

**An Examination of Modern Racism and its Subtle Language**

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HUM 103

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## Difficulty Passage

“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

or 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>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carillo, 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

## Engagement Passage

“As the ideas of racial equality produced in and through the civil rights movement gradually acquired hegemony in the nation, they congealed into firm notions of what counted as victories over racial subjugation, and in the process produced their own meanings of racism. As important as these victories have proved to be, the inflexibility of the resulting definitions of racism has created, both in legal and popular discourses, enduring deceptions regarding the nature of racism. Definitions of racism informed by particular historical conditions became trans- or ahistorical ways of conceptualizing racial discrimination and subjugation. The persistence of these meanings beyond the particular historical conditions that have produced them has hampered the evolution of a new vocabulary and new discourse that might allow us to identify new modes of racism in what is known as the post-civil rights era.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, Angela Y., and Robin D. G. Kelley. *The Meaning of Freedom*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2012.

I initially understood Carillo's poem to simply be an explanation of the daily life of some black women in the mid-20th century. I recognized that there were underlying issues that Carillo was portraying by using violent language, such as "bayonets bombs knives."<sup>3</sup> This language reflects anger but much of the poem does not appear to be reflecting rage at the surface. I noticed the repetition of "our white sisters/radical friends" and did not understand why she focused so much on white women, rather than white people as a whole, in a poem about racism.<sup>4</sup> Carillo also mentioned the black women in the fields "smiling," as though they appeared happy to the white women, but Carillo's subtle discontent made it clear that they were not happy.<sup>5</sup> At this point, I realized that Carillo was likely expressing dissatisfaction with society, but I still lacked understanding of her passage in its entirety, specifically its subtle yet growing criticism of modern racism and emphasis on white women. The quiet anger that Carillo expresses and the subtlety with much of her language reflects her view towards racism in the modern day. I looked to Davis, as I knew her passage examined racism in modern America, for guidance on Carillo's poem. Davis and Carillo both recognize the subtleties of modern racism, which Carillo depicts throughout her poem and Davis analyzes in her passage.

Davis's passage analyzes the shift from, during the Civil Rights movement, clear-cut forms of racism in the legal system to less obvious instances of racism. She explains the idea that, as racial barriers, such as segregation, were broken, racism became an inflexible concept, which created "enduring deceptions regarding the nature of racism."<sup>6</sup> Modern racism is not seen by many as a pattern of general intolerance in American culture, but rather as something that

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<sup>3</sup> Carillo, "When You Leave," 9

<sup>4</sup> Carillo, "When You Leave," 1-2

<sup>5</sup> Carillo, "When You Leave," 23

<sup>6</sup> Davis, *Freedom*, 167

exists in discrete, obvious instances, resulting from laws that were made clearly to oppress people of color. However, the refusal to change American perception of racism was harmful, as its nature shifted, leading to different struggles for people of color that were not addressed during the Civil Rights era. Carillo criticized the blindness of “white sisters radical friends/[who] should think again,” because although many white Americans believed racism was over, black men and women still struggled with the newly transformed nature of racism.<sup>7</sup> Davis explains the danger of not developing a widespread “new vocabulary” to depict these modern struggles, as it allows white people to ignore the long-term effects of racism.<sup>8</sup> Davis also talks about the dangers of this system, as it can keep us unaware of injustice if it is not presented as unmistakably racist. Due to the somewhat obscured nature of modern racism, many white people are blind to the oppression that people of color face, as there are no laws enforcing segregation. This creates blindness to the lasting impacts of racism that minorities face, manifesting in long-term struggles that white people have the privilege of being able to ignore.

Another issue criticized in both passages is the idea that racism has been eradicated, when it has simply changed form. Davis also discusses the “victories over racial subjugation,” won during the Civil Rights era.<sup>9</sup> She notes that these victories were incredibly important, but that they did not cure the epidemic of racism. Davis describes, rather, that this hinders our perception of modern racism, leading to a worse understanding of racism in the long run. Upon reading this, I recognized the parallels between Davis’s ideas and Carillo’s poem, as Carillo describes the work that still needs to be done regarding racism. Carillo also mentioned, “books from literacy campaigns,” portraying these books as a victory over discrimination. However,

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<sup>7</sup> Carillo, “When You Leave,” 10-13

<sup>8</sup> Davis, *Freedom*, 167

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *Freedom*, 167

work was still to be done - the literacy campaign was immediately juxtaposed with her depiction of “machine guns bayonets bombs guns knives.”<sup>10</sup> Similar to Davis, Carillo acknowledges the literacy campaigns, but also knows that these isolated campaigns do not mark an end to racial discrimination. Davis, instead, argues that a “new discourse” is necessary to identify modern racial struggles.<sup>11</sup> Both Carillo and Davis remark in their passages that, while there have been some positive changes for minorities, racism still exists and must be viewed in a new way.

Carillo challenges the belief that racism has been conquered, similarly to Davis’s passage regarding the language of racism, by juxtaposing successes with the lingering effects of racial oppression in America. Carillo describes that although slavery has ended, racism has not died. In the passage, she mentions women working in factories, no longer in slavery, but acknowledges the oppression that still exists, saying that “no one smiles... cleaning up after our white friends,” depicting that black women are still not living in great conditions. Carillo begins the poem with “our white sisters/radical friends,” which I initially assumed to be her describing white women as allies to black women.<sup>12</sup> However, upon recognition of Carillo’s theme of subtle anger towards society, I sensed that it might be an ironic phrase, dismissing half-hearted attempts by white women to fight racism. Davis discussed our lack of an ability to recognize “new modes of racism,” today.<sup>13</sup> This drew my attention back to the mention of white women, who in the poem appear to think that black women are happy with the new era, believing that oppression has been defeated. Since white women are not directly affected by racism, they likely do not recognize it as easily. In addition, the white women may choose to ignore the discrimination, as they benefit

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<sup>10</sup> Carillo, “When You Leave,” 9

<sup>11</sup> Davis, *Freedom*, 167

<sup>12</sup> Carillo, “When You Leave,” 1

<sup>13</sup> Davis, *Freedom*, 167

from the system. This brought understanding to Carillo's passage, as I realized that the mentions of white women were criticisms of blindness to new forms of racism. Davis and Carillo both acknowledge the modern forms of racism and criticize others for their rigidity in recognizing racism.

Davis examines the definitions of racism and compartmentalization of racist ideas, specifically considering a "language of racism" created during the Civil Rights era. This idea illuminated Carillo's work, as it aligned with Carillo's descriptions of hidden racism. Carillo demonstrates that the conditions of black women that appear to be better than before but still hide oppression. She describes the conditions of some black women, who are unhappy "cleaning up after/our white sisters/radical friends," once again acknowledging the difficulty that black women still face.<sup>14</sup> Davis describes, in regards to her "language of racism," how many people believe racism to only be obvious, legalized forms of discrimination.<sup>15</sup> She acknowledges, however, that oppression comes in many forms, not solely in segregation or disenfranchisement. This aligns with Carillo's work, as she describes a socioeconomic inequality stemming from racism. She explains how black women are often serving white women, forced to take on a role similar to that held of slaves in the past. This points out the clear connection between legalized forms of racism in the past and lingering forms of racism in the present. In addition, Carillo does not just mention black women working for white people, but for their "white sisters/radical friends," people who were supposed to aid them in the fight against racism but instead furthered their oppression.

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<sup>14</sup> Carillo, "When You Leave," 26-28

<sup>15</sup> Davis, *Freedom*, 167



These passages are important because they both recognize modern forms of racism and criticize others for not combatting their effects. Carillo draws attention to the white women who have attempted to fight racism, but do not see it right before them. Davis provides an explanation for this behavior, as she says that rigid definitions of racism in America led to its lack of recognition. These passages provide a deeper look at racism in America, not only in legalized forms, such as redlining and segregation, but also in the less obvious remnants of pre-Civil Rights racism, such as socioeconomic disparities between blacks and whites. Davis encourages us to change our views on racism, and to focus on its hidden effects, rather than ignoring the real problems faced by people of color today. Carillo brings a more emotional appeal to this idea, with her depiction of the rough conditions faced by women of color, and the betrayal of white allies in their lack of understanding. Davis also encourages us to explore ideas that we hold as unchanging in our minds; in any society, you cannot avoid thinking under the paradigms you are raised with. However, it is beneficial to explore and challenge the beliefs that you hold, even revolutionary, as unpacking your beliefs can lead to positive change.