

AND WHEN YOU LEAVE, TAKE YOUR INTERNALIZED RACISM WITH YOU:  
An Exploration of Intersectionality Through the Juxtaposition of the Commentary of Dr. Jo  
Carrillo and Dr. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak

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Pledged.

Jo Carrillo's poem "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You" struck me the first time I read it; its words are simplistic, but after finishing the poem, I was dissatisfied.<sup>1</sup> I had completely missed something, though I was unsure of what precisely. I consider myself an empathetic person, so I felt ashamed for not grasping what initially came across as a straightforward poem because I knew that it was intended, at least in part, to open the eyes of white women like me who consider themselves allies of women of color. On the other hand, the question arises as to whether my white guilt has any right to exist within the context of this poem or if Carrillo's narrator is intentionally playing the role of shame-inducer. Is the speaker truly representative of Carrillo, or simply a sleight of hand to make her audience believe that she is qualified to speak on topics with which she may not have any genuine experience? I was grateful that these sentiments and queries presented me more time to think on the poem than I had previously allotted it because it was difficult for me to remain complacent in ignorance of the struggles that fellow women face.

My first approach to dissecting Carrillo's poem was analyzing at the poetic techniques it employs. Despite a distinct lack of punctuation aside from the sparse use of periods and single comma, the spliced structure of the lines is cause for the reader to pause and mull over the shorter lines rather than racing through the poem. Likewise, initially separating "Our white sisters/radical friends" in coupled lines creates a slower interpretation of the phrase in line 24, leaving a sour taste in the mouth and a clearer sense of the verbal irony Carrillo conveys.<sup>2</sup> She does not genuinely consider these women her sisters, and instead wishes to hold them more

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for full poem.

<sup>2</sup> Jo Carrillo, "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1980), 4th edition, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015): 63.

accountable in their self-proclaimed liberation movement. Similarly, when describing the various pictures white women “own,” Carrillo presents “machine guns bayonets bombs knives” together in a generalized way to showcase both societal desensitization to violence and a need for deeper contemplation of the connotation that praise of such pictures holds. To repeat this sentiment, she repeats “Our white sisters/radical friends/should think/again.” severalfold, intentionally adding a period to the end for added emphasis every time the phrase is used regardless of the spacing’s configuration.<sup>3</sup> The reiteration of the phrase “reading books from literacy campaigns” implies the minimal measures that white women employed to more fully include those with less privileges than themselves.<sup>4</sup> It nearly suggests that literacy campaigns were the only thing that white women did to improve the condition of women of color. Furthermore, Carrillo’s choice to repeat the sentiment that the “white sisters [...] love to own pictures of us” objectifies the collective “us” in a way that is representative of the reality they face; being repeatedly and historically homogenized and commodified results in serious damage to self-image that is only compounded as time moves onward.<sup>5</sup> Though delving into structure clarifies the poem’s meaning, there is more to be fleshed out. This impasse is where Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak’s *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* comes into play.

The passage by Spivak that I believe best illuminates Carrillo’s poem is as follows:

It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem. [...] There has to be a persistent critique of what one is up to, so that it doesn’t get all bogged down in this homogenization; constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge,

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<sup>3</sup> Carrillo, “When You Leave,” 63.

<sup>4</sup> Carrillo, “When You Leave,” 63.

<sup>5</sup> Carrillo, “When You Leave,” 63.

leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Spivak's analysis of society's state focuses mainly on the attitude of benevolent imperialism and the condescending pity that it harbors. She argues that being perceived as a token in an environment of self-proclaimed activists reduces one's presence into a "salve [for their] conscience[s]."<sup>7</sup> Ignoring differences obscures minority struggles because it encourages those who fall under the category to remain quiet about their experiences unless given the opportunity to speak about them in an overly contained manner for a specific purpose. If they vocalize in any other fashion, they are often frowned upon for doing so because they "do not appreciate what they already have."<sup>8</sup> We must continue to recognize and celebrate differences without settling on bare minimum efforts of inclusion and diversity; the nitty gritty must be tantamount to the perfectly packaged success stories. The questions of who decides which people fall under the category of Other and how those in the categories either self-represent or are represented without input remain relevant inquires as well. The people who have the power to craft the idea of Otherness are in turn granted the ability to transform those that they classify as such into mere objects; the Others become tokenized for the purpose of providing a feel-good sensation of quasi-inclusion for the majority, rather than actual embracement of differences.

Spivak clarifies Carrillo's final stanza through her critique of tokenization and condescension. This stanza bothered me initially because I could not grasp the exact meaning

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<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, "Questions of Multiculturalism" in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, ed. Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990): 63.

<sup>7</sup> Spivak, "Questions of Multiculturalism," 63. Not included in the excerpt mentioned previously, but it is on the same page.

<sup>8</sup> This is a sentiment that I do not share but have heard too many times from peers and adults alike in my hometown. This is often said in context of discussions of microaggressions, welfare, availability of affordable healthcare, etc.

behind it, but after coupling it with Spivak's piece its nuance became apparent. Similarly to Spivak, Carrillo comments on minority women's objectification in the Women's Rights Movement, and their resulting loss of humanity in the eyes of those more powerful than themselves, regardless of if those perceiving them as such are conscious of this fact or not. Tokenization and generalization are harmful to all parties involved. The homogenized are reduced to their outward appearance's value, which is a direct hit to self-worth, while the oppressors live in a fantasy in which they believe the world's problems are solved because they have mentally homogenized everyone's issues. On the contrary, Spivak's line that explores how society "[leaves] out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to [...] waves of benevolence," provokes readers to consider: is Carrillo unintentionally benefitting from the system in which she lives as an academic, given the fact that she has a platform to speak?<sup>9</sup> Is she exploiting the women with whom she identifies herself by lumping them in a collective "us" and "we" incorporated throughout the poem, particularly when they appear "in the flesh" in the final stanza, or is she helping them by spreading the knowledge of injustices done against them?<sup>10</sup> In my eyes, Carrillo further critiques women of color's generalization through her use of the sweeping terms "us" and "we" because she utilizes them with an acerbic bite that is nicely exposed when coupled with Spivak's excerpt. The Women's Rights Movement of the 1970's had a drastic need for upheaval regarding intersectionality, and Carrillo's poem and Spivak's excerpt—both set in the wake of this movement in the 1980's—are demands for such. The concept of intersectionality was not as widespread in the eighties as it is today, though it remains a difficult concept for many people to accommodate and welcome.

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<sup>9</sup> Spivak, "Questions of Multiculturalism," 63.

<sup>10</sup> Carrillo, "When You Leave," 63-64.

Carrillo and Spivak were champions of the push for actively incorporating an intersectional approach into society's attempts to improve itself. When put into conversation with each other, they hold one another accountable in how they both self-represent and represent others. They come together to build a convincing case for those who may be hesitant to accept the relevancy of intersectionality in not only politics, but also in day-to-day life. Spivak's call for a "persistent critique" is precisely how we must all approach our lives.<sup>11</sup> No one is ever as "happy as [they] look/on/their/wall."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Spivak, "Questions of Multiculturalism," 63.

<sup>12</sup> Carrillo, "When You Leave," 64.

Appendix A

Our white sisters  
radical friends  
love to own pictures of us  
sitting at a factory machine  
wielding a machete  
in our bright bandanas  
holding brown yellow black red children  
reading books from literacy campaigns  
holding machine guns bayonets bombs knives  
Our white sisters  
radical friends  
should think  
again.

Our white sisters  
radical friends  
love to own pictures of us  
walking to the fields in hot sun  
with straw hat on head if brown  
bandana if black  
in bright embroidered shirts  
holding brown yellow black red children  
reading books from literacy campaigns  
smiling.

Our white sisters radical friends  
should think again.

No one smiles  
at the beginning of a day spent  
digging for souvenir chunks of uranium  
of cleaning up after  
our white sisters

radical friends

And when our white sisters  
radical friends see us  
in the flesh  
not as a picture they own,  
they are not quite as sure  
if  
they like us as much.  
We're not as happy as we look  
on  
their  
wall.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Carrillo, "When You Leave," 63-64.



Bibliography

- Carrillo, Jo. "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1980), 4th edition. Edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Albany: SUNY Press, 2015. 63-64.
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