TALKING ABOUT DIFFERENCE

Encounters in Culture, Language and Identity

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between the lines

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LEARNING FROM DISCOMFORT
A LETTER TO MY DAUGHTERS

BARB THOMAS

Dear Karen and Janette:

A few weeks ago, Janny, we had a conversation at a friend's cottage—two of us well over forty, three of you twenty and under, all of us white. You were talking about the huge chasms between kids with different racial identities in high school—how you felt unwelcome when you went to the Afro-Can club and you never went back; how old friends from as far back as daycare got pressured by their peers to avoid you as a friend because you were white; how you experienced the different clubs in the school as being divisive and exclusive. Your stepsister got angry with me when I started to talk about the reasons why these clubs might be a place of relief and comfort for kids who experience racism in the school and society. She said I was always "sympathizing with the Black kids," but what about a white kid's feelings of being excluded and laughed at by a group of Black kids? I said that both kinds of pain could be happening at the same time, and that it wasn't necessary to deny Black kids' realities in order to pay attention to the feelings of exclusion she as an individual might feel. And this is, of course, not simple, because she, as a Jew, also experiences a form of racism in anti-Semitism.

I've been thinking about the many times we've talked about these questions, trying to hold different truths in our hands at the same time without smashing the ones we don't like. And this cottage

conversation has some of that same spirit. But it also has some echoes—uncomfortable for me—of the louder, more strident pronouncements out there in the streets, organizations and newspapers about "white people's pain," in particular "white women being silenced."

It is important to acknowledge and address your own hurt; and there are different kinds of hurts, different scales of hurt and wounds. There are also different kinds of power to ignore others' wounds, or get your hurt recognized. We've got some names for those huge wounds—words like racism, sexism, imperialism, poverty. These wounds are not accidental—they are done to some people by other people. And the damage has been, and continues to be, massive.

Right now there is an enormous denial of the big wounds, in particular of racism, by the people who are not on the receiving end. You'll hear such people say they're tired of "hearing about racism," or "listening to women griping" or reading newspaper stories about child poverty. "What about my job, my problems, my freedom of speech?" They'll talk about something called "political correctness," which is a label slapped on anyone who feels and expresses revulsion against the big wounds. They'll rail about "angry women of colour who hurt my feelings when they said I was racist."

As white people, we have the immediate luxury of saying these kinds of things and actually getting listened to. But I don't think we have the long-term luxury, not if we want things to be any different for your children. When people who are not the targets of racism get that uncomfortable and angry, and are that determined to trivialize enormous social problems, you can bet there's something substantial to look at and change. And when people can't see what's right around them, there's some effort being exerted not to see.

I didn't always think or feel this way. In fact, you've witnessed some of my awkward, stumbling journey thus far, often to your embarrassment and inconvenience. However, the times I've learned the most have been when I managed to stay with my moments of discomfort and learn from them. And I'm distinguishing here between the constant discomfort zone where I live as a woman in which sexism is directed at me, and the less pressured unease I feel as a white person where I am not the target of racism. It's this second type of discomfort I want to explore from my own experiences. And you'll decide, as you always do, what is useful to you. I'll organize these moments around four of the questions you have put to me from time to time.

You asked me what, in my growing up, affected my learning about the world.

My parents—your grandparents—and the communities from which we came, gave me both the nourishment to be critical, and the reasons not to be. You know that we emigrated from England after the war, when I was two, and my sister three months. My dad is English. You know that my mother was born in Canada; her grandparents on her mother's side emigrated from Scotland; her family on her dad's side descended from United Empire Loyalists. This ancestry was unremarkable in downtown Ottawa of the fifties and sixties, and unremarked. I didn't ask about it; I was "normal"; I didn't have to think about it. I only discovered this much later, when I heard other children, who had to know so much more about their histories in order to survive here, talk about their families. It was then that I realized my ignorance.

What I knew was that my sister and I were deeply loved, and that my parents deeply loved each other. This I learned, quite early, not to take for granted. This knowledge both helped and hindered me in my later rebellion against them.

Indeed, your grandparents were both very present in my life as a child. Dad's office was at home, and his and my mother's preoccupations were transparent, part of our everyday lives. My parents' travel and their opinions on international events had a profound effect on the questions I asked or didn't ask, and on my views on the world.

I was the child to whom Dad showed his stamp collection, and to whom he explained, with the help of a map, how the world was organized. From his point of view, the most significant part was the British Empire. Your grandfather had been a British officer with the Gurkhas in India from 1936 to 1945. We had many photograph albums of him in India and in Burma. His own father had owned a colonial outfitting business, equipping English people "going to the colonies." There were photographs of my dad on horseback, or being served tea. The people in the foreground of all these photographs were white. Sometimes, in the background, there were Indian people, serving and carrying. (These are later reflections on something I took for granted at the time.) When I was a child, I loved these photographs of my dad in earlier moments in his life.

I first heard of Aden (which became Southern Yeman and is now the Republic of Yemen), Antigua, Australia, Bahamas, Barbados (where we were later to live), Bechuanaland (now Botswana), Bermuda, British Guiana (now Guyana), British Honduras (now Belize),

Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), right through the alphabet to the Turks and Caicos Islands and Zanzibar (now part of Tanzania) from the meticulously groomed stamp collection which my father helped me to continue. Together we would send for the prettiest ones (which always came from places other than England or Canada), or the special commemorative ones. In his book, these included the Bahamas 1942 stamps celebrating "450 years after the landfall of Columbus"; or the gorgeous 1906 Barbados stamp commemorating the "tercentenary of annexation" (I had no idea what this meant); or the 1939 royal visit to Canada. The same king or queen's head appeared on stamps from all these countries. We were all—including Canada—part of the "family of the Empire."

I felt these connections with "another home" at Christmas time particularly. In late October, we would pack up an enormous cheddar cheese, a big fruitcake and other goodies to send to my aunt and cousin in England. And we would await the package of hand-knitted sweaters and books that would arrive every year. The books were Enid Blyton adventure books, or *Girls' Annual*s in which comics and stories were set around the world. Young white people (although I didn't see them as white then; they were just people) my age strode across countries, solving mysteries in jungles and deserts. They seemed to do so with resolve, cunning, and more compassion than their "enemies"—usually the people who lived there—appeared to deserve.

On Christmas Day we would count down to 10:00 a.m. for the Queen's message—a voice struggling through underwater cables and transmission problems; a voice heavy with responsibility, overseeing the Empire, urging compassion, harmony, enrichment together; a voice calming in its assurance that things would get done. There must have been messages before 1952 when she abruptly became Queen, but I don't remember them. I do remember the death of King George, and trying to imagine what a king really did. My parents were of the opinion that he was a "good king," whatever that meant, and that this was a very sad occasion indeed. And so the Queen's coronation was a grave and dignified event—a young woman assuming "enormous responsibilities." In order to help me imagine what these might be, I was equipped with lots of books about the Royals—the Queen and Princess Margaret as young girls, their education, their travels, their horses, their parents, lots of people in carriages. I was taught respect for the monarchy and a sense of being part of a benevolent "Commonwealth" where people treated each other decently and

responsibly, but where sometimes things went amok. I never questioned that the words "empire" and "commonwealth" could be used interchangeably.

And then there was the BBC at 8:00 every morning—that garbled, pebbles-in-the-mouth voice crackling through the seawaves—pronouncing on Ceylon, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Malaya (part of what is now Malaysia), the Mau Mau Rebellion and India. My father and mother had a sustained and intense interest in international news, and always tried to develop my own curiosity in "world events." But as a child, I never made the connections between these countries and their struggles and my life in Ottawa.

I think I had more daily experience of, but no words for, class differences. There were the "kids from Heron Park" who invariably became the "tech kids" at our high school. We were exhorted to be friendly, but to stay away from these kids. I had a friend, Sandy Olsenberg, who got talked about differently than anyone else. I was aware of differences between us, but didn't grasp their significance. Her parents listened to Johnny Cash; her dad was often unemployed; they moved a lot; she got to eat more junk food than I did; Sandy had lots of responsibility; she looked anxious much of the time. I once brought home a boyfriend from university who named himself as a working-class kid. My parents were concerned about "important differences between us." It appeared we were not working-class. However, at the same time my father would get angry with me for using words and references designed to make my father himself feel stupid. He would warn me about the social folly of "my pseudo-intellectualism"—quite rightly I now think—but also because he shared the anxiety that many self-taught people have that they will appear unlearned to those with a few more years of school. I was the first in our family to go to university.

Unlike your experience in Toronto, my Ottawa childhood was filled with the static noise of worlds outside my neighbourhood, and, at the same time, devoid of real, daily contact with the people in those worlds. But that doesn't mean there was no contact. I think it was my fifth birthday party. My parents borrowed the movie *Little Black Sambo* from the library along with a projector and screen and set it up in a neighbour's house. I remember this movie vividly. I felt wonder, curiosity, derision, anxiety. Were there creatures in the world like this? Were there really jungles? Is this who lived here? Why were children my age having to deal with tigers? Was this a human child? There was nothing and no one to help me answer these questions.

There was no respectful, authentic representation of African peoples, Native peoples, Asian peoples. Most white children like myself, growing up in Canada in the fifties, "met" the other four-fifths of the world through comics; through movies such as Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (see Alice Walker's essay on how this movie hurt her and other people in her community); through radio programs such as *Amos and Andy* (now satirized, sort of, in the movie *Amos and Andrew*); through the countless westerns on radio and TV, such as *The Lone Ranger*; through missionaries at church; through the limited range of people authoring the school textbooks and novels; through the narrow world view of teachers; and through the garbled voice of the BBC. Almost without exception, these versions of the rest of the planet were written and directed by white people.

This "absent presence" or "present absence" of four-fifths of the world, characterized what "contact" I had with people who *did* live in Ottawa and environs at the time. When we went for picnics with my grandparents to see the site of my grandfather's family farm that is now buried by the St. Lawrence Seaway, we did not talk about the Aboriginal peoples who lived there before the Loyalists, or whose land may have been taken to give to the Loyalists. It was not in the school books, and it was not part of my family's consciousness at that time, either. It is only this week, in the summer of 1993, that my mother recollected why her father's family never relied on store-bought drugs. She was reminiscing that her father and aunt always looked for boneset and other plants good for stomachache. She told us that when her father's family migrated to Canada as Loyalists, they learned about the healing properties of local plants "from Indian people who lived here."

In Ottawa, I was more specifically aware that French people and Jewish people "were not like us." French people were "poor and less educated"; Jewish families "had lots of money." Face-to-face contact was sporadic, guarded, unequal, and just enough to reinforce these powerful stereotypes. Certainly, nobody named social class, ethnocentrism or racism as factors affecting people's lives, or shaping what we learned to see and hear, and not to see and hear.

In these years of my youth, I was self-absorbed and protected from trouble in ways that neither of my parents had been. I had the choice to stay unconnected to the larger world I inhabited. At Queen's University, I remained unaware of even the mild political activity on that campus. There was evidence of people's pain, oppression, and resistance all around me. Their muzzled voices were present in the events

that one *could see*, like the civil rights marches on television, or the sustained and vicious forms of contempt expressed towards Aboriginal peoples; and in the things that one couldn't see, such as the exclusion of most people who weren't white from the university; the all-white teaching staff; the total European focus of all studies; the strange silence, even during those civil rights days, concerning race and racism in Canada. I walked around as though vaccinated from the disturbance that these real people and these real struggles might make in my life. This kind of blinkering and ignorance, this distortion of the world, is one of the chief effects of a racist environment on white people.

And yet, I must have been exerting some effort to not see/hear what was around me, because I had some indefinable unease, some snuffling sense that there was more to the picture, some curiosity and some fear about how it was with other people, whomever they were.

I'm reminded, as I read the above again, that I have really only begun to answer the question June Jordan poses: "What took you so long?" In her essay "On Listening, A Good Way to Hear," she challenges a white American activist to explain what took him so long to "very very very very slowly realize that something is hideously wrong."

You asked me what I learned when we lived in the Caribbean.

I had to leave Canada and live and work in Barbados for two years to see what Ms. Jordan was talking about. It was there that things came unravelled—quickly, it seems now—but in identifiable stages. Barbados was one of the places behind the beautiful stamps; a place that had celebrated a "tercentenary of annexation," a part of the "family of the Empire."

I was twenty-four, your father was twenty-five and you were two, Karen. I remember sitting on a bus to Speightstown in the first week we were there. I was looking at the skin on my arm and thinking, "I'm white. What took me so long to name this?" This sounds so elementary now. It wasn't to me then. I remember thinking that "white" was less my physical colour (indeed, I was a violent pink) than it was my "social" colour, if you know what I mean. It had everything to do with the mixture of deference, resentment and polite distance that I felt from so many people—the effort people had to exert to see beyond my whiteness to whatever qualities they might find

attractive in me. This awareness emerged in little lurches. I'm sure I whined, initially, about people not seeing the "real me."

And I was learning, through Caribbean writers, that the Empire was not a happy family. I read about Europeans exterminating Arawak and Carib peoples to clear land for European plantations; Europeans capturing African peoples to provide a pliant labour force; Black and indigenous people resisting this sustained brutality against them; the legacy of this history economically, socially, psychologically; and the current, continued struggles of Caribbean nations to forge authentic, new, democratic paths for themselves.

My learning was stimulated by more than books. I could see the effects of colonialism in every aspect of daily life. Observations, and frequent conversations with friends, neighbourhood children and students, many of whom you met, Karen, raised whole new questions for me. There was one exchange in particular where fifteen-year-old Anthony Griffiths told me that he really liked me because I was white. I was startled and hurt. Didn't he like me "because of me"? I racked my brains for a question that would explain this to him, and settled on, "How would you feel if I told you that I liked you because you were Black?" He replied in a deeply wounded voice, "I'd think you wanted me for a puppy dog." I looked at him helplessly. He was not talking about individual hurt caused by a comment; he was talking about what white people could do to him and other Black people. I realized, then, I had no notion of the scale of damage which had been done to him. The effects of racism on me were not "equivalent" to the effects on him. And, whether I liked it or not, I could not filter out my whiteness from Anthony's responses to me. Anthony Griffiths helped me to begin to analyse power, in particular, the power behind the exercise of racism. In the world as it is, Anthony Griffiths can hurt my feelings, but he has none of the social power, none of the weight of history that would help him, through the exercise of racism, to reduce my circumstances, my life chances, my sense of myself.

These everyday moments forced me to examine what "white" represented, what white people had done, and were continuing to do to Black people in Barbados. And from Barbados, I had to think about the rest of the Caribbean, and the United States, and Africa, and other parts of the world, and eventually, Canada. What had taken me so long? I was furious at the information I had been denied, and ashamed of my own collusion in the situation.

At the same time I was reflecting on my situation as a woman and developing questions about feminism. I was young, married, with a

small child—you, Karen. A white American anthropologist was also living in Barbados at the time. She was there with her child—defiantly not married—investigating why Barbadian women would not participate consistently in the birth control schemes that proliferated there. She would express exasperation with the women who were my neighbours. She saw them as taking abuse from their men, getting pregnant when it wasn't necessary, and not fighting for their rights. She saw part of her job, in addition to her research, as "promoting feminism." It seemed there were certain ways you showed that you were a feminist. It seemed that neither myself nor my neighbours were feminists. It was in Barbados that I learned something else that now seems obvious—that women's struggles are shaped by race and class. I had struggled to prove that I could both have children and go out and work. Some of my neighbours would have loved such a choice. They were fighting to put food on the table for their children. For them, working outside the home was a given. Women carried loads of sugar cane and food on their heads for miles. This was everyday life since slavery. They took care of middle-class (usually white or light-skinned) women's children to the detriment of their own. Many of my neighbours did not see birth control as some kind of liberation; some of the birth control experiments made women sick and unable to have children; in the absence of old age pensions, children were their security. And women looked out for each other's children, including you, Karen, in ways I had never seen in Canada. I had to ask myself whether Canada was as child-loving as I had thought; I was forced to broaden my understanding of women's rights; I had to question a feminism that only acknowledged some women and some rights.

Some of these issues were only half-formed insights and questions when we returned to Canada in 1972. But the two years in Barbados made everything different. Toni Morrison, in her book of essays called *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, has a wonderful passage which, for me, names this shift in my vision:

> It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl—the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface—and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.

Having seen "the bowl," I now had a responsibility to chip away

and widen the cracks in it. And the biggest cracks came, I discovered, from people who were outside the bowl, who were organizing to make a different structure that would meaningfully include them.

You'll hear that not much was going on in the seventies or even the eighties, but this is someone's wishful thinking. Over the next years I learned a great deal from efforts to organize non-profit daycare, to get our voices heard as parents in schools, to support farm workers and domestic workers in their organizing, to build community and coalition, to expose racism and get new policies and practices in public institutions. When I came back from Barbados, I "discovered"—I guess a bit like Columbus—what had been happening for some time. Native peoples, lesbians, women, poor people, artists, workers, South Asian people and others had formed organizations, were talking back and were making a difference.

For a number of years after Barbados, I was furious with my father and ashamed of my family's participation in this Empire—this "fishbowl." My father and I had fruitless fights in which I disparaged him cruelly for the criminal activities of the British, for what he had done in India, for American imperialism. We managed to hurt each other a great deal, I think, before we made peace with each other's lives. I know that is part of what has taken so long. Another writer, Minnie Bruce Pratt, says a helpful thing for me:

> When we discover truths about our home culture, we may fear we are losing our self; our self-respect, our self-importance. But when we begin to act on our new knowledge, when we begin to cross our "first people boundaries," and ally ourselves publicly with "the others," then we may fear that we will lose the people who are our family, our kind, be rejected by "our own kind."

I both feared and wanted this as a way of distancing myself from my own shame at not seeing, earlier, what was all around me. But my parents never let this happen. You'll remember the painful time in 1983 when I was working in Grenada and the U.S. marines invaded. There was a handful of us who came back to Canada choked with rage, and incredulous at the lies that were passing for news. We spoke about what we had seen, and we went on a cross-country tour to make sure that other people heard about it, too. My parents found it really difficult to believe that the Americans would have deliberately done something that wasn't for the protection of all of us. However, whether or not they agreed with our analysis of what the Americans were actually doing there, they did believe that the Americans had

contributed to my immediate physical danger. They collected all the news clippings, and soon after our return went to a party with the clippings, as usual, tucked in my mother's purse. They were assailed by criticism from old friends, angry that I was misleading people and that I was saying all these "Communist things." Your grandparents tried to defend me by accurately quoting from the clippings, and they were supported by another friend who loudly and contemptuously dismissed the entire gathering. Shortly after this, my parents attended a little photographic exhibit on Grenada, entitled "A Small Revolution"—wonderful photographs documenting the extraordinary achievements of Grenada from 1979 to 1983—the real reason for the invasion. They gave me a poster of this exhibit for Christmas. I was more moved by the love in this gift than anything they have ever given me. And I stopped arguing with them.

You asked me how the two of you helped me learn.

You were constantly brushing me up, uncomfortably, with my ignorance, and my unfamiliarity with the world. I'm grinning as I remember you, Karen, on the back steps, your two-year-old fist clutching the hair of your friend, her fingers stroking yours, both of you quite entranced with each other. And when she pushed her finger into your arm it left a white mark momentarily. Why was that? Why didn't her brown skin do that? Why did the water leave your hair all lank and plastered against your head? It didn't do that to Sophie's. And while I rushed around trying to find out about melanin and skin colour, you'd come up with some harder question. Why was Sophie's mother upset because we gave Sophie a Black doll? Why, when you wore clothes that a relative had outgrown, did Sophie's mother throw your perfectly fine, outgrown clothes back on our doorstep calling them "dumps?"

And just when I thought I was on the right track, a reaction from one of you would shake things up again. How was I to comfort you, Janny, when you were five years old, and we had just read the book and sung the song the "Drinking Gourd"? You began to sob that you were frightened that they would come and catch your friend, Fran. I tried, awkwardly, to explain that slavery was over, but that its legacy was not. And I also fully realized something, at that moment, that I had only partially grasped before. You needed to know more about how Black people had fought back, and continued to do so. We read

Harriet Tubman; we talked about South Africa. And you needed to know that some white people resisted being caught into a set of oppressive relations with their Black neighbours.

And when you were seven, Karen, there was the day I heard you calling, taunting, "nigger, nigger," to your friend, Connie, next door. Before I reached the back door, I realized that my rage was also about my failure, and would not help Connie or you. And so we talked about that word, about where it came from. And we went to talk to Connie and Connie's mother. I'm not sure whether your friendship survived that day. But it was an important jolt to my liberalism. It was not enough to have a variety of books, exposure to different music, or to live in a cosmopolitan neighbourhood. Contact between people was still not equal. There were weapons you had in a fight with Connie, that she didn't have against you, and you had, at seven, learned to use them, as I had at seven. Resisting white supremacy required an everyday, active set of interventions. There was no such thing as "non-racism," only "anti-racism." This was a very important lesson for me, and one that directly influenced my increasing focus on anti-racism work in my job at the Cross Cultural Communications Centre.

Indeed, at ten years old, Janny, you already grasped that inaction about racism by adults had left kids on their own to fight it. Do you remember sitting at the dining room table eating supper—you, your friend Fran and I? You were congratulating Fran on the damage she had inflicted on the eye of one of your classmates, Louis. Fran nodded. I, of course, asked what happened. Fran responded economically that Louis had called her "nigger" and she had punched him out. I asked, in my law-and-order way, if there hadn't been some teachers around who could have helped. You two looked knowingly at each other, and Fran began explaining—slowly and carefully, because clearly I wasn't too swift—that if teachers did hear that word, they always found something else to do, or pretended they didn't hear. If you reported the incident to a teacher or principal, they either asked you what you had done to provoke it, or they punished you for being a tattle-tale. "So," concluded Fran, slowing down to let me get the point, "if you're going to get punished anyway, you might as well have the satisfaction of punching the guy out." I had no response to this inescapable logic. This was just another incident in the daily series of child-wise nudges that shook up my comfortable edges. What took me so long, anyway?

Meanwhile, you were making your own paths. I still remember

your march home from a grade nine science class, Karen. You asked whether the Board of Education had a policy that could stop teachers from being racist. It seemed that your science teacher had slipped into the classroom at a raucous moment. Everyone was acting up, but he had swooped down on your classmate, Bao, and sneered, "What's the matter with you? Your kind are well-behaved and quiet, so what's your problem?" In the uneasy silence that followed, no one had spoken up—for Bao, or for themselves. You returned to school the next day, having read the Board's race relations policy. And you went to the science teacher at break and told him that you now knew there was a policy that said he couldn't say the things he had said to Bao; and that your parents knew what you were doing; and that if he ever did that again, you would report him. In mentioning that your parents knew about this, you were demonstrating your growing strategic sense that when you speak up you risk punishment, and where possible, you need to protect yourself.

Always, the two of you have challenged me to "make the way by walking." You never allowed me to hoist some politically cleansed flag, and hitch myself to it. Daily living is so much more messy, and if you're paying any attention at all, that living is constantly throwing up new questions. After watching the movie *Jungle Fever*, Janny, you and I spent three hours analysing the powerful scene in the middle where a group of Black women talk about their experiences with Black men, and with white women. They don't mince words. You felt uncomfortable and accused. You had already seen the movie once with a male friend who was Black, and the two of you had struggled for adequate words to talk about questions of sexism, racism and sexuality without hurting each other.

And there was the youth meeting at a local high school that you attended with a friend, Karen; you were one of the few white people there. You wondered whether you were intruding; you tried to watch alertly for signs that your presence might be inappropriate and hoped you'd be able to read the cues. There is a politic to respecting people's need for caucusing and organizing, while at the same time continuing to learn and do your share of the work to make things better. It's important to keep wrestling with that balance and not give up trying because you're afraid you'll get it wrong. There are other questions. What am I responsible for? What will others hold me responsible for, whether it's fair or not? How do I claim the parts of culture(s) that help me be whole, while at the same time opposing those many aspects that oppress, divide and diminish? How do I both protect myself

against malicious and small-minded attack, and leave myself open to continued challenge? These questions take me to the final part of this letter to you.

You asked me what role(s) white people have in fighting racism.

In a certain way, this entire letter is an attempt to answer that question. I can't speak for anyone else, but the efforts I feel best about are those which don't, in themselves, reproduce racism, that build coalition, that acknowledge leadership from activists who experience racism, that ensure that I speak from where I am, and that I move things forward and not back. This is everyday work; I haven't found this easy. I know you two haven't either.

There's a prevalent notion around that white people can choose to fight racism, or not, and people of colour don't have this choice. Let's start with the first part of this statement. It's true that white people are not the targets of racism; and that indeed, many whites have benefitted, and continue to benefit, from dominating and excluding others. Many white people not only do not acknowledge racism as a system of domination, but also choose to do nothing about it if they do. "Having a choice" makes us suspect, because we might pack up anytime the going gets tough. History is littered with examples of people from the power group taking their ball and going home when they're "misunderstood," when they're accused, when the consequences are distasteful, when people "aren't grateful" for their efforts.

We'd better be clear about the reasons we fight racism and other big wrongs. This is where I have come to at this point in my life; I fight racism because I can't be with myself in the world without trying to do so. I fight racism, as I fight other forms of domination, because it has killed millions of people; because it has totally messed up relations between people(s) on this planet; because it forces me into oppressive relations that I reject with other people(s); because it lies about who is in the world and who has made what happen; because it has limited what I have been able to see and know; because it diminishes the friendship and community that I seek, with others, to build; and because I learned through the two of you that inaction is complicity. When I'm clear about that place in myself, I can, as bell hooks says in her book *Black Looks*, "be capable, via *my* political choices, of working on behalf of the oppressed." But I can't work on behalf of anyone else until I know where I am.

And what about the second part of this statement of who has choice about fighting racism? People of colour and Aboriginal persons do not have a choice about being the targets of white domination. However, each person makes decisions about what their stance towards this will be. Not all persons of colour or Aboriginal persons fight racism, any more than all women fight sexism. Certainly there are different consequences and risks for people of colour who fight racism than there are for whites. In your classrooms and workplaces, you will sometimes hear people of colour deny racism, and its effects on themselves and others, just as you'll hear women trivialize sexism. And you will hear white people welcome these pronouncements. In these situations, you will have to speak from your own rejection of racism, and not what you think or hope others will say.

As you already know, there are consequences to speaking and acting against injustice, just as—I believe—there are consequences to not doing so. For people of colour daring to name and challenge racism in a workplace, reprisals are often swift and brutal, crude as well as subtle. Colleagues shun you, talk about you behind your back, suggest that you're crazy and too angry to have any perspective; information about new training, developmental assignments, promotions and new job postings reaches you later than anyone else; decisions affecting you are made at meetings where you are absent; job vacancies you apply for which were previously permanent become temporary; hiring selection teams ask questions about your personal life and views. And on it goes. I personally witnessed all of the above and more in the government workplace where I just finished a contract. These stories are not peculiar to this workplace. It is a serious decision for a person of colour or an Aboriginal person to confront racism—in the workplace or in the streets. It's a serious decision for anyone who's the target of those big forms of oppression to fight back. In lots of places, including Canada, people have been killed for doing so.

Are there consequences for white people fighting racism? Yes, but they're usually of an entirely different order. In my last job, my contract was not renewed. Management didn't like being reminded and challenged about acting on their stated commitment to fighting racism. But this happens less to people who are not at the receiving end of the hurt that you're fighting—men fighting sexism, for example, or straight people insisting on rights for gay people. Indeed, white people challenging racism are often met with an admiration and surprise that can be seductive. "What got you into this anti-racism thing?" I've been asked with interest by people of different racial

backgrounds. This applauding of white people's anti-racism efforts is not confined to individual interactions. "Association with anti-racism work" can actually help white people get promotions and jobs, if they are careful, tactical and "not too noisy." In an anti-racism pilot school project on which I worked a few years ago, several of the white teachers included their participation in the project on their resumés and in many cases this "experience" assisted them in securing a vice-principalship or consultant's job in a Board of Education anxious to appear anti-racist. Contributions to this project produced none of the same benefits for Black and East Asian teachers whose efforts were critical to the work. You will encounter this in your work as a teacher, Karen. There is—still—a prevalent notion amongst white people that Aboriginal persons and persons of colour should be challenging racism; and that therefore their efforts and the risks that they take are unremarkable. Co-existing with this fiction is the puzzling view that Aboriginal persons and persons of colour cannot be "objective" when it comes to racism, are likely to overreact and get angry, and are therefore highly suspect when it comes to fighting racism. The corollary to all of this is that white people are best placed to get paid to do anti-racism work, and they are more likely to get recognition for their work. This is, in fact, a microcosm of how racism works. These are some of the ways in which racism can co-opt anti-racism efforts, and any white people who do anti-racism work.

Needless to say, this situation has justifiably ticked many people right off. In this climate and these circumstances you need to pay attention that when you talk back to racism, you aren't benefitting at other people's expense. Indeed, there are jobs you may have to let pass, or opportunities that are exciting to you that someone else would really do better. This is not about condescending to someone, or pushing someone forward "just because she's Black." This is about making sure that the old affirmative action for white people isn't still in operation, with you as a key beneficiary; it's about really trying to get the work done with all the wits, skills and different kinds of knowledge we can assemble.

And you'd better not expect people to be grateful for your efforts. In fact, the more you work on trying to make things right, the more mistakes you'll have the chance to make, and the more you'll get criticized from different people. Sometimes their criticism will be useful, and even if it's hard to listen to, supportive of you and of more effective work. You're lucky when you get that kind of challenge. But

sometimes people will try to tear you down, and erode even useful work. Watch out for that; distinguish between the two.

Sometimes, you will feel shame at being white; you will feel uneasy about being middle-class and without disability. It's not easy to embrace who you are, to find models you are proud to claim, and, at the same time, to continue resisting the most abusive aspects of the culture of which we are a part. However, in the long run shame doesn't do you or anyone else any good. Shame is immobilizing unless you use it as information to move on and to change things. Part of being in the power group—whether you like it or not—is being the target of anger when people start to analyse how they are being mistreated by "your" group of people, and to demand that things change. As white women, we live with oppression as part of the "oppressor" group and as part of the "oppressed" group. These are different places to be, and we occupy them at the same time. There are different challenges to being a socially responsible person with these simultaneous identities.

There are moments when you can become just another white person, even to people who love you, know you, want you in their lives. (You know yourselves, that there are times when our anger at men's violence against women, and men's power to avoid changing anything, can extend to all men—our fathers and other loved males. And sometimes, intimate men *do* collude in our oppression. Sometimes we *do* collude, as white people, in the oppression of people we love.)

Do you get the picture? It's what you know already; life is a messy, challenging business. Mostly, you walk one day at a time, clucking over mistakes, and being prepared to make some new ones, trying to leave your little corner of the world in slightly better shape than you found it.

If you take nothing else from all these words, take these five ideas and use them in your own ways. First, remember that *you are not responsible for wrongs committed before you were born, but you can't escape the legacy of those wrongs*. You need to understand some history in order to understand your current position in the world and other people's perceptions of you. *And you are responsible for what you do now.* In this regard, *there's no such thing as "doing nothing."* You two and others have taught me that. Even indecision, or unconsciousness, results in some action or inaction which has consequences for you and other people. The question is whether you're going to take responsibility for it.

Second — in whatever situations you experience it — try to *use discomfort to pose new questions to yourself, and to seek new insights*. I'm not talking here about an informed fear of physical danger or attack from other people; I'm speaking of the discomfort resulting from avoidance, silence, or the challenge posed by people seeking justice for themselves. Try to ask, even when it's inconvenient, "What and who is missing from this picture? Who else should be saying something about this? What's behind what's going on here?" (This last question could be about what's going on inside yourself, as well as an event in the world.)

Third, *distinguish between, on the one hand, hurt feelings that a person with privilege might feel at being excluded, and on the other, the sustained, systemic, and pervasive damage inflicted on all parts of the self, by the big wounds* — racism, sexism, class, imperialism, ageism, heterosexism, oppression of people with disabilities. As white people, and as women, you will experience both. There is a backlash against people who are organizing against these big wrongs. Part of that backlash trivializes the damage of these injustices and inflates the personal feelings of those people who are being challenged to change.

Fourth, *value your own experiences as sources of learning and wisdom about yourself and the larger society*, even if those stories are painful. The tensions in our personal lives, whether they are economic, social, and/or in our psyches, mirror in some way the tensions and contradictions in the larger world. This is not the same thing as thinking that your experience is everyone else's experience. My stories here are about some moments when I managed to be more "accurate about myself and to force my mind into a constantly expanding apprehension of my political and moral situation." (These are not my words; they're June Jordan's, but I like them as one descriptor of what I'm trying to do, what I've seen both of you try to do.)

And finally, *make the most of who you are without damaging other people with less social power than yourself*. This means being self-aware, and self-critical. It means using what you know and acknowledging and being curious about what you don't know. It means living as truthfully and as consciously as possible with all your social identities as young, white, middle-class women, but not being reduced by them. It means not being apologetic for who you are, but being responsible for what you do.

As Bernice Johnson Reagon (of the singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock) says, "Most of the things you do, if you do them right, are for people who live long after you are long forgotten. That will only happen if you give it away. Whatever it is that you know, give it away." And that is what I'm trying to do here. To put it mildly, you haven't always warmly welcomed the knowledge I wanted to give to you at different moments in your lives. But I feel some urgency now about what I've tried to say in this letter. Please take these thoughts with you as you decide how you will travel these roads.

Loving you in all the ways I know,

Your mother.