

Color of violence 2002: Building a movement

Mantilla, Karla

color of violence

The 2nd annual Color of Violence Conference was put on by INCITE! Women Of Color Against Violence, a national activist group of radical feminists of color formed at the first Color of Violence conference held in Santa Cruz, California, in April 2000. The conference was held March 15-17 in Chicago to standing-room-only crowds-over 2000 people attended, and from the looks of it, over 90% were women of color. There was a great variety of ethnicities represented there: African American women, Asian women, Native American women, Latinos, and Arab women-and there seemed to be substantial numbers of each group.

The opening plenary, "Sovereignty, State Violence, and Colonialism," began with a group of Asian drummers named Oorisori (Our Voice) who infused the filled-to-capacity room with a vibrant energy and passion that carried through the rest of the conference. After a traditional prayer paying tribute to and honoring ancestors, Beth Richie began the plenary by saying "We want to build an anti-racist justice and peace movement-the kind of peace movement that is against war!" She emphasized that violence against women takes many forms and that women of color resist every day. In a running theme throughout the conference, she paid tribute to those who have gone before her: "We are a movement that doesn't forget. We don't forget those who cannot be here, who could not come, who were afraid, who did not survive..." She honored the presence of "our elders" and also welcomed the energy and leadership of the many groups of young women who came. She asked the audience to be mindful of the tremendous obstacles-money, time, lack of support-that many women had surmounted in order to attend, and thanked the sponsors, activists, organizers who made the conference possible.

The first speaker of the plenary was Cherrie Moraga, poet, playwright, co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, and author of *Loving in the Wars Years* and *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*. She gave a spokenword-like talk in which she covered huge ranges of her experience in order to address her experience of being a "Chicana dyke of changing consciousness." She told of how she is "not always convinced I am a good writer," and how she experiences herself "writing under a blanket, not like official censorship," but imposed within oneself, a part of which is reinforced/caused by commercial disregard. She said that she loves to read "American Indian writers because they aren't afraid of betraying America." She spoke of being grateful for the lesbian feminist movement, saying that it had saved her from many years of pain, of being grateful for the Chicana movement, and equally grateful for the early betrayals of those and other movements that "kept me looking elsewhere." She said "she learned more from them than from any easy solidarity."

She then turned to her experiences as a mother, saying that she "had a Chicano child because the raza is turning white." She said that the "white nation may feed your belly, but not your soul." She asked how you can teach a child about genocide and then, to still "love beyond their front door," and wondered "how to teach a counterculture of courage to my children." She then spoke of the ways in which she as a mother becomes angry, that "anger has always run my life." She told the story of when her "girl child forgot her math homework again," and how she experienced "helpless rage to convince [the child] to care," and how she saw the child shrink upon seeing her rage. Moraga said that at those times, her fear is stronger than her compassion. She spoke of how her mother "closed the last days of her life in fits of rage." She ended by asking how we can stop violence without naming our own violent acts, both psychic and physical. How do we move to wholeness daily, refusing acts of victimization in our lives?

The next speaker, Heather Milton, a self-described Cree Stony Blackfoot Ojibwe has worked with the Native Youth movement in Canada and is an organizer with the Indigenous Environmental Network. She explained that she was adopted by white people when she was three months old and she left when she was 16 years old because she "couldn't handle being with them." Her consciousness of Native oppression arose when she saw Native people "suffering in the streets, on drugs, in gangs, working as prostitutes, suffering as old people, and in poverty." She said that "violence is having your own water in your body polluted and kids born with problems" because of it, "not having your own food, having your land taken away for crimes, climate change, not being able to be sustainable in your own communities." She criticized "white enviros" for their idea of what sustainable development is, saying it may be sustainable, but it is not development. She said that indigenous people know that the issues of fresh water, food and air are vital because "they are connected to the land."

Katherine Acey, Executive Director of the Astraea Lesbian Action Foundation, spoke next. She spoke of her multiple identities, as a woman over 50, as coming from a working-class background and from an Arab American family, and as a feminist, a lesbian, and a socialist. She spoke of the importance of embracing all identities; not abandoning them, but going beyond them, to embrace such qualities as values, beliefs and passion for social justice. She talked about the Astraea Foundation, saying that Astraea was the goddess of justice and truth. She said that Astraea, conceived of by lesbians, began in 1977, but has since expanded its philanthropy to support grassroots women's groups, giving "modest, but significant funds." Astraea gives priority to lesbians of color and multicultural antiracist groups. She talked about helping two lesbians who were in danger because one had come out to her Arab family, whereupon she was kidnapped and beaten for several days and was almost sent back to her home country before she received help. She said the two are in hiding for their protection now. She told of an Arab lesbian underground in this country that has grown because many Arab lesbians cannot be out-they would face loss of family, country or job.

In explaining the interconnectedness of progressive movements with global politics, she said that lesbian and gay groups protested the homophobia in the fact that "Hijack this, fags" was written on a bomb dropped over Afghanistan, but "they neglected to be concerned about where the bombs were going or even that they were going" [to bomb Arab people].

Finally, about the occupation in Palestine, she exhorted the audience to "speak out about this brutal military occupation," to challenge state violence both in the U.S. and in Israel, to demand that the U.S. government do something about the Palestinian oppression, especially since it is the U.S. government that has "fed and funded this war."

Judith Scully, a professor of law at the University of West Virginia spoke about the use of contraception as an act of violence against women. She spoke of methods of contraception that are not women-controlled, but provider-controlled, that interfere with normal hormonal balance. She said women generally think of contraceptives as tools of liberation, but that they can also be tools of oppression. She spoke of Norplant, Depo Provera and Quinacrine as methods of contraception that have been tested on poor, politically powerless women with less access to legal resources and so assumed less likely to complain about their deleterious health effects. She said that the use of Quinacrine for sterilization was especially an "act of violence" as it has not been approved for use anywhere in the world. She explained that its use consists of inserting Quinacrine pellets into the vagina with an IUD tool whereupon the pellets dissolve, causing a chemical burn in the fallopian tubes.

However, the process doesn't always cause a complete blockage of the tubes and can result in ectopic pregnancies, particularly dangerous for poor women with inadequate access to medical care. And Quinacrine is a mutagenic agent (it causes genetic mutations in cells) and is suspected of causing reproductive cancers. More than 30,000 women in India filed a lawsuit over Quinacrine use and India has banned its use. In Vietnam, over 100 women were sterilized with Quinacrine without their knowledge or consent. She said that Quinacrine testing is motivated by racism and classism and is an act of violence against women of color.

She said that large numbers of women of color are not told about the side effects of Norplant, which include severe depression, nervousness, incessant bleeding, weight gain, delayed return of fertility and even sterility. Women who experience these side effects are often told by medical personnel that the implant cannot be removed. Furthermore, Norplant provides no protection against AIDS, a disease which affects 36 million people and is the leading cause of death of African American women between the ages of 25 to 40 today. She said that it appears that women of color are better off dead than pregnant.

Finally, she criticized the rhetoric of choice in the pro-choice movement, saying that women of color don't so much need choice as they need more choices and that the rhetoric of choice "elevates quantity over quality of choices," ignoring that not all women have the same choices available to them. She said that when some young African American women want to leave the hospital after giving birth, they must use either Norplant or Depo Provera, and that when poor women apply for welfare, they too are often required to use one of these forms of birth control. Of the choice rhetoric, she said that to portray these as choices is like saying a battered woman chooses battering when she has limited employment potential, several kids and low self-esteem, or like saying a woman chooses prostitution when she comes from a history of poverty, coercion and prior sexual abuse.

Next, Francine Kenyon, a deaf and disability rights advocate of Chinese-Hawai'i descent, spoke about her experiences as an abused deaf woman. She said, "I want all of you to know that deaf women need your support. We are suffering a lot." Kenyon recounted her own experience in an abusive marriage and how being deaf compounded her sense of isolation and the lack of services available to help her. She had become a deacon of a deaf church. When her husband hit her, other churchgoers asked her about it, but she denied that she had been hit because she was afraid to tell the truth. She said that once she was able to leave her husband, many other deaf people

in her church came to her and revealed that they too had been abused. She said that there is not the same level of information about abuse in the deaf community as in the hearing community. She now works with a variety of deaf

women of color dealing with issues of abuse.

She called on women to be considerate and creative in finding ways to communicate with people with disabilities, to motivate themselves to learn sign language, to show patience in dealing with disabilities, and to be aware that self-esteem is of utmost importance for deaf and hard of hearing people.

Finally, in a stirring conclusion to the first plenary and the first evening of the conference, P. Catlin Fullwood delivered a rousing and passionate talk which had the audience up on their feet hooting and shouting in agreement. Fullwood, who has served on the board of trustees of the Ms. Foundation for Women, founded the People of Color Against AIDS Network in Seattle and currently consults with organizations working for social change, began by honoring her grandmothers, mother, daughter and sisters. She said that this was the hardest talk she had ever worked on. She began working as a black outreach worker in 1978 for VISTA and has continued working on community outreach ever since. Commenting on the overwhelming turnout for the conference, she said, "This is the largest assemblage of women of color working to end violence against women. Somebody is scared tonight. This is power we have been waiting for. Twentyfive years we have been waiting."

She said, "terrorism is not new to women and girls of color." They have been subjected to battering, to images of women of color's bodies created for sexual use, to every war waged by men, to low paying jobs, to communities torn asunder by addiction, to prisons." To thunderous applause, she said, "I've got an evil axis for you, George: racism, homophobia, ableism, gender, class and economic oppression! These form axes of evil!"

Of disagreements from within communities of women of color, she said, "We don't need to agree, we won't, we don't. But as long as I take breath, I've got your back. I am working to save my life. Will you join me?"

Fullwood then delineated four lessons she wanted to pass on. First, she said, "Do not romanticize the past." She warned people to beware of retrospective radicalism, the idea that things were better in the past-more grassroots and poor, not so professionalized. She said that the truth was that the "battered women's movement was grassroots for about a half an hour."

Second, she advised women to learn from the past. She said it is important to be able to take unpopular stands. Belief in women's abilities to save our own lives and to beware of mono-issue strategies. Things are too complex in the world to see things in terms of black and white.

Third, she said, "Do not recreate the past." She warned that "justice does not come with the granting of a 501 (c)(3)," that "the system that demonizes us will not save us," and that "revolution can only be built on the ground." She also advised women not to give up friendship for politics. She lamented the time she spent not speaking to women because they disagreed about politics, saying although she still thinks they are wrong, she missed so much of their lives over the years. Finally, she said we should protect and support the future, not be timid or cautious, and to take our issues seriously, but not ourselves.

In a final word to the young women of color in the audience, she thanked them for being there and then said to them of older women, "You will think we are condescending and judgmental, and we will think you are naive, impetuous and judgmental, and we'll both be right!" But, she asked them not to give up the struggle together.

Finally she said she was an "oldschool kind of sister" who was not afraid to take a stand. She said, "I demand the right not to be beaten, raped, silenced, poor, and enslaved for the wealth of a few ... And I demand the right not to allow these things to be done to my sisters. I demand the right to criticize each war we enter and the freedom of assembly to do it. I demand quality education, to be as queer as I want to be, to live free from fear." She ended by affirming her dedication to her country, the U.S., saying that "my country is almost never right, but it is my country, to criticize, and to be ashamed of."

The second plenary, held the next morning, "Sovereignty, State Violence, Colonialism," began with a performance of a Peace Dance by Palestinian Women for Peace. Julia Sudbury, professor of Ethnic Studies at Mills College, moderated the plenary and gave a short talk about patriotism, saying that in the American flag, "I see in every star, 100 indigenous nations; in the red stripes, the blood of Asian, Latin American and other immigrants; in the white stripes, the white hood of the white supremacists; and in the blue, the water of the

passage of the Africans who died on the way." Rather than identify with a particular nation, she expressed her allegiance to people of color all over the world. She finally said that, in thinking about violence, it was important to broaden our concept of violence so that we include not just personal violence such as rape, incest and domestic violence, but state violence like the military, border patrols, the police, prisons, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the bombing of Vieques in naval exercises in Puerto Rico, the bombing of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the violence occurring in Colombia, Chile, and Palestine, all of which are funded by the U.S.

The first speaker was Lourdes Lugo, the co-director of the Puerto Rican High School in Chicago and niece of Oscar Lopez, a Puerto Rican political prisoner. She said that historical problems and injustices do not go away; they "insist on being resolved." Puerto Rico continues to be a colonized land of the U.S. She said that some of the effects of colonization on a daily basis include "an incredible amount of self-hate and self-destruction." She said that 36% of the population of Puerto Rico is HIV positive and that they have the highest suicide and homicide rates in this hemisphere. She said that social ills such as these are not "manifestations of individual choices, but of a political structure which is in place to get rid of us." She said Puerto Ricans have been denied their history, because they know about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, but not about Puerto Rican historical figures.

"What brings us together in this room is the possibility of hope for the future. We have a political social and human responsibility to change the social ills imposed by colonialism." She spoke of her experiences working in an alternative high school with "students no one wants to deal with." She said one of her students who had been "one of the lost causes," had graduated and now had the highest grade point average in biophysics at the University of Chicago. She said, "We are all committed to some cause that moves us. We have a duty and responsibility to do this. All of us should leave this conference with the responsibility to fight for the sovereignty of nations around the world. One day I will come to this conference and Puerto Rico will be a nation, the Philippines will be demilitarized, the Palestinians will live in a land of peace, all the political prisoners here in the U.S. will be freed. Some day the U.S. military with all its genocide will have to have a bake sale in this goddamned hallway to support themselves!"

The next speaker was Kemba Smith, an African American woman who had received a 24-year sentence without possibility of parole due to mandatory minimum sentencing policies for her involvement with an abusive boyfriend who was a major figure in a crack cocaine ring. Clinton granted Smith executive clemency before leaving office in 2000. Smith began by explaining that she spent six and one-half years in prison-without clemency, her scheduled release date would have been in the year 2016. She has a son whom she gave birth to in prison.

Smith said that although she was thrilled that she was released, she "left a lot of women behind." She said there are women who are losing hope every day behind bars, some even contemplating suicide, and because Bush is in office, there is even less chance they will gain clemency. She explained that harsh drug laws which consider associating with a drug dealer a crime are affecting countless women. She thanked Beth Richie for "all she did for me," explaining, "I was at a point when I was blaming myself for allowing myself to stay in an abusive relationship. She helped me understand the cycle of violence, that the things I did [were because] I was trying to survive, that the government was trying to make me feel bad because I had a middle class upbringing [and therefore should not have been vulnerable to being involved with a drug dealer]." She explained that in mandatory minimum laws, "there is no understanding of women involved in abusive relationships." Smith said that "Eighty percent of incarcerated women have been in abusive relationships and were involved in illegal activities because of it. I was doing what I needed to do to protect myself, my son, my parents. I could not turn my boyfriend in to [government] agents because I was afraid for all of us." Because she refused to give the state evidence against her boyfriend because she was afraid of what he would do to her and her family, she was prosecuted as an accomplice. She explained that the prosecutor wanted her to lie, but she did not. "Most women and men will [lie, they] will go for it-freedom. I can't fault them for doing that." The reason her case gained the publicity it needed for it to be brought to the attention of President Clinton was that the NAACP Legal Defense Fund represented her pro bono. Because of the draconian drug laws, she said that in her case, "My only option was executive clemency." She is still on parole, cannot vote and is subject to other restrictions. She explained that most convicted felons are not eligible for financial aid for education, a thing she said makes it very difficult for exoffenders to rebuild a life. Smith is pursuing a degree in social work in Virginia and expects to graduate this May.

She closed by saying, "I feel the unity of women in this room. I recognize our power, what we can do. I ask you all as women of color to get more involved in [the issue of the incarceration of women of color]. I thank all of you for your support, but I am only an individual, just me. What about the others, the hundreds, the thousands, of women and men? When I look at this audience, I see so many diverse faces. The last time I saw that I was in prison. I ask you to be committed. We have to move forward.

Stormy Ogden, an American Indian woman who is Kashaya Pomo and a member of the Tule River Yokuts tribe, spoke next. Ogden was incarcerated for five years at the California Rehabilitation Center and holds a Bachelor's degree in Native American Studies. She began by acknowledging and welcoming the other native women at the conference. She told of Native American dances which usually last 3 to 4 days and nights and so need a singer with a very strong voice to last that long. Traditional practice is for the singer to swallow a cricket in order to gain the ability to sing all night as crickets can. She then told of her two cats, one of whom caught and presented crickets (rather than mice) to her. Upon telling a relative about this, he told her that it meant that "your voice needs to be strong and clear," in telling her story and advocating for women inside and outside the prison walls. She said that women comprise the fastest growing segment of the prison population, that over 90,000 women are incarcerated in the U.S. She also said that while two-thirds of women on probation are white, two-thirds of the women incarcerated in federal and state prisons and jails are of color.

She recounted her experiences being incarcerated, explaining that she was classified as "other" rather than Native American. She said that every day she would erase her classification on the wall next to her cell and write American Indian in its place. The guard admonished her for doing so and threatened to write her up, but she kept doing it every day. Finally she got tired of having to rewrite it every day, so she found a permanent black laundry marker and wrote "American Indian" on the wall next to her cell. She said that for doing that, "I lost 60 days [she was put into solitary confinement], but it was worth it."

She said that she was incarcerated because she was addicted to alcohol and drugs, because she was a survivor of domestic violence and incest and for being a Pomo and Yokuts woman. Her crime was welfare fraud-which consisted of \$1730 worth of welfare benefits and \$59 worth of food stamps.

She said that she was sexually abused starting at age five and continuing until six years ago. She gave some statistics about women in prison: Seventy-one percent of women experienced ongoing abuse from before the age of eighteen, 62% experienced ongoing abuse after the age of eighteen, 27% were raped and 67% are mothers of children under eighteen. She said that for women who have been sexually abused, prison conditions can bring up memories and trigger symptoms-she said that the majority of prison guards are men who have total control over the women, watching them use the toilet, change their clothes, sleep, and take showers.

She also spoke of the problems of incarcerated single mothers. She said that for many of them, there is no one who will bring their children to them for visits, but that for incarcerated men, frequently their wives or girlfriends make the effort to bring them their children for visits. She said that 6% of women who are convicted are pregnant and that these women are required to be shackled while giving birth. She said that many of these babies are lost in the foster care system unless there is a relative available to take the baby. This is a big problem for Native Americans, who often lose their children to be raised by white people.

Ogden also criticized the prison mental health services, saying she was given Elavil and other psychotropic drugs three times a day, which turned her into "a complete zombie." She was given no choice about taking the drugs and they checked her mouth to be sure she had swallowed her pills. She also said there is no medical care in the prison system. She knew one woman who complained of stomachaches, for which they only gave her Motrin. When she was released from prison, it was found that she had cancer which had been allowed to spread throughout her whole body during her incarceration. They refused her any other care because she had been a drug offender so they just assumed she was trying to get drugs when she complained of pain.

She said that institutions such as prisons are not new to the experience of Native Americans-- they have long been subjected to boarding schools and orphanages in addition to prisons and jails. She recounted that in the 1800s, nineteen Native American men were sent to Alcatraz because they refused to let their children go to school and they did not want to be farmers. In the 1930s, Native Americans were incarcerated for practicing their religious beliefs and for keeping their hair long. She said, "As Indian people, we still have a sense of country, of home. Women hold the traditions in our hearts, in our songs, and in our languages, even though they [the traditions] have had to go underground."

She said that we "need alternatives to prison and to embrace women when they come out" of prison as a community, and to create alternatives "so that they don't turn to the streets, to drugs." She ended by reminding the audience, "When you walk upon this land, always walk with respect

because you are walking on the graves of our ancestors."

The last panelist to speak was Nadine Naber, co-founder of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and cultural anthropologist in

Cairo. She spoke of the Palestinian female suicide bomber, Wafa Idris, asking what historical conditions could produce a female suicide bomber. The woman had worked with the Palestinian Red Crescent society (like the Red Cross). International photographers who worked with the woman had documented Palestinian children being shot after cursing Israeli soldiers. The children would lift their shirts to bare their chests to the Israeli soldiers, taunting the soldiers to shoot them the soldiers would shoot the children from behind using silencers.

In the 17 months since the Intifada, 1000 Palestinians have lost their lives. The Palestinian ghettos are controlled by Israeli Apache helicopters and F I 6s, sent to the Israelis by the U.S. The Israelis shoot ambulance drivers and paramedics, they use jets, helicopters and tanks, yet, Naber said, in the U.S. newspapers, "only Israeli blood is seen, Palestinian blood has no value."

She said that "every Israeli town was built on Palestinian land, Palestinian towns." She explained about the Israeli attacks on Palestinians, where Palestinians are told that if they surrender and abandon their homes for Israelis to occupy, they will not be hurt. She said that the Israeli massacres are subsidized by the U.S., and that the colonization of the Americas was founded on Native American, Mexican and Puerto Rican genocides.

Naber explained that Israel wants to colonize the entire region economically, that the "dominant view in Israel is to kill Palestinians till they cry `uncle.'" Palestinians' access to food and sustainability is blocked. She said that Israel should be "called out as a colonial settler state," that Israel is a "colonial implant on Arab lands," and asked as we include racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia into our analysis, "why have we forgotten Zionism?" She asked, "why, even in radical women of color circles do we remain supportive of the Israeli project?" She defined Zionism as "unified pro-Israeli policies," saying that critics of Zionism are demonized, that Arab American women's voices are silenced and excluded when anti-Zionism is interpreted as anti-Semitism. African American women are the first targets of this; for Arab and African American women to unite would be a big threat. To much applause, Naber declared that anti-Zionism is not racism against Jewish people.

Naber ended by affirming that "We are still alive. We will fight the occupation until all Palestinians have the right to return to their original homes. Let us rise and mount a resistance. We will continue to fight, to be there as a thorn in their side. Over one-half of the Palestinian population has been expelled. We will never concede our lands. Let us rise! We will continue to struggle until they are as desperate as they should be. We are ready. Our agenda is clear. To Palestine!" She ended by chanting, "No justice, no peace!" with the audience.

The third plenary, held Saturday evening, entitled "Organizing in Communities of Color," began with Sista It Sista, an activist group of young girls based in Brooklyn, New York. Nancy Moran, a 13-year-old member of the group spoke first, explaining that Sista II Sista "was created for women of color to stand together, act together." She said they spoke of experiencing each form of oppression (sexism, racism, classism) as being like a rope or a braid, and that if you try to cut hair when it is braided, the braid is too strong, so the oppressions need to be unraveled first in order to be broken. She said some people are working in isolation without organizing together, but also some people are doing the organizing without doing the work they need to do inside.

She said Sista II Sista came to work on the issue of violence against women not through theorizing, but through the experiences of the girls they work with--almost every member and volunteer has been raped, sexually assaulted, or assaulted in some way. She said one friend was killed by an off-duty cop and another was raped and killed by an auxiliary cop.

Simone Bussey spoke next saying she has worked "educating young women on the `isms,'" and that sexism, racism and classism are the biggest ones affecting young women of color. She said in working with young girls of color, they found that almost all of them had been sexually harassed. The group conducted a survey of girls in the Brooklyn area and found that, out of 400 respondents, 57% knew someone who had been raped, 90% of those 57% who had been raped did not receive help, and 54% felt not safe in the community.

Sista II Sista responded by doing street theater to raise consciousness about violence against women-- they created a fake scene in which a man was harassing his girlfriend. She said that passersby and other neighborhood people, including an ambulance crew that was resting nearby, did nothing. No one attempted to help the woman.

Bussey also spoke of the ways in which women are blamed if they are sexually harassed by men such as the view that she deserves harassment because "she should not be partying and dancing to music," or that "she's a `ho," and especially, if she respects herself. She said young women should "make our own definition of sexual harassment," and stressed that "it is not normal and you don't have to

take it!"

Isabel Gonzalez spoke next, emphasizing that the "solution to violence against women does not lie with the cops." She said, "In our experiences, the police sexually harass women in the community and women get harassed by the cops [when they are victims of] domestic violence because of the patriarchal structure of the police department." She added that "the cops can't protect girls from harassment by other boys," when they are doing the harassment themselves.

She said they have been working on alternatives to fighting violence against women without involving the police department. They have also been working on a campaign to publicize police sexual harassment of women: in a program they call "CopWatch," in which they will videotape incidents of police harassment of girls in the 831 precinct and then take the videotape to the precinct headquarters to show it to police. They will also hold a press conference to show the videotape to the media and hope to display the video in other places around the community.

Nancy Moran spoke more about the CopWatch project and about other projects they are working on including performances of songs and poems in area schools. She said they will hold workshops and "get the opinions of high school students on how to stop harassment," and that they will reach out to boys too. She said that sexually harassing girls is "subconsciously ingrained," but that it doesn't have to be that way. She ended by saying, "We would just like to tell everybody that cops are not the answer."

Other members of Sista II Sista talked about additional projects the group is working on such as creating a resource binder of places to get help for things like pregnancy tests, support groups, or condoms, and a project for older women-mothers, grandmothers, cousins-to have a space to meet and talk about issues.

The next panelist was Yura Kochiyama, a grassroots activist with a long history of involvement in the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Black, Puerto Rican and American Indian movements, defense of political prisoners, and Japanese Americans for Reparation. She currently works with the David Wong Support Committee and the People's Resistance Against U.S. Terrorism. She began by recounting the violations of women of color in World War II when 200,000 Asian women and young girls, mostly from Korea, the Philippines, China and Indonesia, were "sexually violated in the most frightening and systematic manner," by the Japanese military. She said that it was organized and approved by the Japanese government. Many of the women involved were so shamed they did not return home to their families. The story was not revealed until many years later by a Korean journalist.

She said it is an insult to call these raped and violated women, "comfort women." Kochiyama said that at the Tokyo tribunal, "Japan and the U.S. shelved the issues," and that "the two imperialist countries decided there was no need to pay reparations." Korean women still remember and demonstrate every Wednesday in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. She asked, "How can we as women of color support and sustain their struggle for reparations to these women whose lives were destroyed?" and expressed hope that "reparations may set an international precedent so the world will never allow forced sexual slavery again."

She then turned to another kind of slavery, the mostly Black and Latina women in the U.S. prison system 900,000 women under "correctional supervision" and 150,000 women in prison, 60% of whom are mothers.

She said women tend to commit "survival crimes" due to drug dependency, brutalizing physical conditions, and abusive relationships. She added that racism plays a significant role in the creating racist drug laws, "brutal conditions," and the "continuing process of mortification." She asserted that "Prisons are built to provide jobs for whites." She said that we must stop the growth of prisons, end "double-ceiling" (the practice of placing more inmates in cells than they were built for), demand more parole, medical care, educational programs, and the end of long sentencing. To help incarcerated people, she said "people on the outside can send letters or reading material, take out a subscription for them, or send commissary money." She added that it is important to "take the issue to the public and to elected officials who have created the prison industrial complex." She said there is a "war against Blacks, Asians and Latinos and that the way to keep down those populations is to put women and men in the prime of their lives in prison so they cannot reproduce."

She asked what position women of color should take on the war in Afghanistan. She criticized the "demonizing of Osama and the Taliban," and the "daily bombing of Afghanistan, a poor country blessed with oil that the U.S. is coveting—a pipeline to oil from other countries. She said the Arab world has four good reasons for the 9/11 attacks: (1) 50 years of U.S. dominance in the Middle East; (2) the robbery of the Palestinian nation; (3) the occupation of the U.S. military in the holiest of Arabic lands-Mecca in Saudi Arabia; and (4) the sanctions in Iraq where from which half a million children have died. She said, "before the Patriot Act muzzles us, we must speak

out," that we must speak out, write, email, demonstrate, that "the most powerful weapon we women of color have is the truth," and to "tell the truth everywhere."

"All over the world, people are becoming sick and tired of the transgressions of the U.S. military," she added, and that the "war on terrorism is directed not only at nations who would not cooperate, but also inside the U.S. against us-- against women of color, Asians, Blacks, Latinos, progressives and leftists." She concluded that "we must watch each others' backs." She said that "our allies are based not on their color, but on what they hold in their hearts and minds." Kochiyama ended by saying that, "We women of color must fight for justice, equality and truth for not just ourselves, but for others, not just for our children, but for all children."

The next speaker was Madonna Thunderhawk, a longtime American Indian activist who has been involved in major actions of the American Indian Movement such as the Trail of Broken Treaties occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1972, the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, and the occupation of Alcatraz from 1969 to 1971. She established the "We Will Remember" Survival School for Native children in Rapid City, South Dakota, fought to save South Dakota's Black Hills from uranium mining and co-founded Women of All Red Nations to expose illegal sterilizations of Native American women by the Indian Health Service in the 1970s. Thunderhawk wore a Palestinian shawl and a T-shirt which said, "Free East Timor," proclaiming that "as an indigenous person in this country, the belly of this monster, we understand the land struggles" of other indigenous groups.

She said, "I want you to know how much I appreciate being here. Usually I am the token Native American, but this is amazing, all women of color. I never thought I would see this."

Of Native Americans, she said, "dogs and cats outnumber us in our own land," and "as community organizers, we have to cover all bases [because] we are always outnumbered no matter what we do." She spoke of the difficulties where she lives: "In our tribe, we are in subsistence survival mode-how people can pay their utilities." She spoke of the government-built houses needing propane for electricity or heat and that they must pay rent to the government. She said that on her reservation, propane trucks don't come unless 3 or 4 houses need gas at the same time.

She said that "if you are a community organizer, you have to face all kinds of issues," that you can't specialize, that you have to respond to the needs of the community which are complex "because we women of color don't have support systems."

She ended by saying, "I feel happy-I didn't know you were all out there." She said she will go back to her reservation and tell them, "There is something happening," Commenting on the young women in the audience, she said that "when the young are on the move, change happens."

The final speaker of the evening plenary was Angela Davis. Davis rose to prominence in 1969 when she was removed from her teaching position in the philosophy department at UCLA because of her social activism and membership in the Communist Party USA. In 1970 she was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List due to false charges stemming from her involvement in the campaign to free the Soledad Brothers. She was captured and incarcerated for 16 months, during which time a massive international Free Angela Davis Campaign was waged, leading to her acquittal in 1972. She now teaches at the University of California at Santa Cruz and is active in prison issues, working with the Prison Activist Resource Center and Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex.

She began by saying, "I keep remembering what Kemba Smith said-that she had never seen a group that looks like we look since she got out of prison." She commented on the number of young women in the audience and said it was "an honor to be with women who believe in the possibility of a better world, who are trying to create conditions for that world:"-She said that Sista II Sista was "the most exciting young women's organization."

She said that it is possible to insist on an understanding of the links between intimate violence and state violence, between state violence in prisons and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, between homophobia and racism, between violence against women and the violence of war, between Viet Nam and Afghanistan, between the internment camps of World War II and the Patriot Act of today. She said, "so much has changed, yet still remains the same."

She said that before 9/11, many people considered Bush to be a joke. She paraphrased Hegel, saying that the first time is a tragedy, the second time a farce, and that Bush "really is a farce." She criticized him for representing himself as "an archetypal hero fighting evil in the world" when terrorism has enabled a significant increase in the military budget.

She commented how effortlessly the media has entertained the possibility of nuclear attack. She said it is frightening to recall how, "when I grew up, I had to hide under the desk during nuclear drills." She remembered Nagasaki and Hiroshima and she thought to herself, "under the desk?" She criticized the U.S. support of Israeli attacks on Palestinians and lamented "the kind of massive resistance there should be." She asked, "what has made this relative silence possible?" and added that there has been a "failure to produce massive organized resistance, that there is a problem translating radical consciousness into organizing."

She said that "we can no longer engage in isolated organizing projects" and spoke of trying to link consciousness into organizing strategies and the problem of defining communities of color without "fully formed consciousness of themselves." She described organizing as "generating, producing and building communities of struggle." She said that the identity of women of color is not grounded in pseudo biological race, but is about radical political projects. It is not about bodies-now that the idea of women of color has entered into popular discourse, there are cosmetics for women of color, women of color can be commodified now, and that Bush's advisor is a woman of color. "Would we invite her to join this community?" she asked.

She said it is important to emphasize politics across sexualities, race, ethnicities, culture, religion, and nations. It is not so important what we are, but our political commitments on these issues. She said that the task "is not organizing communities of color, but [it is]organizing that produces communities."

At a conference she attended last November in Brisbane, Australia, Davis said women there advocated "giving up the missionary position" in organizing, that is, the idea that organizers have to organize other people instead of focusing on their own issues. She said that women there organized a campaign against state sexual assault-strip searches in prison. They did a performance of strip searches on the stage of a conference of correctional administrators. In the performance, they made a woman bend over and do all the humiliating things women have to do to demonstrate that they are not carrying anything in their bodily orifices. The performance was a "complete scandal" to the administrators, and "some of them even started to cry." Davis said that because the venue was different-a correctional administrator conference instead of a prison, the acts were seen as horrifying instead of routine. She suggested finding "creative and dramatic ways of making points," such as this performance.

Davis ended by exhorting the audience: "Every single one of us can make a difference ,and together we can make a significant difference. We can build new communities, and we can build new worlds."

At the end of the plenary on Saturday evening, the girls of Sista 11 Sista led the panel and the whole audience in an enthusiastic cheer, shouting, "Together, Forever, Sisterhood!" At the word "Sisterhood," they held their fingers together in a diamond shape over their crotches (see photo above left). Dubbed the "pussy cheer" by conference-goers, it was an extraordinary moment among so many powerful and remarkable moments at the conference. by karla mantilla

Copyright Off Our Backs, Inc. May/June 2002

Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights Reserved