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Other Kinds of Dreams

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Source: *Feminist Review*, Spring, 1989, No. 31, The Past before Us: Twenty Years of Feminism (Spring, 1989), pp. 55-65

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1395090>

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## OTHER KINDS OF DREAMS

**Pratibha Parmar**

In 1984 a group of us who guest edited a special issue of *Feminist Review* entitled 'Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives' stated in our editorial: 'We have attempted to provide a collection of perspectives which are in the process of continual development, refinement and growth. It [the issue] also indicated some of the diversities within Black feminism, a diversity from which we draw strength.' (Amos *et al.*, 1984 : 2).

Rereading that issue now, four years later, it seems difficult to fathom where the optimism and stridency which many of us had who were active in the black women's movement has gone, and why. Where are the diverse black feminist perspectives which we felt were in the process of growth? And where indeed is the movement itself? In moments of despair one wonders if those years were merely imagined. Four years is not a long time, but it is obviously long enough to see the disintegration of what was once an energetic and active black women's movement: a movement which was given a shape and form by the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. The history of OWAAD and its subsequent demise has been well documented and discussed, for instance by the Brixton Black Women's Group in their article 'Black Women Organizing' (Amos *et al.*, 1984 : 84–9) but suffice it to say here that there were some very real grounds for the optimism that many of us felt as we witnessed and became part of the growth of black women's groups around the country; groups that initiated campaigns around education, housing, immigration, health and policing.

The end of the 1970s saw the demise and fragmentation of the white women's movement and by 1980 the countless campaigns, groups and support networks that had been build up in the 1970s and which were the backbone of the women's movement were already in disarray, as

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Lynne Segal chronicles so clearly in her book, *Is the Future Female?* (1987: 56–61). Many of these groups and centres re-emerged temporarily through the efforts of municipal feminism whose primary impact was felt throughout the short but vibrant life of the Greater London Council and subsequently on some of the labour-controlled local councils. So while on the one hand the women's movement as a whole was collapsing as a political force and a forum, black women were concentrating our energies on building a black women's movement. The brunt of the emerging New Racism was being felt keenly by the black communities and by black women in particular. Black women were busy campaigning and creating autonomous organizational structures through our new found collective self-confidence.

There is no doubt about the dynamic effects that the black women's movement and black feminism has had, not only on the lives of black women but also on the Women's Liberation Movement and on other progressive movements. One of the challenges that black feminism posed was to the Eurocentric theories and practices of white feminism. The take-up of this challenge was very slow, indeed sometimes defensive and racist. For instance, Kum-Kum Bhavnani and I wrote a tentative article for discussion on 'Racism and the Women's Movement' for a workshop on Women Against Racism and Fascism at the 1978 Socialist-Feminist conference. We stated:

The women's movement in Britain has never taken up the question of racism in any real way and because this issue affects all black women, we feel that a failure to take it up has ensured and will continue to ensure that the Women's Liberation Movement as a whole is irrelevant to the needs and demands of most black women. It is fairly clear that we are not 'all sisters together' and it is important to understand why this is so. The failure to take this issue seriously has produced certain anomalies in the relationship of feminism to black women and their specific situations.

We then went on to outline and critique feminist analysis and practices around the family, immigration controls, abortion and contraception, and reclaim the night marches.

At the suggestion of the women in the workshop, we sent the article to *Spare Rib*, asking them to publish it in their forum page, which at the time was used to debate issues of pertinence to the women's movement. We received a three-page letter from a member of the collective who attempted to answer our critique.' The problem is that while *our movement* [my emphasis] is undoubtedly failing to reach large numbers of black women we have not in fact made the precise mistakes your paper describes.' Throughout, she addressed us as if we were speaking from outside of the movement and used 'we' to denote white women as being representative of the women's movement. The letter concluded by stating: 'We didn't really feel your article could form a basis for discussion inside the feminist community as it betrays so many misconceptions about the movement's history.'

I quote this incident at length partly to illustrate that it was experiences such as these which made many of us look elsewhere, in particular to other black women, for collective strength, and partly to locate subsequent challenges historically. Since the late 1970s black women have written many articles and books and organized autonomous publishing resources. This has meant that we are no longer at the mercy of individuals and collectives who censor our work because they disagree with it or find it uncomfortably close to the truth. The theoretical development of a critique of white feminist theories was initiated by Hazel Carby in her article, 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' (1982). Subsequently, other articles appeared, including 'Black Feminism: Shared Oppression, New Expression' (Lewis and Parmar, 1983), 'Many Voices, One Chant' (Amos *et al.*, 1984) and, more recently, the publication of an anthology, *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (Grewal *et al.*, 1988). As a result, there has been, albeit belatedly, a certain amount of rethinking amongst some white socialist-feminists, taking up some of the issues black feminists have raised. For instance, 'Many Voices, One Chant' provoked an article by Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh entitled, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory' (Barrett and McIntosh, 1985), which in turn rekindled the debate on racism and the women's movement (see Ramazongolu *et al.*, 1986 and Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986).

For me, while there are several problems with some of the critiques and responses that have emerged in recent years to this debate on the challenge of black feminism to white feminist theories, the most important point has been that at least and at last white socialist-feminists are beginning to rethink their positions. But it is not only white socialist-feminists who are rethinking.

Critical self-evaluation is a necessary prerequisite for *all of us* engaged in political struggle if there is to be any movement away from intransigent political positions to tentative new formulations. And such self-evaluation has already begun amongst some black women. In the preface to *Charting the Journey*, the editors ask:

For where are we at present? Instead of at least the semblance of a Black women's movement, the futile 'politics' of victim and guilt tripping runs rampant and is used to justify actions that any self-respect would deem impossible. Or there is the tendency towards the collective adornment of moral and political superiority which is supposed to derive from the mere fact of being a Black woman. That this is so gives rise at least to a wistful sigh and more often to a scream from the far reaches of the soul – the only way to express one's disbelief and bewilderment that we could have got here from there. (Grewal *et al.*, 1988 : 3).

This article is not an attempt to bemoan the past nor to wring my hands in angst at what went wrong. But it is almost a truism in these times of reassessment to state that in order to move forward one needs

to learn from the lessons of history. It is not my intention here to provide a detailed analysis or assessment of the past and current state of black women's politics. What follows is a number of initial and exploratory thoughts which have emerged out of discussions with friends and fellow activists; discussions which have focused on how to move out of the political and theoretical paralysis that seems to prevail.

## **Identity politics**

In these post-modernist times the question of identity has taken on colossal weight particularly for those of us who are post-colonial migrants inhabiting histories of diaspora. Being cast into the role of the Other, marginalized, discriminated against, and too often invisible, not only within everyday discourses of affirmation but also within the 'grand narratives' of European thought, black women in particular have fought to assert privately and publicly our sense of self: a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages. Black feminism has provided a space and a framework for the articulation of our diverse identities as black women from different ethnicities, classes and sexualities, even though at times that space had to be fought for and negotiated.

To assert an individual and collective identity as black women has been a necessary historical process both empowering and strengthening. To organize self-consciously as black women was and continues to be important; that form of organization is not arbitrary, but is based on a political analysis of our common economic, social and cultural oppressions. It is also based on an assumption of shared subjectivities, of the ways in which our experiences of the world 'out there' are shaped by common objective factors such as racism and sexual exploitation.

However, these assumptions have led to a political practice which employs a language of 'authentic subjective experience'. The implications of such a practice are multifold. It has given rise to a self-righteous assertion that if one inhabits a certain identity this gives one the legitimate and moral right to guilt trip others into particular ways of behaving. The women's movement in general has become dominated by such tendencies. There has been an emphasis on accumulating a collection of oppressed identities which in turn have given rise to a hierarchy of oppression. Such scaling has not only been destructive, but divisive and immobilizing. Unwilling to work across all our differences, many women have retreated into ghettoized lifestyle 'politics' and find themselves unable to move beyond personal and individual experience.

Identity politics or a political practice which takes as its starting point only the personal and experiential modes of being has led to a closure which is both retrogressive and sometimes spine chilling. Take for instance, the example of an article that appeared in *Spare Rib*

entitled 'Ten Points for White Women to Feel Guilty About'. The title alone made some of us cringe in despair and consternation. There is an inherent essentialism in such articulations which has become pervasive within the women's movement in general and has led to political fragmentation. Lynne Segal has convincingly critiqued the biologicistic and essentialist thinking which has begun to dominate much feminist analysis and practice in the 1980s and I would agree with her conclusion that 'Whereas the problem for women's liberation was once how to assert personal issues as political, the problem has now reversed to one where feminists need to argue that the political does not reduce to the personal' (Segal, 1987 : 243).

## Racial identities

Another problem that has been more specific to black women and the black communities is that of shifting definitions of black identity. In a recent article that I wrote on the politics of representation and the work of black women photographers, I argued thus:

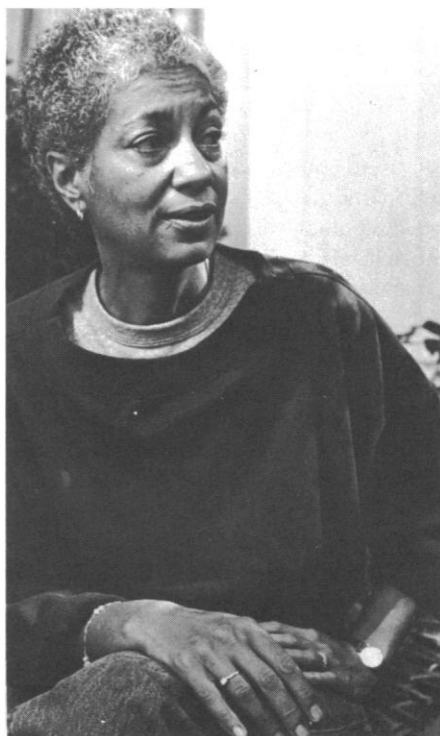
The idea of blackness which in the past has enabled different cultural and racial communities to form alliances and engage in collective political struggle seems to be foregrounded in recent times as an arena for contestation. For some of us there has always been a vigilance against the entrapment of cryptic nationalistic sentiments which rely on biologicistic definitions of race. Yet it is once again becoming increasingly important to restate certain basic first principles which have been assumed to be the *modus operandi* for many black activists in the past: race is a social and political construction and racial identities are created in and through particular historical moments. If the unifying strength of 'blackness' is diminishing because it has become an organising category of a nationalist discourse and is responsible for wasted energies and political fragmentation then the time is ripe for a radical reassessment. Racial identity alone cannot be a basis for collective organising as the black communities are as beset with divisions around culture, sexuality and class as any other community. . . . The black communities of Britain have discontinuous histories and have been culturally and socially displaced through migration, slavery, indentured labour systems and as political refugees and exiles. The concept of diaspora which embraces the plurality of these different histories and cultural forms is one which allows access into the diversity of articulations around identity and cultural expressions. It is also a way out of the essentialism of certain notions of blackness which refuse to acknowledge or understand the transitory nature of historical and political moments. (Parmar, 1988 : 9)

While I do want to point here to some of the problems and consequences of identity politics I would not want to conclude that any analysis of the

political and cultural articulations around identity should be abandoned. Rather, as Stuart Hall has argued:

It seems to me that it is possible to think about the nature of new political identities, which isn't founded on the notion of some absolute, integral self and which clearly can't arise from some fully closed narrative of the self. A politics which accepts the 'no necessary or essential correspondence' of anything with anything, and there has to be a *politics of articulation* – politics as a hegemonic project. (Hall, 1987 : 45)

In trying to find my way towards such a politics I myself have turned to the writings of June Jordan, a black American poet and essayist whose work has clarified many of my doubts and confusions and helped to clear the cobwebs of despair and anger. Val Amos and I found her book *Civil Wars* invaluable when we taught an adult education class on 'Women and Racism' at London University in 1984. At a time when many contemporary movements need to reassess the method and basis of their organizing, June Jordan's moral and political vision offers an inspiration. Her commitment to internationalism and her ability to articulate the complex links and contradictions between the deeply personal and the deeply political in a clear and passionate way is rare.



SUZANNE RODEN

*June Jordan moving towards a different politics*



Her writings are a timely reminder that identity politics 'may be enough to get started on but not enough to get anything finished'. She visited Britain for the first time in September 1987 when I talked to her about some of the problems I have outlined above. Below are extracts from this interview by way of a conclusion. (Parmar, 1987)

**Pratibha:** One of the most interesting and challenging things I have found in your writings is the way in which your radicalism refuses to suppress the complexity of our identities as women and as black people. In Britain there has been a tendency in the women's movement, both black and white, to organise around the assumptions of our shared identities but in the process of political organising many of these assumptions have fallen apart. Can you talk about some of the issues raised around identity politics and what you think it means to define oneself as a political person.

**June Jordan:** We have been organising on the basis of identity, around immutable attributes of gender, race and class for a long time and it doesn't seem to have worked. There are obvious reasons for getting together with other people because someone else is black or she is a woman but I think we have to try to develop habits of evaluation in whatever we attempt politically. People get set into certain ways of doing things and they don't evaluate whether it's working or not. Or if they do evaluate then it's to say it's not working but it's not our fault, there couldn't possibly be anything wrong with our thinking on this subject or this issue. The problem invariably is that the enemy is simply inflexible or impregnable. This is a doomed *modus operandi*. We have to find out what works and some things may work to a certain extent and not beyond that.

I don't think that gender politics or that race politics per se are isolated from other ways of organising for change, whether reformist change or revolutionary change. I don't think that they will take us where we want to go. I think that's abundantly clear if we look at our history as black people. We as black people have enormous problems everywhere in the world and we women have colossal problems everywhere in the world. I think there is something deficient in the thinking on the part of anybody who proposes either gender identity politics or race identity politics as sufficient, because every single one of us is more than whatever race we represent or embody and more than whatever gender category we fall into. We have other kinds of allegiances, other kinds of dreams that have nothing to do with whether we are white or not white.

A lot of awareness of ourselves as women, as black people and third world people really comes out of our involuntary forced relationships with people who despise us on the basis of what we are rather than what we do. In other words our political awareness of ourselves derives more often than not from a necessity to find out why it is that this particular kind of persecution continues either for my people, or myself or my kind. Once you try to answer that question you find yourself in the territory of people who despise you, people who are responsible for the invention of the term



racism or sexism. I think it's important to understand that each one of us is more than what cannot be changed about us. That seems self-evident and accordingly our politics should reflect that understanding.

This is not at all to disparage or dismiss the necessity for what I would call issue oriented unity among different kinds of people, women, black people, or black women. I am not dismissing it but just saying that it's probably not enough. It may be enough to get started on something but I doubt very much whether it's enough to get anything finished.

**Pratibha:** So you are saying that in order to move forward, a crucial part of the political process is to go beyond the personal and experiential ways of organising? You have written, 'It occurs to me that much organisational grief could be avoided if people understood that partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership for change: *when we get the monsters off our backs all of us may want to run in very different directions.*'

**June Jordan:** Yes, for example, I think that for any woman who has ever been raped, the existence of feminist or all female rape counselling centres is absolutely necessary, the recourse to a refuge where a woman can retire to repair herself without fear. But the problem is more than an individual problem. She didn't rape herself. In order to eliminate the possibility of rape or even the likelihood of rape for women generally we have to go beyond ourselves. We have to sit down with and/or stand up to and finally in some way impact upon men. I don't think it's ever enough on your own. And I would say the same thing about race identity politics. I didn't, nor did my people or my parents, invent the problems that we as black people have to solve. We black people, the victims of racism are not the ones that have to learn new ways of thinking about things so that we can stop racist habits of thought. Neither do we have the power to be placed in appropriate situations to abolish the social and economic arrangements that have assured the continuity of racism in our lives. That's for white people. What we really need to do is pass the taking of succour from each other, so to speak and build on our collective confidence and pride. Some people who I have met since I have been in London have been saying, it's terrible because nothing is going on politically. But that's not the point. I don't mean to knock that at all, but okay, now you know and I know that something is terrible, what are you going to do about it. Let's not sit inside our sorrows, let's not describe things to death. My orientation is activism. Other than that it's like a kind of vanity or a decadence. I will tell you how I suffer and you tell me how you suffer . . . it's bad enough to suffer but to talk about it endlessly . . . I say to them stop it . . . stop it . . .

**Pratibha:** Many movements such as the women's movement, the black movement and black women's groups have been organising for a number of years around their shared oppressions. But it seems to me that many of these movements are stagnating because there is a refusal to

acknowledge the need to move away from modes of being, that is accumulating all the isms of race, sex, class, disability etc, to modes of doing. What do you think are the dangers of this? How do you think we can move forward from this paralysis.

**June Jordan:** I am sure there is a danger. The first part of the political process is to recognise that there is a political problem and then to find people who agree with you. But the last part of the political process which is to get rid of it is necessary and something too many of us forget. I am not interested in struggle, I am interested in victory. Let's get rid of the problems, let's not just sit around and talk about it and hold each other's hands. That's where you make the evaluation: is it getting us there, if it's not, then let's have other kinds of meetings with other kinds of people. I think people can get stuck absolutely. What is the purpose of your identity. That is the question. So what? is the way I would put it in my abrupt American way. What do you want to do on the basis of that? You just think that if you fill a room by putting out flyers, with 50 women of the same colour as you, somehow you have accomplished everything you set out to accomplish. I don't think so. Not at all, why are you meeting.

Almost every year black students at Stonybrook where I teach, come around to say to me that they want to hold a meeting and I say, yes and I ask what's it about. They say unity and I say unity for what? I am already black and you are black so we unify okay but I don't need to meet with you about that. When we get together, what's the purpose of that, what do you want to do? I don't need to sit in a room with other people who are black to know that I am black – that's not unity. Unity has to have some purpose to it otherwise we are not talking politics. I don't know what we are talking, maybe a mode of social life. That's okay, but beyond that people have to begin to understand that just because somebody is a woman or somebody is black does not mean that he or she and I should have the same politics. I don't think that's necessarily the case.

We should try to measure each other on the basis of what we do for each other rather than on the basis of who we are.

**Pratibha:** There has been a strong tendency in the women's movement to create hierarchies of oppression. What is your experience of this?

**June:** I have a tremendous instinctive aversion to the idea of ranking oppression. In other words for nobody to try and corner misery. I think it's dangerous. It seems to me to be an immoral way of going about things. The difficulty here is the sloppiness of language. We call everything an oppression, going to the dentist is an oppression, then the word does not mean anything. Revisions in our language might help and it might also steer us clear from saying something as useless as, but mine is this and yours is that. If I, a black woman poet and writer, a professor of English at State University, if I am oppressed then we need another word to describe a woman in a refugee camp in Palestine or the mother of six in a rural village in Nicaragua or any counterpart inside South Africa.

**Pratibha:** In the last few years there has been much talk about the need for coalitions and alliances between different groups of women not only nationally but internationally. What is your assessment of this form of political organising?

**June:** I would say about coalitions what I said about unity, which is what for? The issue should determine the social configuration of politics. I am not going to sit in a room with other people just to demonstrate black unity, we have got to have some reason for unity. Why should I coalesce with you and why do you coalesce with me, there has to be a reason why we need each other. It seems to me that an awareness of the necessity for international coalition should not be hard to come by in many spheres of feminist discourse because so many of our problems, apparently have universal currency. I think that never having been to London, for example, I can still be quite sure that most women here, whatever class or colour, are going to feel shy about walking out at night just as I do. I just assume that. That's about safety in the street. There is a universal experience for women, which is that physical mobility is circumscribed by our gender and by the enemies of our gender. This is one of the ways they seek to make us know their hatred and respect it. This holds throughout the world for women and literally we are not to move about in the world freely. If we do then we have to understand that we may have to pay for it with our bodies. That is the threat. They don't ask you what you are doing on the street, they rape you and mutilate you bodily to let you remember your place. You have no rightful place in public.

Everywhere in the world we have the least amount of income, everywhere in the world the intensity of the bond between women is seen to be subversive and it seems to me there would be good reasons to attempt international work against some of these common conditions. We cannot eliminate the problems unless we see them in their global dimensions. We should not fear the enlargement of our deliberate connections in this way. We should understand that this is a source of strength. It also makes it more difficult for anyone to destroy our movement. Okay, they can do whatever they want to in London, but there is Bangladesh, it's hydra headed, it's happening everywhere, you can't destroy it. That's not to negate the necessity or obviate the need to work where you live but this is only part of a greater environment. I am talking against short sightedness.

I also think it's a good idea not to have any fixed notions in one's head. I don't want any one to tell me where I should put my attention first. If down the line we can try to respect each other according to the principle of self determination then we can begin to move forward. There are enough of us to go around and you don't have to do what I do and vice versa. I do this and you do that, there is plenty of room.

## Notes

June Jordan was born in Harlem and raised in Brooklyn. She is the author of

several award-winning books which include six volumes of poetry and two collections of political essays. Her poems and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Essence* magazine and elsewhere. She currently teaches at SUNY (Stony Brook) and lives in Brooklyn. Forthcoming are two collections of her work: *Lyrical Campaigns: Selected Poems* and *Moving Towards Home: Selected Essays* to be published in spring 1989 by Virago.

Pratibha Parmar is a writer, film-maker and political activist. She has co-edited several books including *The Empire Strikes Back* (Hutchinson, 1982), 'Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives' *Feminist Review* No. 17, 1984, *Through the Break: Women in Personal Struggle* (Sheba, 1987) and *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (Sheba, 1988). Her videos include *Emergence* (1986), *Reframing AIDS* (1988), *Sari Red* (1988). She has written for *Marxism Today*, *Women's Review*, *City Limits*, *Spare Rib*, *Ten: 8* (photographic magazine) and other periodicals and journals.

I would like to thank Shaheen Haque, Claudette Williams, Shaila Shah, Sona Osman, Vron Ware, Paul Gilroy and Issac Julien for their support, friendship and hours of useful discussions and Usha Brown for her timely encouragement. My special thanks to June Jordan for her friendship and inspiration.

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