvoir is the double symbol her name evokes: as the author of *The Second Sex*, she stands as the pioneer of women's liberation; her life-long relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre has become a myth, for better and worse, of the possibilities of the heterosexual couple. They met when Beauvoir was twenty-one, Sartre twenty-three. Both were completing their studies in philosophy and preparing for the





Interview with Che Guevara, in his office in Havana. Cuba trip, 1960.

*agrégation* (which Sartre had failed the previous year). From the outset, there seems to have existed between them the mutual recognition of a special kind of kinship. They shared by temperament a passionate need for absolutes and an equally passionate disbelief in them. Sartre's anarchistic denunciation of bourgeois society responded and gave value to Beauvoir's rejection of the dutiful daughter she used to be.

For fifty years, until Sartre's death in 1980, they stayed together on the basis of the pact Sartre proposed early in their relationship. "Sartre did not have the vocation for monogamy," Beauvoir writes in *The Prime of Life*. "Between us," he explained to her with typical headiness, "there is a necessary love, we should also experience contingent loves." Beauvoir adds, "We were two of a kind, and our relationship would endure as long as we

did: but it could not take the place of fleeting riches to be had from encounters with different people. How could we deliberately forego that gamut of emotions — astonishment, regret, nostalgia, pleasure — which we were also capable of feeling?" They made another pact: they would never lie to one another, and neither would conceal anything from the other. Although they usually saw each other every day they never lived together: "Why live under the same roof when the world was our common property?" The ideal was freedom and a perfect transparency.

Beauvoir's relation to Sartre emerges as a complex dialectic of liberation and alienation. From the time they met, she felt that what Sartre valued in her was what she valued in herself: her love of personal freedom, her passion for life, her curiosity, and her determination to be a



writer. When she failed to carry through her desire to write in the early years of their relationship, it signified a loss of esteem not only in her own eyes but in Sartre's as well. Describing each of her major writing projects, she speaks of Sartre's encouragement and the creative impetus he gives to her thinking. The memoirs, however, enact a conflict between the text of Beauvoir's imperious need to assert her autonomy and the subtext of an equally imperious need to be overwhelmed by Sartre. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir radically questions the culturally imposed value of femininity that has made women into relative beings. But she does not submit Sartre's existentialism — and the private obsessions that complicate it — to

the same questioning. As a result, the thrust of Sartre's masculinist idea of freedom sometimes threatens to overwhelm Beauvoir's feminist project.

Beauvoir's last publication before her death was the *Lettres au Castor* (1983), two volumes of Sartre's letters to her (and to a few others), written for the most part early in their relationship through the period between 1939 and 1941 when Sartre was drafted and then taken prisoner by the Germans. The letters confirm, often movingly, Sartre's sense of their love as an absolute. At the same time, his compulsively detailed sexual descriptions of affairs with "contingent" women in his life show us how ambiguous in meaning truth-telling can be.



*Woman's Day colloquium in Brussels, November 11, 1972.*

A friend of mine has said that Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre are my "family romance." I'm inclined to agree. Certainly Beauvoir has been a kind of adopted mother in my imagination for many years, although she would not like my choice of that metaphor. I continue to be fascinated by the contradictions within and between her feminism and her relation to Sartre. In the concluding chapter of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes of the independent woman as a divided self, caught between her femininity and her vocation as a "sovereign subject." Almost all the novels present a heroine who is similarly torn between a desire for autonomy and a desire to give herself to another. Beauvoir has asserted that she herself was not divided, thanks to Sartre and his insistence upon her freedom as well as his own. But the inscription of her life in the *Memoirs* and even in *The Second Sex* is much more problematic. For many feminists, especially those of us who still find ourselves in intimate relations with men, the example of Simone de Beauvoir raises questions of how to reconcile our need for freedom and for love that we are far from being able to resolve.

Dorothy Kaufmann teaches French at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. She is the author of *The Theater of Jean Paul Sartre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) and has written about Simone de Beauvoir and contemporary French feminism.

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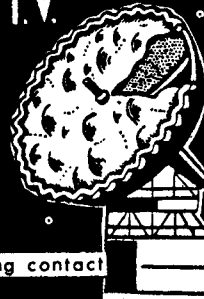
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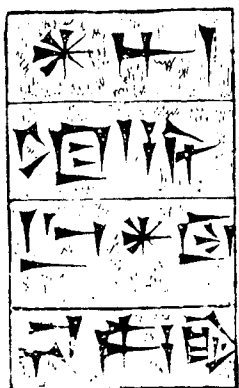
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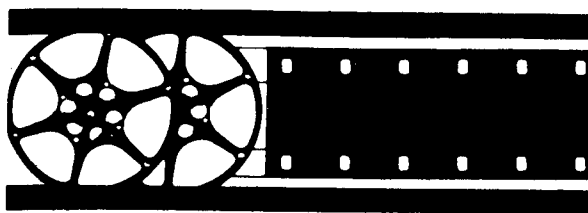
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# FILM SHORTS



**"She's Gotta Have It" directed by Spike Lee, an Island Pictures release, 1986.**

Any film that starts out with a Zora Neale Hurston quote grabs my attention right away. But, if Spike Lee's intent in the comedy "She's Gotta Have It" was to create a strong-willed black woman like the main character in Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, he didn't make it.

Nola Darling is sketchily depicted to be artistic and politically aware. It's hard to take Nola or the gestures regarding her independence seriously since Lee doesn't take her seriously himself: Nola doesn't have much of a life beyond the mattress. Her main goal is sleeping with each of her three male lovers whenever she feels like it. She refuses to make a commitment to any one of them and this, of course, drives the men crazy. Needless to say, they don't show much interest in her art or her politics.

Much of the humor in the film derives from the clashing personalities and values of the men and the attempts of each to win Nola for himself. There is the vain and conceited model Greer Childs, the oh-so-serious and self-righteous Jamie Overstreet, and the unemployed, fast-talking, high-top sneaks-wearing Mars Blackmon. (The names that Lee has chosen for the characters represent the types they represent and his attitudes toward them.)

There is a lesbian character, Nola's girlfriend Opal Gilstrap (jockstrap?). The one scene between them, where Nola squelches Opal's advances, seems to have no point other than the rejection itself (except perhaps to cater to the homophobes in the audience). It's more of a statement of Lee's attitudes about sex between black women than a comment about Nola. It would not have been far-fetched for the supposedly free, sexually adventurous Nola to sleep with Opal and then say something like, "Sorry, I like you but I'm not into being tied down this year."

While the film nominally revolves around Nola and her escapades, the actual heart and soul of the film is Mars Blackmon, played with wit, charm and an energy that is hard to resist, by Lee himself. Blackmon, as implied by his name, is something of a black Everydman: a for real, down-to-earth, take-

no-bull street brother. He plays the dozens on everyone from Larry Bird and the Celtics to egotistical men lamely trying to get over on women.

As for Nola, by the end, you're still not quite sure who she is or what she's gotta have. When the men proclaim that it's sex she wants, you think, "There's Got To Be More To It Than That." Her big declaration of independence—that her body is hers and she's not a "one-man-woman" is flimsy. Especially coming after the shocking, let's-punish-the-woman-cause-that's-what-she-deserves scene, where Jamie brutally "gives her what," he says, "she wants." The reconciliation afterwards plays like they were discussing rudeness rather than rape.

We need more films by and about black people. Independent black filmmakers need support and room to move. Yet, my overall reaction to Spike Lee and his film remains. Why does this talented, energetic, charismatic, gutsy black man with access to resources (however limited compared to Hollywood producers) have to resort to gay put-downs and woman abuse? Lee shouldn't be expected to make any film but his own, but he should be expected to do better. He should be expected to bring all of his talents and comic sense to the women characters in his films without being ham-strung by the perverse need to put them in their place, punish them or keep them confined within adolescent male fantasies. Hopefully, in his future films, Lee will stick to what he knows best and, in the meantime he'll find out the Real Deal about who black women are and what it is we say we "gotta have."

**Kate Rushin**

*Kate Rushin is a poet and a member of the New Words bookstore collective. She is a member of Boston Women's Community Radio. An earlier version of this review appeared in Gay Community News and Black/Out.*

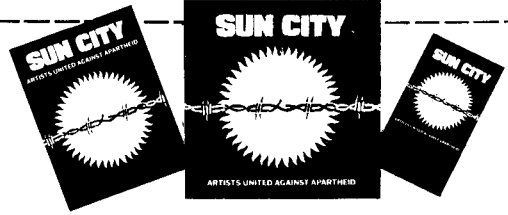
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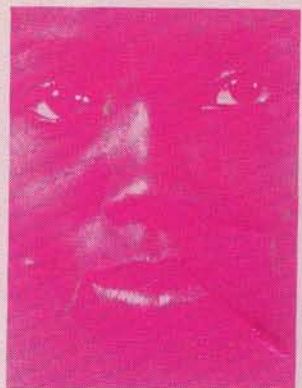
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