Home Girls

Home Girls, a Black Feminist Anthology, Barbara Smith (ed)
Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press (New York) 1983 ISBN 0 913175 02 1 $10.95

Sometimes, when I get depressed about the way things are going in the world — what with Thatcherism, Reagonomics, ‘backyard’ atrocities in Grenada, gunboat diplomacy in El Salvador and the hassles and injustices that confront me as a Black woman in a racist, sexist society; or when I see many young Black girls today eschewing some of what I consider to be positive manifestations, like wearing their hair naturally; or sisters failing to make or consider relevant the links between race, sex, class and homophobia — then I start to wonder whether what I and my Black sisters are doing as committed Black feminists is likely to make much of a dent. I wonder whether it’s considered by some as just another instance of fringe participation or leftover politics from the 60s — outdated and unwanted. I wonder whether we are doing little more than keeping our integrity intact (no inconsequential task), but not really making a difference as to how things are run, or are likely to be run for the foreseeable future.

I was in something of this frame of mind when I took up Home Girls. In fact, when I first heard of it, it was with the view of ‘Okay, another Black feminist anthology. So what?’ I should point out here, that I by no means intend that as a put down of this kind of work. And besides, when I think about it in perspective, there isn’t that much of it about. It is extremely important and necessary as a base for Black women to build upon — outwards and upwards. But there was not the excitement I felt when I first discovered Alice Walker’s You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down for instance, or when I came across Any Woman’s Blues. And while I figured Home Girls was probably another interesting contribution to that whole outpouring of soul-searching and coming to terms with who we are as Black women which is being produced, I must admit to being a bit blasé about it.

That is, until I started to read Barbara Smith’s wonderful introduction. It was hard, then, to continue to be jaded, because it said much of what I was feeling at the time. But not only did it voice some of my own doubts, uncertainties and feelings of which way now, it also proceeded to challenge me to get beyond them to the next stage. It broached the painful and seldom-talked about arena of the differences between us as Black women, differences which get in the way and become counter-productive and of the need to transcend those differences in order to tackle the oppressions of race, sex, class and homophobia. It was a political re-statement of what we’ve done and, just as importantly, an exhortation to not lose sight that there is still much to be done.

I should have been alerted to its force by the title. Home Girls conjures up for me an easily, readily identifiable and positive feeling of kinship with Black women. To be a home girl meant an immediate recognition that here was someone with whom you could empathize and share some basic and fundamental points of reference. And that, even if you weren’t a home girl in the strict sense of the phrase, i.e., from the same hometown or neighbourhood, you could still find common ground. It is a phrase which says you’ve found kin — a little piece of home.

And that is exactly what I did find between its pages. I could relate, for example, to Smith’s description of the strong Black women of her childhood — her mother, aunts, and grandmother — because it made me recall the strong Black woman that was my grandmother, who could hoe and plant, and even built the small house we all lived in in Beaumont, Texas, and who still managed to tend all the other needs of her eight grandchildren and those of other children in the neighbourhood who needed her. But I
found something else as well. I found Black women talking about the problems and differences that exist between us as Black women.

The class differences which are fostered and perpetuated by the Black middle class is painfully and vividly chronicled in Michelle Cliff's essay *If I could write this in fire, I would write this in fire*. In it she sheds light on the pernicious system of 'colorism' existing during her childhood in Jamaica (as well as today), which dictated that 'rarely will dark and light people co-mingle'. It is this kind of pseudo-difference which contributed to light-skinned Blacks assuming 'oppressor status' over their darker-skinned sisters and brothers. Nowhere more forcefully apparent than in the 'houseworker/mistress' relationship in which, says Cliff, 'one Black woman becomes the oppressor of another.' Then there are the other problems raised by the fact that we don't all look the same or have the same cultural background. This gives rise to subtle (and not so subtle) racism between different ethnic groupings. It is the kind of situation which allowed Cenon, a mixed Afro-American/Latina woman, to be taught the difference between 'good hair and Black hair'. This was done by the Puerto Rican side of her family, who felt the need to make a separation between themselves and 'those blacks.' Sadly, it was also a situation which was repeated in reverse. Her experiences led her to observe that while we are all in the same oppressive waters, we are not all in the same boat, and that 'according to how the oppressor identifies us, as being more pliable or not, our boats therefore express it.'

The seemingly insurmountable problem of the Black communities' homophobic attitudes towards their lesbian daughters is also explored. And whether through a son's hurtful rejection of his Black lesbian mother as in Raymina Y. Mays' *LeRoy's Birthday* or the anguish of condemnation and forced betrayal depicted in Julie Carter's *Cat*, Black lesbianism is identified as a reality which has always been there and which will not go away. The home girls are saying it is an issue which must be confronted and dealt with effectively by all our communities — by Black women and men. It is necessary so that we can allow ourselves to give our Black and lesbian sisters the space they must have, and which is their right within those communities.

We must, as Audre Lorde said, see the need 'to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside ourselves and touch the terror and loathing of any difference that lives there; and see whose face it wears.'

I found strength in the excellent essay by Bernice Johnson Reagon on the need to build coalitions, which, at the best of times, is not easy work, but which, if we don't undertake, and at the same time 'feel threatened to the core' when we do, results in 'barred rooms' and counterproductivity.

*Home Girls* talks about the 'simultaneity of oppressions' which we suffer as Black women and the need to voice the oppressions of race, sex, class and homophobia, and what's more to force the Black and Third World communities to address them. Because if we don't, no-one else will. It also talks about the overriding need to link the struggles of Black and Third World women, whether here in Britain, in the deep south of the US, or in rural Zimbabwe. Wise and true words, and ones which are difficult to quarrel with.

So now, I no longer feel so down, as I did before I started to read it. I don't have the answers or the solutions to the dilemmas which face us as Black women, either, but what I do have is a strengthened resolve to deal with them and to reach out and maybe help, and be helped, by other Black women to do the same.

It has led me to think that maybe what I and other Black feminists are doing now is not going to result in dramatic changes all the time that will set the world on fire, but it will keep the embers glowing as ammunition for future generations of Black women who might.

Melba Wilson