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# Work in Progress

## Women Race and Racism A Dialogue in Black and White

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# Women, Race and Racism: A Dialogue in Black and White

Andrea Ayvazian, Ph.D.  
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## About the Authors

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## Abstract

*Using their own friendship as a case study, the authors examine the development of mutuality in a relationship forged across racial lines. The possibility of connections, and the risks of disconnections and violations in interracial relationships, developing in the context of a racist society, are explored. The implications of mutually empathic interracial relationships for the development of one's own racial identity are considered.*

**Tatum:** We're very pleased to be here this evening. This presentation is the outgrowth of a paper I presented at the Stone Center in 1993 entitled, "Racial Identity Development and Relational Theory: The Case of Black Women in White Communities." That paper (Tatum, 1993) was based on my research with Black women in predominantly White communities. One of the themes that emerged repeatedly in my data was how difficult it can be for Black women in White communities to find the kind of mutually empathic relationships that lead to the emotional growth described by the Stone Center theorists (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey, 1991). During the discussion that followed my presentation that evening, a White woman in the audience asked, "How can a White woman genuinely befriend a Black woman? How can that kind of relationship be nourished across racial lines?" That is the question that we intend to address here.

Jean Baker Miller (1988) has written eloquently about the constructive power of relational connections and the potentially destructive force of relational disconnections and violations. This theme of connections, disconnections and violations is certainly central to our thinking about how we can connect across racial lines. What happens when our experience is validated by another in a mutually empathic relationship? We feel a strong sense of connection. But when we have experiences that are not validated, for example, when I as a Black woman encounter racism and I am unable to talk about that experience with White colleagues, I may feel a sense of disconnection from them. Or, should I choose to share those experiences, and in fact find them invalidated by my colleagues, I may question my own perceptions. Without validation from others, I may choose to deny my own perceptions in order to avoid the isolation that comes from disconnection. Repeatedly separating myself from my own experience in order to stay in relationship with others ultimately results in a psychological state of violation. Negotiating the choices involved in maintaining connections across racial lines is a central focus of this presentation, "Women, Race, and Racism: A Dialogue in Black and White."

**Ayvazian:** I want to add my welcome and my greetings to Beverly's and I want to say that for both of us, although we travel nationwide and do work on issues of racial justice offering consultation and seminars together, we have decided to take a personal

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risk tonight by offering a look into the issue of connections across racial barriers by using our own relationship as the basis of our talk. Beverly and I are venturing into new territory by offering an analysis of our own relationship as a case study of women connecting across racial lines. We want to speak very personally tonight because, as Bev said, this question was asked when she was here a year ago. I can also add that in traveling and doing speaking with Beverly, White women often stop me in hallways and restrooms and at the coffee machine and say, "You two seem so close. How did you create that bond?" So we want to look at our relationship in the light of Jean Baker Miller's work. We are going to focus on the following three areas, which we call the critical junctures in our relationship: how the relationship was established, the theme of mutuality in our relationship, and difficult periods we have faced. A thread that is also woven into our talk is what we call "common differences," areas where we are the same or have similar feelings, viewpoints, even experiences, and yet these similarities are expressed in different ways in our lives. We will close by talking about our friendship as a work in progress. So with that background, and appreciating you all for sharing in what is a new venture for us — to speak about these issues very personally — we want to begin by discussing the critical junctures in our relationship within the framework of this theme of connections, disconnections, and violations.

## Critical Junctures

Ayvazian: When I think about some of the critical junctures in our friendship — for example, how we met and how the relationship began — I am reminded of an article by Joe Wood (1994) that I read in the *New York Times Magazine*. In the article, Wood, who is Black, was talking about his friendship with Dan, who is Jewish. Wood said of the relationship: "Our kinship is not easy."

In many ways, my kinship with Beverly is *very* easy. Deep affection and admiration flows between us and the friendship is strong, nourishing, and treasured. However, it is also fair to say that in 1994, any adult relationship that crosses racial lines is "not easy." If the friends are conscious of the social, political, and economic realities in this country today, their "kinship," as Wood states, will inevitably have times that are "not easy." And we have faced those

times.

To put this in perspective, let me back up and provide some of the details about how our relationship was formed. Our relationship was established on a professional basis. Beverly and I do not live in the same neighborhood, although we live in the same town, and we do not work in the same place. Our children do not attend the same schools. We were brought together by an agency that does anti-racism education, paired up as a bi-racial team to do some anti-racism training at a college in the Boston area. We were brought together initially on a professional basis and immediately had the experience of preparing to work together as a team. Also, because the job in Boston involved a series of workshops, we had the experience of traveling to and from our area in western Massachusetts to Boston, a two-hour car ride each way. Beverly and I call that first professional collaboration, during which our relationship was formed, our "trial by fire." The group of college students with whom we were working proved to be a very challenging group. It was a difficult training because of so many, what we call "Yes, buts." The students were resistant to hearing our material and working with the concepts and the framework for understanding race and racism that we were offering. Yet this adversarial experience actually pulled us together as a twosome. Going into what turned out to be a hostile environment forced us to really scrutinize the material that we were presenting to the group.

Consequently, Beverly and I had the experience of talking very deeply about painful issues around race and racism very early in our professional/personal relationship. We had potentially difficult conversations analyzing racial inequity because we had to scrutinize the material we were presenting to this challenging group. These conversations in the first days of our relationship, we have discovered, are of the sort that bi-racial friendships sometimes avoid for months or years. Looking back on it now, we believe that this process was a bonding experience.

We also found that our rides to and from Boston were opportunities to talk not only about our work, but about our personal lives. We discovered some common ground as women, as mothers, and as professionals in our community. Early on, Beverly was very helpful to me as I was going through a difficult period with my then one-year-old son. We

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forged close personal ties through what was initially a professional connection.

**Tatum:** As Andrea has said, our relationship did form in the context of work. This is an important observation because one of the things that we know about our society is the fact that it is still quite socially segregated. As Andrea has told you, we don't live in the same neighborhood, our children don't go to the same school, and we don't worship in the same places; our lives are separate in many ways. Even though we frequently work together and certainly spend leisure time together now that our friendship has developed, our paths would not likely have crossed in other ways. Given the reality of social segregation, work does provide one of the few places where women of color and White women may come together across racial lines. So, it is not an accident that it was our work together that laid the groundwork for a friendship to develop.

As Andrea mentioned, one of the things that has been very important is that at the beginning of our relationship there was an examination of our values as they related to the work that we did. We were forced to talk at a deeper level — not the superficial chit-chat that you might engage with someone over the coffee machine — regarding what we thought about a very significant issue, in this case race relations in the United States. The mutuality that evolved in that relationship was very much in keeping with what Jean Baker Miller calls the “five good things.” When a relationship is in fact mutually reinforcing, it gives you a feeling of increased zest, a sense of empowerment, greater self-knowledge, increased self-worth, and most importantly in the context of a friendship, a desire for more connection (Miller, 1988). Certainly as the mutuality in the relationship became apparent, we did seek each other's company outside of work situations, and we have been fortunate to have been able to share life experiences, as Andrea has said, around issues of parenting, and personal relationships of a wide variety. That has been very important.

But as in all relationships, conflict arises. There certainly has been some conflict in our relationship, which we want to talk about, too, because it is also an important part of how one negotiates relationships that are going to be genuinely mutual. The most significant conflict, a real test of mutuality in our relationship, occurred when Andrea and I were conducting a workshop in St. Louis about three years

ago. At that time, we were facilitating a workshop with a group of clergy on racism, and as we often do, we made reference to other “isms,” including heterosexism. This topic, in the midst of a roomful of clergy representing a variety of religious traditions, triggered a rather heated discussion about homosexuality in which a range of religious viewpoints were expressed. As we struggled to deal with this issue in the context of our workshop, Andrea and I became aware of the fact that we had differing strategies for interacting with our participants on this issue. While we were able to deal with that difference productively in the context of the workshop, as we were processing the event on the flight home, we had a conversation which led to a real test of the mutuality in our relationship.

As background information for this incident, I should say that I had just become very involved in a worship community in Springfield. I had just joined a church which was a very important and significant step in my personal life, and as we talked about the controversy which had arisen in our workshop, we talked about the positions that our own religious communities had regarding homosexuality and heterosexism in the church. I am a member of a Presbyterian church. At this writing, that denomination is in the midst of a struggle around whether or not to ordain gay men and lesbian women. Andrea is a Quaker and belongs to a Meeting that is openly gay-affirming and sanctions and supports same-sex commitment ceremonies. So our two worship communities have very different positions.

Andrea said to me that she didn't understand how I could be a part of a religious community that was exclusionary in the way that the Presbyterian church currently is, and in fact suggested that I should find another church. When she first said it, I was taken aback by the comment, but had some trouble figuring out exactly what it was about it that bothered me. In fact, I shared her concern about the heterosexism in my denomination, and in my local church. I have raised, and continue to raise, questions about this issue with my pastor and with fellow parishioners. On the other hand, my local congregation is a relatively progressive, predominantly Black, Afrocentric congregation which is very affirming of my racial and spiritual identity in many ways. I experienced Andrea's suggestion that I should leave this congregation as an affront. I did not express this

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initially, but withdrew into my book, and we completed the plane ride in relative silence. I continued to think about the conversation, and later realized what was most offensive to me about it.

It occurred to me that there was really a lot of White privilege in her statement. As a Black woman living in a predominantly White community, there are not many opportunities for me or my children to be part of a community where our African-American heritage is explicitly affirmed. Consequently our Sunday worship experience in a congregation which defines itself as “unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian” is extremely valuable to me. I did feel that her statement that I should withdraw from this community was a statement of her White privilege. In fact, she was taking for granted the many churches or worship communities that she can choose from because almost all of them are predominantly White and will affirm her racial identity. She can easily choose to be a Quaker, without worrying that she and her family will again be one of few White families present. Her statement to me was a failure to recognize that privilege.

I felt that I had to say something to her about this. At the same time, I hesitated because this relationship was important to me and I did not want to alienate our friendship. Yet, it was a real juncture in terms of this issue of connections, disconnections and violations, because I could feel myself disconnecting. Was my spirituality an aspect of my life that I would not be able to share with this person? In order for us to be able to maintain the growth and development of our relationship, certainly being able to talk about my spiritual journey and my worship community was an important point of connection that I needed to be able to maintain. I decided to share my perspective with Andrea, and I am happy to report that she responded in a very validating way. She simply listened to what I had to say, and then said, “You’re right.”

**Ayvazian:** I want to speak to this because a potentially serious “disconnection” threatened our relationship — a relationship that had developed strong bonds, one that had become mutually important. When Beverly raised her feelings and concerns with me, two things went through my mind — two things that I knew she and I had said specifically to White people many times in the past! One was that when a person of color tells you something you have said or done is racist or reveals your inattention to

White privilege, take a deep breath and begin by assuming they are correct until proven otherwise. The other point is that as White people strive to be strong White allies, we do not have to hold ourselves to a standard of perfection. It is impossible, given our socialization, our background, the struggle, the sensitivity and the pain surrounding these issues, that we can be perfect White allies. I try to remember that I am not called to be perfect, I am called to be faithful and consistent on these issues. Beverly was exactly right. I remembered all the times I have said to White people: “When your racism is pointed out to you, when your privilege is made evident again, just listen, listen undefensively, and take a deep breath and respond in ways that will further your progress along this difficult journey.” I tried to follow the very advice that I had given to others. I tried to follow the advice I heard from a man of color who, when I asked him what he most wanted from his White allies, he responded, “I want them to be consistently conscious.” I believed that this was an opportunity for me to not attempt to be perfect or defensive, but to say, “I’m on a journey, and have not yet arrived.” That was an important juncture, a disconnection threatened, but we managed to talk it through.

There was another time that a disconnection threatened but was overcome by both of us being aware of what was going on in the relationship. This happened around the time of the Rodney King beating and the Simi Valley verdict in which the four L.A. police officers were acquitted. After the Rodney King beating, both Beverly and I were shaken by the videotape, and we were stunned by the news of the acquittals. But again, Beverly and I responded in a manner that we had actually talked about with other groups. It was a surprise, but in some ways not a surprise, to find ourselves experiencing it. In our shock and grief following the Simi Valley verdict, we essentially separated for a period of time and turned to different communities for comfort and support. Beverly talked about her reactions to the events primarily with other African-Americans. I suspected that she would want to immerse in the Black community, and then I witnessed it. In my own state of pain, shock, and anger, I found myself talking to two White men who I specifically called and met with, two men who identify as White allies. Meeting with them was the appropriate place for me to take my grief and do some healing and action planning in order to move forward.

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In fact, one of the meetings that I had following the verdict was with a minister in our community, The Reverend Peter Ives. During those meetings in which we grieved and expressed our despair and outrage, we also said to each other that we needed to do something that was proactive, visible, and long-term to bring issues of dismantling racism into the centerpiece of our community. From those meetings, something very positive was created — the Committee for Northampton.

Taking a moment to explain what was born from this time of upheaval and pain might be instructive. The Committee for Northampton began with just two people, quickly grew to two dozen, and soon encompassed hundreds of people in our community who joined together to bring issues of dismantling racism into every conceivable aspect of community life. The Committee designated 1993 as the year when "dismantling racism" would be the overarching theme for our small city of 35,000. A committee that included parents, teachers, city councilors, business owners, members of the clergy, students, and others spent the second half of 1992 organizing activities that would happen in 1993 — including hanging a banner across Main Street with our goal, "Dismantling Racism, Building Community." In fact, we were very successful. During 1993, the Committee for Northampton organized or co-sponsored 54 events in 52 weeks. These included speakers in the service clubs, pulpit exchanges, dismantling racism workshops, film and video series, cultural events, dinners and picnics, photography exhibits, and special events in the schools. The year culminated with eight performances of Langston Hughes' play, "Black Nativity." The Committee for Northampton grew out of our response to the atrocities in California.

Following the Simi Valley verdict it was appropriate for Beverly and me to separate for a while and immerse ourselves in our own groups to work on these issues. We recognized that the separation did not need to be a disconnection. We maintained the connection between us, but we recognized then, as we do now, that there are times when it is more appropriate to seek the comfort, support, and planning time with, in my case, strong White allies; in her case, members of the African-American community. I bring this up now because I have heard so many White people talk about periods when they feel separated from their friends of color who go without them to a

meeting, an event, or an empowerment group. This is an important point because White people can feel a loss, and even a sense of personal rejection, when this happens. I don't think these periods of separation should be interpreted in that fashion. Beverly and I see these as normal, necessary, and even predictable after racial trauma. The bridges that have been built may be perfectly strong, but there still may be a need to separate for a time.

**Tatum:** I want to add just a few comments to what Andrea has said. In fact, the weekend when the events following the Simi Valley verdict were unfolding, I was at a small women's conference, a gathering of about twenty women, to which I had been invited. The only person I knew in the group was the woman who had invited me, and I was the only woman of color there. As we were arriving, everyone was very much aware of the riots that were unfolding in Los Angeles following the acquittal, and what struck me was the reluctance among the group to talk in any serious way about what was going on in Los Angeles. A few people expressed a need to talk about what was happening and what it meant for the country and for their own particular communities, but generally speaking, the majority of the participants seemed to disregard these events as someone else's problem, not of concern to us as a group. I felt very alienated by that response, I have to say. Perhaps because I was with White women I didn't know, it did not feel like a safe place for me to completely engage. I was quite concerned about what was happening in communities of color in Los Angeles and in other parts of the country in response to this verdict. Yet I felt like my concern, a part of who I was, a part of my own perspective as an African-American woman, could not be safely brought to this meeting. I certainly experienced that as very disconnecting, and in fact, I went home early from the conference, and declined the invitation to attend the following year.

**Ayvazian:** Beverly and I also want to talk about other ways that we feel connections, and to respond to a question that is often asked of us about our relationship. White people often say to me, "It sounds like you two work together on issues of racism and talk about them very openly in your friendship, but are you, Andrea, always in the position of learner?" Beverly and I want to take a moment to remind all of us that each individual has multiple social identities. We feel this point is important

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because there are ways that Beverly and I are, in some areas of systematic oppression, both in the dominant category. We both receive the privilege or advantage, and we support each other in being strong allies. I am not always in the position of being dominant, and Beverly is not always in the position of being targeted. In the area of race inequity and racism — in that form of systematic oppression — I am clearly dominant. I receive the privilege, the unearned advantage and benefit of being White, and Beverly is targeted.

But there are other areas where Beverly and I are both targeted, and areas where we are both dominant. We're both targeted as women, and we're both dominant as Christians, as heterosexuals, as able-bodied, as middle-class. We felt it was useful to remember that as women we both feel targeted in groups of men where we are negotiating around money, for example. We are both disadvantaged systematically in a society that overvalues male attributes and characteristics. Again, the writing of Jean Baker Miller (1987) is useful here as she discusses the experience of gender domination and subordination in her book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. The fact that we are both practicing Christians and women of faith and identify very strongly and publicly in that way means we are both dominant. We are not Jewish or Muslim. We are both able-bodied, both heterosexual, both middle-class, and we offer each other support in remembering that we have a responsibility to interrupt anti-Semitism, to interrupt homophobia and heterosexism, to interrupt classism, and so on. We thought it was necessary to bring our attention to the fact that because each of us has multiple identities and plays multiple roles in a multi-layered fabric in society, we offer each other support and connection around being allies in areas where we are dominant and in the area where we are both targeted as women.

**Tatum:** Obviously in any relationship the kind of support you receive from the person with whom you are in relationship is significant. As Andrea has discussed, we do support each other in our own journey toward understanding the implications of our social identities, both in those areas where we are dominant and where we are targeted. But I want to also speak about another place where I have felt a great deal of support in our relationship. This has been around a personal experience of loss. As I

have indicated, my worship community is a very significant part of my life, and two years ago we experienced the loss of our pastor. For those of you not involved in a worship community, that may seem like a minor thing. Suffice it to say, that it is a lot like losing your therapist. It was a very difficult and painful loss for me to lose the opportunity to regularly meet and talk with someone who had been very influential in my own spiritual development. What I really appreciated was the fact that I was able to share my own grief about this loss with Andrea who, because she also is a person of faith, was very understanding and appreciative of the significance of this loss for me. Sharing this loss has been a very important and significant part of our relationship. It has been a real source of connection, and I certainly have felt some empowerment in dealing with this transition in my life and the life of my church community through our relationship.

## Common Differences

**Ayvazian:** Given the past discussion of the formation of the relationship, the developing of strong mutual support, respect, and affection between us, and the difficult periods that we have gone through, Beverly and I wanted to move into talking about what we call our "common differences." These are areas where there is sameness between us, yet where our sameness is expressed or manifested differently in our lives because of our racial difference.

Beverly and I are both mothers of sons. One of the areas that has been a strong connection and a source of mutuality is that we have shared considerable dialogue about our children's growth and development over the past five years that we have been friends. Beverly has been extremely supportive of me as I have faced challenging periods with my feisty and assertive little boy who has at times taxed my ability to know what is best for him and how to move forward. My friend Beverly, who happens to be a clinical psychologist, has been very helpful.

We are two mothers with school-aged children who have many similarities, but who have made some different choices, we believe, because of our racial difference. In particular, we have made different choices about the schooling for our sons and the environments we feel they need in order to thrive. My son is in a public school in our town, and fits in well in his kindergarten class and in his school. During a

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parent-teacher conference this past spring, his teacher said to me, "Andrea, your son is just like a thousand other rambunctious, big-for-his-age six year old boys that I have had in my teaching career." And I thought to myself, "I'm sure he is. I'm sure he doesn't stand out in very many ways. He's like a thousand other children that this woman has had in her long career of teaching kindergarten." In our predominantly White community, the same could not be said about Beverly's sons. Her two African-American boys are in a private school setting. I will let her speak to why that decision was made for her children.

**Tatum:** It's true that I have chosen to put my children in private schools. Like many of the Black families I interviewed and wrote about in my book, *Assimilation Blues: Black Families in a White Community* (Tatum, 1987), I have worried about how my children will be responded to by what has been to date an entirely White teaching staff (with the exception of an occasional student teacher of color). Though it may only be an illusion, I believe I have been able to exercise more control over my children's classroom experiences as a result of enrolling them in private schools. There have been times when I have felt that racial issues were present in both peer and teacher interactions, and both my husband and I have been actively involved in negotiating those issues with the school and our children.

The task of raising young African-American children, especially boys, in contemporary society is not an easy one. My children are also big for their ages, but unlike for White boys for whom physical maturity is often a social advantage, being Black and big for your age places you at some psychological risk. Seven-year-old Black boys may be thought of as cute; fourteen-year-old Black boys are often perceived as dangerous. The larger you are, the sooner you must learn to deal with other people's negative stereotypes, and you may not yet be cognitively and emotionally mature enough to do so effectively. The smallness of their private school environment where I can easily make myself known as a parent, and where my children may be seen as individuals rather than representatives of a racial group, may offer some small margin of protection for them. They will need all the margin they can get. Though I am a product of public schools myself and I support quality public education, I have not regretted our decision to send our children to private schools.

**Ayvazian:** There are two other areas we want to talk about in terms of "common differences." As Beverly and I have mentioned throughout our talk, we both identify as women of faith, specifically as Christians, but we express our faith in very different ways. Beverly is a member of an Afrocentric Presbyterian church in Springfield, Massachusetts. I am a member of a Quaker Meeting in Leverett, Massachusetts. The experiences that we are having during the same hour on Sunday mornings are markedly different. When Beverly and I visit each other's houses of worship, we stand out as visitors. I have been to Beverly's church a number of times and I have been the only White person in the room on a couple of occasions. Beverly has been the only person of color at Quaker worship when she has come to visit my Meeting. At Beverly's church, I have been moved and inspired by the singing, altar calls, testifying, sermons, and other vocal expressions of faith. My Meeting is essentially eighty White people sitting in a room being silent. It is a very different experience. Although comfortable worshipping with each other, we have been struck by the ways that each of us stands out as being a visitor and how we have chosen such different paths to express our faith.

Although I identify as a White anti-racist, my "church" experience is very monocultural, and it strikes me as a very "White" thing to do, to sit there in silence. Occasionally people are moved by the Spirit to stand and speak, but it still feels like I am having a very White experience on Sunday mornings. Beverly's worship experience strikes me as being grounded in her African-American heritage. Also, when I visit Beverly's church, I am reminded of what it is like to be in the statistical minority. When visitors are recognized during the service at her church, and asked to introduce themselves to the congregation, I say my name and that I am there with the Tatum family. Following the service, over a hundred African-Americans remember greet me by name, "Hi Andrea. Welcome back." It has been a reminder for me of what it is like to be very visible in a group or community.

**Tatum:** Another area where our common differences have emerged, and actually has been an important aspect of our relationship, is that we have sought different kinds of experiences and some of those have been a point of separation. At one point I decided that I really wanted to have an opportunity to

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talk about faith in daily living in my own town during the week, rather than always having to drive thirty minutes on the highway to Springfield. So I could have this opportunity more conveniently, I thought I would invite a small group of women to come to my house and talk about these issues. My idea to start such a group was very much influenced by two books I read, *The Monday Connection* by William Diehl (1991) and *The Dream of God* by Verna Dozier (1991). I was inspired to call my group the "Dream of God" group.

As I talked about my idea with Andrea, she was very excited about it and wanted to participate. This was a point of discussion because in some ways I had envisioned this as a group of African-American women, yet at the same time I did not want to exclude Andrea. We talked about the fact that maybe it could be an "African-American women and Andrea" group. In fact, I was willing to do that and discussed it with the other women I had in mind, because I knew she was a woman of faith who would appreciate this opportunity as much as I would. But as circumstances would have it, or perhaps God's grace, Andrea's schedule conflicted with mine and it was very difficult to find a time when we were both free. So she has not participated in the group. Retrospectively, we both look back on it and agree that perhaps this is how it was meant to be. My group consists of three Black women, and it has been a very satisfying experience just as it is.

**Ayvazian:** On this point, with the Dream of God group, and the retreats organized by and for Black Christian women that Beverly has also participated in, I have struggled with a certain level of envy, which we have talked about. Beverly has gone away on religious retreats specifically for Black women, and she has told me about them in some detail. The reports have been very moving. I have found myself wishing that I could be a part of them and join with her in these experiences, but I know that I can't. Again we have tried to look these times of separation as periods that do not need to be a source of division or disconnection between us. I can hear about the retreats that she's attending without me, support her, and our relationship need not be threatened.

## Choosing the Margin

The last point that we want to talk about as another example of common differences is what Beverly and I have come to call from "margin to

center" or from "center to margin." Both of us have been influenced by the works of bell hooks, particularly *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), and Audre Lorde's work, *Sister Outsider* (1984). Beverly and I have been influenced by these women's writings, and the concept of moving from margin to center or in my case, from center to margin. Let me clarify this further. Beverly and I have remarkably similar political views. We share very similar progressive politics, but again in this area of common differences, we have expressed our personal politics in different ways. I am a person who appears to start at or near the center of acceptability and power in our society. As a White, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied person, I receive considerable privilege in society. (I'm in so many dominant groups.) I start at the center where social, political, and economic power rest. Consequently, bell hooks' book, *From Margin to Center*, speaks to me, but in the reverse. I recognize that I start at the center and I feel called to move to the margin.

As I move to the margin, I try to take other progressive people, specifically in my case, well-intentioned White people, with me into more progressive politics, living a more progressive agenda, choosing the margin. To accomplish this, I have made decisions like choosing, since 1981, to be a war tax resister, which means I don't pay a portion of my federal income tax every April; I make a public protest, objecting to the priorities reflected in the military portion of our federal budget and our ongoing preparation for and involvement in war. Also in my journey from center to margin, my life partner (who is male) and I have chosen not to sanctify our union and our love of each other in a formal wedding. Instead we had a ceremony of commitment that could be replicated exactly for same-sex couples. We made this decision so that we can advocate as allies to gay, lesbian, and bisexuals as a couple that has chosen in one small way not to accept heterosexual privilege. Because I start with so much privilege — so clearly at the center — these are two ways that I can move to the margin, stir up good trouble, and invite other people like me to question their politics, and live their commitments to the principles they hold dear. However, I have not lobbied for Beverly to make those same choices. There are ways that because of my privilege I've had the luxury to step out of the center, to do what is unexpected and in some ways unacceptable.

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But I have not during the last five years suggested that Beverly make the same choices. For example, with war tax resistance, Beverly supports me. She hears about it all the time; she hears about my latest traumas with the IRS, but we don't have conversations about how I feel she should make the same choice. I recognize that my daily life is more advantaged and more comfortable than hers because of my color. Consequently, I do not advocate that she should choose war tax resistance. She expresses her political convictions in other ways. The same is true around formal marriage and same-sex unions. It has not been an issue for me and it has not been a source of disconnection for us that Beverly has made different choices for her behavior as a strong ally to gay men and lesbians. Her allied behavior is evident in other ways. These are examples of how I believe it is my task to move from center to margin and to take other people with me, as I often say, to stir up good trouble.

**Tatum:** As Andrea said, this idea, from margin to center, has been important and I'd like to refer to a reading that I found very helpful from Letty Russell's book, *Church in the Round* (1993). She refers to the work of Audre Lorde and bell hooks, and uses this idea to make the following point. She says, "We make choices about moving from margin toward center or from center toward margin according to where we find ourselves in relation to the center of power and resources and the cultural and linguistic dominance in any particular social structure. Our connection to the margin is always related to where we are standing in regard to social privilege, and from that particular position we have at least three choices, not to choose, to choose the center, or to choose the margins (p. 192)." As Letty Russell points out, our first choice is not to choose. If we make this choice, if we choose not to choose, we are essentially saying that those of us who are marginalized by gender, race, sexual orientation, class, or disability, have the possibility of doing nothing. But as she says, in so doing we internalize the oppression. I think that if we consider not choosing, if we think about internalizing our oppression and allowing ourselves to be defined as marginal, then we have in effect been psychologically violated. Referring again to Jean Baker Miller's (1988) discussion of disconnections and violations, it seems clear to me that to not choose is in essence a choice of violation, because it forces us to disconnect from our own experience, to try to ignore and not

name the particular alienation that we are exposed to in our society.

A second choice that Russell points out is to choose the center. She says, "those on the margin choosing the center do so by emulating the oppressors and doing everything to pass or to be like those who are dominant and be accepted by them (p. 192)." Whenever we make this choice we are choosing disconnection in the sense that we are saying, "Yes I want to be in relationship with you. If I have to deny certain aspects of my experience to do so, then I will. I will disconnect from that part of my experience in order to maintain my connection with you." Certainly some Black women may choose to do this so the relationships that they develop with their White colleagues will be, by definition, somewhat incomplete because there will be this kind of distancing, or disconnection from one's own experience, or at least those experiences will be kept separate from the relationship.

Our third choice is for the margin. Here Letty Russell says, "Those on the margin claim the margin by working in solidarity with others from the margin as they move toward the center. They seek a transformed society of justice where they will be empowered to share the center and no one will need to be marginalized (p. 193)." As I reflect on this choice, it seems to me this is the choice of connection. This is the choice of saying, "I will be connected to those who are able to acknowledge and affirm my experience in the world, who are able to stand on the margin with me." As I look at my own situation relative to these choices, I am proud to say that I choose to be an African-American woman. You may say, "That is not a choice! You were born an African-American woman." By saying I choose, I am saying I claim that identity and my own definition of it, rejecting those that others may impose upon me against my will. Society can be transformed by those on the margin only if we "choose" the margin. Otherwise we collude in our own oppression and the oppression of others.

I choose to stand on the margin as someone who is defined by society as marginal in terms of my race and in terms of my gender. I also recognize that there are places where I am in the center and need to choose the margin because, as Andrea has already pointed out, there are places where I am dominant. But the primary point here is that those of us on the margin, or in the center, claim the margin by working

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in solidarity with others from the margin as they move toward the center. It is in this context that I can warmly embrace Andrea as my friend, as someone who has chosen to stand on the margin with me. I am proud to claim her as my friend.

**Ayvazian:** Beverly and I want to close by sharing some of our thoughts about what we call our friendship as a work in progress. We have said that we recognize the challenge of continually joining together and being apart, joining together and being apart. We have forged a relationship that is not based on the false goal of color-blindness. We recognize the differences in our life experiences and the difference that race makes in a relationship, and we have built a sturdy bridge across that divide.

In closing I want to share with you two lines of a Pat Parker poem called, "For The White Person Who Wants To Know How To Be My Friend." The first two lines are as follows: "The first thing you do is forget that I'm Black. Second, you must never forget that I'm Black." Do I forget that Beverly is Black? Sure I do. She is a dear friend who I spend time with. Love, admiration, and affection flow between us. Do I ever forget that she's Black? Sure I do, she is my friend who I care about, there are times that I totally forget that she's Black. But do I really forget that Beverly is Black? Yes and no. Sure I do, and no I don't. That is who she is in the world, and yes it is forgotten, and no it is not actually ever forgotten. But in the end, I have discovered that the issue is not how I respond to Beverly's Blackness. It is how I have come to understand my own Whiteness. In the end, I believe the issue for me is how I have come to understand social, political, and economic power and my unearned advantage and privilege as a White woman in a racist society. I believe the strongest thing that I bring to our friendship, our relationship, and our connection is an understanding of the significance of my own Whiteness. I come at long last to our relationship with an understanding of my Whiteness, something that for several decades, I was helped to not see

walking shoulder to shoulder toward the promised land we cannot yet see. But we have strength and courage and faith in the journey. Others are marching with us and many have gone before. We have not arrived but we are well on our way, and we celebrate each victory that moves us forward. Beverly calls us "partners in justice" — shoulder to shoulder we move toward our goal.

Thank you!

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