As black lesbians in Britain we are growing in our numbers and in strength. The following discussion is a result of eight hours’ taped discussion between four of us. It was impossible to reproduce the full text of the discussion due to lack of space. Here we are printing only extracts of our discussions and we hope to publish the full text as a pamphlet in the near future. The process of coming together and talking and eating has been exhilarating and strengthening. When we started out, two of us were unsure and reluctant about being identified by our real names, but towards the end of our discussions, we felt strengthened and supported and decided to be identified. We are all aware of how vulnerable we are making ourselves and putting our lives at risk in many ways, but it is only when we begin to make ourselves visible that we can break the silence about our lives.

Feminist Review No17, July 1984
Coming Out and the Joys of Visibility

Pratibha: I’ve been really excited about this, but I’ve also been worried, because I thought if I use my real name it will be the first time I’ve come out in a really public way.

Carmen: Me too. There’s two sides to my worry really, one is to do with being known by the state. You know, the drastic things that are going on in this country, names in print are prime targets because of the threat our words make. It could also affect our freedom of travel into different countries. On the other hand, there’s the way that names in print get taken up by the media, they like to pin mass movements onto a few individual ‘heroes’ or leaders. It’s a totally false representation. Of course, they can still get to you, but it’s a little bit harder, just one more layer.

P: I think it is different for black women — the whole notion of coming out — than it is for white women. One is made to feel guilty if you don’t come out. At one time in the gay movement there was this pressure that ‘You’ve not really come out till you’ve come out to your family’ and I find that really oppressive. I feel that doesn’t hold in the same way for us because often we don’t want to take the risk of total rejection by our families who we might rely on for lots of different kinds of strength and support.

Shaila: The myth that Black families or people are more homophobic than whites should really be demolished, because really what is obvious is that the security links we need with our families/communities are stronger. But about using our names… I think it is important, it makes us accessible, which is very difficult and personal, but it would be nice for other sisters to be able to recognize us.

Gail: The family! The family is very contradictory for us. There are emotional involvements, there are ties, the roots that it represents for us all as individuals in a fundamentally racist/sexist society. That’s why Black people may decide not to come out as lesbians or gay for fear of being rejected by a group of people whom you not only love but who represent a real source of security, of foundation. That’s a choice that has to be respected as a political choice, not just an individual one. But we also have to recognize that not coming out does exact a terrible toll, or can do, in the sense of living this huge personal/political lie. I was terrified to tell my mother, who in fact told me in the end, and who came to accept and love me for that. In fact just before she died last year she spoke very honestly to me and my lover of the time and said how upset she would be if we broke up. That was very important to me. But I must say that before it was all in the open, and I was living closely with my family and my husband, I found it intolerable that they didn’t know this important thing about me, especially because I felt so good about having become a lesbian at last. Now I feel that coming out can be very liberating, a feeling of release. But I don’t believe in that old GLF idea that every gay man and lesbian should immediately come out in every situation — that doesn’t deal with reality, nor is it a very good way of supporting others who can’t come out.

C: It definitely is what we should be working towards. But there’s also the threat of our own Black communities as well. I feel that these guys are quite willing to come and burn your house down.

P: I still don’t feel sure about using my name… On the one hand I really want to use it and be who I am and be identified. My greatest fear is total rejection from my family, who I really am close to.

S: Yes, I can understand that fear and I may well have experienced it myself if I had come out at home, in India. But being here, so far away from family, it does become
marginally easier. But it does pose problems if I were to return to India to live…

P: It's good for women to see that there are others with similar fears. I think it is a real dilemma because the more of us that come out the stronger we are going to be, and the more other women are going to feel that they are able to come out, because we are creating that kind of a situation where it is possible.

C: This very discussion makes a point about lesbian oppression. Either way, there are going to be four Black lesbians talking about our lives in this publication!

G: Yes! It never stops being difficult… There may be a period say twenty years later when you are confronted again with the difficulty of coming out. If any of us go and live at home (countries of origin) what is going to happen? In all seriousness? It is important for people to know that coming out is liberating in an individual sense, but it is also very much a process that you have to go through all the time.

P: I remember the very first time I came out publicly was at the OWAAD (Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent) conference in 1981, when there was that big uproar about Black lesbians demanding an autonomous space for a workshop. I remember standing in the lunch queue when this woman I vaguely knew asked me quite loudly which workshop I had been to. I just froze inside and said what am I going to do? Am I going to lie? Or am I going to tell her? And I said 'Oh the Black lesbian workshop' before even thinking about it. Afterwards it was a real sense of 'well, I've said it and felt good about it' but it was frightening. She looked at me blank and then turned away, there was no other response.

S: I found that experience at the conference really painful… It was a process that all of us had to go through, lesbian or not, their fears, our anxieties, and our insistence that our demands be met. I felt we were exposed in a terrible way. I felt so disappointed that we were under attack, in a sense, at this conference where we should have experienced a feeling of togetherness… We were up at the top on this gallery (where the rabble always is) where everyone could look up at us and there was such a feeling of hostility coming towards us…

G: The whole of the Saturday night I remember that I felt bad because I had split with other lesbians at that conference. I split over the closed workshop because I felt it went against the grain of what OWAAD had been about and because I felt it let a lot of people off the hook. A bit like whites not having to deal with racism if they 'let' us have our own workshops. I felt angry for lots of reasons. I felt angry at my group, angry at OWAAD past and present organizers, angry at other lesbians for not allowing me to say what I wanted to say without being hostile to me… at myself for not articulating clearly what I meant to say. The only time I felt solidarity with other lesbians was over the fact that they and me declared our sexuality and therefore made ourselves vulnerable, and that in a way is one of the most important lessons of feminism, that politics and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive. There were lots of other women there who would not even say they were bisexual but who we all knew were sleeping with each other.

C: I was one of those!

G: I didn't know you were. I was angry at those women even more because this was the time to say there are lots and lots of Black women who are activists and lesbians and there is a range of political opinion over these questions among us. I suppose I just felt that whatever position you took on the workshop the time had come to declare yourself, even though I know that is a very difficult thing, especially because many
women acted like complete voyeurs.

But the whole issue of our relationship to heterosexual women and differences between us was an important issue that was missing and that opportunity in a way has not come back again. It’s not that it won’t, it will.

P: Despite all these horrible things happening, for me, in a lot of ways, being able to have that Black lesbian workshop was the beginning of something important, personally and politically, because that was the beginning of the Black Lesbian Group (BLG) that Shaila and I were involved in. It played an important part for me and gave me the confidence and support of other lesbians to be able to come out in ways that I’d not been able to before and be much stronger in myself about my own lesbianism.

At the conference, despite the tensions, Black lesbians still forced and created a situation where we did meet, and when we turned up in the room where we were meeting it was really good to see so many women walking in. For the first five minutes we all looked at each other, sharing a real high because there were so many of us, forty of us, there.

S: Also I knew there were several others who did come up to those of us who had identified ourselves and whispered ‘thank you’... just because we had been there.

C: I was one of the women who didn’t stand up and declare my bisexuality. But it all depends where you are at the time. I’ve been heterosexual and anti-lesbian; I’ve been bisexual; now I’m a lesbian and coming out strong. Opening your mouth at a conference is a harrowing enough experience. But for me at the time I did speak out and argued for the closed workshop for Black lesbians on the principle of independent organization, which after all is what a Black women’s conference is all about. But I also felt, yeah, I want to discuss those things too. It was about where did we fit in. There was a definite disrespect for bisexual women. But I guess it was up to us to make our space, in some ways.

S: Another point is that at the conference there were so few visible Asian lesbians. I know a dozen Asian lesbians in this country and that’s very few, but then I think that five years ago I only knew one other so now it is twelve times better! I know many more Afro-Caribbean lesbians and what bothers me is that I wish there were more Asian women able to come out.

P: In the past year, when I’ve heard about all these other Asian lesbians, it has been really good to hear about more Asian women coming out. I know of quite a few young Asian women who are fifteen or sixteen living at home and wanting to explore their sexuality. Some of them tell me that they are lesbians, some of them are already having a relationship with their best friends but are frightened about what to do about it. It is nice to know that there are young Asian women who are coming out or who are lesbians.

S: I used to feel the gap more strongly in the Black Lesbian Group where there were only four of us out of thirty.

G: You said that you wish there were more Asian women who were able to come out, but come out in what? We only know the people who move about in certain circles, although I understand what you mean because I had this same feeling about two years ago when more lesbians of African descent became visible. But I also feel a joy and strength at seeing any Black and Third World women coming out because they all help to shatter the myth that lesbianism is a ‘white thing’. It’s also important that we don’t forget that there are lots of other Black lesbians we will never meet but we know are there — and that’s one of the joys of visibility — it’s not just about seeing it’s also about ‘knowing’!
S: Did you see Eastern Eye recently? The presenter, and I never thought I would hear this, said 'our gays are having a hard time out there', but again, this was gay men and didn't include us. Overall I suppose the tone was quite sympathetic. I never thought they would discuss the issue in the first place, and then I was surprised that they weren't being anti-gay. It's silly but I found myself being put in a position of having to be grateful...

P: That's about being recognized within our own community and that's really important.

Working/Challenging Racism

G: I felt excited about doing this tonight because I thought it would help me sort out a problem about coming out at work. There are a lot of white lesbians who ask me to join in some of their activities, but I feel very unsure about it, because there are also a lot of Black people with whom I have to work directly, in an atmosphere of political tension, about how to challenge racism there. So I don't want to be more alienated from the Black people but I feel there is no way at all I can begin to discuss this with the white lesbians. In a way just having said this to you makes me feel better and stronger about dealing with it, and I know I'll feel good when I do eventually come out to the Black people, especially those whom I respect politically. I suppose it's just an example of what I was saying earlier about coming out never ending! Ah well. (Since then I have begun the process of coming out to some of the people and it wasn't too painful.)

P: In a way for me, working in a feminist project, the problems of challenging racism are there all the time, even though I am out as a lesbian. I think it is a real problem when white feminists set up projects without including Black women at the start because they set the terms. So when individual Black women go to work with them it is always on their terms and within their frameworks. I have found the battle to change their structures so that we and our work is not marginal or token, really exhausting. It also makes me resentful because I might try and integrate an anti-racist perspective within the work situation and it might seem to work for a few days or weeks, then again it's back to normal. Unless white feminists who are genuine about change begin to internalize anti-racist ways of behaving and an anti-racist consciousness, and I don't mean just by adopting the right rhetoric, I am increasingly sceptical about wasting my energies on educating them.

S: Yes, you're right. I see in various publications, including Outwrite, where I work, the number of advertisements from white women's projects, urging Black and working-class women to apply for jobs. And I have strong suspicions sometimes about these because for one, it might suggest that Black women are being employed in great numbers, and that is just not true. It disguises the realities for the vast numbers of Black women who are being made redundant, unable to get employment, facing the cuts, etc. And secondly I think that it can be dangerously tokenistic. I mean, why are they suddenly doing it now? Why did they not do this earlier? Okay, I know they are having to respond to really strong pressure from us about racism, and being included in projects, etc., but it can backfire. Merely employing Black women to make up the numbers as it were, is no guarantee that there is a real change of politics or political direction in the white women's commitment to taking up issues of racism, imperialism, class issues, etc. It's ironic really, there they are, falling over backwards to employ Black women, and sometimes those Black sisters are having a really hard time and are being forced to make the choice to leave...

G: Yes — definitely, and what is frightening is that often white women don't even
realize this.

C: Definitely so, and these groups are also pressured by their funding bodies to employ Black and working class women. What you say is so true about being forced to leave in the end. I'm fast coming to the conclusion that I am totally unemployable. At the moment the only practical choice for being employed to work with Black women has been within white feminist organizations. A refuge for two years, and now a women's centre. The isolation you feel as the one, or lately two, Black workers is incredible. Even if there are Black women on the support group, which itself is rare, the white women cannot understand that our whole experience has been different. Our perceptions of the state, of other community organizations, of white women, are through the experience of racism. It's not just a case of adding the word to the long list of oppressions that we 'right on women' are 'uniting' to fight together. Both our priorities and the compromises we are prepared to make are therefore different. Also our willingness or ability to deal with unnecessary bureaucracy.

P: I also think that the fact we are seeing more jobs being advertised by white feminist projects encouraging Black women to apply is really suspicious. There are many Black women being run up to join management committees at the last minute, by white feminists, because it looks good when applying for funds, particularly to the GLC women's committee, where priority is supposed to be given to Black and 'ethnic' minority women. (Some of us know otherwise.) I find it really disgusting because we are just included superficially and once they've got their funding, Black women are either slowly eased out or leave anyway, because the structures they have to work with, even in so-called feminist or left collectives, are inherently racist. And it's all about getting us in there on their own terms and even though they don't recognize that and some of them might genuinely believe that they are open to us, they are unwilling to change so that more Black women get access to the resources they have. Ultimately I don't feel that there is any change happening. I feel pessimistic because on that fundamental level of giving up power, there is a reluctance to do so.

S: That depends on, as you were saying earlier, the terms that have been set. I work with Black and white women on *Outwrite*, but I feel that the situation there is different, and that's because the newspaper was started by Black women/women of colour in opposition to the white feminist media that ignored us. That was important because we had a long period in which we were able to discuss what we wanted. Then, as white women started joining us, we were strong in our aims, and I would like to think that those white women still with us have shown commitment to politically understanding many issues. But more important for me is that I am working with Black lesbians and the variety of politics and origins of the Black women in the group is always stimulating. I know I have learnt more in the past three years there than for a long time previously. It's understood that priority is given to our issues.

P: I am also much more concerned about putting energies into creating our own work situations and our own structures. Like, for instance, Carmen and I are involved in setting up a Black women's publishing co-operative. This comes directly out of our experience of being excluded and/or being made invisible by white feminist publishers, as much as our commitment to seeing Black women taking control and creating our own media and means of communication.

**White Women's Movement/Scene**

P: What I find disturbing is that very often in the white lesbian scene there is a sense in
which Black women are made to feel that they have to prove their lesbianism. A lot of it is to do with the ways in which we organize as Black women and as lesbians. For some of us, our sexuality doesn't mean that we have the 'luxury' of organizing as lesbian separatists, nor do I particularly believe in doing so. So while my sexuality is a part of me, it's not the only thing. My race and class are equally important and this has an implication for me in the way I organize, or want to organize, politically. If you don't have the same politics as some white lesbians and are seen to be politically involved with Black men, then they somehow patronize you and think you haven't quite made it yet. And they believe themselves to be at a much higher stage of consciousness because according to them they are woman identified whereas you are still male identified.

I remember having several experiences of being harangued and pressurized by a few white women who called themselves revolutionary feminists, when I was part of a Black mixed group and doing anti-racist work. They would say things like 'Wouldn't it be better for you to spend your energy working with white women around their racism and gain some ground of sisterhood than to be politically working with Black men?'

At another time, at a meeting when there were some Irish women from the Relatives Action Committee who had come to speak from Belfast, one of these revolutionary feminists said to them 'Have you ever considered the fact that it might be in your interests as women to have the British troops there until such time as all of you as women have organized yourselves because the Republican movement is so male dominated.' That was in 1977. I'm sure that some of these women have had to change their views, but some have got worse. The implications of their politics are so totally reactionary that I felt quite strongly that I had nothing in common with them, even though they are lesbians, and I had much more in common with the Irish sisters who had an anti-imperialist perspective.

S: Here's another example... I'll never forget reading an article, again by a revolutionary feminist, which implied that perhaps it was not such a bad move really that Asian men were not being allowed into this country, because 'we' did not want more men in this country and 'we' should be fighting arranged marriages anyway. At the time a lot of us were making a noise about the immigration laws, etc. and I was so angry that such a reactionary position was being published in a feminist newsletter. That certainly made me stay away from revolutionary feminism, and made me cling more fiercely to what I believe is my brand of radical feminism. I don't want them to define it, I don't see why they should because it only alienates more of us away. I think there are useful things to be found in radical feminist theory (I believe that of most radical theories) they are worth investigating, discussing — you can get something out of them to suit your own situation. Recently, Trouble and Strife, a radical feminist magazine, declared in its first editorial that they could not find any Black radical feminist (in their terms) to join their group... I think that is outrageous... they did not bother to explain why, or challenge their own definitions, or allow for other definitions...

P: That's a new trend, because a lot of books are being published and they say this is only going to be dealing with white women's experience because we are not in a position to deal with Black women's 'experiences'. It's a cop-out, absolving themselves from the responsibility of what they are saying. Possession of definitions is so crucial because they have been defining the terms forever and that's why it is so important for us to get together and create our own definitions.

G: Yes I think we should be — in fact we are — in the business of making our own definitions. But making the terms our own is also about defining the content of those
definitions. This is why I feel that our challenge to the assumption that feminism is the exclusive property of white British women includes a challenge as to the content of feminism. We are saying feminism is also ours but we define what that means — we are defining our Black Feminism. And this has its roots in the Black Power Movement, in the Women’s Liberation Movement and in the struggles against imperialism and for National Liberation. It is essentially about the simultaneity of class exploitation and race and sex oppression and that is in no way about getting a fair share of an unequal system. We can redefine the same terms and fundamentally alter them because our starting point is so different. And what’s so potentially revolutionary about it is that our definitions, so long as they are based in and extend their roots, are not colour bound, because white sisters involved in the struggle for National Liberation can understand us and unite with us. The obvious example being Irish sisters.

P: I totally agree. I think that, as you say, because our starting point is different, and because as Black women, we are up against so many different systems of oppression and exploitation, that our political analysis and practice has the potential to be all-embracing as well as the most threatening. What I mean is that, if, as we do, examine our histories of dispersal around the world, and look at why and how we come to be living here and at our collective and individual past and present experiences, we are forced to see the links between all these systems and develop a global perspective.

G: Separatist political strategies are always simplistic and I believe essentially reactionary. The example Shaila just gave is a supreme illustration of that. This is one of the reasons why I could never define myself as a radical/revolutionary feminist. I do, though, respect the fact that Black women who define themselves so are in the business of challenging racism amongst radical feminists.

About Relationships with White Women

S: I know some women who are so insistent that Black lesbians must not have relationships with white lesbians and if you do, that it was sleeping with the enemy. I did find that over the top because I could see and still can see lots of other enemies around…

C: I can’t imagine me having a sexual relationship with a white woman, but that’s my conclusion at the moment. There is too much clubbing each other over the head between Black women for whatever reason. There are so many reasons why we are who we are at a particular time. We need to give each other more space and respect. It happens all the times in meetings, there’s a line and whoever says it the heaviest gets to win.

G: Again it comes down to separatist politics being facile. But I do feel that if we are going to argue that there is no hard and fast rule about whom we have relationships with, then we have to take the responsibility for that position and support sisters in relationships with white women. Unfortunately I do not see an awful lot of that sort of support.

C: We definitely do have to talk about differences but it is the way that we do it. If you start off with this ‘I think what you’re doing is a load of shit and I disrespect you because of it’ then where can the discussion go from there? Nowhere. We can learn from each other in so many ways, like sharing experiences rather than saying ‘This is what is politically correct’.

P: I don’t think anyone should make hard and fast rules about whether you have
relationships with white women or not. Although, I personally wouldn't anymore, because when I have in the past it's been at a cost. It's been unequal, not just in terms of sex but also class. I also felt forced to make personal and political compromises. I couldn't always afford to jeopardize what little I had, and challenge white women's racism, because if I did that then I would be even more isolated. But the thing is that at that time I didn't have much choice; many sisters still don't. Because I didn't know many other black lesbians, there was nothing like the networks we are developing now amongst ourselves...

S: But people do make hard and fast rules.

C: But then I don't think we should have hard and fast rules about relationships with men either.

S: I do see a difference between sleeping with men, whatever men. With a woman you would not get the power relation based on sex lines, of course, other power relations based on race and class are still there, but heterosexuality is an oppressive institution for women.

C: I remember thinking along those lines once but I don't anymore. It seems like a hierarchy of oppression, of sexual oppression being more devastating than others, which I don't agree with although it is very fundamental. I'm not about to have sexual relationships with men, but it's still not a hard and fast rule. It's more that what counts is whether they're gonna respect you or not, and treat you in a way that is equal. So until they can do that I'm not going to, but then that goes for white women as well.

P: It would be good to go on to talk about the development of a Black lesbian feminist perspective, particularly in terms of how it can inform political organizing, our different experiences of working with heterosexual Black feminists, Black male activists, and also discuss the possibilities of making alliances with white women, mixed groups etc...

C: Becoming lesbians within the local Black women's group I was in, wasn't easy. It became more and more tense and difficult because it seemed as though the Caribbean women were more questioning in this direction that the Asian women. But Afro-Asian unity wasn't really the issue, as two of the Asian women were very supportive, one of whom is now a lesbian herself.

It seemed such a contradiction, you would be in a black feminist group and then outside of that you live your life with men. What we were putting up with from men seems incredible now. Some of us felt we should talk about it in the group, but others felt that to be completely out of order. That that area was their personal life and had nothing to do with politics. But it reached such a height for me and one of the other West Indian women. We read this pamphlet 'Love Your Enemy' — a discussion between many different kinds of lesbian and heterosexual feminists — which we'd never seen the likes of before.

It was Christmas two years ago, and we settled down with this book, and talked through every argument and personal experience for four days. By the end of it we couldn't bring any reasons forward for continuing relationships with men and that was it. But we felt very isolated because in that part of London, we didn't know any other Black lesbians at all. We did hear about the Black lesbian group, but just as we were deciding to get involved it packed up. Although there were white lesbians involved in the local refuge where I was employed for two years the isolation from Black lesbians was too much and we...

S: Did Southall Black Sisters not change after that?
C: I feel that the group still needs to take us more seriously as lesbian feminists.

G: When I first joined the Brixton group I was terrified because I knew that I, at some time, would have to make it clear that I was a lesbian, even though I didn’t push for that to become a focus of its politics. I was also a bit scared about saying that I was involved in the Women’s Liberation Movement — though on that issue I was just being paranoid — accepting stereotypes of Black women’s organizations. My stereotypes were also challenged by the fact that most of the other lesbians or bisexuals hadn’t had anything to do with the Women’s Liberation Movement, but had their roots in the Black movement (if anywhere). That taught me a lot about the invisibility of lesbians in the Black community and about the lack of space that the Women’s Liberation Movement provided for Black lesbians.

But it has been incredibly hard because the group has been so rabidly homophobic, though I feel there’s been such a lot of movement. Now it is easy to get a discussion about lesbians/lesbianism within the group and I feel the atmosphere is much more supportive to lesbians.

In the past we had the problem that Carmen talked of — that of some people not wanting to talk about sexual love and practice. Ironically I have been one of those at times, and I feel now that a lot of that had to do with not feeling strong enough to get into detailed discussions about sexuality because I’d be isolated in talking about being a lesbian. Though I must say that people have commented on how close I am and inaccessible, so that they have felt unable to raise it with me. But in a way that’s been the problem that I would have had to make myself vulnerable in what felt like isolation.

I’ve also found it much easier to have one-to-one discussions about lesbians/lesbianism, its political importance etc., with some of the heterosexual women. This has been because these were often women who had some notion of political accountability and had the politics to want to ask questions about all social relationships and constructions. Consequently it’s been amongst these women, who were often examining their own relationships with men, that I’ve seen the most changes. And the group has changed a hell of a lot, and that’s meant that we’ve all grown together. It’s not been easy and it certainly isn’t over, but it seems that we’ve learnt that we must put all of our feminism into action and discuss the political importance and limitations of questioning heterosexuality, lesbianism and the whole area of the construction of sexuality.

P: What sometimes concerns me is the gap between our political development as Black feminists and/or lesbians and our male ‘comrades’. I feel that we are moving forward all the time but they seem to be standing still or getting worse, in some cases. One of the challenges of Black feminism to the Black movement is that we have and are creating intrinsic links between our personal political practice and wider political concerns, and knocking down some people’s assumption that sexual preference is just about being interested in an alternative lifestyle. I wonder if they will ever accept Black lesbians as political activists and not dismiss our sexuality as ‘lifestyle politics’.

G: For me it’s been more a case of relegating my lesbianism to my private life, as though it’s nothing to do with my overall political perspective. That of course allows them not to think about the oppression of Black lesbians and gays. But it’s not that I’m not taken seriously or dismissed outright, in fact I’m often chastized for not being involved in certain things because I’ve something to offer. It’s more a case of selecting parts of my politics that ‘fit’. A selective dismissal if you like and sometimes I find that harder to deal with.

P: What I’ve found is that when you work with Black men politically and they know you are having a relationship with a woman, they think it’s something you do in your spare time. Before, I didn’t allow my sexuality to come in, in any way, into how I
was working politically, because I didn’t have the confidence to do it. As long as I worked within the framework that was laid down by them it was alright, and if I brought in any kind of serious discussion about feminism or lesbianism as part of my political perspective, then it wasn’t acceptable.

I didn’t always have the courage to do it either. I know I too have compartmentalized my politics in the past because it’s often been the only way I could cope. It’s also because it’s only now that I am beginning to be able to integrate the various aspects of my politics and feel confident about being more upfront, but it’s still an ongoing and difficult process, really. But when your sexuality does inform your general political perspective, how do you make those connections you made in your head, more concrete?

C: You can’t do it on your own. What the mixed groups have got to realize is that they have got particular structures, particular oppressive ways of working, apart from the issues that they don’t see as important. It is not till there is space with Black women and especially Black lesbians, that you start to see that we have so much in common — a particular perspective and ways of organizing. Mixed organizations have got to learn, but they won’t until there is a general movement of Black women enforcing those changes.

G: One of the difficulties I find concerns the points of tension between Black lesbians and Black heterosexual feminists. Sometimes I feel more angry at them than the men, especially in social situations where their behaviour can be very unfeminist in my view, and extremely exclusive, and that serves to isolate us or dismiss our personal practice. Of course, I sometimes feel quite disgusted at the way lesbians behave in social situations but that doesn’t have the same effect of excluding us. So for me sometimes the same questions are raised by both heterosexual feminists and male comrades.

C: Yes, maybe the same questions, but how to deal with them is completely different if it’s men or women.

G: Yes, maybe different, but the same questions. How you resolve them, the way in which you tackle them, will be different, and anyway, because we are working on a more daily level with women, there is more space to resolve them. But I just feel it is important that we state that there are points of tension between us as feminists.

P: In a way just thinking about that, many Black heterosexual feminists do feel really more threatened than the men do because it is about acknowledging the potential in themselves, and it’s that fear they have about themselves.

S: Yes, it’s about their friend who was heterosexual last year and this year...! (Laugh).

P: And more of them are coming out. Some of them can’t deal with it and because from their own experiences and development, the logical conclusion of what they are feeling and doing is to have sexual relationships with Black women, it’s that jump and so many of them are frightened.

G: I think that particularly when they learn that what they are doing is not just spending time with other Black women but growing to love other Black women, and stopping competing with them. I’m sure that is what happened with me in a way, and I clearly see it happening with the women I work with. And you almost sit there smugly smiling to yourself thinking I wonder when it will be... It’s not just the working together, but it’s all these other things. Ultimately that has to force the changes on all the Black organizations. When it’s one or two women they know they
can isolate you and say 'Oh no this is crap politics'. When you are doing that work, and you are still involved with Black struggle, and there are more and more of you that are coming out but are still involved, and often leading the way of the struggle, not in a sense that it is always written down but you know that is what is happening in practice, that forces changes. Sometimes there are minor ones, not very overt, but like the fact that they will ask opinions on issues. I see that as part of the movement forward. And that is not overtly about them beginning to say that questions of sexual construction are something that should be taken on board, as social constructs. But they can't write you off any more and say that you are just nothing. A few groups like Race Today can continue to ignore and attack you but they do that to everybody. Anyway even they cannot completely ignore us as the sessions on the Black women's movement at the bookfair show.

C: There is so much violence among the men that it really puts me off thinking that I can begin to start talking about where I am. Also those that are not dealing with direct violence against us, just the structures of the way they organize. Just to get yourself heard you have to become like them which I am not prepared to do. There are only certain people that will get listened to, of a certain type. There isn't a thing about making space for everyone to speak. Things like that are definitely coming out of feminist organizing. I mean it's got to be broken down but I just don't think it's going to happen until there is a general movement of Black feminists rather than individuals within the mixed organizations.

P: Rather than being on the defensive in those situations, and going to them and saying or feeling that it's us that has to make those moves about forging alliances or working on general political issues, the initiative has got to come from them... I feel that we have done that enough either as individual Black women activists or as small groups. They have got to make the moves because they have to recognise that there is a force here that they have to reckon with, and that Black women are not just into their 'ghetto' politics, of looking at just their issues, issues about being women, but also involved in a whole lot of other things. They should be coming to us and saying we would like you to work with us on this particular campaign, etc. I don't think the initiative has yet come from any of these organizations, it's always been from women's organizations because we recognized the necessity of being involved in wider political issues as they are directly linked to our specific situations as individual women.

G: For me though, from my political perspective, it is important to maintain links with mixed organizations in the Black community. Anyway, I don't see the Black movement — and we are part of that — as a monolith, as one homogeneous thing. I think there are sections of it in which there have been progressive developments on the question of women, whilst others have retrogressed. But I also see this as having followed the development and strengthening of autonomous Black feminist organizing. Definitely as the Brixton group has got stronger in its feminism and less willing to compromise, we have forced some movement on the part of mixed organizations we work with. It's not that all is wonderful and we ourselves are not clear on all the implications. But the fact that we have developed our feminism but still maintained links for me illustrates the importance of not writing off comrades and allies.

C: But it's really a question of priorities isn't it? Because we have only got so much energy. I am very interested to hear what is happening with the mixed Black organizations and how they are developing, but I am not prepared to put my energies there at the moment. It would have to be really different before I started doing that. I
think there is definitely enough work to do with Black women. We have to respect
each other's choices.

S: I suppose I want them to start thinking we are valuable to them, and our ways of
organizing and our ways of being, and all that we are saying, is going to be valuable
to them. I have not had a political history of organizing with men, and it would be in
'crisis' situations that I would consider temporary alliances. I want us to be working
with women, for women, because if we don't, who will?

P: Gail, what you were saying that the Black movement is not homogeneous and that
there are different sections within it... We have had different kinds of experiences
from the Brixton group which has been around a long time — it's established, it's got
'status' — for individual women who have been around the same kind of political
arena, but have not got the same kind of reputation and support to fall back on, it's
been different. I think that it's those women, and groups that have formed more
recently, who have had the negative experiences with Black male activists, which has
made them say that they don't want to struggle with the brothers, because the
brothers are not really our brothers anyway, and because of the kind of shit they've
been giving us. Which is not to say that they have necessarily written off the
possibility of ever working politically with men in the future.

G: I just want to clarify. I am not saying that changing mixed organizations in a
direct way is a major focus of our energy. What we are saying is that we work with
mixed political organizations with whom we have a general empathy, as a way of
winning them to feminism. In fact the reverse has happened. As we have become
stronger, more confident and clearly defined as a Black feminist group, so we said we
are not going to subsume all our work to you, and that's really important. And
what's been important about that is that whilst these groups may have felt that we've
made wrong decisions — and don't forget that includes the women in those
organizations too — they have still been prepared to work with us. Maybe the fact
that the group has been around for ten years and has some base in Brixton and
Stockwell has something to do with it. But I think the most important point has been
maintaining a political perspective which told us that while we develop our feminism,
we mustn't do that at the sacrifice of other struggles. It's been about being around,
trying to get feminism taken on board as of relevance to all the Black community,
and about making alliances. And all that has stemmed from our socialism as much as
our feminism.

C: Some Black women and Black women's groups are able to work with mixed Black
organizations because of having a socialist feminist line. There can be this agreement
over — yes, women are oppressed, yes, there has to be women's liberation — because
capitalism is the root cause of all oppression — class, race and sex. We can therefore
unite on that basis. But I feel we are often being tolerated, you know, because the
responsibility is taken off men, off their sexism, and put on to capitalism. It means
that a socialist feminist could be comfortable in a way that I couldn't, because
although I am not saying that all men are responsible for all the shit, I think they have
got a definite responsibility. When it's pointed out to them they find it hard to
accept.

G: But in order to understand that, in order to understand any social relationships,
we have to see what the dominant form of exploitation is, in terms of the way that
actual things are produced and the way that all that is reproduced, and to see how the
oppression of women fits into that (and the way that reproduction itself is
reproduced). So that if then when you say that, you can't say that patriarchy precedes
anything if patriarchy means the oppression of women, because these forces act on each other, and change each other even at the same time as they entrench each other. So having said that, that is the framework in which we would try and understand the situation of Black women and Black people and homophobia and the oppression of gay men and lesbians within that... They are aspects of a whole.

C: We’re getting into some heavy things. (Laughter.)

G: But that’s because you said what you said, and I can’t say to you ‘No we don’t see capitalism as the source of women’s oppression’ because it’s not simple like that.

C: But even hearing what you said I disagree...

G: Yes, you may do...

C: It’s going onto another level.

P: I would say that a socialist analysis is very much part of my political practice. But while I believe class relations are important, I also want to stress that race and gender shape class as much as the other way round. What I think the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Black Power movement has done is challenge the traditional left’s heavy emphasis on class as a unitary category. I sometimes think that the hostility many feminists feel towards the word socialist is justified and that’s because of the way in which the white left organizations, usually male dominated, have appropriated the term and given it their own specific connotations, depending on their particular sectarian tendency. To me, being a socialist is very much about having a vision of a future society and what and how change is going to come about. I often think it’s a vision many of us share despite using different labels to define ourselves.

C: There is no sort of definite category of this equals this, we’re all somewhere in and around and somewhere in between. But I just know that that is the direction I’ve been in and moved away from since becoming a lesbian and so there is a direct connection. That’s why I call myself a Black lesbian feminist, because my lesbianism is not just about who I sleep with or just about anti-heterosexism as an institution, it’s also about an understanding of all the oppressions that we face. I don’t agree that you start from this place of production and that the relations involved in production can be seen as dominant.

G: That’s what I was trying to say we did not do. In brief, we are talking about production and reproduction, but that production itself is reproduced and it is a location in which oppression reproduces itself, manifests itself. Why I can’t call myself a ‘lesbian feminist’ because to me it is a whole concept that says you subsume everything to patriarchy.

C: It depends on what patriarchy means...

G: It depends on what capitalism means...

(Laughter)

P: Fighting patriarchal oppression, the power men have over women, is very much intrinsic to my understanding of socialism, and is very much on my political agenda. At the moment that’s what I am putting a lot of my political energies into fighting and organizing against, particularly within our communities. Incest, rape and violence are common experiences for many of us and to me organizing against these forms of oppression is as important as organizing against state racism, factory
closures and unfair work conditions etc. All this brings me back to what I was trying to say before about our definitions of feminism, which inevitably must extend beyond colour, gender, class, sexuality as single factors but rather our concern is to create a synthesis... I don't think though, that it's always very useful to operate within definitions because they are and can be dangerous blocks to being open to hearing what other sisters are saying...

S: I define myself as a radical feminist if I have to define myself. But I can see from the conversation we are having now that sometimes those definitions are quite useless. I also consider myself a socialist, definitely, I have for a very long time, but again, like Carmen, I do not call myself a socialist feminist because for me that means taking certain very definite positions e.g. being a Marxist feminist or adopting a certain kind of theoretical base from which we then work outwards or fit your feminism into. And for me radical feminism has been about asking questions about power, and who has the power in a given situation. And why I feel it is quite broad based is because I feel the method of that sort of questioning politics can be applied to any situation; imperialism, racism, sexism. Who has the power? Who benefits from a particular situation? Who is going to profit from oppression? And then learning from the answers which you see and which you can apply to your own experiences. I think going back to your own experience of your life, and what has happened in it, is for me the most useful way of learning and growing politically rather than reading a book, getting a theory, trying to understand it, (which is also sometimes difficult because it is very often written in a language which is not accessible to you), and then trying to fit your life to it. I'd rather do it the other way round, talk about our own experiences and learn from what we share between us, from what has happened to us, what is happening to us, as a method of leading to change as a result of that.

G: What do you mean you are a socialist?

S: That means I would like to see an end to systems of exploitation and oppression based on class, race, imperialism, sex, other power structures. I would define myself as a Black lesbian feminist who is also a socialist and an anti-imperialist. Take socialist theories and practices — it's very evident that historical, cultural and political circumstances have determined particular kinds of socialism. Similarly, I feel we should be able to adapt feminist theories. They are not the prerogative of the West and should not be allowed to be. We should define our feminism as Black women, Black lesbians. And then again, there are a wide range of differences between us (I always think these are necessary and healthy!) depending on where we are coming from...

G: Why doesn't radical feminism or Black radical feminism include that?

S: For me they do, for me it is part of that. That's why I said that the method is quite important. I can apply to different situations not just my situation as a woman, or me as a Black woman, or as a worker... Does that make sense?

C: Yes.

S: That is why I do not like it when people make a distinction between socialist on one hand and radical feminist on the other, as if they are two opposing forces. For me there's been more of a difference in method, and because you have a difference of method, you have a difference in identification of root cause — saying that yes, men as men, have power over women, as women. For me this is as true as saying that capitalists as capitalists, wherever they are in the world, have power over the workers as workers. There are different power systems operating. I won't accept that capitalism
is the root cause of oppression of all types the world over. I won’t accept that a man
who rapes his wife or daughter has necessarily got anything to do with the capitalist
system existing in this country, or, if a Third World country, the country that
colonized him. To me that is male power over a woman. And men do exercise that
power.

G: I think that it is wrong to assume that people who define themselves as marxist-
feminists would say that ‘Oh that is because of capitalism.’ Okay, say the situation for
Black women at home where there is feudalism of some sort, it’s about how all those
things in a difficult situation intermash with the systems of exploitation, which is
probably more accurate on a world scale. All of the philosophies that have informed
their political development — like Black power, women’s liberation, class, or systems
of exploitation — all of them are about questioning, about how you understand the
situation. The point of difficulty is how you answer the questions... I can’t begin to
answer any of the questions without understanding how oppression relates to the
systems of exploitation, and how they are reproduced. Which is why it is not just about
production in the workplace, it’s about production and reproduction, not just bio-
logically, but how the whole thing gets turned over time and again in the process of
change and continuity. If I don’t understand that I don’t see any way out, because I
won’t see where the points of contradiction are or where the weaknesses are and where
the dialectic is and where the imminent change is.

**Strengthening our Love and Building Alliances**

P: Okay, so while we have our differing yet similar political perspectives, it seems to
me that we have to begin to think about the dilemmas we are often faced with in terms
of political organizing... I mean, we all only have limited energies and often it’s a
problem deciding how, and who you organize with, how you create alliances with
other groups and struggles from a position of strength, how you incorporate your
overall political perspectives into the day to day organizing you are faced with...

C: We were discussing this at home recently and ended up drawing this diagram and
picturing what we are facing. If you imagine oppression coming down on the Black
woman — so you’ve got racism, sexism, anti-lesbianism, and class through the dif-
ferent state institutions, and individuals. You’ve got black women at the bottom, then
there’s a two-way process of struggle for us. There’s coming together as Black women
in our independent organizations, and that’s crucial because that’s the only way to find
out what our priorities are and strengthen our core. Then from this strong centre we go
back out taking our understandings and demands into the movements for socialism,
Black liberation, women’s liberation and gay liberation. So we’re going back to the
places we’ve left but from a position of unshakeable strength, and resistance to all the
old shit we used to get.

P: Recently, I’ve been inspired to think about all these things by reading some of the
Black feminist literature from the States, where they are having discussions about
integrating Black feminist lesbian perspectives into an overall discussion about stra-
tegies and political organizing.

... What Bearnice Reagon and Barbara Smith in *Home Girls* are saying about
building alliances is really important and so crucial.

G: But making alliances in that way isn’t just necessarily going into those movements
where you’d be a minority... for example, talking about Afro-American women doing
things with other Third World women in the States, where maybe they may not be the
majority in terms of numbers but where the traditions that they’re bringing are dominant. In the *Home Girls* book the last chapter by Bearnice Reagon is so good because there she’s saying making alliances isn’t just about not subsuming and never letting go of your struggle. It’s saying in certain situations you will listen to other people’s perspectives and that can be so within the Black women’s movement, or over difference between radical and feminist separatist, or whatever we define ourselves as. But particularly in the States, and to some extent with us in the African-Asian split — I don’t know if we’ve called it a split — then it’s about us listening to what Asian women have got to say for example about the practical problems raised by organizing all under one umbrella of Black because that was a concrete aspect of OWAAD and that was about not allowing others to subsume. That’s maybe one of the major political questions that perhaps we’re just beginning to learn, because we’ve always been having to say ‘but what about us?’ Sometimes we say it so much that we can’t say ‘just listen now a minute’. Personally that’s why I’m saying about listening to other people. I still feel very opposed to separatist politics but listen to what other people are saying as a movement or as a social force. We have to do that within our own ranks and that also means listening to heterosexual Black women who’ve oppressed us and continue to do so — serious ones I mean. People who are saying ‘yes we’ve learnt and we must listen now’, but listening to what their fears, anxieties or questions are as well.

C: It’s difficult at the moment because most of us have been concentrating on Black women, those we work with. But the way it’s going worldwide, and in this country, something really drastic is just around the corner and if we don’t do something quick, not just in our Black women’s groups, but if there’s some massive rebellion then it’s just going to be too late.

P: So what does that mean in terms of our organizing as Black women or Black lesbians specifically?

C: Theoretically it’d mean putting some energy into, on the one hand, building this strong centre and, on the other hand, taking it out as far and as wide as we can. But that’s theoretically.

P: But practically we are so stretched as individual activists. Often it seems like a drop in the ocean, but when you’re absolutely tired out, not having the time, yet knowing that there ought to be all these other things happening too, that’s a frustrating part of it, like the Police Bill’s coming up, which is crucial for us as Black women, people, lesbians, all those.

S: I think we have the potential in us to be the most radical because all those forces have fashioned us: being women/Black/working class/lesbians/anti-imperialist/coming from Third World countries, so your consciousness has been made up of surviving many oppressions, that when you start rebelling your consciousness is necessarily going to expand to take in all these factors. You get exhausted because all these issues affect us, you can’t choose one and dump the others. So many white women, white lesbians or white socialist feminists/radical feminists can pick and drop issues. That can’t be the same with us because we’ve got to face these head on, because whether you like it or not it’s going to face us at some time or the other. And we should allow for contradictions, for prioritizing different issues at different times depending on what’s going on for us. At the moment I’m quite a visible lesbian in the circles I mix in. At home I could keep it relatively quiet because my priority might in fact be to do something about poverty. It annoys me that making this space for us is not allowed to happen. Sometimes you can only fire little bullets at little things...
C: We’re facing everything, but there’s still more that I think the white women have started to look at more than we have — like disability, motherhood.

S: But there are material reasons why white women have organized around that much more than they have around racism for example. I’ve not come across white women who have spent time talking about racism or thinking about it or organizing around it.

P: I think we are getting trapped by labels and definitions and what I can see is a hell of a lot of similarities.

C: But that might come out. I think that is quite positive, because it is something that has raged through the Black women’s movement. Anyone that brings up one of these words and there’s another that goes ooohhhhhhh when really I don’t see any reason for it to be like that.

P: Being a socialist for me is not so much being informed by the Euro-American traditions of socialism but much more about the creative forms of organizing and resistance found in some of the Third World countries, where there has been a revolution or there is a national liberation struggle. Okay I’m not saying they are perfect, but in some places they have actually created their own definitions and methods of socialism informed as much by their cultural traditions as by the economic conditions, well beyond anything Marx had envisaged, or had the imagination for… that’s another long debate, for another time...

S: I’ve actually found it very useful to read Black lesbian literature from the USA.

P: I have as well, I’ve gained a lot of strength from it. I feel it’s also given me confidence to come out and begin to talk about those things here.

C: It’s also given us the inspiration and energy to set up our own Black women’s publishing co-op. We want our voices to be heard as well. Because you also feel frustrated that it is always coming from the USA and you want to hear what British Black women are saying. This is a really crucial thing to do.

S: Also the things I’ve read about lesbians surviving in the Third World I’ve found that sometimes much more pertinent to myself, and a source of strength. I don’t know other lesbians who have lived in India and who are in England now. Sometimes this can be isolating for me as there are differences between those of us who have grown up and lived in Third World countries, and those that haven’t. But I do know other sisters — the woman I work with, for example, comes from Chile — and we have strong links between us because of the places we come from and where we find ourselves now.

P: I read the thing about lesbians in India and that gave me quite a buzz because you never see that at all and also reading the story in Manushi about lesbians in ancient India. There have been references to lesbians in the past… and reading those accounts and picking them out about back home and what is going on...

C: I am waiting to hear it from the Caribbean and African countries.

S: Diane from New York showed the Black Lesbian Group some interesting slides, about West Africa, they are the results of her research on evidence of lesbianism and female bonding. That was fascinating, she was finding out all these things that nobody had found out before and nobody knew existed which had been ignored or passed over, and she was finding out and giving it a name, which I thought was really important to call it something, and not just let it pass by as ‘women friends’ when it was obviously more than that.
P: The Manushi story was written in the style of an old folk tale and it was about two lesbians... It is a lovely story, and very intrinsic to Indian culture because of all the reference points it makes. It's not something that came from outside, but it is part of our culture. It affirms this thing that you might have always known that there has always been lesbianism in our cultures, and you begin to get some information and oblique historical references to, for example, women’s kingdoms in India in the past...

S: I have a book of Indian women poets, given to me by a lesbian from India, and that contains assertions of love between women. It's good to find out all these things in your own culture.

    Let's end on an encouraging note...

(Laughter)

C: We've said a lot of it in other ways.

G: On a personal level, as a feeling type thing, just actually saying in connection with my feminism and my Marxism... that all of those things together, when I feel all of those things together, when I'm feeling really good about myself, I feel yes that is what you are. And then when you are able to put that into practice and raise that issue at that important meeting or conference, and there was an embodiment of your Marxism and feminism and your lesbianism... especially if that is in a Black situation that is when I feel really good about it. It sums up what it means to me because it is about being whole I suppose. I can't take away any of those three.

S: I feel for me it has been one of the most positive choices I have made for myself. I feel strong about it.

P: Yes. I feel exactly the same about the choice of being a lesbian it is one of the most positive things I've done. I've never ever been really happier, even when I have been lonely, or isolated, or having a terrible time with some woman or whatever. It will still be totally different from having a terrible time from when I was heterosexual. It's totally different having made that choice. I feel really lucky that I've had that space and that I had the opportunity of being in an environment where I could have made that choice. I can never ever think of going back on it. I have found a part of myself. There is never going to be anything that is going to change that and in that way I feel really good about that. When people talk about being oppressed as lesbians I feel that is nothing to do with me, and how I feel about it, but everything to do with society and what other people say and their negative feelings about us... How because of their heterosexism and homophobia... that creates situations for us where we have to live in fear. That's what I find oppressive, not being able to go down the road in the same way as heterosexual people, having to be really careful in certain situations, etc.

S: I suppose it's the oppression of not having male approval, 'The strong man by the side', of being alone.

C: And not being a nuclear family.

S: Yes.

C: With housing and jobs.

G: But I used to feel dreadful. Remember, last week I was telling you about how I felt I always knew I was a lesbian... and I think I like women, not in a flirtatious way. Like I feel about Black people — yes I like Black people, and that is the irony about oppression. Because oppression is real, it is systematic, it is institutional, and yet you can feel so good, and strong...
C: Because, for me, becoming a lesbian was about a liberation for me, as a woman, although I've been through different periods and I've felt real liberation at realizing what it means to be Black, or what it means to be working class. Those are processes of liberation for me. Lesbianism is definitely about women's liberation, or my liberation as a woman... and it is just a feeling of freedom really. In the midst of hell it is still there.

S: It is a feeling of having control over at least one aspect of your life, when you are still fighting for control over so many others. At least on an individual level with collective support, you are able to make that choice. Something I feel we haven't touched on is lesbian motherhood...

G: And housing, being told you are insane, or need therapy/psychiatry — the whole thing in this country, particularly if you make a proclamation about feeling good about your Blackness or lesbianism.

S: So... something must be wrong in their eyes!

G: Like the whole threat about your children being taken away from you, or the feeling that you somehow should not have children, the internalized stuff. Not only because of the threat that they might be taken away from you, but you partially believe that perhaps they do need a nuclear family... That is an aspect of oppression, i.e. having children... Like all the stuff about being alienated from your parents, community, when you need the support of your family, community. Like the stuff at adolescence, when the cut-off point becomes a whole realm of sensuality, or when eroticism is cut off from you. I didn't think that at the time, but I think that is what happened to me. If I could have come out when I wanted to I could have been happy all these many years (laughter).

S: Well I hope that now we are here we can provide some sort of short cut to other sisters who are lesbians or about to come out. I would like to encourage other Black women, here, in India, everywhere, to come out, to demand respect for our choices, to tell others we are here, and make ourselves visible.

Note

1 Home Girls, a black feminist anthology Barbara Smith (ed) 1983 New York: Kitchen Table Press

As an Asian lesbian I have been extremely privileged in participating in the production of this crucial work. I have learnt so much and gained so much strength from reading all the articles I typed. I have two requests: one, that my name be mentioned humbly in connection with this work and with these, my Black sisters, whom I respect greatly and two, that I have a copy of Feminist Review sent to me so that I can refer to these articles in my old age!

Thank You, In Black Sisterhood, Ravinder Sethi