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Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color

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The aim of this essay is to analyze the notion of “loving, knowing ignorance,” a type of “arrogant perception” that produces ignorance about women of color and their work at the same time that it proclaims to have both knowledge about and loving perception toward them. The first part discusses Marilyn Frye’s accounts of “arrogant” as well as of “loving” perception and presents an explanation of “loving, knowing ignorance.” The second part discusses the work of Audre Lorde, Elizabeth Spelman, and María Lugones in their attempts to deal with the issue of arrogant perception within feminism, and examines how Lugones’s notion of “‘world’-traveling” may help us deal with “loving, knowing ignorance.” Ultimately, the author suggests that we need to become aware of instances of “loving, knowing ignorance,” especially if we are to stay true to Third Wave feminism’s commitment to diversity.

What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman’s face? What woman’s terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny? ... We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt.

—Audre Lorde

It is the nature of privilege to find ever deeper places to hide.

—Elizabeth Spelman

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For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

—Audre Lorde

1979. Audre Lorde speaks at a New York University Institute for the Humanities Conference on a panel about feminism and the personal as the political. She is one of two African-American women who have been invited at the last minute. She wonders why this is the case; she wonders how the audience deals with the fact that while they are attending a conference on feminism, women of color are cleaning their houses and taking care of their children; she wonders about academic arrogance. How many times have those words been quoted, repeated over and over again, so that now they are part and parcel of feminist knowing—*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* Could there be a feminist who can call herself a feminist without having considered these words of wisdom or quoted them?

2001. I am attending a meeting where plans are being made for an important conference on feminist issues. Over and over we hear that this group wants to make sure that the voices of those who are at the margin and the voices of women of color are heard. “We need to give space to their voices,” say the concerned, well-meaning Third Wave feminists—until a light-skinned woman raises her hand and politely says, “You keep talking about women of color as if we were not here.” Perhaps the confusion had to do with the fact that the only two women of color who were there were light-skinned; perhaps the problem is that behind all the good intentions rests what I want to call a “loving, knowing ignorance,” a type of ignorance that is as pernicious as the ignorance of those who have arrogant perception\(^1\) or of those who simply don’t want to include the notion of difference in their thought.

In this essay, I would like to examine this loving, knowing ignorance—an ignorance of the thought and experience of women of color that is accompanied by both alleged love for and alleged knowledge about them. Audre Lorde painfully brings to light the ignorance white women have shown about women of color in an open letter to Mary Daly, where she asks Daly if she has really read the work of women of color. In her 1979 text *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence,* Adrienne Rich labels problematic treatment of women of color by white feminists “white solipsism,” a tunnel vision blind to nonwhite experience and which Elizabeth Spelman criticizes in her influential 1988 text, *Inessential Woman.*\(^2\) But it is 2006
now and we are supposed to have moved forward. Third Wave feminism is supposed to be a feminism that attends to issues of race, racism, and the experience of nonwhite women. Many feminists quote the work of such feminists as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, María Lugones, and Patricia Williams, those few but revered names that are invoked whenever a work must show its “Third-Waveness,” its mindfulness of the experience of women of color.

Why is it then that the list of respected women of color is still so short? Why is it that feminists still scramble to fill out the spot for the respected, well-known woman-of-color speaker that will bring in a crowd? Why is it that there is only a small percentage of books and articles written by women of color in the growing lists of feminist publications? Why is it that I or any of the few women of color who are involved in feminist work could write lists of all the experiences that make us invisible, misunderstood, homogenized, and victimized while dealing with white feminists—lists that are eerily similar to the list Lorde provides in her 1981 essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”? Why is it that there is still so much anger on the part of women of color and so much guilt and so much ignorance on the part of white feminists who are supposed to have knowledge of them and who are supposed to have loving perception toward them?

This essay is really an exercise in archaeology, an excavation of important texts that somehow have become ruins, forgotten at the very same time that they are viewed and repeatedly brought to light. Perhaps it is true that sometimes the hardest thing to see is that which is in front of us, which should be the most visible. In the first part of this essay, I discuss Frye’s notions of arrogant and loving perception as well as the notion of loving, knowing ignorance. In the second part, I outline antidotes provided by Lorde, Spelman, and Lugones to white feminists’ arrogant perception of women of color. I also discuss Lugones’s notion of “world”-traveling and how this practice may help alleviate loving, knowing ignorance. In the end, I emphasize the dangerous terrain white feminists traverse when they claim to be concerned about women of color while at the same time being fully engaged in production of ignorance about the lives of these women. Twenty-five years have passed since Lorde’s famous admonition; shouldn’t we ask whether such production of ignorance is yet another instance of the master’s tools?

The Loving Eye That Cannot See

The Arrogant Eye

In her now classic essay, “In and Out of Harm’s Way, Arrogance and Love,” Marilyn Frye explains the different mechanisms by which men exploit and enslave women in male-dominated cultures and by which even some women
demean and belittle other women. Her aim is to provide some correctives to what she calls “poor vision,” wherein the seer aims at “dis-integrating an integrated human organism and grafting its substance to oneself” (Frye 1983, 66). The arrogant perceiver is guilty of seeing with arrogant eyes, eyes that skillfully organize the world and everything in it with reference to the arrogant perceiver’s desires and interests. Nature, pencils, chairs, women, and wives are all in the world to serve the purposes of the arrogant perceiver. By virtue of his dominance and status in society, it is this arrogant perceiver who defines such values as “good” and “healthy,” and who gets to say which wives are good and which wives are not. Goodness and health are measured by how well the arrogant perceiver’s desires are satisfied. In a world in which males practice arrogant perception, women become men’s servants, are good if they do what their husbands tell them to do, and feel worthy only if the male gaze deems them so. It is a world inhabited by “metaphysical cannibals,” who perceive arrogantly, and by their “robots,” their objects of perception (75).

Frye points out that even women are guilty of this arrogant perception toward other women, because they have “a mortal dread of being outside the field of vision of the arrogant perceiver” (80). The arrogant eye gives the world intelligibility and thus women want to be inside the web of meaning the arrogant eye creates. Having understood the importance of community in the fight for liberation from patriarchal society, some women believe that there needs to be a “harmonious community of agreement” in order to have meaning and thus be successful in countering arrogant perception. They therefore arrogate those women who are different, who threaten to destroy the homogeneity of their community. Following this analysis of women’s arrogant perception toward other women, Lugones explains how white women arrogate women of color. She states, “White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. All of this while we are in their midst” (2003, 83). As we shall see below, this arrogant perception toward women of color persists, even if in more subtle ways.

**The Loving Eye**

Contrary to the coercive, arrogating eye with which men see women and white women see women of color, Frye presents the notion of the loving eye, of loving perception. As opposed to a traditional understanding of love as selfless, such as the love of the devoted wife, Frye’s conception of love does not require the perceiver to disappear. Instead, the loving perceiver is required to “know what are one’s interests, desires and loathings, one’s projects, hunger, fears and wishes, and that one know what is and what is not determined by these” (Frye 1983, 75). **The loving perceiver does not see the other as a constant threat or as**
someone who is there to fulfill all of her desires. As Frye states, “The loving eye knows the independence of the other. . . . It is the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination. One must look at the thing. One must look, and listen and check and question” (Frye 1983, 75). Thus, the loving perceiver does not consume the object of perception. Rather than completely simplifying that which is perceived, the loving eye is careful to see its complexities and to understand the boundaries between the loving perceiver and that which is perceived. In the end, Frye describes the loving eye as neither giving nor taking from the object of perception, as not being coercive or invasive to the object of perception, and, instead, as being generous to the object of perception.

Importantly, Frye’s explanation of the loving eye includes the idea that to perceive lovingly one needs not only to look and listen but also to check and question. It is not enough to look and listen to the object of perception, to understand where my boundaries differ from hers or to see that she is not there to fulfill all my desires and needs. I also need to check whether I have invented a different reality when I perceive her. Frye points out how some human beings in society are taught that they deserve and can have everything they desire, whereas others are taught that they can have nothing. Thus, we develop what she calls “a great wanting.” Because of this wanting, we simplify, invent, and expect the world to be a specific way rather than investigating it, asking questions to know more about it. In the face of this great wanting, Frye asks us to be disciplined. She says, “But the necessary discipline is not a denial of the wanting. On the contrary, it is a discipline of knowing and owning the wanting: identifying it, claiming it, knowing its scope, and through all this, knowing its distance from the truth” (1983, 75). To perceive lovingly, then, requires that we become vigilant of the ways in which our own desires, needs, or own great wanting, is implicated in the ways in which we come to know the world and the ways in which we distort knowledge of this world.

As Frye notes, loving perception must feel as a “great gift” (1983, 76). Unfortunately, it is a gift that continues to be missed as there are still plenty of metaphysical cannibals—arrogant perceivers—and their robots in our society. There are also those who suffer from what I have called loving, knowing ignorance; those who seem to have understood the need for a better way of perceiving but whose wanting leads them to continue to perceive arrogantly, to distort their objects of perception, all while thinking that they are loving perceivers.

**Loving, Knowing Ignorance**

The notion of loving, knowing ignorance as it pertains to the relationship between some white feminists and women of color has two meanings, both of which are connected to Frye’s notion of arrogant perception. First, it needs to
be understood in its ironic sense. **Loving**, knowing ignorance is not loving at all; it is not a way of practicing loving perception. Neither is it a way of practicing loving ignorance or seeing the other with all her boundaries but not knowing much about her. In fact, it denotes a stance in which the perceiver and the knower are actually involved in the production of knowledge about women of color—whether by citing their work, reading and writing about them, or classifying them—while at the same time using women of color to the perceiver’s own ends. It is a mode of arrogant perception whose alleged aim is not simply to coerce or dominate or turn someone into what we want them to be, but to make knowledge claims that are supposed to further understanding of the object of perception, of women of color. Thus, there is a sense in which this loving, knowing ignorance has nothing to do with love, although the perceiver may claim that it does.

Second, loving, knowing ignorance can be understood as genuinely having some of the elements of loving perception that Frye describes. As we have seen, according to Frye, loving perception includes looking, listening, checking, and questioning. The second sense of loving, knowing ignorance is that ignorance of those who look and listen, as Frye suggests, but do not check and question. Thus we may find the feminist who wants to perceive lovingly, who wants to see women of color in their own terms, does not want to homogenize them, does not want to be coercive with them, does not want to use them but who, despite her well intentions, turns women of color into something that can be used to further her own desires.

The loving feminist is one who knows (and wants to know) about women of color. It is not the arrogant perceiver that Frye describes who does not even care to know about the object of perception, who merely wants to possess, use, coerce, and enslave this object. Instead, this loving, knowing perceiver may be engaged in knowledge production about women of color in various ways: by citing the work of women of color, by including women of color in her political and practical agenda, by making claims about the lives of women of color, by classifying the experience of women of color, or by systematizing her findings about the experience of women of color. What is unfortunate, however, is that the knowledge this loving, knowing perceiver acquires may be inaccurate or may inadequately represent the experience of actual women of color and consequently leads to ignorance. Here, we can make use of Frye’s appeal to checking and questioning.

As described above, according to Frye, checking and questioning are necessary if the perceiver is to avoid making up a reality that reinforces his or her worldview or that makes up for what Frye refers to as the great wanting, which we experience as we are socialized into particular types of beings. An example is the man who is socialized to believe that he can have everything and that he deserves everything. Rather than seeing the woman’s facial expression for
what it is, a repulsion to his advances, he sees it as a challenge from a woman who really wants him but wants to be difficult. In this case, the negative turns into the affirmative. This perceiver has “invented” a reality that accords more with his desires and expectations than with the actual state of affairs.

The same behavior can be seen in white feminists who are lovingly, knowingly ignorant about women of color and their experiences. Third Wave feminists emphasize the importance of including the work of women of color and examining their experiences. The well-meaning white feminist who perceives with a loving eye to some extent uses the work of women of color in her academic or political discussions. Her discussion has the double function of (1) legitimating the words of the woman of color used (thus exposing a society in which the words of women of color are only heard when they are used or praised by white feminists) and (2) legitimating her own status as a Third Wave feminist (thus showing that in the end her use of the work of women of color is instrumental). The desire, the great wanting, of this feminist is to be respected in a field that claims to care about women of color and their thought. She sees herself as someone who really understands women of color, who is putting the voices of these women on the map, who is “giving” them a voice. She constructs a reality that is in fact closer to what she wants it to be rather than what it is—a reality in which the voices of women of color are still taken seriously only if well-known white feminists quote them, in which white feminists who read the work of one woman of color think they understand the experience of all women of color, in which the words of women of color are quoted briefly rather than analyzed in depth, in which the experience of women of color are homogenized, in which women of color are seen as half-subjects who need to be “given a voice”—hence loving, knowing ignorance.

Those guilty of this kind of loving, knowing ignorance have learned the main sayings of such well-known feminists of color as hooks, Lorde, and Lugones, and are aware of Spelman’s claims about the problems of exclusion in feminist thought. They theorize and make claims about women of color. However, they do not check whether in fact their claims about the experience of women of color are being described with attention to detail and with understanding of its subtleties. In other words, this ignorance goes hand in hand with the production of knowledge about the experience of women of color. The result of this ignorance is that women of color continue to be misunderstood, underrepresented, homogenized, disrespected, or subsumed under the experience of “universal sisterhood” while “knowledge” about them is being encouraged and disseminated and while feminism claims to be more concerned and more enlightened about the relations between white women and women of color.

Interestingly, this type of ignorance about women of color is not simply “arrogant ignorance,” since rather than perceiving arrogantly without any desire to understand the object of perception, it calls for more love toward and more
“knowledge” about women of color. Arrogant ignorance is arrogant perception that does not make any attempt to understand the object of perception; loving, knowing ignorance is arrogant perception that involves self-deception and the quest for more knowledge about the object of perception—the perceiver believes himself or herself to be perceiving lovingly even though this is not the case, and the perceiver wishes to make knowledge claims about the object of perception, even though such claims are not checked or questioned.

To further clarify this concept of loving, knowing ignorance, let us consider Haraway’s use of the work of women of color and her analysis of how some women of color have reappropriated the myth of La Malinche or Malintzin, the indigenous woman who was Hernán Cortés’s lover and translator and who has come to symbolize treason in Latin American popular culture.1 In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s” (1990), Haraway presented a compelling account of the cyborg, a creature that is of both the imagination and reality and that serves as a model for a socialist-feminist politics, given its fluidity, its capacity to see from multiple perspectives, its denial of traditional dichotomies, its capacity for irony, and its refusal to believe in holism and a myth of origin. While Haraway’s analysis in this text is admirable, given its proposal for an alternative socialist-feminism and its arguments against traditional dualisms, it nevertheless illustrates instances of what I have referred to as loving, knowing ignorance.

In her presentation of the cyborg, what she considers a myth of political identity in a high-tech world, Haraway recognized the importance of the contributions of such radical feminists as Griffin, Lorde, and Rich although she disagreed with their holding on to the distinction between the organic and the technological. As she explained, “there are also great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the western self. It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities” (1990, 216). In order to construct a helpful cyborg myth and thus prompt some of the breakdowns needed to crack matrices of domination, Haraway appealed to “two overlapping groups of texts . . . constructions of women of color and monstrous selves in feminist science fiction” (216).

At first hand, it is startling to see constructions of “women of color” in the same vein as constructions of “monstrous selves.” Of course, one needs to remember just how much Haraway likes science fiction monsters and how much Haraway appeals to irony in the text. If we get past the disturbing alignment of these two groups, we see that Haraway praises the ways in which such women of color as Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and other Chicanas use writing, specifically the rewriting of or retelling of origin myths, in order to “displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities” (Haraway 1990, 217). For example, Haraway
points out that Chicanas like Moraga use a language that is a combination of English and Spanish, a “chimeric monster” in order to construct an identity that cannot be neatly categorized as white or brown. According to Haraway, Moraga effectively displaced the myth of an innocent origin, of Eve before eating the forbidden fruit, and establishes La Malinche as mother. In constructing herself via the mix of conquerors’ languages she finds survival. Thus, Haraway states, “Stripped of identity, the bastard race teaches about the power of the margins and the importance of a mother like Malinche. Women of color have transformed her from the evil mother of masculinist fear into the originally literate mother who teaches survival” (1990, 219).8

How does Haraway’s analysis betray a loving, knowing, ignorance? On loving: it is clear that Haraway does not perceive women of color strictly in an arrogant way. She shows interest in the plight of women of color, not only in the United States but all over the world, where they are being exploited to expand the ever more technological market. That is, unlike the arrogant perceiver, Haraway does not simply consider women of color as a constant threat or as beings who are there to fulfill her desires; she does not seem to be in the business of possessing, coercing, or enslaving women of color. She is not engaged in consuming the object of perception; she is looking and listening.

On knowing: Haraway is not only aware of important texts by white radical feminists but also knowledgeable of literature by women of color. In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” she provides a note with a bibliography of relevant texts by women of color; she certainly does more than simply provide the one famous quote by the famous woman of color. She also is willing to use ideas of women of color, even when they were not at the time well known—for example, she presents the idea of “oppositional consciousness” that Chela Sandoval developed in her dissertation. Haraway is engaged in an examination of the ways in which women of color construct their identities. She is thus engaged in the production of knowledge about women of color. She examines their work, includes them in her political and practical agenda, makes claims about their identities, and applies her findings to her view of socialist-feminism.

On ignorance: while Haraway presents the interesting way in which some Chicanas are reappropriating the myth of La Malinche, she is not careful in her analysis. She does not check or question. It is indeed the case that some Chicana feminists are involved in reappropriating the myth of La Malinche. Yet, such readings of La Malinche are not being done by all Chicanas or Latinas and are indeed quite controversial. A reader who may not know anything about Latina or Latin American culture would, after reading Haraway’s text, get the impression that this reconfiguration of the myth is the norm in the writings of Chicanas. There are plenty of U.S. Latinas and Latin American women for whom the myth of La Malinche has stood and still stands as a negative charac-
terization of womanhood that informs their everyday experience, rather than the positive view of survival that Haraway discusses.9

While some women of color are indeed representative of beings who can transform themselves in order to combat established cultural norms and norms about the stability of identity (and are thus embodiments of the cyborg myth), there are plenty of women of color who for various reasons do not or cannot live the cyborg existence. It is interesting to note how Haraway, who warns us of the “serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions” (1991, 191), was herself romanticizing the experience of women of color. In Haraway’s analysis, women of color become the monstrous heroines, not in the sense that they are the defenders of good over evil—Haraway doesn’t buy simple dichotomies—but in the sense that they are fractured beings from the margins who have the possibility of disrupting prescribed norms and oppressions, while in much of the United States and the world women of color are the beings at the margin who continue to be abused, demeaned, and undermined. If only they could use cyborg writing!

Despite Haraway’s powerful and important points about the possibility of a more effective socialist-feminism, her writing is still infused with loving, knowing, ignorance. In the end, because of her appropriation of the contested story of La Malinche and because of the more subtle but still present overgeneralization of the perspectives of women of color, it is possible to see how her analysis has the vestiges of arrogant perception. Haraway effectively used the constructions of women of color for her own benefit, to enhance her theory of the cyborg and her brand of feminism.

How white feminists are to theorize about women of color and the work of women of color is a difficult issue. The analysis of Haraway’s work above should not lead us to conclude that white feminists working on issues about women of color will always fall into the trap of loving, knowing ignorance. Its aim is to show the possible dangers that lurk even for well-meaning white feminists interested in issues about and the work of women of color.

**Antidotes**

How can loving, knowing ignorance be possible in light of Third Wave feminism, standpoint theory, and claims of the epistemic privilege of minorities? Does it involve what Jean-Paul Sartre called bad faith, a lie to oneself?10 Or is it an unconscious phenomenon that can only be explained in a psychoanalytic paradigm?11 There may be various causes that could give rise to such ignorance. Concerned feminists have provided some possible reasons as to why the phenomenon occurs. Along with hooks, we could claim that white women have undergone years of racist, sexist indoctrination or that white women’s concern
with sexism does not let them see their own role in perpetuating a white racist imperialism (hooks 1981, 124).

Following Frye, we might say that it is the result of women’s still being afraid of being outside the field of vision of the arrogant eye (Frye 1983, 80), in this case the arrogant eye of white feminists in their relations to women of color, as Lugones so vividly described in the essay “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” (2003). Following Lorde, we could say that it has to do with the “built-in privilege of whiteness,” that white women have too many investments in ignoring “real differences” (Lorde 1984, 117–18).

Finally, following Lugones’s analysis of “white/Angla” women in “Hablando Cara a Cara” we could explain that it has to do with an “infantilization of judgment,” that white feminists become childlike, scared of hostility, wedded to their ignorance, and plagued by guilt (2003, 48). Perhaps it is a combination of these reasons that leaves white feminist theory lovingly and knowingly ignorant about the experience of women of color. **While no one would deny that being a child is difficult, sometimes scary, and sometimes dangerous, and while many would agree with the Nietzschean call for childlike creativity and adventurousness, white feminism cannot remain in a state of infancy despite its claims to greater maturity with regard to the experience of women of color.**

Symptoms have been recognized, the disease has been diagnosed, and possible cures have been prescribed. With an interest in archaeological work, let us unearth some of those famous cures to this disease that does have a name and that continues to plague us, even if in its latest mutation. First, let us look at Lorde’s suggestions (from the 1970s and early 1980s): do not be silent—silence immobilizes (1984, 44); do not be passive (40); do not just “tolerate” difference but see it as part and parcel of a true dialectic (111); look inside yourself and “touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears” (113); recognize differences among women of color (122); recognize our anger (127); see guilt as merely lack of action (130); and be always vigilant, for “Revolution is not a one time event. It is becoming always vigilant for the smallest opportunity to make a genuine change in established, outgrown, responses; for instance, it is learning to address each other’s difference with respect” (140).

Next, let us examine Spelman’s suggestions (from the late 1980s): reexamine the traditions that reinforce sexism and racism (that is, challenge feminism’s fear of the body that leads to racism); do not discuss sexism and racism as if African-American women did not exist; understand the variety of women’s experiences and oppressions (2003, 131); do not make claims about commonality and equality without realizing that this itself is an act of arrogance and of privilege; be imaginative (178); be tolerant (182); and remember, “Imagining isn’t the same thing as knowing, nor tolerance the same as welcoming; neither show curiosity and openness to learning what may be disadvantageous to one’s closely guarded position of privilege . . . our recognition of this need (of knowing
women of color) must be matched by an awareness of how the legacies of our privilege appear in the ways we may try to satisfy that need: in our confusing imagining women with knowing them; in priding ourselves on tolerance; and in appropriating others’ identities through our desperate rush to find similarity” (185). Spelman recognized the terrible mistake that feminism has made in dealing with the “problem of difference”—that a group of women, white feminists, have taken their situation as the “condition of women.” She explained the problem of difference as “a reflection of the problem of privilege” (182).

Finally, we should examine Lugones’s important suggestion (2003): recognize difference rather than indulge in a theoretical discussion on the problem of difference. As she says, “White women used to simply and straightforwardly ignore difference. In their theorizing, they used to speak as if all women as women were the same. Now they recognize the problem of difference. Whether they recognize difference is another matter” (68). Lugones discusses the tricks that racism plays on white women which lead them not to notice women of color, to think that this lack of noticing is merely a theoretical problem, and to think that all differences are the same (70). Following Frye, Lugones prescribes loving perception, and enhancing the view of loving perception, she proposes that we engage in loving, playful, “world”-traveling, a practice in which we are able to get to know others in their differences, to understand ourselves and others, and to be open to construction or reconstruction as oppressors or oppressed (97).

If we closely consider Lorde’s, Spelman’s, and Lugones’s suggestions, we can see that they have laid the groundwork to deal with the problems of ignoring and homogenizing the experience of women of color; it does not take long to see how this framework could also be used to address what I have here called loving, knowing ignorance. Perhaps we are suffering from what Lorde called “historical amnesia” (1984, 117) and we are not passing along what we have learned. Optimists could say that it is just a matter of looking into the not-so-distant past of feminism and listening to Lorde, Frye, Spelman, and Lugones. Those who are more pessimistic about the situation would simply point to the countless times these writers continue to be quoted and appealed to in feminist works while the marginalization of women of color continues in the works and actions of white feminists.

Lugones, in such essays such as “Structure/Antistructure and Agency under Oppression,” and “Boomerang Perception and the Colonizing Gaze,” has captured part of the problem (2003). No matter how much theorizing goes on about the problem of difference and no matter how many times the works of Lorde, Lugones herself, and the rest are quoted, women of color will continue to be ignored, homogenized, and misunderstood if feminism cannot understand the importance of praxis and the relational nature of knowledge about the so-called other. In other words, knowledge about the experience of women of color cannot simply be attained by reading their writings or the writings of white feminists.
about them. There is a need to build relationships among white feminists and women of color; a need for a more active stance on the part of white feminists to learn about the experience of women who are not like them.

Women of color cannot and should not continue being theoretical beings at the same time that many theories about them purport to do justice to their experience. As Lugones suggests, it is important to see that for women of color, doing feminism is about ending racism, not simply about engaging in a theoretical debate (2003, 74). Theorizing about women of color without checking and questioning about their actual lives, without actively trying to participate in their lives, without knowing any flesh-and-blood women of color, or without practical engagement with them, is loving, knowing, ignorance. It is also a very effective way of masking the very privilege that allows white feminists to engage in the analysis of women of color. Engaging in theory about women of color without actual engagement with flesh-and-blood women of color and their environments allows the loving, knowing feminist to construct a different reality about the lives of women of color and about their own lives—a reality that is bound not to be challenged or questioned if it is only part of a theory.

Lugones points out that it is important for white feminists to recognize how afraid they are of the plurality that emerges when encountering women of color. Lugones, following Spelman, points out how women of color are mirrors in which white women are supposed to see themselves but, instead, see themselves as no other mirror can show them—as selves that are plural and who instead of being righteous, moral beings, are also participants and perpetuators of a racist system (2003, 72–75). As long as women of color stand in this relationship to white feminists, our relationships will continue to be problematic. How is difference going to truly be understood (as required by Lorde, Spelman, and Lugones) if the presence of a woman of color invokes the white woman’s part of herself that inspires terror and loathing in herself? If the woman of color is that mirror, she provides the opportunity for the white woman to feel better (by being kind and even condescending) but also to feel terrible about herself, because she is reminded of the fact that she has privileges in the racist system that she inhabits, privileges that she loathes, but that she doesn’t want to lose. Such privileges include being the one who decides which woman of color gets to be let in the club, being able to speak for women of color, being able to feel that she is the one responsible for their salvation, and having the choice to see women of color or not.

**Loving “World”-Traveling**

Lugones’s suggestion of loving, playful “world”-traveling is an important contribution to the problem of difference within the women’s movement. It is an appeal to “travel,” to try to experience and thus to understand the “world” of
others who are different; it opens the possibility for crossing racial and ethnic boundaries.\textsuperscript{12} It seems clear that we would all do better if we learn to travel “worlds” in the way that Lugones suggests. However, it seems that the ones who do most of the traveling are precisely those beings who are already marginalized, those beings who are so poignantly described by Lugones. They are the ones who are usually forced to travel to the dominant “world.” How to convince those who are part of the dominant “world” to travel my “world” of being a Central American, of being a Latina, of being bicultural, of being a Latina philosopher in a male-dominated field? I certainly don’t see many male philosophers interested in traveling to my “world” or the “worlds” of other nonwhite people; even more distressing is the fact that I don’t see many white Third Wave feminists interested either! To theorize about women of color, to include the token women of color in conferences, to quote the most known citations from books by famous women of color does not constitute loving, playful “world”-traveling. They are yet more examples of what Lugones calls “agonistic” “world”-traveling, still tied to conquest, domination, and erasure (2003, 95); they are other instances of the master’s tools.

Rather than a nice addition to one’s manuscript, rather than being the seal that must be stamped in Third Wave feminist work, “world”-traveling has to do with actual experience; it requires a tremendous commitment to practice: to actually engage in activities where one will experience what others experience; to deal with flesh and blood people not just their theoretical constructions; to learn people’s language in order to understand them better not to use it against them; to really listen to people’s interpretations however different they are from one’s own; and to see people as worthy of respect rather than helpless beings that require help. It also requires a great deal of imagination in the way that Spelman suggests in order to place the experiences of those other “worlds” in the context of one’s own life. My question to white feminists is: What is “world”-traveling to you? Is it a nice theoretical notion or a way of life? Letters neatly printed on a page or a path to more understanding and experiencing difference?

When “world”-traveling is simply a theoretical notion that helps the white feminist place her work on the map of Third Wave feminism, it merely reinforces loving, knowing ignorance. One may write about “world”-traveling, always quote Lugones’ points about it, and construct hopeful theories about the relationship between white women and women of color without really having an accurate understanding of the situation of actual women of color. One, however, appears as more loving toward women of color and more knowledgeable about their lives. Ignorance may pass as knowledge and white privilege becomes ever more transparent.\textsuperscript{13}

When “world”-traveling is taken seriously as a concrete life activity that might help us understand the lives of those who are different from us, then it may open possibilities for fairer, more accurate representations of women of
color and for theories that do more justice to the experience of these women. "World"-traveling is not to be thought of as the notion that will solve the problems of arrogant perception or loving, knowing ignorance. Given the past record of feminism, much more than the practice of "world"-traveling will be needed. It may, however, alleviate instances in which a feminist can make claims about the experience of women of color, without really knowing anything about her situation. Various ways in which one could "travel" someone’s "world" include learning about the person's culture in a less superficial manner than simply eating her food. They include learning her language, living in her environment, trying to understand issues from her perspective (as hard as this may be), and imagining what it means to be her in her "world." These travels to "worlds" should not be mere tourist exercises which, as Jamaica Kincaid painfully reminds us, turn us into ugly, empty, stupid things "pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that" (1988, 17). Rather, they should be genuine attempts at understanding the "worlds" of others. These travels should be done lovingly. Perhaps then white feminists could make knowledge claims about women of color that do in fact relate to these women’s experiences.  

**Historical Amnesia**

As we reach the end of this archaeological exercise, it is important to ask why we should care about the past, about ruins made out of words that now seem to have been forgotten, misunderstood, or not followed. Can we not already predict an unfortunate future for feminist studies about women of color? Perhaps. But there are good reasons to cure historical amnesia about past solutions to arrogant perception and there are good reasons to understand newer, subtler ways of arrogance such as loving, knowing ignorance. Revisiting past cures, examining why they did not work, practicing loving "world"-traveling, and being aware of the newer, deeper places in which privilege hides may help us stay true to Third Wave feminism’s commitment to be inclusive of the work and the concerns of women of color.

In “Boomerang Perception and the Colonizing Gaze” Lugones suggests that dichotomies presupposed by the “oppressor’s logic” need to be replaced by a “fluency in more than one persistent logic” when dealing with issues between the culturally homeless (those who do not fit neatly in a culture) and those who guard the gates of the treasured cultural home. She suggests that this fluency helps fight the internalization of whiteness that guardians of cultural homes go through. Although her suggestions are to be applied to distinctions between members of the same group (say, Latinos who consider themselves more authentic because they speak Spanish and Latinos who do not speak Spanish well) this fluency can also be considered in our discussions of the relationships among white feminists and women of color. White feminists stand as the guardians of
the doors of feminism, while women of color are those who remain homeless in this feminism, the ones who don’t quite belong in the imagined homeland.

It is easy to see that white feminists stand to lose if they give up being the guardians of the door; their very being would be at stake. Their guardianship presupposes a binary system in which there is an inside/outside, center/margin. Some white feminists have internalized the arrogant perception that they themselves are objects of when dealing with men. Interestingly enough, it is this perception of their condition that also affords them the possibility of resistance. That is, in having a sense of belonging to a group, they feel empowered and more capable of resisting the oppression felt in a male-dominated society. The inclusion of women of color who bring to light their differences is not welcomed precisely because the plurality that these women of color bring to light threatens the safety of white feminists’ home.

According to Lugones, women of color, those who are homeless, are capable of showing the dangers of rigid boundaries. The critique of closed boundaries “opens the door to a plethora of resistant possibilities, alliances, understandings, playful and militant connections” (2003, 162). How women of color show the danger of rigid boundaries is a difficult question at a time when loving perception and knowledge about them is claimed, at a time when boundaries are supposed to be more fluid. My exercise in archaeology suggests that we already have some answers and that we need to revisit them even when feminism claims to know better. What we find are not ruins but full structures that need to return to light. They point to the arduous work ahead, that of not just thinking about race and racism but doing something about it. Let’s remember Lorde’s words again (1984, 141); her call is as important to African-American women and other women of color as it is to white feminists today: “We know what it is to be lied to. The 60’s should teach us how important it is not to lie to ourselves.”

Notes

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1. For a discussion of arrogant perception see Frye 1983 (66) and Lugones 2003 (78).
2. See Rich 1979, especially the chapter “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia.” Also see hooks’s critique of Rich in hooks 1981 (chapter 4),
where hooks criticized Rich for claiming that white women rights advocates are part of an antiracist tradition. See also Spelman 1988 (chapter 5).

3. I like to think of "attending to" in the sense that Frye uses it in her discussion of how feminists have to study their own ignorance, when she says "attention has everything to do with knowledge" (1983, 118).

4. I was a member of the program committee for a new feminist organization that wanted to have a woman of color speaker. Given that I was a Latina I was asked to compile a list of possible speakers. After a series of email exchanges in which I made suggestions, my suggestions were completely ignored and an appeal was made to invite the well-known woman of color of speaker who is usually invited. There was absolutely no interest in the work of lesser-known women of color.

5. Given the standard view of ignorance as lack of knowledge, one may wonder what it means to "produce" ignorance. It has to do with maintaining or creating practices that aim at keeping knowledge (about particular groups, social issues, and so on) hidden or covered up. For example, Mills (1997) coined the term "epistemology of ignorance" and has discussed the ways in which whites sustain ignorance about issues related to race and racism.

6. For an interesting discussion of the problem of understanding the experience of women in a global context see Mohanty 1995.

7. The character of La Malinche is blamed for helping Cortés in the conquest of the Mexica and is regarded as the mother of the Mestizo people. Her name is appealed to when someone wants to imply that one is willing to sell one's people and defend the foreigner, the conqueror, rather than fighting him. Her name is also used to imply sexual promiscuity.

8. For further discussion on how Chicanas have reappropriated the myth of La Malinche, see Alarcón 1981.

9. See Moya 2002 for a critique of Haraway's reading of La Malinche in light of issues of identity and social location.

10. See Sartre 1956 (part 1, chapter 2) for an account of bad faith, which Sartre described as a project in which one tries to lie to oneself. Bad faith ultimately has only the appearance of a lie, since in this instance, the subject has to know what information needs to be suppressed. See also Gordon 1999 for an account of how bad faith plays a role in antiblack racism.

11. For discussions on race, racism, and the unconscious, see Sullivan 2003a, 2003b.

12. Here, I am using the term "world" as Lugones uses it in "Playfulness, 'World'-traveling, and Loving Perception." For Lugones, "world" means "an actual society given its dominant (or non-dominant) culture's description and construction of life," "a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society," an "incomplete visionary nonutopian construction of life" or a "traditional construction of life" (2003, 87–88).

13. Thanks to Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana for this point.

14. As already stated, "world"-traveling is not to be thought of as the solution to the problems of arrogant perception or loving, knowing ignorance. It should also not be thought as guaranteeing understanding that does justice to the experience of people of color. Here, it is helpful to think of the saying, "a little knowledge is a dangerous
thing.” Indeed, “world”-traveling may only give the appearance of knowledge or it may yield some knowledge that is subsequently interpreted, mistakenly, as being enough to understand the subjects in question.

References


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