

# Feminism is for EVERYBODY

*Passionate Politics*



bell hooks

# **FEMINISM IS FOR EVERYBODY**

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**Passionate Politics**

**Bell Hooks**

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Come Closer to Feminism

Everywhere I go I proudly tell folks who want to know who I am and what I do that I am a writer, a feminist theorist, a cultural critic. I tell them I write about movies and popular culture, analyzing the message in the medium. Most people find this exciting and want to know more. everyone goes to movies, watches television, glances through magazines, and everyone has thoughts about the messages they receive, about the images they look at. It is easy for the diverse public I encounter to understand what I do as a cultural critic, to understand my passion for writing (lots of folks want to write, and do). But feminist theory - that's the place where the questions stop. Instead I tend to hear all about the evils of feminism and the bad feminists: how "they" hate men; how "they" want to go against nature and god; how "they" are all lesbians; how "they" are taking all the jobs and making the world hard for white men, who do not stand a chance.

When I ask these same folks about the feminist books or magazines they read, when I ask them about the feminist talks they have heard, about the feminist activists they know, they respond by letting me know that everything they know about feminism has come into their lives third-hand, that they really have not come close enough to feminist movement to know what really happens, what it's really about. Mostly they think feminism is a bunch of angry women who want to be like men. They do not even think about feminism as being about rights - about women gaining equal rights. When I talk about the feminism I know - up close and personal - they willingly listen, although when our conversations end, they are quick to tell me I am different, not like the "real" feminists who hate men who are angry. I assure them I am as a real and as radical a feminist as one can be, and if they dare to come closer to feminism they will see it is not how they have imagined it.

Each time I leave one of these encounters, I want to have in my hand a little book so that I can say, read this book, and it will tell you what feminism is, what the movement is about. I want to be holding in my hand a concise, fairly easy to read and understand book; not a long book, not a book thick with hard to understand jargon and academic language, but a straightforward, clear book - easy to read without being simplistic. From the moment feminist thinking, politics, and practice changed my life, I have wanted this book. I have wanted to give it to the folk I love so that they can understand better the cause, this feminist politics I believe in so deeply, that is the foundation of my political life. I have wanted them to have an answer to the question "what is feminism?" that is rooted neither in fear or fantasy. I have wanted them to have this simple definition to read again and again so they know: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." I love this definition, which I first offered more than 10 years ago in my book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. I love it because it so clearly states that the movement is not about being anti-male. It makes it clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action. As a consequence, females can be just as sexist as men. And while that does not excuse or justify male domination, it does mean that it would be naive and wrong-minded for feminist thinkers to see the movement as simplistically being for women against men. To end patriarchy (another way of naming the institutionalized sexism) we need to be clear that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism until we change our minds and hearts, until we let go of sexist thought and action and replace it with feminist thought and action.

Males as a group have and do benefit the most from patriarchy, from the assumption that they are

superior to females and should rule over us. But those benefits have come with a price. In return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit and oppress us, using violence if they must to keep patriarchy intact. Most men find it difficult to be patriachs. Most men are disturbed by hatred and fear of women, by male violence against women, even the men who perpetuate this violence. But they fear letting go of the benefits. They are not certain what will happen to the world they know most intimately if patriarchy changes. So they find it easier to passively support male domination even when they know in their minds and hearts that it is wrong. Again and again men tell me they have no idea what it is feminists want. I believe them. I believe in their capacity to change and grow. And I believe that if they knew more about feminism they would no longer fear it, for they would find in feminist movement the hope of their own release from the bondage of patriarchy.

It is for these men, young and old, and for all of us, that I have written this short handbook, the book I have spent more than 20 years longing for. I had to write it because I kept waiting for it to appear, and it did not. And without it there was no way to address the hordes of people in this nation who are daily bombarded with anti-feminist backlash, who are being told to hate and resist a movement that they know very little about. There should be so many little feminist primers, easy to read pamphlets and books, telling us all about feminism, that this book would be just another passionate voice speaking out on behalf of feminist politics. There should be billboards; ads in magazines; ads on buses, subways, trains; television commercials spreading the word, letting the world know more about feminism. We are not there yet. But this is what we must do to share feminism, to let the movement enter into everyone's mind and heart. Feminist change has already touched all our lives in a positive way. And yet we lose sight of the positive when all we hear about feminism is negative.

When I began to resist male domination, to rebel against patriarchal thinking (and to oppose the strongest patriarchal voice in my life - my mother's voice), I was still a teenager, suicidal, depressed and uncertain about how I would find meaning in my life and a place for myself. I needed feminism to give me a foundation of equality and justice to stand on. Mama has come around to feminist thinking. She sees me and all her daughters (we are six) living better lives because of feminist politics. She sees the promise and hope in feminist movement. It is that promise and hope that I want to share with you in this book, with everybody.

Imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction. Imagine living in a world where we can all be who we are, a world of peace and possibility. Feminist revolution alone will not create such a world; we need to end racism, class elitism, imperialism. But it will make it possible for us to be fully self-actualized females and males able to create beloved community, to live together, realizing our dreams of freedom and justice, living the truth that we are all "created equal." Come closer. See how feminism can touch and change your life and all our lives. Come closer and know firsthand what feminist movement is all about. Come closer and you will see: feminism is for everybody.

# FEMINIST POLITICS

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## Where We Stand

Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. This was a definition of feminism I offered in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* more than 10 years ago. It was my hope at the time that it would become a common definition everyone would use. I liked this definition because it did not imply that men were the enemy. By naming sexism as the problem it went directly to the heart of the matter. Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism.

As all advocates of feminist politics know, most people do not understand sexism, or if they do, they think it is not a problem. Masses of people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to men. And a huge majority of these folks think feminism is anti-male. Their misunderstanding of feminist politics reflects the reality that most folks learn about feminism from patriarchal mass media. The feminism they hear about the most is portrayed by women who are primarily committed to gender equality - equal pay for equal work, and sometimes women and men sharing household chores and parenting. They see that these women are usually white and materially privileged. They know from mass media that women's liberation focuses on the freedom to have abortions, to be lesbians, to challenge rape and domestic violence. Among these issues, masses of people agree with the idea of gender equity in the workplace - equal pay for equal work.

Since our society continues to be primarily a "Christian" culture, masses of people continue to believe that god has ordained that women be subordinate to men in the domestic household. Even though masses of women have entered the workforce, even though many families are headed by women who are the sole breadwinners, the vision of domestic life which continues to dominate the nation's imagination is one in which the logic of male domination is intact, whether men are present in the home or not. The wrong minded notion of feminist movement which implied it was anti-male carried with it the wrong-minded assumption that all female space would necessarily be an environment where patriarchy and sexist thinking would be absent. Many women, even those involved in feminist politics, chose to believe this as well.

There was indeed a great deal of anti-male sentiment among early feminist activists who were responding to male domination with anger. It was that anger at injustice that was the impetus for creating a women's liberation movement. Early on most feminist activists (a majority of whom were white) had their consciousness raised about the nature of male domination when they were working in anti-classist and anti-racist settings with men who were telling the world about the importance of freedom while subordinating the women in their ranks. Whether it was white women working on behalf of socialism, black women working on behalf of civil rights and black liberation, or Native American women working for indigenous rights, it was clear that men wanted to lead, and they wanted women to follow. Participating in these radical freedom struggles awakened the spirit of rebellion and resistance in progressive females and led them towards contemporary women's liberation.

As contemporary feminism progressed, as women realized that males were not the only group in our

society who supported sexist thinking and behavior - that females could be sexist as well - anti-male sentiment no longer shaped the movement's consciousness. The focus shifted to an all-out effort to create gender justice. But women could not band together to further feminism without confronting sexist thinking. Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another. Utopian visions of sisterhood based solely on the awareness of the reality that all women were in some way victimized by male domination were disrupted by discussions of class and race. Discussions of class differences occurred early on in contemporary feminism, preceding discussions of race. Diana Press published revolutionary insights about class divisions between women as early as the mid-'70s in their collection of essays *Class and Feminism*. These discussions did not trivialize the feminist insistence that "sisterhood is powerful," they simply emphasized that we could only become sisters in struggle by confronting the ways women - through sex, class, and race - dominated and exploited other women, and created a political platform that would address these differences.

Even though individual black women were active in contemporary feminist movement from its inception, they were not the individuals who became the "stars" of the movement, who attracted the attention of mass media. Often individual black women active in feminist movement were revolutionary feminists (like many white lesbians). They were already at odds with reformist feminists who resolutely wanted to project a vision of the movement as being solely about women gaining equality with men in the existing system. Even before race became a talked about issue in feminist circles it was clear to black women (and to their revolutionary allies in struggle) that they were never going to have equality within the existing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

From its earliest inception feminist movement was polarized. Reformist thinkers chose to emphasize gender equality. Revolutionary thinkers did not want simply to alter the existing system so that women would have more rights. We wanted to transform that system, to bring an end to patriarchy and sexism. Since patriarchal mass media was not interested in the more revolutionary vision, it never received attention in mainstream press. The vision of "women's liberation" which captured and still holds the public imagination was the one representing women as wanting what men had. And this was the vision that was easier to realize. Changes in our nation's economy, economic repression, the loss of jobs, etc., made the climate ripe for our nation's citizens to accept the notion of gender equality in the workforce.

Given the reality of racism, it made sense that white men were more willing to consider women's rights when the granting of those rights could serve the interests of maintaining white supremacy.

We can never forget that white women began to assert their need for freedom after civil rights, just at the point when racial discrimination was ending and black people, especially black males, might have attained equality in the workforce with white men. Reformist feminist thinking focusing primarily on equality with men in the workforce overshadowed the original radical foundations of contemporary feminism which called for reform as well as overall restructuring of society so that our nation would be fundamentally anti-sexist.

Most women, especially privileged white women, ceased even to consider revolutionary feminist visions, once they began to gain economic power within the existing social structure. Ironically, revolutionary feminist thinking was most accepted and embraced in academic circles. In those circles the production of revolutionary feminist theory progressed, but more often than not that theory was not made available to the public. It became and remains a privileged discourse available to those

among us who are highly literate, well-educated, and usually materially privileged. Works like *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that offer a liberatory vision of feminist transformation never receive mainstream attention. Masses of people have not heard of this book. They have not rejected its message; they do not know what the message is.

While it was in the interest of mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to suppress visionary feminist thinking which was not anti-male or concerned with getting women the right to be like men, reformist feminists were also eager to silence these forces. Reformist feminism became their route to class mobility. They could break free of male domination in the workforce and be more self-determining in their lifestyles. While sexism did not end, they could maximize their freedom within the existing system. And they could count on there being a lower class of exploited subordinated women to do the dirty work they were refusing to do. By accepting and indeed colluding with the subordination of working-class and poor women, they not only ally themselves with the existing patriarchy and its concomitant sexism, they give themselves the right to lead a double life, one where they are the equals of men in the workforce and at home when they want to be. If they choose lesbianism they have the privilege of being equals with men in the workforce while using class power to create domestic lifestyles where they can choose to have little or no contact with men.

Lifestyle feminism ushered in the notion that there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women. Suddenly the politics was being slowly removed from feminism. And the assumption prevailed that no matter what a woman's politics, be she conservative or liberal, she too could fit feminism into her existing lifestyle. Obviously this way of thinking has made feminism more acceptable because its underlying assumption is that women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture. For example, let's take the issue of abortion. If feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression, and depriving females of reproductive rights is a form of sexist oppression, then one cannot be anti-choice and be feminist. A woman can insist she would never choose to have an abortion while affirming her support of the right of women to choose and still be an advocate of feminist politics. She cannot be anti-abortion and an advocate of feminism. Concurrently there can be no such thing as "power feminism" if the vision of power evoked is power gained through the exploitation and oppression of others.

Feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definitions. We have those definitions. Let's reclaim them. Let's share them. Let's start over. Let's have T-shirts and bumper stickers and postcards and hip-hop music, television and radio commercials, ads everywhere and billboards, and all manner of printed material that tells the world about feminism. We can share the simple yet powerful message that feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression. Let's start there. Let the movement begin again.



# CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

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## A Constant Change of Heart

Feminists are made, not born. One does not become an advocate of feminist politics simply by having the privilege of having been born female. Like all political positions one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action. When women first organized in groups to talk together about the issue of sexism and male domination, they were clear that females were as socialized to believe sexist thinking and values as males, the difference being simply that males benefited from sexism more than females and were as a consequence less likely to want to surrender patriarchal privilege. Before women could change patriarchy we had to change ourselves; we had to raise our consciousness.

Revolutionary feminist consciousness-raising emphasized the importance of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination, how it became institutionalized and how it is perpetuated and maintained. Understanding the way male domination and sexism was expressed in everyday life created awareness in women of the ways we were victimized, exploited, and, in worse case scenarios, oppressed. Early on in contemporary feminist movement, consciousness-raising groups often became settings where women simply unleashed pent-up hostility and rage about being victimized, with little or no focus on strategies of intervention and transformation. On a basic level many hurt and exploited women used the consciousness-raising group therapeutically. It was the site where they uncovered and openly revealed the depths of their intimate wounds. This confessional aspect served as a healing ritual. Through consciousness-raising women gained the strength to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at home.

Importantly though, the foundation of this work began with women examining sexist thinking and creating strategies where we would change our attitudes and belief via a conversion to feminist thinking and a commitment to feminist politics. Fundamentally, the consciousness-raising (CR) group was a site for conversion. To build a mass-based feminist movement women needed to organize. The consciousness-raising session, which usually took place in someone's home (rather than public space that had to be rented or donated), was the meeting place. It was the place where seasoned feminist thinkers and activists could recruit new converts. Importantly, communication and dialogue was a central agenda at the consciousness-raising sessions. In many groups a policy was in place which honored everyone's voice. Women took turns speaking to make sure everyone would be heard. This attempt to create a non-hierarchical model for discussion positively gave every woman a chance to speak but often did not create a context for engaged dialogue. However, in most instances discussion and debate occurred, usually after everyone had spoken at least once.

Argumentative discussion was common in CR groups as it was the way we sought to clarify our collective understanding of the nature of male domination. Only through discussion and disagreement could we begin to find a realistic standpoint on gender exploitation and oppression.

As feminist thinking, which emerged first in the context of small groups where individuals often knew each other (they may have worked together and/ or were friends), began to be theorized in printed matter so as to reach a wider audience, groups dismantled. The creation of women's studies as an academic discipline provided another setting where women could be informed about feminist thinking and feminist theory. Many of the women who spearheaded the introduction of women's studies classes

into colleges and universities had been radical activists in civil rights struggles, gay rights, and early feminist movement. Many of them did not have doctorates, which meant that they entered academic institutions receiving lower pay and working longer hours than their colleagues in other disciplines. By the time younger graduate students joined the effort to legitimize feminist scholarship in the academy we knew that it was important to gain higher degrees. Most of us saw our commitment to women's studies as political action; we were prepared to sacrifice in order to create an academic base for feminist movement.

By the late '70s women's studies was on its way to becoming an accepted academic discipline. This triumph overshadowed the fact that many of the women who had paved the way for the institutionalization of women's studies were fired because they had master's degrees and not doctorates. While some of us returned to graduate school to get PhDs, some of the best and brightest among us did not because they were utterly disillusioned with the university and burnt out from overwork as well as disappointed and enraged that the radical politics undergirding women's studies was being replaced by liberal reformism. Before too long the women's studies classroom had replaced the free-for-all consciousness-raising group.

Whereas women from various backgrounds, those who worked solely as housewives or in service jobs and big-time professional women, could be found in diverse consciousness-raising groups, the academy was and remains a site of class privilege. Privileged white middle-class women who were a numeric majority though not necessarily the radical leaders of contemporary feminist movement often gained prominence because they were the group mass media focused on as representatives of the struggle. Women with revolutionary feminist consciousness, many of them lesbian and from working class backgrounds, often lost visibility as the movement received mainstream attention. Their displacement became complete once women's studies became entrenched in colleges and universities which are conservative corporate structures. Once the women's studies classroom replaced the consciousness-raising group as the primary site for the transmission of feminist thinking and strategies for social change the movement lost its mass-based potential.

Suddenly more and more women began to either call themselves "feminists" or use the rhetoric of gender discrimination to change their economic status. The institutionalization of feminist studies created a body of jobs both in the world of the academy and in the world of publishing. These career-based changes led to forms of career opportunism wherein women who had never been politically committed to mass-based feminist struggle adopted the stance and jargon of feminism when it enhanced their class mobility. The dismantling of consciousness-raising groups all but erased the notion that one had to learn about feminism and make an informed choice about embracing feminist politics to become a feminist advocate.

Without the consciousness-raising group as a site where women confronted their own sexism towards other women, the direction of feminist movement could shift to a focus on equality in the workforce and confronting male domination. With heightened focus on the construction of woman as a "victim" of gender equality deserving of reparations (whether through changes in discriminatory laws or affirmative action policies) the idea that women needed to first confront their internalized sexism as part of becoming feminist lost currency. Females of all ages acted as though concern for or rage at male domination or gender equality was all that was needed to make CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING 11ten gained prominence because they were the group mass media focused on as representatives of the struggle. Women with revolutionary feminist consciousness, many of them lesbian and from working

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By the early '80s the evocation of a politicized sisterhood, so crucial at the onset of the feminist movement, lost meaning as the terrain of radical feminist politics was overshadowed by a lifestyle-based feminism which suggested any woman could be a feminist no matter what her political beliefs. Needless to say such thinking has undermined feminist theory and practice, feminist politics. When feminist movement renews itself, reinforcing again and again the strategies that will enable a mass movement to end sexism and sexist exploitation and oppression for everyone, consciousness-raising will once again attain its original importance. Effectively imitating the model of AA meetings, feminist consciousness-raising groups will take place in communities, offering the message of feminist thinking to everyone irrespective of class, race, or gender. While specific groups based on shared identities might emerge, at the end of every month individuals would be in mixed groups.

Feminist consciousness-raising for males is as essential to revolutionary movement as female groups. Had there been an emphasis on groups for males that taught boys and men about what sexism is and how it can be transformed, it would have been impossible for mass media to portray the movement as anti-male. It would also have preempted the formation of an anti-feminist men's movement. Often men's groups were formed in the wake of contemporary feminism that in no way addressed the issue of sexism and male domination. Like the lifestyle-based feminism aimed at women these groups often became therapeutic settings for men to confront their wounds without a critique of patriarchy or a platform of resistance to male domination. Future feminist movement will not make this mistake. Males of all ages need settings where their resistance to sexism is affirmed and valued. Without males as allies in struggle feminist movement will not progress. As it is we have to do so much work to correct the assumption deeply embedded in the cultural psyche that feminism is anti-male. Feminism is anti-sexism. A male who has divested of male privilege, who has embraced feminist politics, is a worthy comrade in struggle, in no way a threat to feminism, whereas a female who remains wedded to

sexist thinking and behavior infiltrating feminist movement is a dangerous threat. Significantly, the most powerful intervention made by consciousness-raising groups was the demand that all females confront their internalized sexism, their allegiance to patriarchal thinking and action, and their commitment to feminist conversion. That intervention is still needed. It remains the necessary step for anyone choosing feminist politics. The enemy within must be transformed before we can confront the enemy outside. The threat, the enemy, is sexist thought and behavior. As long as females take up the banner of feminist politics without addressing and transforming their own sexism, ultimately the movement will be undermined.

# SISTERHOOD IS STILL POWERFUL

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When the slogan “Sisterhood is powerful” was first used, it was awesome. I began my full-fledged participation in feminist movement my sophomore year in college. Attending an all women’s college for a year before I transferred to Stanford University, I knew from firsthand experience the difference in female self-esteem and self-assertion in same-sex classrooms versus those where males were present. At Stanford males ruled the day in every classroom. Females spoke less, took less initiative, and often when they spoke you could hardly hear what they were saying. Their voices lacked strength and confidence. And to make matters worse we were told time and time again by male professors that we were not as intelligent as the males, that we could not be “great” thinkers, writers, and so on. These attitudes shocked me since I had come from an all-female environment where our intellectual worth and value was constantly affirmed by the standard of academic excellence our mostly female professors set for us and themselves.

Indeed, I was indebted to my favorite white female English professor who thought I was not getting the academic guidance I needed at our women’s college because they did not have an intensified writing program. She encouraged me to attend Stanford. She believed that I would someday be an important thinker and writer.

At Stanford my ability was constantly questioned. I began to doubt myself. Then feminist movement rocked the campus. Female students and professors demanded an end to discrimination based on gender inside and outside the classroom. Wow, it was an intense and awesome time. There I took my first women’s studies class with the writer Tillie Olsen, who compelled her students to think first and foremost about the fate of women from working-class backgrounds. There the scholar and one-day biographer of Anne Sexton, Diane Middlebrook, passed out one of my poems in our class on contemporary poetry with no name on it and asked us to identify whether the writer was male or female, an experiment that made us think critically about judging the value of writing on the basis of gender biases. There I began to write my first book at the age of 19, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. None of these incredible transformations would have happened without feminist movement creating a foundation for solidarity between women.

That foundation rested on our critique of what we then called “the enemy within,” referring to our internalized sexism. We all knew firsthand that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred. Sexist thinking made us judge each other without compassion and punish one another harshly. Feminist thinking helped us unlearn female self-hatred. It enabled us to break free of the hold patriarchal thinking had on our consciousness.

Male bonding was an accepted and affirmed aspect of patriarchal culture. It was simply assumed that men in groups would stick together, support one another, be team players, place the good of the group over individual gain and recognition. Female bonding was not possible within patriarchy; it was an act of treason. Feminist movement created the context for female bonding. We did not bond against men; we bonded to protect our interests as women. When we challenged professors who taught no books by women, it was not because we did not like those professors (we often did); rightly, we wanted an end to gender biases in the classroom and in the curriculum.

The feminist transformations that were taking place in our coed college in the early '70s were taking place as well in the world of home and work. First and foremost feminist movement urged females to no longer see ourselves and our bodies as the property of men. To demand control of our sexuality, effective birth control and reproductive rights, an end to rape and sexual harassment, we needed to stand in solidarity. In order for women to change job discrimination we needed to lobby as a group to change public policy. Challenging and changing female sexist thinking was the first step towards creating the powerful sisterhood that would ultimately rock our nation.

Following in the wake of civil rights revolution feminist movement in the '70s and '80s changed the face of our nation. The feminist activists who made these changes possible cared for the well-being of all females. We understood that political solidarity between females expressed in sisterhood goes beyond positive recognition of the experiences of women and even shared sympathy for common suffering. Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes. Political solidarity between women always undermines sexism and sets the stage for the overthrow of patriarchy. Significantly, sisterhood could never have been possible across the boundaries of race and class if individual women had not been willing to divest of their power to dominate and exploit subordinated groups of women. As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized.

As more women begin to opportunistically lay claim to feminism in the '80s without undergoing the feminist consciousness-raising that would have enabled them to divest of their sexism, the patriarchal assumption that the powerful should rule over the weak informed their relations to other women. As women, particularly previously disenfranchised privileged white women, began to acquire class power without divesting of their internalized sexism, divisions between women intensified. When women of color critiqued the racism within the society as a whole and called attention to the ways that racism had shaped and informed feminist theory and practice, many white women simply turned their backs on the vision of sisterhood, closing their minds and their hearts. And that was equally true when it came to the issue of classism among women. I remember when feminist women, mostly white women with class privilege, debated the issue of whether or not to hire domestic help, trying to come up with a way to not participate in the subordination and dehumanization of less-privileged women. Some of those women successfully created positive bonding between themselves and the women they hired so that there could be mutual advancement in a larger context of inequality. Rather than abandoning the vision of sisterhood, because they could not attain some utopian state, they created a real sisterhood, one that took into account the needs of everyone involved. This was the hard work of feminist solidarity between women. Sadly, as opportunism within feminism intensified, as feminist gains became commonplace and were therefore taken for granted, many women did not want to work hard to create and sustain solidarity.

A large body of women simply abandoned the notion of sisterhood. Individual women who had once critiqued and challenged patriarchy re-aligned themselves with sexist men. Radical women who felt betrayed by the fierce negative competition between women often simply retreated. And at this point in feminist movement, which was aimed at positively transforming the lives of all females, became more stratified. The vision of sisterhood that had been the rallying cry of the movement seemed to many women to no longer matter. Political solidarity between women which had been the force putting in place positive change has been and is now consistently undermined and threatened. As a consequence we are as in need of a renewed commitment to political solidarity between women as we were when

contemporary feminist movement first began.

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When contemporary feminist movement first began we had a vision of sisterhood with no concrete understanding of the actual work we would need to do to make political solidarity a reality. Through experience and hard work, and, yes, by learning from our failures and mistakes, we now have in place a body of theory and shared practice that can teach new converts to feminist politics what must be done to create, sustain, and protect our solidarity. Since masses of young females know little about feminism and many falsely assume that sexism is no longer the problem, feminist education for critical consciousness must be continuous. Older feminist thinkers cannot assume that young females will just acquire knowledge of feminism along the way to adulthood. They require guidance. Overall women in our society are forgetting the value and power of sisterhood. Renewed feminist movement must once again raise the banner high to proclaim anew “Sisterhood is powerful.”

Radical groups of women continue our commitment to building sisterhood, to making feminist political solidarity between women an ongoing reality. We continue the work of bonding across race and class. We continue to put in place the anti-sexist thinking and practice which affirms the reality that females can achieve self-actualization and success without dominating one another. And we have the good fortune to know everyday of our lives that sisterhood is concretely possible, that sisterhood still powerful.

# FEMINIST EDUCATION FOR CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Before women's studies classes, before feminist literature, individual women learned about feminism in groups. The women in those groups were the first to begin to create feminist theory which included both an analysis of sexism, strategies for challenging patriarchy, and new models of social interaction. Everything we do in life is rooted in theory. Whether we consciously explore the reasons we have a particular perspective or take a particular action there is also an underlying system shaping thought and practice. In its earliest inception feminist theory had as its primary goal explaining to women and men how sexist thinking worked and how we could challenge and change it.

In those days most of us had been socialized by parents and society to accept sexist thinking. We had not taken time to figure out the roots of our perceptions. Feminist thinking and feminist theory urged us to do that. At first feminist theory was made available by word of mouth or in cheaply put together newsletters and pamphlets.

The development of women's publishing (where women wrote, printed, and controlled production on all levels, including marketing) became the site for the dissemination of feminist thinking. While my first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, written in the '70s and published in 1981, was produced by a small socialist collective, South End Press, at least half of its members were feminist women, and all its members were anti-sexist.

Producing a body of feminist literature coupled with the demand for the recovery of women's history was one of the most powerful and successful interventions of contemporary feminism. In all spheres of literary writing and academic scholarship works by women had historically received little or no attention as a consequence of gender discrimination. Remarkably, when feminist movement exposed biases in curriculum, much of this forgotten and ignored work was rediscovered. The formation of women's studies programs in colleges and universities provided institutional legitimation for academic focus on work by women. Following in the wake of black studies, women's studies became the place where one could learn about gender, about women, from a non-biased perspective.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, professors in women's studies classes did not and do not trash work by men; we intervene on sexist thinking by showing that women's work is often just as good, as interesting, if not more so, as work by men. So-called great literature by men is critiqued only to show the biases present in the assessment of aesthetic value. I have never taken a women's studies course or heard about one where works by men were deemed unimportant or irrelevant. Feminist critiques of all-male canons of scholarship or literary work expose biases based on gender. Importantly, these exposures were central to making a place for the recovery of women's work and a contemporary place for the production of new work by and about women.

Feminist movement gained momentum when it found its way into the academy. In classrooms all over the nation young minds were able to learn about feminist thinking, read the theory, and use it in their academic explorations. When I was a graduate student preparing to write a dissertation, feminist thinking allowed me to choose to write about a black woman writer who was not widely read at the time, Toni Morrison. Very little serious literary scholarship had been done on works by black women writers prior to feminist movement. When Alice Walker acquired fame, she participated in the recovery of the work of writer Zora Neale Hurston, who shortly became the most canonized black woman writer in American literature. Feminist movement created a revolution when it demanded



respect for women's academic work, recognition of that work past and present, and an end to gender biases in curriculum and pedagogy.

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The institutionalization of women's studies helped spread the word about feminism. It offered a legitimate site for conversion by providing a sustained body of open minds. Students who attended women's studies classes were there to learn. They wanted to know more about feminist thinking. And it was in those classes that many of us awakened politically. I had come to feminist thinking by challenging male domination in our patriarchal household. But simply being the victim of an exploitative or oppressive system and even resisting it does not mean we understand why it's in place or how to change it. My conversion to feminist politics had occurred long before I entered college, but the feminist classroom was the place where I learned feminist thinking and feminist theory. And it was in that space that I received the encouragement to think critically and write about black female experience.

Throughout the '70s the production of feminist thinking and theory was collaborative work in that women were constantly in dialogue about ideas, testing and reshaping our paradigms. Indeed, when black women and other women of color raised the issue of racial biases as a factor shaping feminist thought there was an initial resistance to the notion that much of what privileged class women had identified as true to female experience might be flawed, but over time feminist theory changed. Even though many white women thinkers were able to acknowledge their biases without doing the work of rethinking, this was still an important shift. By the late '80s most feminist scholarship reflected an awareness of race and class differences. Women scholars who were truly committed to feminist movement and feminist solidarity were eager to produce theory that would address the realities of most women.

While academic legitimation was crucial to the advancement of feminist thought, it created a new set of difficulties. Suddenly the feminist thinking that had emerged directly from theory and practice received less attention than theory that was meta-linguistic, creating exclusive jargon; it was written solely for an academic audience. It was as if a large body of feminist thinkers banded together to form an elite group writing theory that could be understood only by an "in" crowd.

Women and men outside the academic domain were no longer considered an important audience. Feminist thinking and theory were no longer tied to feminist movement. Academic politics and careerism overshadowed feminist politics. Feminist theory began to be housed in an academic ghetto with little connection to a world outside. Work was and is produced in the academy that is oftentimes visionary, but these insights rarely reach many people. As a consequence the academization of feminist thought in this manner undermines feminist movement via depoliticization. Deradicalized, it is like every other academic discipline with the only difference being the focus on gender.

Literature that helps inform masses of people, that helps individuals understand feminist thinking and feminist politics, needs to be written in a range of styles and formats. We need work that is especially geared towards youth culture. No one produces this work in academic settings. Without abandoning women's studies programs which are already at risk at colleges and universities as conservatives seek to undo the changes created by struggles for gender justice, we need feminist studies that is community-based. Imagine a mass-based feminist movement where folks go door to door passing out literature, taking the time (as do religious groups) to explain to people what feminism is all about.

When contemporary feminist movement was at its peak, sexist biases in books for children were

critiqued. Books “for free children” were written. Once we ceased being critically vigilant, the sexism began to reappear. Children’s literature is one of the most crucial sites for feminist education for critical consciousness precisely because beliefs and identities are still being formed. And more often than not narrow-minded thinking about gender continues to be the norm on the playground. Public education for children has to be a place where feminist activists continue to do the work of creating an unbiased curriculum.

Future feminist movement must necessarily think of feminist education as significant in the lives of everyone. Despite the economic gains of individual feminist women, many women who have amassed wealth or accepted the contribution of wealthy males, who are our allies in struggle, we have created no schools founded on feminist principles for girls and boys, for women and men. By failing to create a mass-based educational movement to teach everyone about feminism we allow mainstream patriarchal mass media to remain the primary place where folks learn about feminism, and most of what they learn is negative. Teaching feminist thought and theory to everyone means that we have to reach beyond the academic and even the written word. Masses of folks lack the skills to read most feminist books. Books on tape, songs, radio, and television are all ways to share feminist knowledge. And of course we need a feminist television network, which is not the same as a network for women. Galvanizing funds to create a feminist television network would help us spread feminist thinking globally. If we cannot own a network, let’s pay for time on an existing network. After years of ownership by males who were not all anti-sexist Ms. magazine is now owned by women who are all deeply committed to feminist principles. This is a step in the right direction.

If we do not work to create a mass-based movement which offers feminist education to everyone, females and males, feminist theory and practice will always be undermined by the negative information produced in most mainstream media. The citizens of this nation cannot know the positive contributions feminist movement has made to all our lives if we do not highlight these gains. Constructive feminist contributions to the well-being of our communities and society are often appropriated by the dominant culture which then projects negative representations of feminism. Most people have no understanding of the myriad ways feminism has positively changed all our lives. Sharing feminist thought and practice sustains feminist movement. Feminist knowledge is for everybody.

# OUR BODIES, OURSELVES

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## Reproductive Rights

When contemporary feminist movement began the issues that were projected as most relevant were those that were directly linked to the experiences of highly educated white women (most of whom were materially privileged.) Since feminist movement followed in the wake of civil rights and sexual liberation it seemed appropriate at the time that issues around the female body were foregrounded. Contrary to the image the mass media presented to the world, a feminist movement starting with women burning bras at a Miss America pageant and then later images of women seeking abortions, one of the first issues which served as a catalyst for the formation of the movement was sexuality - the issue being the rights of women to choose when and with whom they would be sexual. The sexual exploitation of women's bodies had been a common occurrence in radical movements for social justice whether socialist, civil rights, *etc.*

When the so-called sexual revolution was at its peak the issue of free love (which usually meant having as much sex as one wanted with whomever one desired) brought females face to face with the issue of unwanted pregnancy. Before there could be any gender equity around the issue of free love women needed access to safe, effective contraceptives and abortions. While individual white women with class privilege often had access to both these safeguards, most women did not. Often individual women with class privilege were too ashamed of unwanted pregnancy to make use of their more direct access to responsible health care. The women of the late '60s and early '70s who clamored for abortions had seen the tragedies of illegal abortions, the misery of forced marriages as a consequence of unwanted pregnancies. Many of us were the unplanned children of talented, creative women whose lives had been changed by unplanned and unwanted pregnancies; we witnessed their bitterness, their rage, their disappointment with their lot in life. And we were clear that there could be no genuine sexual liberation for women and men without better, safer contraceptives - without the right to a safe legal abortion.

In retrospect, it is evident that highlighting abortion rather than reproductive rights as a whole reflected the class biases of the women who were at the forefront of the movement. While the issue of abortion was and remains relevant to all women, there were other reproductive issues that were just as vital which needed attention and might have served to galvanize masses. These issues ranged from basic sex education, prenatal care, preventive health care that would help females understand how their bodies worked, to forced sterilization, unnecessary cesareans and/or hysterectomies, and the medical complications they left in their wake. Of all these issues individual white women with class privilege identified most intimately with the pain of unwanted pregnancy. And they highlighted the abortion issue. They were not by any means the only group in need of access to safe, legal abortions. As already stated, they were far more likely to have the means to acquire an abortion than poor and working-class women. In those days poor women, black women included, often sought illegal abortions. The right to have an abortion was not a white-women-only issue; it was simply not the only or even the most important reproductive concern for masses of American women.

The development of effective though not totally safe birth control pills (created by male scientists, most of whom were not anti-sexist) truly paved the way for female sexual liberation more so than abortion rights. Women like myself who were in our late teens when the pill was first widely available were spared the fear and shame of unwanted pregnancies. Responsible birth control liberated many

women like myself who were pro-choice but not necessarily pro-abortion for ourselves from having to personally confront the issue. While I never had an unwanted pregnancy in the heyday of sexual liberation, many of my peers saw abortion as a better choice than conscious, vigilant use of birth control pills. And they did frequently use abortion as a means of birth control. Using the pill meant a woman was directly confronting her choice to be sexually active. Women who were more conscientious about birth control were often regarded as sexually loose by men. It was easier for some females just to let things happen sexually then take care of the "problem" later with abortions. We now know that both repeated abortions or prolonged use of birth control pills with high levels of estrogen are not risk-free. Yet women were willing to take risks to have sexual freedom - to have the right to choose.

The abortion issue captured the attention of mass media because it really challenged the fundamentalist thinking of Christianity. It directly challenged the notion that a woman's reason for existence was to bear children. It called the nation's attention to the female body as no other issue could have done. It was a direct challenge to the church. Later all the other reproductive issues that feminist thinkers called attention to were often ignored by mass media. The long-range medical problems from cesareans and hysterectomies were not juicy subjects for mass media; they actually called attention to a capitalist patriarchal male-dominated medical system that controlled women's bodies and did with them anything they wanted to do. To focus on gender injustice in these arenas would have been too radical for a mass media which remains deeply conservative and for the most part anti-feminist.

No feminist activists in the late '60s and early '70s imagined that we would have to wage a battle for women's reproductive rights in the '90s. Once feminist movement created the cultural revolution which made the use of relatively risk-free contraceptives acceptable and the right to have a safe, legal abortion possible women simply assumed those rights would no longer be questioned. The demise of an organized, radical feminist mass-based political movement coupled with anti-feminist backlash from an organized right-wing political front which relies on fundamentalist interpretations of religion placed abortion back on the political agenda. The right of females to choose is now called into question.

Sadly the anti-abortion platform has most viciously targeted state-funded, inexpensive, and, when need be, free abortions. As a consequence women of all races who have class privilege continue to have access to safe abortions - continue to have the right to choose - while materially disadvantaged women suffer. Masses of poor and working-class women lose access to abortion when there is no government funding available for reproductive rights health care. Women with class privilege do not feel threatened when abortions can be had only if one has lots of money because they can still have them. But masses of women do not have class power. More women than ever before are entering the ranks of the poor and indigent. Without the right to safe, inexpensive, and free abortions they lose all control over their bodies. If we return to a world where abortions are only accessible to those females with lots of money we risk the return of public policy that will aim to make abortion illegal. It's already happening in many conservative states. Women of all classes must continue to make abortion safe, legal, and affordable.

The right of women to choose whether or not to have an abortion is only one aspect of reproductive freedom. Depending on a woman's age and circumstance of life the aspect of reproductive rights that matters most will change. A sexually active woman in her 20s or 30s who finds birth control pills

unsafe may one day face an unwanted pregnancy and the right to have a legal, safe, inexpensive abortion may be the reproductive issue that is most relevant. But when she is menopausal and doctors are urging her to have a hysterectomy that may be the most relevant reproductive rights issue.

As we seek to rekindle the flames of mass-based feminist movement reproductive rights will remain central feminist agenda. If women do not have the right to choose what happens to our bodies we risk relinquishing rights in all other areas of our lives. In renewed feminist movement the overall issue of reproductive rights will take precedence over any single issue. This does not mean that the push for legal, safe, inexpensive abortions will not remain central, it will simply not be the only issue that is centralized. If sex education, preventive health care, and easy access to contraceptives are offered to every female, fewer of us will have unwanted pregnancies. As a consequence the need for abortions would diminish.

Losing ground on the issue of legal, safe, inexpensive abortion means that women lose ground on all reproductive issues. The anti-choice movement is fundamentally anti-feminist. While it is possible for women to individually choose never to have an abortion, allegiance to feminist politics means that they still are pro-choice, that they support the right of females who need abortions to choose whether or not to have them. Young females who have always had access to effective contraception - who have never witnessed the tragedies caused by illegal abortions - have no firsthand experience of the powerlessness and vulnerability to exploitation that will always be the outcome if females do not have reproductive rights. Ongoing discussion about the wide range of issues that come under the heading of reproductive rights is needed if females of all ages and our male allies in struggle are to understand why these rights are important. This understanding is the basis of our commitment to keeping reproductive rights a reality for all females. Feminist focus on reproductive rights is needed to protect and sustain our freedom.

# BEAUTY WITHIN AND WITHOUT

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Challenging sexist thinking about the female body was one of the most powerful interventions made by contemporary feminist movement. Before women's liberation all females young and old were socialized by sexist thinking to believe that our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men. Understanding that females could never be liberated if we did not develop healthy self-esteem and self-love feminist thinkers went directly to the heart of the matter - critically examining how we feel and think about our bodies and offering constructive strategies for change. Looking back after years of feeling comfortable choosing whether or not to wear a bra, I can remember what a momentous decision this was 30 years ago. Women stripping their bodies of unhealthy and uncomfortable, restrictive clothing, bras, girdles, corsets, garter belts, *etc.* - was a ritualistic, radical reclaiming of the health and glory of the female body. Females today who have never known such restrictions can only trust us when we say that this reclaiming was momentous.

On a deeper level this ritual validated women wearing comfortable clothing on all levels in our lives. Just to be able to wear pants to work was awesome to many women, whose jobs had required them to be constantly bending and stooping over. For women who had never been comfortable in dresses and skirts all these changes were exciting. Today they can appear trivial to females who have been able to freely choose what they want to wear from childhood on. Many adult women embracing feminism stopped wearing crippling, uncomfortable high-heeled shoes. These changes led the shoemaking industry to design comfortable low shoes for women. No longer forced by sexist tradition to wear make-up, women looked in the mirror and learned to face ourselves just the way we are.

The clothing and revolution created by feminist interventions let females know that our flesh was worthy of love and adoration in its natural state; nothing had to be added unless a woman chose further adornment. Initially, capitalist investors in the cosmetic and fashion industry feared that feminism would destroy their business. They put their money behind mass-media campaigns which trivialized women's liberation by portraying images which suggested feminists were big, hyper-masculine, and just plain old ugly. In reality, women involved in feminist movement came in all shapes and sizes. We were utterly diverse. And how thrilling to be free to appreciate our differences without judgment or competition.

There was a period in the early days of feminism when many activists abdicated all interest in fashion and appearance. These individuals often harshly critiqued any woman who showed an interest in frill feminine attire or make-up. Most of us were excited to have options. And given choice, we usually decided in the direction of comfort and ease. It has never been a simple matter for women to unite a love of beauty and style with comfort and ease. Women had to demand that the fashion industry (which was totally male-dominated in those days) create diverse styles of clothing.

Magazines changed (feminist activists called for more women writers and articles on serious subjects). For the first time in our nation's history women were compelled to acknowledge the strength of our consumer dollars, using that power to create positive change.

Challenging the industry of sexist-defined fashion opened up the space for females to examine for the first time in our lives the pathological, life-threatening aspects of appearance obsession. Compulsive eating and compulsive starvation were highlighted. While they created different "looks," these life-

threatening addictions had the same root. Feminist movement compelled the sexist medical establishment to pay attention to these issues. Initially this establishment ignored feminist critique. But when feminists began to create health centers, providing a space for female-centered, positive health care, the medical industry realized that, as with fashion, masses of women would take their consumer dollars and move in the direction of those health care facilities which provided the greater care, ease, and respect for women's bodies. All the positive changes in the medical establishment's attitudes towards the female body, towards female health care, are the direct outcome of feminist struggle. When it comes to the issue of medical care, of taking our bodies seriously, women continue to challenge and confront the medical industry. This is one of the few places where feminist struggle garners mass support from women, whether they are or are not committed to feminist politics. We see the collective power of women when it comes to gynecological matters, to those forms of cancer (especially breast cancer) that threaten females more than males, and more recently in the area of heart disease.

Feminist struggle to end eating disorders has been an ongoing battle because our nation's obsession with judging females of all ages on the basis of how we look was never completely eliminated. It continues to grip our cultural imagination. By the early '80s many women were moving away from feminism. While all females reaped the benefits of feminist interventions, more and more females were embracing anew sexist-defined notions of beauty. Individual women who had been in their early 20s when contemporary feminist movement began were moving into their late 40s and 50s. Even though feminist changes in the way we see female bodies have made aging a more positive experience for women, facing the reality of aging in patriarchal society, particularly the reality of no longer being able biologically to bear children, led many women to adopt anew the old sexist notions of feminine beauty.

Nowadays, more than ever before in our nation's history, a huge number of heterosexual women past 40 were and are still single. Finding themselves in competition with younger women (many of whom are not and will never be feminist) for male attention they often emulate sexist representations of female beauty. Certainly it was in the interest of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal fashion and cosmetic industry to re-glamorize sexist-defined notions of beauty. Mass media has followed suit. In movies, on television, and in public advertisements images of reed-thin, dyed-blond women looking as though they would kill for a good meal have become the norm. Back with a vengeance, sexist images of female beauty abound and threaten to undo much of the progress gained by feminist interventions.

Tragically, even though females are more aware than ever before of the widespread problem of life-threatening eating disorders in our nation's history, a large group of females from the very young to the very old are still starving themselves to be thin. The disease of anorexia has become a commonplace theme, a subject in books, movies, *etc.* But no dire warnings work to deter females who believe their worth, beauty, and intrinsic value will be determined by whether or not they are thin. Today's fashion magazines may carry an article about the dangers of anorexia while bombarding its readers with images of emaciated young bodies representing the height of beauty and desirability. The confusing message is most damaging to those females who have never claimed a feminist politics. Yet there are recent feminist interventions aimed at renewing our efforts to affirm the natural beauty of female bodies.

Girls today are often just as self-hating when it comes to their bodies as their pre-feminist

counterparts were. While feminist movement produced many types of pro-female magazines, no feminist-oriented fashion magazine appeared to offer all females alternative visions of beauty. To critique sexist images without offering alternatives is an incomplete intervention. Critique in and of itself does not lead to change. Indeed, much feminist critique of beauty has merely left females confused about what a healthy choice is. As a middle-aged woman gaining more weight than ever before in my life, I want to work at shedding pounds without deploying sexist body self-hatred to do so. Nowadays, in a fashion world, especially on the consumer side, where clothing that looks like it has been designed simply for reed-thin adolescent girl bodies is the norm, all females no matter their age are being socialized either consciously or unconsciously to have anxiety about their body, to see flesh as problematic. While we are fortunate that some stores carry beautiful clothing for women of all sizes and shapes, often this clothing is far more pricey than the cheaper clothing the fashion industry markets towards the general public. Increasingly today's fashion magazines look like the magazines of the past. More and more bylines are by males. Seldom do articles have a feminist perspective or feminist content. And the fashions portrayed tend to reflect sexist sensibility.

These changes have been unacknowledged publicly because so many of the feminist women who have come to mature adulthood exercise their freedom of choice and seek healthy alternative models of beauty. However, if we abandon the struggle to eliminate sexist defined notions of beauty altogether, we risk undermining all the marvelous feminist interventions which allowed us to embrace our bodies and ourselves and love them. Although all females are more aware of the pitfalls and dangers of embracing sexist notions of female beauty, we are not doing enough to eliminate those dangers - to create alternatives.

Young girls and adolescents will not know that feminist thinkers acknowledge both the value of beauty and adornment if we continue to allow patriarchal sensibilities to inform the beauty industry in all spheres. Rigid feminist dismissal of female longings for beauty has undermined feminist politics. While this sensibility is more uncommon, it is often presented by mass media as the way feminists think. Until feminists go back to the beauty industry, go back to fashion, and create an ongoing, sustained revolution, we will not be free. We will not know how to love our bodies as ourselves.



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