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## Historiography/Feminisms/Strategies

### Phoebe Farris

Phoebe Farris spoke in her paper for Historiography/Feminisms/Strategies from the introduction to her book *Women Artists of Color: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to 20th Century Artists in the Americas* (Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 1999).

When I begin to read a book I am always curious about what inspired the author to undertake the project. Many colleagues and friends have asked me why, how, etc., I initiated this particular research endeavor. I have to confess that the initial idea was not mine originally. Having just completed writing/editing *Voices of Color: Art and Society in the Americas* (Humanities Press) and waiting for my complimentary author's copies, I looked forward to a temporary break from writing. But I received a phone call from former Greenwood's Acquisitions Editor, Alicia S. Merritt, who having seen *Voices* at a trade convention, wanted to know if I would be interested in writing a biographical dictionary or bio-critical sourcebook on *Women of Color in Contemporary Art*, in the United States, all of the Americas or worldwide. Alicia sent me a copy of Greenwood's recent book, *Women Film Directors: An International Bio-Critical Dictionary* by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. I enjoyed the book, still refer to it for research purposes, and was impressed by Foster's inclusion of women of color filmmakers throughout the book. The proposal I submitted to Greenwood indicated that I would include four racial/ethnic categories (African-American, Asian Pacific-American, Latin American, and Native American, acknowledging that these "identifiers" can be problematic at times and go through political changes (black, Negro, Hispanic, Oriental, American Indian, etc., to name a few variations). Almost

a hundred artists are profiled, with approximately one quarter in each category.

I felt qualified to select and write about African-American, Latin American, and Native American women artists, having already researched artists from those backgrounds, lived in communities with those three racial/ethnic groups since childhood, and coming from a bi-cultural background (Native American/Powhatan and African American). However, I could not meet Greenwood's deadline unless I had the assistance of other writers. Through consultations with colleagues from around the country I selected Cynthia A. Sanchez, Executive Director of the State of New Mexico Capitol Art Foundation (recommended by Professor Miguel Gilbert, University of New Mexico), Nadine Wasserman, Curator of Art at Lawrence University Art Department (recommended by Frida High-Tesfagiorgis, University of Wisconsin-Madison), and Kathy Kramer, Art History professor at S. U. N. Y. Cortland. Often they suggested artists I had not considered and vice-versa and I am pleased with our mutual decisions. Moira Roth, Art History professor at Mills College, agreed to contribute an afterword.

My knowledge of Asian-Pacific American women artists working prior to the 1980s was limited. The Asian American artists I knew personally were either mid-career or emerging and the book needed to cover the entire 20th century. Professor Dennis Ichiyama, Head of Purdue's Visual and Performing Arts Department recommended Professor William W. Lew from the University of Northern Iowa. Due to personal circumstances beyond his control, Lew was unable to complete the entire chapter. Just a few months prior to production time, Melinda de Jesús, Asian-American Studies professor at San Francisco State University, Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, Art History professor at Mills College, Reena Jana, art critic for Asian Art News, and Khris Kuramitsu, U.C.L.A. graduate student, graciously agreed to complete the chapter with additional entries. Unfortunately, time constraints resulted in a shorter chapter than originally expected but in no way implies a scarcity of dynamic Asian American women artists.

It was difficult to choose which artists to include with the limitation of 100 artists in an entire century and the inclusion of four racial/ethnic categories. My apologies to any living artists and to the families of any deceased artists who feel slighted. Letters were sent to living artists, art museums, and artists organizations requesting resumé's, and updated information on permanent acquisitions. This book attempts to have a balance of older and/or deceased artists who helped pave the way for future generations, mature, mid-career mainstream artists with national/international reputations, and younger, emerging artists. The media represented spans the gamut from traditional painting and sculpture to newer forms such as video, conceptual, performance, etc. Women who write, sing, paint, or run for political office are called "women writers", "women singers", "women painters", and "women politicians". It reflects the male bias in society and language. There are no "male artists", only "artists" and "women artists". Women artists, writers, etc., are considered

representative of all women while men are perceived to be unique individuals. Man is privileged as the “norm” and woman is the “Other”.<sup>1</sup>

This male “norm” is also a white norm. Artists, writers, politicians, etc., that are not white (regardless of gender) are labeled black artists, Hispanic writers, Native American politicians, etc., And, thus, women of color have double labels. My use of the term women artists of color is not of my own volition. It is a term imposed on me by a society that is still racist/sexist and seeks to categorize me and the artists profiled in this book. Until racism/sexism cease to operate in all aspects of life in the Americas, artists who are not white men will continue to be described by their gender and/or ethnicity and be discussed in books such as this.

The historical circumstances of minority and oppressed groups within the Americas have required the initiation of a period of separatism from the majority culture for self-articulation, knowledge of history and heritage, and awareness of unique culture.<sup>2</sup> When we as women in a reaction/response to sexism/patriarchy are forced to separate ourselves, create our own spaces, write about each other, then we are labeled “essentialists”.

When this project began I was Purdue University's Interim Women's Studies Director and used the term feminist in my teaching/writing. Although familiar with Alice Walker's term “womanist”, i.e. ‘a black feminist or feminist of color committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female, not a separatist, one who loves struggle, loves the folk, womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’,<sup>3</sup> I didn't use it much working in a predominantly white Women's Studies Program. However, my summer residency at the University of Georgia's Womanist Studies Consortium (sponsored by U. G. A.'s Institute for African-American Studies and the Rockefeller Foundation) in which I interacted with Filipina Asian-Americans, African (via Ghana & London), Canadian-Caribbean, and U. S. African-American women scholars increased my commitment to use the term womanist more frequently when discussing women of color who are committed to feminism. Although many of the artists in this book lived prior to the 1970s women's liberation/feminist movement, much of their art practices, life styles, and political commitments can be considered “womanist”. I choose to use this term as a way of honoring those who have passed on to the spirit world and those who are still with us in the struggle.

This book is a modest attempt to rectify the inequality of information on women artists of color. The early feminist art movement of the 1970s prioritized gender over race or class. But for women artists of color-despite their concerns with women's issues-ethnicity more than gender has shaped their primary identities, and often the content of their art.<sup>4</sup> Women artists of color were active participants in the civil rights movement and later the anti-war/peace movements, student movements, and leftist politics. As cultural workers/political activists, it was a time of cultural affirmation/celebration as well as anger/outrage at injustice.<sup>5</sup>

'Expressions of early feminism - between 1968 and 1973- took place alongside events like the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam, and the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. The same period witnessed the incarceration and trials of the Chicago Seven, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis, as well as the Attica prison rebellion; student campus protests around the country and the killings at Kent State; the Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island and the confrontation at Wounded Knee...protests and meetings were announced by posters. The streets were alive with murals, graffiti and slogans. The demonstrations and strategies of the civil rights and antiwar movements were important models for feminists. For many women, protesting was inseparably fused with their identities as artists, critics, and historians.'<sup>6</sup>

Women artists of color have expanded the scope of protest art. Working in a myriad of media and styles, they are researching the fusion of past and current history and of gender with race, de-constructing stereotypical mainstream representations of their identities as women and persons of color.

A motif often used in the art of this period was an upraising arm with the hand clenched in a fist. This symbol of struggle for power can be viewed in the 1968 sculpture of African-American artist, Elizabeth Catlett's, *Homage to My Young Black Sisters*. A cedar wooden sculpture, striking in its monumentality and evoking memories of Mexican pre-Columbian art, it 'symbolizes women's participation in the global struggle against the subjugation of women of color, engaging the language of struggle in form, iconography, and iconology.'<sup>7</sup>

Chicana artist Yolanda M. López reaffirmed identity stimulated by cultural and individual memories in a series of work that thematizes *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. López's series of the *Virgen* as her grandmother, mother, and herself (dressed in everyday clothes and working) stimulates thought about feminist/womanist struggles within political and nationalistic struggles. In her 1978 *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgen de Guadalupe*, the figure is a youthful Chicana, actively running toward the viewer as opposed to the traditional, suffering religious icon. "By embodying *La Virgen* in real lives of Chicanas, López calls attention to idealized representations of women whom she sees as meriting the kind of passion and honor bestowed upon the *Virgen*. She commands respect through her self-portrait in her activism to take control of her life and her environment."<sup>8</sup>

Often women artists of color also play dual roles as curators, critics, and art historians. Margo Machida, a New York based Asian-American artist organized the well-received 1991 symposium, '(re)ORIENTING: Self Representations of Asian American Women Through The Visual Arts'. Participating artists Tomie Arai, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min discussed the clichéd images of Asian women in American popular culture as opposed to their lived realities and investigated the positions that gender, race, and ethnicity occupy in Asian American women's self-definitions. Machida critiques Tomie Arai's 1988 print *Laundryman's Daughter* as an 'immigrant

legacy of all Asian women because it emphasizes the close intergenerational ties between them'.<sup>9</sup> She contrasts this to the concept of 'white feminist critiques of patriarchy and emphasis on individual independence, which for many Asians is read as a threat to family unity.'<sup>10</sup>

Currently, the Native American woman artist with the most national/international exposure is Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish-Flathead). As an artist, curator, lecturer, and political activist, she is a role model for many Native American artists, male and female. Her multi-media paintings which incorporate sign language, glyphs, pictograms, and collage are concerned with issues such as the environment, Native American sovereignty, and civil rights. In Smith's *The Red Mean: Self Portrait* (1992), the traced outline of the artist's own body is drawn out in imitation of the form of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Golden Mean*. Superimposed over the form of Smith's body is a large red medicine wheel. Smith has 'conflated an outline specifically of her own racially and sexually marginalized Native American female body with that prototypical and stereotypical icon of perfect human proportions so fundamental to patriarchal western culture, the Vitruvian Man.'<sup>11</sup>

Many women artists of color such as Elizabeth Catlett, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Frida Kahlo, Lois Jones, Edmonia Lewis, and Helen Hardin were expressing concerns about the intersections of art/gender/race/politics in their art, sometimes in subtle, understated ways long before these issues became "trendy" and articulated by feminists, postmodernists, and poststructuralists.

According to Goldman, the leap from modernism to postmodernism was also that from the concept of the artist as a bohemian to the artist as a social thinker; from the microcosm of the studio to society; from art as unigeneric to interdisciplinary; and most important, from culture as a static self-contained system to a dynamic one encompassing multiple territories of thought and action, semiotics, politics, social anthropology, media, education, etc.<sup>12</sup> I would argue that few artists of color (male and female) had the luxury of being "bohemian" and that artists of color were always "social thinkers."

The 1980s were dominated by poststructuralism adopted by the visual arts from philosophy, literary criticism, anthropology and the debate on postmodernism. The 1980s witnessed a politicization of cultural workers, along the lines of the liberating aspects of postmodern theory...what can be called a critique of postmodernism or a postmodern discourse of resistance.<sup>13</sup> Goldman cites the writings of Martha Rosler, Lucy Lippard, Laura Mulvey, Craig Owens, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks as helping to shape the theories of postmodernism, poststructuralism and feminism.

One can ask the question, why is it necessary in 1998 to write/publish a book titled, *Women Artists of Color: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to 20th Century Artists in the Americas*, if postmodernism, poststructuralism, and feminism have "liberated" academia, art, and society as a whole from the rigid boundaries of race, sex, class,

gender, etc. A brief background/overview of affirmative action and multiculturalism as they apply to the art world is needed to that question.

Affirmative action policies were enacted in the corporate world which includes the art world and in academia in a temporary period of a liberal reform (as I write, these policies are now being dismantled in universities across the U. S.) which sought to increase “minority” access to the middle class and to repress more radical “minority” voices such as the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, and A. I. M. (American Indian Movement). It was during this initial phase of affirmative action that African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, and Women's Studies programs proliferated in academia. During the 1980s affirmative action became diluted/watered down into a superficial version of multiculturalism. As the term multicultural became more mainstream its initial purpose as a cultural expression of affirmative action became lost and unfortunately multiculturalism became co-opted as white educational/cultural institutions sought to make profits by securing grants to host so-called multicultural art exhibits, symposia, and artist/scholar residencies. The definition of multicultural populations expanded from minority/people of color to include women (often white), gays/lesbians, and the physically disabled/challenged, etc., when institutions realized that huge profits could be reaped by attaching the term multicultural to every conceivable category. This is not to slight the real needs and issues affecting women of all races, gays/lesbians, and the physically challenged-but to point out how capitalism seeks to profit from disadvantaged/marginalized groups.

Into this arena walk artists of color and for the purposes of this book, specifically women artists of color. Women artists of color have had to walk a thin line between so-called “co-optation” as they enter the mainstream art world and the middle/upper classes and maintaining their artistic, racial, ethnic, and gender integrity and political commitments. University art departments transmit ideology as well as produce artists. They educate future art critics and art historians, thereby creating the components that feed the art market. Financial rewards and status can be inducements to co-optation, accompanied by a change in the artistic ideology reflected in the art work.<sup>14</sup>

Even more so than artists from the dominant society, artists of color have to face harsh economic realities. The ways in which women artists of color attempt to maintain and creatively express their oppositional stances to racism and sexism vary. Many of them bravely refuse to compromise the quality or content of their work for prestige or financial rewards. Whether working for grass-roots arts organizations, creating public murals, or working within the establishment as art educators, museum professionals, etc., the women artists profiled in this book maintained their specific community ties and in some cases involved themselves in national/international coalitions with other peoples of color.

Back to my original question, why is it necessary to write/publish this kind of

book in 1998? The answer-racism and sexism are alive and well in the art world. Mainstream art exhibits/criticism/history is still not fully integrated. If books such as this are seen as “ghettoizing” or “essentializing” women artists of color-then my challenge is for the art establishment to go beyond tokenism such as black art exhibits only in February, Native American exhibits in November in conjunction with Thanksgiving, and multicultural art chapters at the end of the book (back of the bus).

Before the arrival of Europeans to the Americas, Native Americans from Canada to South America honored the Four Directions expressed in the four sacred colors, white, red, black, and yellow assigned to the four directions. In most indigenous societies the north is represented by white/Caucasians, the south by the color red/ Native Americans, east is yellow/Asians, and black, the west/Africans. These directions and colors, often placed on a medicine wheel also have social, personal, and emotional attributes which vary among indigenous nations. In the spirit of Alice Walker's concept of “womanism”, the contributors to this book, women and one man from different races/ethnic backgrounds came together to research and write about some of the peoples/colors on the medicine wheel that have been ignored/neglected/ silenced. Womanism activates female energy toward empowerment, not only of women, but of communities, foregrounding the unity of community so that group mutuality is not attained at the expense of individual affiliations of race/ethnicity, religion, class, etc.<sup>15</sup>

We (the authors) look forward to receiving critical commentary about our essays, choice of artists, and suggestions for future research. Information on “emerging” artists of color in the Americas and around the world would also be appreciated. The medicine wheel of knowledge is continually turning.

## Notes

1. Frances Bonner, Lizbeth Goodman (eds.) *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender* (United Kingdom: Polity Press/The Open University, 19.).
2. Shifra M. Goldman *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
3. Alice Walker *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1983).
4. Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth 'Social Protest: Racism and Sexism' in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds) *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s' History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 141.
7. Freida High-Tesfagiorgis 'Chiasmus-Art in Politics/Politics in Art: Chicano/a and African

- American Image, Text, and Activism of the 1960s and 1970s' in Phoebe Farris-Dufrene (ed) *Voices of Color: Art and Society in the Americas* (Atlanta Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997), p. 150.
8. Ibid pp. 154 - 157.
9. Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth 'Social Protest: Racism and Sexism' in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds) *The Power of Feminist Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 156.
10. Ibid.
11. Erin Valentino 'Coyote's Ransom: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and the Language of Appropriation' in *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture* (London: Kala Press, Spring 1997) p. 35.
12. Shifra M. Goldman *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Barbara McCaskill and Layli Phillips 'We Are All 'Good Woman!': A Womanist Critique of the Current Feminist Conflict' in Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry (eds) *Bad Girls/Good Girls: Women, Sex and Power in the 1990s* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

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