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## Work In Progress

### Talking Paper: Racial Images and Relational Possibilities

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at the Wellesley Centers for Women

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# Racial Images and Relational Possibilities

**Maureen Walker, Ph.D.**  
**Jean Baker Miller, M.D.**

## About the Authors

Maureen Walker, Ph.D., is a psychologist with a practice in psychotherapy and antiracism consultation. Her clinical practice and research projects involve developing links between racial identity development and relational theories to support the growth potential of persons who experience disconnections stemming from marginalization and devaluation within the dominant society. She works at Harvard Business School and is on the faculty of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute.

Jean Baker Miller, M.D., is the Director of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Stone Center, Wellesley College and a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine. She has written *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, co-authored *The Healing Connection* and *Women's Growth in Connection*, as well as numerous articles and chapters in books.

## Abstract

This conversation deals with some of the psychological consequences of structured inequities for those socially defined as “more than” as well as those defined as “less than.” Using Relational-Cultural Theory’s concepts, the talk illustrates how racial and other social or economic inequities interfere with the mutual openness to influence, which is the source of growth. The speakers also discuss the interrelationship of “controlling images” and relational images.

## Introduction

In this conversation, we are trying to understand further the ways in which cultural and relational influences affect each other. Specifically, we want to address how socio-political factors shape psychological development. We explore some of the ways that rigid patterns of inequality and non-mutuality have a destructive impact on all participants in a relationship, restricting possibilities for movement and creativity.

We are talking especially about cultures that first define certain groups of people as less valuable and then oppress and restrict these people. In these cultures, persons who are deemed less valuable suffer both visibly and invisibly. Although persons who have the power to restrict and oppress the “less valuable” groups tend to suffer less visibly, participating in an oppressive socio-political system wreaks damage on relational functioning.

Our conversation rests on the belief that connections with other people are the source of growth for all people and that disconnections are the source of major problems. In order for connection to occur, each person has to be able to receive—and respond to—the experiences of other people.

Out of her/his history of these interchanges, each person constructs a complex set of relational images which constitute her/his picture of what happens in the world. Based on these relational images, each person then creates beliefs about her/himself and her/his characteristics. The background for these concepts can be found in many of the working papers and books produced by the Stone Center—for example, Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Jordan, 1997; and Miller & Stiver, 1997.

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## Conversation

**Jean Baker Miller:** In talking about the need in this country, you recently said, “It’s more than ‘diversity’.” Can you tell me more about what you meant?

**Maureen Walker:** Diversity implies that all we’re talking about is difference, and that there is equality among the different groups of people. But in this culture, people are assigned to categories that aren’t just different; they are subordinate or dominant. There are inherent power differences in these categories and political inequalities that have an impact on how we are with each other. If we truly believe that we grow in relationship with each other, then this situation of cultural and political inequality will have an impact on human development and human functioning.

To use the language of diversity is to imply that we are talking about simple difference, when we are in fact talking about politicized and “problematized” difference: difference that translates into “more than” and “less than” or “better than” or “not as good as.” That’s the fundamental level of naming and acknowledgement. The second level is to recognize that under conditions of political inequality, gross and subtle power distortions have a critical impact on relational development and functioning.

In much of the popular conversation about so-called “diversity,” we focus on those people who have been socialized as “less than” and we try to address and understand what we call internalized oppression (meaning how oppressed people begin to believe the false images of themselves that the oppressor group creates). However, there’s not much talk about what happens to the members of the dominant group. The situation of “structured-in” inequality also distorts the dominant person’s sense of who she or he is in the world, whether in the smaller immediate world of friends and family or in the larger society. A person who is socialized to believe that she or he is “better than” can have a sense of identity that is built on relational images that are malformed and misguided. When we talk about simple diversity, I don’t think we get a sense of that. Because this structured inequality is not named most of the time, people in the dominant group end up with problems they don’t understand.

**JBM:** So are you saying that those people who are socially defined as the more privileged are led to have distorted images of who they are and what should be coming to them?

**MW:** Yes and these distortions set up unrealistic expectations. There are many times when these expectations are not fulfilled because they were unrealistic in the first place. However, if a person has been socialized or “trained” to accept all of the little convenient categories that are set up around difference, they sort of miss all of the distortions.

**JBM:** Will you say more about that?

**MW:** Well, when Joan Chittister (1998) talks about patriarchy, she says something that rings true to me. She said, “Patriarchy humiliates women all the time, but it kills men.” Now I would say that patriarchy also kills women, in obvious and not so obvious ways. I think her point, however, is that the entitlements of socially constructed maleness lead men to an early death: either through the thoughtless violence of legalized or street warfare, or by goading them to participate in a culture of “get more,” “have more” in order to “be more.” Men haven’t been socialized to look at how they’ve been set up by patriarchy. They don’t learn to question the game or the rules of the racist, classist, consumer-driven society that governs their lives—get more, have more, and be more. They are always out there having to measure themselves and compete against other (usually) men and compete, whether in a violent situation like war, or just about who is accumulating the most stuff in a very materialistic culture.

They don’t see that we have an economic situation that sets them up. Only a certain number of people are going to win by the rules of a class-based, consumerist society. The social hierarchies provide them with convenient categories of “less than” people to identify as “others”—“minorities” (whether by virtue of race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation). These “other” people then are often scapegoated as the ones who are preventing them from moving forward and attaining whatever heights and privileges are “due to them” by virtue of their whiteness and their maleness.

**JBM:** When you say that, are you thinking that white men, for example, are led to believe false notions about themselves such as that they are better than other groups of men, are never vulnerable, and the like. Then, the relational images that many white men create lead them to expect they should get much more than most of them will receive because these images are unrealistic in the first place?

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**MW:** Men are constantly having to measure themselves against other men as a way of searching for their value, i.e., "Am I doing better than you?" They are not encouraged to see the economic structure that sets them up to do this. They don't look at that but see only themselves competing with the men nearby.

There's a quotation from Lyndon Johnson that's something like, "If you can convince the poorest white man that he is better than the richest black man he will never notice that his pocket is being picked."

That's an earthy, LJB sort of saying, but I think it speaks to the power structure that keeps us looking through relational images at convenient categories of people without noticing what sets these images in place.

## Underlying Forces

**JBM:** So it's not diversity but an understanding of a whole system.

**MW:** Yes, Patricia Hill Collins talks of "the matrix of domination," acknowledging the many categories of stratification. In the matrix, people are better than or less than along a number of dimensions, and different levels of power inherent in each category.

There is a tendency in this culture to portray some of the results or manifestations of stratified difference, but not the underlying forces. An example of this tendency would be the conventional interpretations of violence. For example, the media show crime-ridden neighborhoods or barrios that are imploding, but they don't show those banks that redline and participate in the creation of desolation and nihilism. Another example would be the common depiction of poor and working class, predominantly white neighborhoods, as "racist." These neighborhoods bear the stigma of political deviance without an analysis of the oppressive and violating effects of the matrix of domination on poor whites.

**JBM:** I've thought that dominant groups in this society tend to project the parts of life that they devalue on to others; for example, people of color or poor or working-class people. They portray others as more sexual or more physical and brawny or more violent. In doing this, dominant groups deny large parts of their own experience. They don't find the ways to integrate these parts of life into growthful cultural images.

Another feature is that such a situation keeps dominant group members from knowing the effects of their own actions. We've said that people learn about themselves (and others) only as they engage in interaction with others. If dominant groups interact with others in only very limited and restricted ways, they don't learn.

Do you think that's so or is that too much "psychologizing"?

**MW:** I think what you're saying is true on a lot of different levels. If we were to talk about racial violence for example, the images that typically come to mind involve some conflagration of dispossessed people throwing rocks and burning things, usually their own surroundings. We are less likely to surface images of those powerful white men redlining in banks, charging unfair and disproportionately high interest rates on loans, or refusing to give loans, decisions based only on racial categories or sometimes race and gender. These are forms of racial violence, but are not the images we usually construct.

Because of the power they have, these men have what we might call "other ways of doing violence." People who don't have the means to perpetrate invisible violence are more easily seen, more easily scapegoated. The dynamic of invisibility works within as well as across racial groups.

Again for example, talk of racial violence by whites usually centers on those with the least economic clout. We rarely identify more economically privileged neighborhoods or suburbs as centers of racial violence. Are we then saying that people in the less privileged areas are inherently less enlightened than people who are in more privileged neighborhoods? So the projections you talk about, sort of get booted downhill, so to speak; so that whoever is in the least powerful position is going to have all of that stuff projected on to them.

**JBM:** And it allows the top people to not really see or admit to what they participate in, another way of living without knowing.

**MW:** Right. There's a theorist, Joel Kovel (1984), who talks about the aversive and the dominant forms of racism. I think you can probably do that with any form of "ism." The aversive racist is the one who can perpetrate violence invisibly. The dominant racist is out there throwing Molotov cocktails or marching in protest against desegregation or some other form of

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power sharing. Kovel maintains that the person with the power—the aversive racist—will always prepare the blow that is delivered by the dominant racist. Another scholar who talks about these patterns is Dr. Kenneth Hardy (1996). He says that people who have power are able to perpetrate racism without leaving their fingerprints on it. Those people can then talk about the less powerful people—either within their own race or not—as unenlightened or racist. They never have to face those parts of their own being. Thus, they never take the opportunity to grow and come into a fuller humanity by owning these parts of themselves.

**JBM:** Also, if you teach disconnection as part of your culture, which you do as soon as you have these categories, it warps your own people. Inevitably, you can't be teaching people to find the fullness of love or justice. This is complex because, for example, some white people can be aversive or dominant racists and can seem to be very good to their own children. But it seems to me that can be true only up to a point because they are teaching hate.

**MW:** And when you get to that certain point, you can see how true that statement is. Maybe that point is reached when you try to push beyond a certain image that a person holds dear, then it takes very little to get to a place of violence. You can see this dynamic working in the family or in the little community the person seems good to and tightly bonded with. You can't really build sustainable bonds around hatred and disconnection. A piece that makes the disconnection intractable is that it is not named. When it's not named, people learn to do disconnection and hatred without talking about it. So it's not available for examination.

### **“Doing Disconnection”**

**MW:** There is a powerful example that speaks to the complexity of teaching people how to *do* disconnection based on categories of difference. I've had the opportunity to do work with many white people who grew up going to Catholic schools in the forties and fifties. Many of them reported that on Fridays they would all bring in “pennies for the black babies.” In some cases with enough pennies, you could “buy” a black baby. That was sort of like getting a gold star. People from different schools in different cities and countries talked about this practice. One gentleman

went so far as to describe a statuette in his school that was rigged up so that when the pennies were dropped in a black child figurine would nod a silent “Thank you.”

Now the power of that image is this: there were children who are supposedly being taught really good things about love, charity, caring for the stranger, enlarging a sense of social and faith-filled responsibility. Those are very positive, very powerful messages, but at the same time those children are being taught to problematize a whole group of people and see them as “less than,” inadequate, inferior, incapable.

**JBM:** That's a striking example. Teaching or doing a supposedly good thing is so contaminated . . .

**MW:** So intertwined. It's no wonder that people end up feeling split and confused. Janet Helms did some research on that. One of the outcomes she talked about is that because of being systematically socialized to have more power, or think they are “better than”; lots of white people are filled with ambivalence. She says that white people learn a lot about being white but don't learn much about how to talk about it. I imagine this is true about any group socialized to think they are “better than.” I wish I could remember that reference.

**JBM:** In these times, when a dominant group is oppressing people, there's a whole denial of what we're doing. I mean it's rarely said in the media or other places that that's what they're doing.

**MW:** In fact, there are whole sets of myths set up to perpetuate the denial: meritocracy for one example, individual endeavor is another.

For example, affirmative action is associated with powerless people. It's not called affirmative action when a powerful man hires another man who reminds him of himself—or someone with whom he feels socially or politically compatible.

**JBM:** In current times, nobody says, “We're a racist society” or “We oppress poor people.”

**MW:** No, in fact, it's usually the opposite. What is said are things like, “Everybody can make it who really tries.”

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**JBM:** That's the individual endeavor and meritocracy part of it. I've been reading a book that's very enlightening on this topic, *How Jews Became White Folks* by Karen Brodtkin (1998). She and others have described how "affirmative action" programs existed historically although they were not called that. For example, after World War II the G.I. Bill made it possible for many men (and the women vets) to go to college and to own a house through low-interest mortgage programs. But African Americans and some other ethnic and racial groups of people often were systematically excluded from these programs.

You were saying earlier that members of a group that is defined as "better than" need to uphold certain images of themselves. This then affects their images of what can happen in their relationships.

**MW:** Yes. There's a movie, "The Long Walk Home," in which a white woman gives a ride to her maid during the Montgomery bus boycott. Her husband finds out and says, "Here I am trying to hold up my head as a white man and you're carting around a nigger maid. She's our maid; we don't know her. And we can't know her. She is as different from us as a cat is from a dog." Much of his oppressive behavior (toward his White wife and black maid) was directed toward maintaining an image of himself. Even the stereotypes, the negative images of others, are juxtaposed against images he is trying to maintain of himself.

**JBM:** I wanted to return to another point. An effect of all the myths we've been talking about is that they keep the more privileged people from knowing the effects of their own behavior. They're participants in the system and they don't know it.

**MW:** And don't want to know it. It might be life changing. So there are a lot of systems in place to keep people from knowing

**JBM:** It's again about keeping people from reality.

**MW:** And it's institutionalized in inauthentic relationship. The privileged person never wants to hear from the less privileged person because it shatters whatever myths he's constructed about who he is in the world. To have to hear something different and really get it, I think could catapult a person into a kind of chaos and eventually a real grief process.

## **Relational Images and Societal Expectations**

**JBM:** We've talked a bit about how the whole overall system operates and a bit about what therefore happens to dominant or privileged groups. We want to discuss further what happens to people who are defined as "less than."

I think you have discussed some of the things that affect children growing up in a group described as "less than" in the U.S. You said that inevitably children grow up with a lot of fear. And you related this to how this situation affects their entering into connections—or disconnections. I know you said that children would experience for one, a huge blow to their sense of fitness for connection.

**MW:** I think I was talking about the fact that from an early age, children can get a sense of being defined as a problem. These can be in ways you might not think about, just in ways that say to them, "You are different and your difference is a problem." Some of that message is delivered just through living in a world where the prevailing images (of what's normal) are different from who the child is. Many people have used the example of "flesh colored" Band-Aids. The big question is: Whose flesh?

Of course, it's much more than that, but we can't ignore the significance of sensate experience. Take, for instance, hair texture. My son has grown up in predominately White neighborhoods. He could not just walk into any of those many shops lining the streets of our town—as his friends could—to get a haircut. As a youngster, getting a haircut meant giving up an entire Saturday morning, and driving 17 or 18 miles into the city to find a skilled barber.

After a while, and many Saturday mornings spent in the car, he became quite fearless (much to the chagrin of his friends) about walking into a suburban shop and asking, "Can anyone here cut my hair?" The reason that's problematic is first of all, it takes quite a bit of courage for a kid to walk into a place and ask the question: "Can you cut my hair?" Then if the answer is, "No," it's not really seen as lack of skill on the barber's part. It's your hair that's problematic, so different, so out of the ordinary that all of us who are skilled in this trade, don't need to know how to do it.

That's such a primitive level of being problematized, but when that starts when the child is very young, he

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or she is susceptible to taking in the notion of himself as problematic. That's not to say there aren't countervailing forces in the child's supportive relationships; that goes without saying. But that doesn't take away from the fact that there are these kinds of devaluing, sensate experiences.

Then there are other experiences. In one of her talks, Beverly Tatum (1997) mentioned the plight of young, black males such as her sons, who might be described as rambunctious, spirited, or energetic. Her experience, however, was that teachers were prone to describe the young, black boys as angry or aggressive—consistent with the prevailing images of “The Angry/Violent Black Male.” This description was in stark contrast to the child's White counterparts, who though they were exhibiting similar behaviors, were more likely described as spunky.

How confusing and violating to the child's experience! This misattribution can be done even by well meaning people: for example, the nice, smiling teacher who's teaching you to read and who seems to care about you. What happens to relational confidence when these images jump up so readily to make her misinterpret a possibly benign action, and view behavior as “aggressive” rather than spirited?

**JBM:** It's such a big thing. You raised a son. It's constant, right?

**MW:** A constant. A struggle for survival. The child (and the parent) walks around not knowing when the next blow is going to come. I don't know any black parents who don't prepare their sons for the day that they will be stopped and harassed. There is a joke about it; we call it “driving while black.” Everyone prepares for that moment. We have to ask what it's like to grow up with awareness that you're under suspicion for being “not as good as,” as moral, as unable to contain one's impulses—all those dirty things that are projected on to “lesser” beings.

**JBM:** The next thing you talked about was the hyper-vigilance, the wariness.

**MW:** Well, I think that follows from what we've just been talking about, this expectation that at some point you'll be targeted and for no other reason than the racial categories and the acculturated images associated with them. One lives with the knowledge that the images exist and that they carry profound meaning and expectation.

**JBM:** You said that there's even a joke about it, “driving while black.” Would you say that that's one of the ways that families and the community give children some strength to deal with this?

**MW:** Yes. Some of the ways are (1) naming it, and (2) I think you're right; humor is huge. I think in some ways it breaks the isolation of it, the belief that it's me and I'm a problem. To be able to joke about it collectivizes it. I guess, in a sense, the person doesn't end up carrying this sense of deficiency and defectiveness as their own private burden.

**JBM:** It's not that it makes it go away or that it's less hurtful.

**MW:** It's just a way to try and understand the “not understandable.” A way to frame it. I think about one mother who says that she always told her son to put his hands up over his head when he walks into a store. Jokingly, the point is well made. But it expresses a real sense that things will be really tough for you if you come up against these images in this world. There is always the expectation that you're going to do something that is illegal, that is immoral. It will not go well for you. It won't be seen as a childish prank; it will be seen as the “criminal impulses in you” or something like that.

Unfortunately, the prevailing relational images are such that the experience is almost cliché. My son was searched one morning when he went into a supermarket to buy a protractor to use in his geometry class. There were so many interesting parts of that experience. One was the way he told me about it. He didn't tell me on the day it happened, nor did he mention it as a “headline” comment. He told it almost as a sidebar remark. I think this way of recounting the experience spoke to the shame and ambivalence he was feeling, as well as the self-doubt. I think he felt he had done something wrong even though he clearly knew he hadn't. It spoke to that notion of disconnection from self. In one of the early papers, you wrote that under conditions of systematic inequality, the person violated will often feel at fault for the disconnection.

A couple of interesting things happened after we learned about his experience. We were able to connect with him and support him so that he got reconnected to *himself*, and could talk with clarity about what had happened to him. That was such a striking example of how connection with others leads to better connection

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with oneself, with one's own experience.

He knew that we were going to follow up and talk about it, make it a larger discussion. He knew that it wasn't just an interpersonal event, but one that had community consequences. We went to the head of the corporation and requested a meeting. One part of the response was quite disturbing. Perhaps because the corporate management was fearful of litigation, they proceeded to scapegoat the young assistant manager who had subjected my son to the search. As a family, we were not the least concerned with anything litigious; we were focused on education, recovery, and prevention.

My concern was this: "What is going on in your organization that led your young manager to think he was doing the right thing by searching my son, a young, black male standing in the aisles gazing at school supplies? The organization pulled out the young manager and they were ready to publicly castigate him as an aberrant person (again the least powerful singled out for "deviant" acts). They wanted to show us what they had written in his personnel file. We refused to look at that.

Our objective was to facilitate a conversation between the manager and our son in the interest of relational clarity and confidence. We also wanted to talk about what should happen in the organization so that other young people would not be subjected to similar mistreatment. The management didn't get that, but conveniently targeted a relatively less powerful young manager and hung him out to dry. To do otherwise would have forced corporate management to acknowledge that powerful cultural systems were in place that led the young manager to expect that he would be rewarded for his vigilance in protecting the store against the likes of this young, presumably larcenous black male.

**JBM:** Did talking about that get anywhere with them?

**MW:** I don't think that went anywhere. The young manager got the incident on his record and eventually got transferred out of the store. It was an unsatisfactory outcome because vengeance was not the goal.

**JBM:** Did your son feel supported?

**MW:** My son felt very, very supported because we had that conversation. The director of personnel came; the manager came and I'm sure they were very

rehearsed. The assistant manager who conducted the search was forced to give an abject apology, to say (a) that he didn't intend any harm, and that (b) what he did was not a racist act. Of course, that's a classic tactic of domination. "Now that we've done what we've done, let's mystify what we've done." My son accepted the apology and said, "I do want to understand what 'it' was then." You know, please explain the "it" to me and tell me what "it" was if not racism. What was there in my behavior (being) that led to my being searched? Although there was no response to that question, it was good that in spite of the "apology," my son could stay connected enough to know that there was some level of mystification going on. Under other circumstances, the mystification could work to make him unclear about what he was feeling and thinking. That's getting back to the receptivity issues and the images issues.

**JBM:** So a big thing for him was to know he could count on you.

**MW:** He could count on family and also he could count on the process of dialogue. He could also know not to have big expectations of dialogue but just to go through the process. I think the process of going through it was really important, of having a place to push for clarity. Clarity may come to different people in different conversations. It's back to that notion of how growth occurs. We don't always see it at the same rate in all parties. It may be in a few events later or further removed that whatever learning there is can take hold or get clearer. Probably, something transformative happened for everybody, just different things.

**JBM:** So putting this in terms of the impact on connection, you also said that these threats have a big impact on receptivity.

**MW:** Right. And I don't think we can underestimate the amount of shame that these threats and negative expectations engender. We know that shame has a big impact on receptivity. One way of dealing with shame is to try not to feel what one really feels in those circumstances. Sometimes there may be collusion with the mystification. Sometimes in the midst of such disconnection, all that can be expressed is the anger or the contempt or the joke, and not the shame or the extreme weariness. In such instances, one is not open to one's own experience, sometimes because it's too

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much to bear in the moment. The fatigue, the disappointment, the wariness, and the sense of hopelessness in some instances hang like a shadow over interpersonal encounters.

The novelist Bebe Campbell-Moore describes it well. In response to the horror of the Holocaust, many Jewish people say, “Never again.” In response to the repetitive trauma of racism, she suggests that a more appropriate saying among African Americans would be, “When will it end?”

I remember once feeling quite indignant that the receptionist at a gym I frequented was an older white man who would invariably speak to me if there were no other white people around. If there were white people around he would ignore me and act like I wasn’t coming through the door. The contrast was striking. We were both part of a system stratified along dimensions of class, occupational status, and race—probably along with many others. Although my professional status was culturally constructed as “better than,” my racial status was clearly “less than.” And in all instances, it was the “less than” that defined the interactions. Now this wasn’t new learning for me. I had experienced such before. It took me a while to recognize and name something more than anger about this situation. I realized when I was able to really stay with the feeling and really keep connected to what was going on, that I had no ill feelings toward him at all. What I really felt was extreme weariness. I felt pain and sadness at how much our relationship embodied the pain of the world.

**JBM:** When you stayed with your feelings, you reached a new view?

**MW:** Whatever relief comes because recognition breaks isolation. The pain is bigger than the dyad, even though we are live embodiments of it in the moment. And by staying alive to and connected with our feeling-thoughts in those moments, we have an opportunity to change it.

### **Controlling Images and Relational Images**

**JBM:** You were saying also, “When will it end?” This just goes on and on in large and small ways and it’s exhausting.

**MW:** It’s hard if there is an expectation of harm, then it’s going to be very difficult to be open—either to your own experience or to being transformed by other

people. I think that’s a huge piece. I think it’s scary to talk about. We sometimes get ruttled in disconnections because the possibility of connection does bring with it vulnerability—the challenge to let go of the relational images that seem to provide a protective function. It is sometimes quite difficult to talk about transformation and mutuality on all sides of the structured-in inequalities. I guess in some instances, it is not always politically expedient to talk about how anyone in the relationship has to be open to change.

Typically what we get in much so-called “diversity” training is that the people who inhabit the more powerful categories need to behave better. That’s certainly true. However, relational-cultural healing is also about how everybody needs to be open to *movement*. The gross and subtle inequalities of a stratified culture inhibit our willingness to receive and to allow and show others that they have an impact on us. We get stuck with these images of the other person or of ourselves that make it hard to move or to be open to any kind of movement. I think it’s just all related.

**JBM:** You’re saying that Relational-Cultural Theory holds that mutuality is the basic force that leads to something happening between people that we call transforming. If you have relational images that make you not as receptive as you could be, immediately that’s going to interfere with that mutuality—and therefore with movement, change, growth, or transformation.

**MW:** Right, it affects what you hear, how you hear, how you receive—sometimes hearing through the layers of historical images rather than being active and aware in the moment.

**JBM:** You’ve mentioned a fourth factor, that these experiences then shape the images of relational possibility.

**MW:** I find myself thinking more about Patricia Hill Collins term, “controlling images” and the images we get from the dominant culture, both individually and collectively. According to Collins, controlling images have the effect of making oppression appear to be a normal, natural part of everyday life. They take on special meaning because the power to define the images resides with the dominant group. These images are then key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression even when the political and economic conditions that

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originally generated the images disappear (Collins, 1990).

I am particularly concerned for young people who get so many images coming from the dominant culture, very few of which are about how to be in mutually-empowering relationship. I should say, how to be in relationship in more liberating, transformative ways. The images promulgated through the media are about how to establish dominance and subordination. And I think they cripple people a lot.

Recently, I was having a conversation with some young people about the images that come through music. There's a very popular song by a young woman, "I Was Born to Make You Happy" or something like that. We were saying, "Wow. What an image that is for an eleven-year-old to hear about who she can be in the world and who she can be in relationship." I think it is important for families and courageous communities of people to say something different. It's crucial for the family and caring communities to be cognizant that when she's grooving to a song like that, she's getting images of relational possibility, not just cognitively but also on an emotive and sensate level. I think we deal with those images and we have to have ways to make them conscious. In the course of listening to the music, I don't think they're even conscious.

In terms of race relationships, a lot of the images that come through affect us in ways that are not conscious, in ways that we sort of swallow without thinking about what we're swallowing. An advertising campaign by a major automotive company exemplifies this issue. The ad was trying to show the car company as one that valued diversity and employed different kinds of people. There was also a theme about total quality assurance and about how decisions can be made on the spot. The purpose of the ad was to show that any employee is empowered to stop the assembly line to correct a defect, so that we consumers can have confidence in the quality of their product. The scene unfolds with an African American man on the assembly line; he's looking at the product with a really studied focus. He sees something wrong and he stops the line because he spies a defective molding of some sort. He holds up production until the problem is corrected.

On one level the image is of this African American male who's making the decision that helps us to have confidence in the quality of the product. However, the commercial doesn't end until a white male comes over, places his hand on the black worker's shoulder

and pats him with a silent message "Good job." So the message was loud and clear that we still needed the White male voice over before something can be defined as good and trustworthy.

I think that's an example of an image that comes in quite unconsciously and that unless we talk about it, can provide a distorted response to the questions: "Whom can we trust; who is capable, and who gets to say what knowledge or what expertise is, and how does it get sanctioned in this society?" It was done in such a seductive and slick way that it would be hard to know what it was conveying.

**JBM:** And this is the new way to make a car youthful and "with it."

**MW:** These are examples of controlling images that tell us what to expect of ourselves and of other people. Put another way, the images seek to define the roles that people can take in relationships. With sufficient proliferation, the very limited roles seem natural and necessary rather than socially ascribed.

**JBM:** You were starting to say this is about the images and how few we have that are about good connection.

**MW:** And how many images we have that are about dominating something or someone, or being dominated by someone. The images may also be about being seen as a product or a prize. These are images that support inauthenticity, images that support strategies of disconnection. Sometimes the images are about "having" relationship as a possession or a prize. What we see in media is that relationship is not a way of being. It's something to have, with connotations of "power over." The images do not help us develop good connection practices.

This feels quite important because I think it addresses how we want to be with people. What is the quality of relationship we seek? Far too often, when the emphasis is on having power over, we behave in relationships in ways that seek to maintain stasis: that keep our cherished images in place, even if they are destructive ones.

**JBM:** It seems to me, you're developing a very helpful linkage using the concept of "images." Beebe Moore Campbell has spoken of "controlling images," which the dominant groups in a culture impose. We've spoken of relational images that people construct from their experiences in relationships. I think you're

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spelling out some of the ways that the culture's controlling images become internalized in the individual's relational images, that is, how the external becomes the internal or how the cultural becomes the psychological.

Controlling images based on dominance and subordination affect the relational images of both the dominants and the subordinates but in different ways for each group. Most importantly, they create a mode of operation, a *modus vivendi* that hinders openness to the influence of others, to receiving the experience of others—the openness that is essential for connection. And connection is the source of growth for each group and each person in the group.

**MW:** Yes, the culture, itself, becomes an agent of disconnection and distortion, proliferating images that undermine mutuality and authenticity. So much of what we deal with are power distortions that interfere with relational development. Growth and healing take us back to the notion of mutuality—not sameness, but openness to influence on both sides. Growth-in-connection means recognizing that everybody lives under a culture that prescribes relational violations: a culture that says, “this is how to survive under these conditions” and so forth. Nobody walks out unscathed and everybody has to be open to transformation.

Further, if I spend so much of my time and energy scanning the world for possible trouble, I can lose touch with my own desire. An Afro-Caribbean business student once said to me, “I spend so much time playing defense here that I forget where I'm going.” When focused on survival and defense in a power-over relationship whether organizational or personal, strategies for disconnection become standard operating procedure. To merely survive, a person may set up so many conditions for connection that make authenticity all but impossible. The relational damage is obvious; it is impossible to focus on objectifying the other without doing the same to oneself.

**JBM:** Can you explain that a little more?

**MW:** I'm thinking about how dehumanizing the whole process of stratification and power distortion can be so that as a way of surviving one might say “Men are like this.” Or, “White people are like this.” Or, “Republicans do this and Democrats are like this. Whatever.” To the extent that I have captured them in

an image, there's a complementary image of myself that doesn't allow for shades of gray, doesn't allow for ambivalence, doesn't allow for movement. Those stances are all about blockages to mutuality and to movement and growth. The movement really happens in the gray. Disconnection also happens in the gray, in the subtleties.

An interesting by-product of social progress is that the universe of relationships is harder to scan. That was illustrated in the automobile commercial we talked about earlier. There have been times when the inequities were gross and blatant. Most often that's not now the case—at least in the professional and social arenas where a lot of us are operating. (When I say that, I realize how class bound what I just said is. I'm sure there are places where the inequities are as gross as they have ever been in the past, but for the people who've been helped by all the civil rights progress, all the middle class and upper-middle-class people, the relational arena is larger and larger. (There certainly are other places you can be where the relational world is quite small). But there's the danger that the relational arena is getting larger and larger and our connection practices haven't kept up with the arena. Our relational practices can get smaller and more restricted.

**JBM:** So would you say it's harder or more confusing and mystified today?

**MW:** Maybe I'd say it's more complex. It's different for each generation. The black sons of this generation are probably less likely to suffer the fate of Emmett Till, getting beaten and lynched and thrown into a river. However, I do think this generation has to figure out more ambiguities without having a lot of cultural support. This generation has to figure out how to do connection practices in a culture that does not support authenticity and mutuality. If you have a relational arena that is large and filled with ambiguities, but you have relational images that are tight and don't allow room for movement, then you have the possibilities for lots of disconnection. That's where I see the room for healing.

And I think it is a part of this current patriarchal set up of disconnection, this need to have categories based on this notion that somebody's got to be “better than” and somebody's got to be “less than” in order for the world to go on—or the world, as it is constructed, to go on. It really is about connection and about what derails connection. Intuitively, when I talk

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about this topic, I say it's about healing the world.  
And I believe it; I believe it. But I think we have to  
clarify and define further just how it is.

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