

Women of Color?

From *Ancestors Known and Unknown: Box Works*, (essayist), traveling exhibition organized by Coast to Coast National Women Artists of Color, 1991, "Women of Color?"

Coast to Coast: National Women Artists of Color has become a vehicle through which women of color artist may work together. *Ancestors Known and Unknown: Boxworks* was the first project that we as a large collective of *women of color* artists collaboratively and cooperatively initiated and implemented. However, the combination of the theme ancestors, the concept of box, and the use of the term *women of color* caused so many issues to surface.

We received challenged about the use of these terms from several individuals and groups. These challenges forced us to question our identities and commitment to each other. Answers were not readily available, but we respectfully listened and talked to each other. This process helped us see that practically all the objections stem from the particular and peculiar ways in which we are oppressed in this society.

In seeking a term that identifies our collectivity, our solidarity with each other, and our alliance with each other, we use the term *women of color*. The term *Third World* has been used by some, but we don't use it because it presumes that there is a first world and that we are not in it.

Apart from the alliances, the solidarity, and the connectedness that we share with all people in common, the term *women of color* is a way of stating that we are aware that our present socio-political reality in this country, in this hemisphere, and in the world has been subjected to an imperialism that continues right up to Persian Gulf War. There we had a very clear view of the European manifest destiny: "I am in charge of the world, I take responsibility for the state of the world."

For us, the use of the term *women of color* is not about skin color or biology. It is about a socio-political reality. It is a way to take charge of naming that socio-political reality and claim alliance with each other at the same time.

We have learned how Europeans rank ordered us according to a set of characteristics they considered to be most valued and important in themselves. This *notion of race* was used to assign everyone *a place* along this hierarchy. We never did fit into their groups, but, this *notion of race* continues to be used to justify and explain the exploitation of our people for their benefit.

The success of this hierarchical system, however, depends on our separation and division. It has and still depends on the willful participation of each of us to stay *in our place*. It does not take much, however, to keep us suspicious and afraid of each other. In certain places in this country right now, excessive and brutal force is used to make people know

and stay *in their place*. It gets to the point that people believe that it is too much trouble not to say *in their place*.

When we come together as *women of color*, we realize that we were the peoples throughout the world who got subjected to this particular form of European imperialism. We have an alliance with all human beings; but as *women of color*, regardless of our class background, to claim that this common experience of having been the target of this form of imperialism and colonialism gives us some right to claim each other.

We feel we have a special understanding of each other's wounds and pain. It is a slow process, but, we try to let ourselves notice where we learned the lies about each other: where we learned to fear each other; where we learned to mistrust each other; where we learned to feel disconnected, separated, and alienated from each other.

Because of the richness of the experiences we bring to each other, we begin to see how staying inside the box that society has created for us meant giving up pride in ourselves and who we are. To stay inside that box required that we give up the awareness of our brilliance, our beauty, our power, our right to be in charge, and to speak our words. In connecting, we step outside the box of false reality and see what the truth is about ourselves. As we learn to look at who we are as human beings, we encourage each other to push against limits in every part of our lives. As the process continues, we learn to trust and count on each other. We find we are "particularly" suited to assist each other in reclaiming our powerful, beautiful, and victorious selves.

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