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For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend

*March with me, march by yourself, educate yourself, your
mother, your mechanic, speak out....*

by Bes'Lee Heron

I shouldn't have to tell you any of this. It hurts and enrages me, and makes me just plain tired.

It is long past the time when I should be expected to answer a racist remark, the only lesbian of color in a room full of whites, while everyone ponders their thumbnails in silence.

If I call you on a racist remark don't be so quick to deny it. You probably think that you can't be racist as long as you're talking to me or not out canvassing for David Duke. Racism exists in hundreds of insidious forms, it is in everything, from the way you cower, afraid of potential violence from me because my voice is louder than white culture would allow, to having someone actually say "black bitch," or "nigger." It is the subtle dishonesty that manifests itself in white guilt when a group of white gays and lesbians in a studio audience doesn't confront homophobic remarks by a person of color. Or when Sandra Bernhard mentioned Nina Simone not caring about animal rights because she was a black woman and already knew about oppression. Or when Bernhard can't decide whether or not to support Anita Hill ("a black man, a black woman, I can't figure it out.") Or when you have the nerve to ask what we're still complaining about.

Please don't look at me and expect support when you say the world would be better without men. It ignores the real reason for our oppression as women and lesbians, and is inherently racist in that it denies that men of color, gay and straight, suffer in this system as well. I'll not give up the men in my family or community, supportive friends or beautiful feminist black gay men like Marlon Riggs. Besides, following that line of logic means that white women would be next to go...think about it. Racism, sexism, homophobia have the same origins in an oppressive capitalist system that needs prejudice to survive. Poor straight white men get screwed over too. They're only led to believe that they deserve more privilege because of who they are and so blame their problems on the rest of us; keeping everyone divided, not fighting back against our common oppressor. To ignore all of this is only to support

the continuation of racism, of all oppression. It doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Know that I trade your best lines like jokes, familiar phrases, which identify your politics like a beacon, talk of hiring quotas, being too sensitive, or even personality conflicts. To me these are tales from the front, ironic humor covering pain that could easily turn to rage. My personal favorite comes as an indignant whine: "but you called me racist!" Once a friend responded to the white woman in question and said, "Honey, what are you crying about?"

I am a lesbian, and want to be addressed as such. Saying women of color, when speaking of lesbians only relegates us to invisibility within an already marginalized community. Please don't tell me that "it's harder to be gay," harder than what, I wonder. In a room full of lesbians, I don't stop being black, nor do I stop being a lesbian.

My justifiable anger did not cause your racism, in saying so I'm only amazed at your great ability to execute such incredible leaps of logic. Please don't tell me that you were racist, asking me "what about white history?" because you hurt so very deeply. That very well may be, but I'm not at all sympathetic, it is insulting to me and everyone who has to live with racism every day. Suffering the super-vigilance of store clerks while holiday shopping or having you say that Arsenio Hall looks like a pimp, with his shiny greasy hair, shiny suit, shiny black skin.

Know that to me it is not only my responsibility, but my duty, to educate myself so that I will not continue or support oppression. Understand the importance of this commitment to change myself and by extension the world.

To be my friend you must be an ally. March with me, march by yourself, educate yourself, your mother and your mechanic, speak out, yell, scream, take responsibility, hold others accountable, process if you must, analyze, tear it up and put it back together. Now, do you know how to be my friend?

Title taken from a poem of the same name by Pat Parker, A Movement In Black, Crossing Press, 1984.

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