

off our backs

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WE'VE COME A WRONG WAY, BAY-BEE

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As I was saying, the phrase, "This may be politically incorrect, but...", makes me reach for the "delete" key. Why? Because it almost always precedes a mindless bit of racism or a snotty put-down of women. The cutesy idiom masquerades as disobedience but in fact dismisses consciousness and justifies meanspirited conformity.

So-called "political correctness" didn't weaken feminism, but fear of that label did. Excusing the perpetrator from taking on tough issues, this phobic umbrella shelters a multitude of retreats. Too often it's trotted out by Lesbians to defend to the death their right to wear lipstick and hang out with boys.

How did conscious feminists become such easy targets? And why have cheap shots at women's culture become so pervasive? Personal ambitions aside, we have to wonder what has driven our Lesbian icons to distance themselves from the very community which jump-started their careers and to this day supplies them with audiences and readerships.

Remember when we used to scrutinize everything by holding it up to feminist analysis? Sure we were sometimes overly harsh with each other and yeah, sometimes we beat each other over the head with our politics, but those

of us who suck it out in honest engagement moved forward together. We thought on our feet, excited ourselves and each other with insights, set light bulbs off like strings of firecrackers. And we had good, clean fun!

But these days when I see most Lesbian productions, or peruse most Lesbian writing, my mind wanders. I feel empty. It's so gosh-darned dull. "Ho(mo) hum", as Jorjet says. I can only hope that beneath all the fluff and nonsense, the old firebreathing feminism is just resting, biding it's time, getting ready for a comeback.

"Diversity" was once code for the inclusion of every racial and ethnic heritage in our thoughts, lives and community. Many a white woman's consciousness was raised by painstaking Lesbian anti-racist process, and although a few used it to manipulate and bully their way to power, a multi-cultural Lesbian community represents feminism at it's best. Diversity IS correct, both personally and politically, but somehow anti-racism got lost in a "diversity" which has come to mean the inclusion of men-of-all-genders in Lesbian community.

How did this happen? The reasons are abundant and, to borrow a

phrase from Andrei Codrescu, "too boring to enumerate". But hey, it's important to track how we've devolved from a volunteer participatory and highly conscious culture to the business of rainbow paraphernalia, once-a-year festivals, holiday cruises, and little else.

When we contemplate how feminist meaning and mission have departed our daily lives, and when we mourn the absence of gritty political analysis, we are left with troubling questions. They are questions sure to trigger "politically correct" marks of disapproval and explain why popular gay media avoids them like, well, the plague.

Of course we suffered casualties and defections from the fierce emotional combat erupting between passionately driven comrades in what I call the "Lesbian Wars".

Next came cleanliness, sobriety and of course, therapy, to capture our attention and chart a new course.

Meanwhile, non-feminists slipped into University Women's Studies programs, trashed "politically correct" "gender" or "cultural" feminists, instituted the far more respectable "Gender Studies" and gained male academic approval and tenure.

Discovering that certain categories of men scored higher on the

oppress-o-meter than they did, multitudes of caretaking, compassionate Lesbians scurried away from their woman-centered priorities. As Gloria Steinem confessed, "I still (at age 65) have the female psychological disease of knowing what other people are feeling better than knowing what I'm feeling". Lesbians, being devoutly female, are arguably even more vulnerable than others of our gender (you'll excuse the expression) to the historic allure "victimhood" presents.

Indeed, it takes a politically conscious, dedicated band of superwomen to resist the relentless barrage of male-centeredness that is patriarchy. We know many Dykes who simply tired of the intense effort required to build and sustain community against the tide of popular mainstream. Many partnered up, joined up, and settled down to demanding careers and families, taking their commitment with them. Who can blame them?

There's no need for blame, but there IS a need to question our own cultural arbiters and pop psychologists who've colluded in the dumbing down of our community for their own benefit, who've legitimized the abdication of our feminism by supplying even more mud to throw at political consciousness. "Politically correct"? You tell me.

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into our individual memories had she not taken this project on as her very own. After awhile, Donna returned and took me into the dining room-turned library/archives to view more resources.

In 1975, Donna and her daughter Martha began producing the annual Women's Media Index Directory, an invaluable resource which makes it possible to locate any article written for the Media Report. Without the index it would be impossible to locate specific articles. Every time she wrote an article for Media Report she would type a one-line description of the article, the source and date, and placed it in under an appropriate heading, like Broadcasting or Radio. The Index spans the 15 years of the Media Report. She told me that she had created the first media index at her father's house during their annual looked-forward-to Thanksgiving visit. Subsequently, every Media Index was created during her Thanksgiving visit to her father's.

Allen lived long enough to see evidence that women's leadership and activism did indeed change the culture. She believed that as a result of women's acquisition and use of communication technology, the decades from the 1960s to the 1990s enabled millions of women worldwide to take part in political decision making. "It was, in short, a revolution in both communication and democracy" (Allen, 1996, p. 323). She was optimistic about the possibility of the new technology but realistic about the obstacles. She rightly asserts that

the nation's mass media reality is even worse than it was in the nineteen-seventies. Fewer white men own more of the nation's mass media than ever before and are able to reach the majority of Americans 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Allen, 1996, p. 324). However, she does go on to say:

What has changed the prospects for democracy so drastically is that the owners of mass media no longer have sole control of the content of the media they own, and it is the expanded content that is making possible more democratic decision-making. Men still own the mass media, nationally and internationally. That has not changed. It has grown even more extensive and more concentrated. But their sole ability to provide the common knowledge on which the public bases its political decisions has been broken by women creating their own media, as also by other unheard people, using the new communication technology to offer the public new and very different information. (Allen, p. 325)

Donna's relationship between the history and the future of women and media and communication drove her intense energy and made her a visionary. On the day of my visit she talked about the important work of the many interns—high school and college women who came to the Institute, the ones who understood the spirit of the second wave of the feminist movement even though they were too young to know it first hand.

After taking me down to the basement, the only cool spot in the house, to

show me the additional archives stored there, she told me about some of the many projects that were waiting to be finished, including her work on a book about the media's role in national health insurance. The only thing wrong with her life, she said, was that there were not enough hours in the day. I told Donna that some of the materials she had prepared so faithfully and meticulously and shared with me will be going into my article and that I was looking forward to her editor's eyes as the project moved forward. Of course she agreed. Another quick, wiry hug and I was off, even as she was sitting down to write a letter of recommendation, one of several projects still awaiting her on that hot Saturday evening before she would finally lie down to rest. (4.)

by jennifer abod

NOTES

1. One publication put out by the Institute is *Women in Media: A Documentary Source Book*, by Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons in 1979. Several other publications are in the works.
2. In 1979 Dr. Allen won a Headliner award, the highest award bestowed by Women in Communications, Inc. In 1983 she won a "Wonder Woman Award" from the Wonder Woman Foundation for personal courage, strength of character, risk-taking and pioneering new territory. (Beasley, 1992 p.154)
3. She told me that the original Media

Report was only nine pages long because that is what you could send out with only one stamp. The publication reached about 2000 subscribers, 55 of which were libraries. Allen sold the Media Report in 1987 to another publisher (as cited in Beasley, 1992) Although Allen continued to write for it, the new Media Report is not based on the exchange system with women's papers.

4. Contributions to continue the work of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press are always needed and can be sent to in care of: Dr. Martha Allen; 3306 Ross Place Rd., NW; Washington, DC 20008

References:

- Allen, Donna, Rush, Ramona R. & Kaufman, Susan J. (Eds.) (1996). *Women Transforming Communications Global Intersections*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Beasley, Maurine H. (Summer-Fall 1992). *Donna Allen and the Women's Institute: A Feminist Perspective on the First Amendment*. American Journalism, Vol. IX, Nos. 3 & 4. published by the American Journalism Historians Association

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