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allow men in your classes, I want them to appreciate your powerful public voice and at the same time, this singular instance of respectful silence. And here contra Lorde, silence enabled a great deal. It allowed especially a few generations of feminist scholars with race and class privilege to hear Lorde's call, a call addressed specifically to you but really, as you seem to have known, a much larger call directed to all of us through you.

Thank you, Mary, for this,
LAURA

THE GIFT OF ARGUING WITH MARY DALY'S WHITE FEMINISM

Traci C. West

As a religious studies major in college during the late 1970s and early 1980s, I wrote a senior thesis on contemporary Christian ethics and theology. I decided that a fundamental goal of my thesis would be an exploration of the most radical critiques that I could find of racism and sexism in Christian theology and church practices.

By my senior year in college, I had already taken the initial steps in my ordination process in the United Methodist Church. I had been impatiently waiting to begin this process since I was fifteen, when I first announced to a somewhat skeptical male pastor that I had the desire to become a minister. As a college senior I was excited about entering seminary the following year.

While writing my senior thesis, I remained the stubborn, black feminist campus activist I had been throughout my previous years in college. I sought scholarly discussions for my thesis in Christian religious studies that substantively engaged politics and offered insights about systemic injustices. My conceptualization of systemic injustice was fed as much by my campus activism as by the texts that I had been studying for classes. My activism focused on anti-apartheid corporate divestment by my university, a procedure to address sexual harassment of women students by their professors, and other institutional justice issues that preoccupied me and a cohort of troublemaking students.

For the most politicized critique of the church combined with the most expansive vision of post-Christian feminist religiosity I naturally turned to Mary Daly. I focused mainly on her *The Church and the Second Sex with a New Feminist Post-Christian Introduction* and her *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*.¹ Therefore, at age twenty-one, I had the

¹ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex with a New Feminist Post-Christian Introduction* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, [1968] 1975), and Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

astonishingly good fortune to devote a major portion of the academic energy my thesis requirement demanded on analyzing these innovative texts by Mary Daly. I celebrated the cutting-edge religious feminism in her work and rejected the white racial myopia also found there.

No other author that I could locate so trenchantly and thoroughly assailed the deification of maleness in the church. Daly employed her wordsmithing genius to depict the history of women's mistreatment by the institutional church. She seized upon some of the worst psychic fears attached to maleness in her repeated demand for "the castration of sexist religion."² She shocked audiences with her complete rejection of Christian idolization of maleness when calling for "the death of God the Father."³ It is hard to recapture how shocking that language sounded to Christian ears in the 1970s. Most likely, it would still be shocking today if anyone dared to use this rhetoric among Christians. I found Daly to be at her best when she pointed out the utter absurdity of the patriarchal logic that saturated both church practices and long-standing Christian theological tenets. My nascent black feminism was inflamed by the boldness of her critiques.

At the same time, I had sharp differences with some of the ideas I found in her writings. My ability to criticize white racist feminism in my chosen field of religious studies was launched as I discerned the right words to articulate my disagreement with Daly. It was a rare opportunity, I now realize, to have had her radical feminist ideas about religion to spark my dissenting reflections.

Daly, like many other white feminist authors at the time, compared blacks and women as two categories of experience. She used this comparison to add dramatic flourish to her description of the evolution of her feminist ideas. To illustrate her views on the struggle for women's equality in the church, for instance, she employed a racial analogy in one of her retrospective prefaces to *The Church and the Second Sex*. "Why, I wondered would anyone want 'equality' in the church? In a statement that I had given to the press only three or four woman-light years distant from now, I had explained that a woman's asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan."⁴

When I first encountered those words, I was preparing my application to begin my ordination process. I did indeed feverishly desire equal treatment in the church. I anticipated a struggle for both racial and gender equality in my predominantly white Protestant denomination and needed feminist critiques

² Mary Daly, "Theology after the Demise of God the Father: A Call for the Castration of Sexist Religion," in *Sexist Religion and Women in the Church: No More Silence*, ed. Alice L. Hageman, in collaboration with the Women's Caucus at Harvard Divinity School (New York: Association Press, 1974), 125–42.

³ This is Daly's title of chapter 1 in *Beyond God the Father*.

⁴ Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 6.

to help me wage it. I did not want equal opportunities for membership in the Ku Klux Klan. Daly's analogy between a (white?) "woman's" request for equality in the church and "a black person's" demand for equality in the Klan misleads. While subordinate in status, women church members have always played a major role in the organization of and support for the church. Daly's analogy minimizes the distinctiveness of the exclusively white supremacist goals unifying the Klan as well as the significance of the Klan's twentieth-century terrorism and murder of African Americans in accord with those core goals. The routine participation of white women in the Ku Klux Klan is also erased in her formulation. Daly's disregard for the salience of white supremacy serves the purpose of maintaining the victim-status and innocence of white Christian women. I was disappointed because I found the reiteration of white racial needs too thoroughly embedded in the scathing critiques of sexist church practices and ideas that I welcomed.

In the current century, however, Mary Daly still inspires me to wonder where radical critics of sexism in the church and religion academy can be found. Protestants, at least, now have an abundance of women clergy, women bishops, and women seminary professors. What structural and ideological difference has the presence of so many women leaders made? How has their presence transformed patriarchal assumptions constituting the foundations of the church and religion academy? It seems to me that instead of being diminished, the patriarchal assumptions of major religions now have women spokespersons added to the men who have always been well represented on the dais at the public group-rituals of academic and religious life preserving those mainstream traditions. The presence of women clergy and bishops, for example, in my own seven-million-member United Methodist denomination has had no impact on its exclusionary heteropatriarchal rules. The paternalistic culture of the religion academy now infiltrated by women at every level of leadership also remains minimally altered by their presence. Within Christian religious studies, close attention to sexism in the contemporary church seems to be viewed as a rather passé endeavor. Feminist scholars have moved on to poststructuralist, postcolonial, or postgender analyses that supposedly offer the most sophisticated tools and foci for our intellectual work on Christianity.

Too much theoretical feminist discourse nicely accommodates itself to the prevailing ethos of the religion academy where intellectual language and goals bypass structural critiques and actual transformation of the institutions in which we are heavily invested. Most often, our ego needs for institutional acceptance win out over any notion of embracing change that risks the perpetually embattled pariah status that Mary Daly occupied in the academy. In addition, women's studies scholars in religion tend to fit themselves into neat silos of white feminist, womanist, black feminist, mujerista, Latina feminist, Asian feminist, or indigenous/Native feminist groupings. Separate silos allow us to avoid the

raw, bruising conflict that might erupt if we directly engaged our differences with one another as it did when black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde published her open letter to Mary Daly.

We now know that Lorde perpetuated a lie when she failed to revise the claim: “The following Letter was written to Mary Daly, the author of *Gyn/Ecology* on May 6, 1979. Four months later, having received no reply, I open it to the community of women.”⁵ In her biography of Lorde, Alexis De Veaux revealed her discovery of a note handwritten by Lorde and attached to Daly’s September 1979 response.⁶ This response from Daly was found among Lorde’s papers. I do not know why Lorde failed to publicly acknowledge Daly’s response to her. Lorde’s biographer, De Veaux, offers an in-depth appraisal of their conflict-ridden relationship that includes some helpful clues.

But amid Lorde’s dishonesty about Daly’s response to her that is now appended to the history of Lorde’s essay “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” racial truths contained within the essay remain.

Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women—the assumption that the herstory and myth of all white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask you to be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of Black women and other women of Color. . . . This dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us.⁷

During the 1980s, these words resonated with many of us who were feminists of color. They truthfully represented some aspect of our own angering experiences of white feminist racist dismissals. I felt a profound appreciation for the ideas in Lorde’s letter to Daly that continues to this day. Lorde gives public recognition and theoretical definition to a familiar reality of racially charged slights and paternalisms that can occur with exhausting frequency within everyday interracial interactions. I am reminded of a recent conversation with a white feminist religion scholar and acquaintance I have known for many years. She tossed a comment into our relaxed chat over coffee that I am embarrassed to admit caught me completely off guard. “These days,” she said in a bland matter-of-fact tone, “black women can get any academic job they want and everything they demand for a salary package too.” “You really think so?” I replied. Her erasure of white

⁵ Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 66.

⁶ Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 46n21.

⁷ Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” 69.

racism was thorough. Her comment also seemed to include some perception of herself (of all white women perhaps) as racially disadvantaged because of the privileges she believed were now granted to black women.

Additionally, Lorde's letter to Daly can helpfully stimulate a hunger in all of us for analytical conversations about white feminist racism found in the broader political landscape of our twenty-first century. An opportunity for such analyses lies in the historic moment that occurred at the beginning of the century during the 2008 democratic primaries when presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were pitted against each other. Racially charged white feminist views surfaced that need critical examination and dialogue, such as Gloria Steinem's 2008 *New York Times* opinion editorial supporting Clinton. In its aftermath, there was insufficient public discussion of the racist implications of Steinem's article that queried: "So why is the sex barrier not taken as seriously as the racial one?"⁸ Steinem made Obama's black maleness a key issue in her piece but failed to mention Clinton's whiteness.⁹ The editorial asserted white men's affirming approval of black maleness (albeit via racist stereotypes). In contrast, Clinton was represented as a raceless woman icon of sexist victimization. With her unmarked whiteness, Clinton appeared to have no complicity in the anti-black white racism Steinem referenced as being taken more seriously than sexism.

In her letter to Daly, Lorde dared to put in print a resolve routinely made and then broken by so many of us who live and work in the predominantly white world of women's studies. "I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy," Lorde contended.¹⁰ She pointed to white women's "destructive guilt and defensiveness" and the emotional cost to women of color as reasons for avoiding this discussion. But she changed her mind and spoke out anyway addressing Daly as "a sister Hag."

For Lorde, this speaking out was essential. There must be some attempt to overcome "an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope."¹¹ In Daly's work, Lorde found an opening to address the role of racism in white feminism. In particular, Lorde articulated

⁸ Gloria Steinem, "Women Are Never Front-Runners," *New York Times*, January 8, 2008.

⁹ See Sarah Jaffe, "Why Are There So Many Right-wing Extremists? The Face of the Right Wing Is Increasingly Female, Why?" *Bitch Magazine*, October 7, 2010. In this article, Jaffe also notes the moment "when Hillary Clinton downed a shot of whiskey and made some offhand, wrong-footed comments about 'hardworking voters, white voters' who still supported her despite her African-American opponent's lead in delegates."

¹⁰ Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

its costly undermining of the revolutionary potential in the universal radical philosophy of gender that Daly sought to invent.¹²

Currently, there may not be very much enthusiasm among scholars of women's studies in religion to seize opportunities to probe the ongoing racism in white feminism. Perhaps, for some, we have already moved beyond the need for such analysis or we are too afraid of the inevitable conflict that will result. I confess my own apprehensions about the costs of such conflict. Also, it is difficult to analytically focus on white racist feminism without undercutting the antiracist goal of decentering whiteness. Yet I am also certain that leaving white racist feminism in religion and elsewhere uninterrogated destroys all possibility of the structural change envisioned by both Daly and Lorde. Avoidance of this challenge also betrays the project of risk-taking, radically emancipating, social-order-transforming sisterhood that they left unfinished, bequeathing it to us.

¹² As De Veaux explains, "Daly's work was the catalyst which made it possible for Lorde to challenge the imperialist nature of white feminist thought," 253.