
Friendships between African-American and White Lesbians

RUTH HALL AND
SUZANNA ROSE



Ruth Hall (left) and Suzanna Rose (right) renewing their friendship at the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation.

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The racial divide between African-American and White women has not been healed by the balm of sisterhood as feminists once hoped would happen. Awareness of a shared gender oppression did not result in the desired cross-race friendships and political ties, even among lesbian feminists who highly value both sisterhood and women's friendship. Instead, the alliance between African-American and White women has been tense (hooks, 1990). The tension has extended to the lesbian community. Lesbians of color have issued challenges to White lesbians to confront their own racism; others have withdrawn from multicultural work (e.g., Lorde, 1981; Smith and Karp, 1988). White lesbians, in turn, often have responded to women of color with confusion, guilt, anger, or dismissal (Frankenberg, 1993). This social context has had a direct impact on friendships between African-American and White lesbians. For example, African-American lesbians who seek friends in the predominantly White lesbian community report facing three negative consequences (Mays, Cochran and Rhue, 1993). They may be rejected because of their race, they may be accepted but exposed to racism within the community, or they may be expected to minimize their own African-American culture.

But racial segregation within lesbian communities also has influ-

enced some White lesbians to begin a process of self-examination that eventually will help them build friendships and alliances with African-American lesbians (Pratt, 1991; Segrest, 1994). Although cross-race lesbian friendships have not materialized on the large scale predicted by feminism, a productive dialogue about racism has occurred in some circles that has encouraged cross-race friendships. One example is the friendship we, the authors, share. Our friendship developed through our involvement in the Association for Women in Psychology. Suzanna was already a member of the Implementation Collective when Ruth joined it as the first coordinator of the Women of Color Caucus. A series of antiracism workshops in which Ruth and Suzanna participated as members of the collective facilitated the friendship. We took the business of undoing racism seriously, became political allies, and learned to laugh together, too. Our friendship is now eight years old and we consider each other to be family. Reflecting on our friendship caused us to wonder how representative our experience was of other cross-race friendships among feminists. We decided to explore this question by examining friendships between African-American and White lesbian feminists.

In this chapter, our intent is to illustrate some of the considerations, problems, and rewards of friendships between African-American and White lesbians by drawing on twelve in-depth interviews conducted in St. Louis by Suzanna.¹ Six of the participants were African-American lesbians whose ages ranged from twenty-one to sixty-one; six were White, aged twenty-one to forty-seven. Three of the African-American and two of the White women described themselves as working-class; the remainder were middle-class. Our participants represented a very select group. Individuals chosen were at a high level of racial awareness; many had participated in or led antiracism workshops or confronted racism in the lesbian community. They also had been successful at establishing intimate ties across race lines; for example, all had at least one close cross-race friendship.

The interview questions were aimed at exploring the defining characteristics of cross-race friendships. It was assumed that cross-race friendships would share the features of close friendship, including a

sense of belonging, emotional stability, opportunities for communication, assistance, reassurance of one's worth and value, and personal support (Duck, 1991); thus, these general processes were not investigated. What interested us was how the politics of race and racism would affect the formation and development of friendships between African-American and White lesbians. The ten questions selected for the interview focused on: (1) friendship initiation, including the criteria participants had for cross-race friends; (2) common problems in cross-race friendships, particularly in terms of building trust concerning the issue of race; and (3) the political and personal rewards associated with cross-race friendships.

Friendship Initiation

The process of initiating any friendship is a complex one (see, e.g., Derlega and Winstead, 1986). Previous research has shown that demographic factors such as age, race, sex, social class, sexual orientation, and geographic location to a large extent dictate with whom individuals come into contact and, therefore, with whom they can become friends. As an acquaintanceship develops, personal factors, such as attitude similarity, physical attractiveness, personality style, and interests, become increasingly important. Four behaviors also appear to be related to successful friendship development: companionship, consideration, communication and self-disclosure, and affection (Hays, 1984). In addition, friendships are governed by certain informal "rules"; failing to follow them can impair the friendship (Argyle and Henderson, 1984). For example, it is expected that a friend will stand up for you, share good news with you, give emotional support, trust and confide in you, offer you aid when needed, and try to make you happy when the two of you are together.

Cross-race friendship initiation as described by our participants largely fit the pattern described above. However, the usual demographic factors limiting contact between people differing in age, race, and social class appeared to have less effect on participants than is normally the case. Instead, sexual orientation (a demographic factor) and political activism (a personal one) were the two similarities

most often reported as promoting initial contact. These two factors "located" the participants in situations that allowed them to interact with lesbians of different races, backgrounds, and neighborhoods. However, other criteria for cross-race friendship were likely to come into play once initial contact occurred. Thus, we asked participants what criteria they had for determining if someone of another race was "friendship material."

Responses to questions about friendship initiation revealed that racial awareness was the most important criterion for potential cross-race friends. Racial awareness was described by participants as having two components. First, a racially aware person was described as someone who recognized and appreciated differences in culture, values, aesthetic standards, and so on among races and did not regard these differences as signs of superiority or inferiority. Second, a racially aware individual was able to identify and challenge the ways White people actively or passively participate in and benefit from racism. This concept of racial awareness corresponds to the most recent view of race to develop historically, according to Frankenberg (1993), one that includes a recognition of how race oppression is institutionalized within our society, as well as a positive valuation of cultural differences. As such, it represents a definite rejection of the two dominant views of race prevailing in the United States until recently. According to the first or essentialist view, people of color are regarded as biologically inferior to White people. In the second, the color-blind view, all people are held to be the same under the skin. Those holding this view tend to deny that race affects how they treat people or how they are treated (Frankenberg, 1993).

That participants defined racial awareness in a way that has only recently emerged suggests that they themselves were at the most advanced stage of racial identity development (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990) and were looking for friends who were at a similar stage. For African-Americans, the fifth and highest stage of identity development is *integration*. Integration is said to occur when a strong pride in one's African-American background exists alongside a willingness to establish meaningful relationships with Whites who are respectful

of one's self-definition (Cross, 1991). For Whites, the fifth and highest stage of racial identity is *autonomy*. At this stage, a positive White identity is internalized along with an appreciation for racial differences and similarities; cross-cultural interactions are sought out as opportunities for growth (Helms, 1990).

Participants regarded individuals as potential candidates for friendship if they appeared to share a highly developed racial awareness or identity, as described above. Those holding the essentialist or color-blind views were not seriously considered as likely candidates for friendship, particularly by African-American lesbians. Generally, African-American lesbians assumed that White lesbians were, at least to some degree, lacking or less developed in terms of racial awareness. This assumption set up a dynamic that required the White women to pursue the friendship, if one was to occur. Most of the African-American lesbians felt positively toward White women who made an extra effort to establish a friendship. For example, Renee Upshaw² (aged thirty-one) remarked, "The first thing that they see is that I'm Black. I would think, is she just trying to be diverse in her friends? It doesn't stop me if that is her motive. If I'm the first [Black friend], I can pave the way for more." Friendship initiation was a sign to African-American lesbians that the White woman had done some work on understanding her racism. Tonya Hutchinson (aged twenty-two) noted, "I guess I would wonder, 'Why would they want to hang out with me as opposed to someone White?' . . . Or, I would think that they were curious about Black people . . . or that, 'Man, that person must be really cool or dealing with race shit.'" Similarly, Lynn (aged sixty-one) asserted, "When a White woman becomes friends with a woman of color, it's a kind of migration as opposed to a need. . . . [T]hey have an education [about race] or they wouldn't be approaching a Black woman as a friend. . . . She's not coming with overt racism or prejudice."

However, several of the African-American lesbians also expressed caution about forming friendships with White women. Some of the more serious concerns were explained by Alicia, a forty-year-old African-American lesbian:

I would assume that she didn't know much about race relations . . . that she wants to learn about Black people . . . that she wants to know me so she can tell her friends she has a Black friend . . . that her world is White and that she has no or few people of color as friends, which means she's had little experience with cross-cultural relations except maybe in work situations where she was most likely the boss or supervisor or serving clients of color . . . that she thinks she's smarter than I am or that she has more to offer in the friendship . . . that she has access to more resources than I . . . that [she believes] her Eurocentric values are superior to mine and will assume when any conflicts come up that I should change . . . that she will be pretty uncomfortable in my world, at least at first . . . [and] that she will have misconceptions about Black women, for example, that Black women are stronger than her, as in "You Black women are so strong you can do anything."

In general, White lesbians saw their race, as well as any unidentified racism in themselves, as being a drawback in terms of initiating friendships with racially aware African-American lesbians. Monitoring oneself constantly for signs of one's own prejudice put a psychological strain on White women that made the friendships more stressful to initiate. However, the self-examination process also made the White women aware of the reasons why African-American lesbians tended to be reserved about cross-race friendships. Janey Archey, a thirty-nine-year-old White lesbian, indicated:

I always have to screen what I say, because I'm afraid what I say will be racist . . . because I've had so little experience with African-Americans. I can't say, "I know how you feel" related to race. It almost comes out of my mouth and part of the screening is that I can't say that. . . . It takes a lot of effort. It's very tiring and then I feel guilty about it—I'm the White person—Black women are tired all the time [from dealing with racism], so I shouldn't be tired. I feel irritated that we're not more alike. I was always raised to think "different" was bad. Now I'm looking at it as something good, but sometimes I still think, "Why can't we be the same?" . . . So, I think African-American lesbians are guarded about having friendships with White women. . . . I learn a lot from them. . . . I'm not sure they get as much [from the friendship as I do].

Marlene Schuman (aged forty-seven), a White lesbian, expressed similar anxiety: "I'm concerned that I will let them down, that I won't be there for them in the way they expect me to be. Even when there is a close bond, there is still a space between us when it comes to the

pain [of racism], a space I can't cross because the White person—myself—hasn't really walked in the other person's shoes."

White lesbians described friendship initiation to be largely their responsibility in cross-race friendships, due to African-American lesbians' perceived and actual cautiousness. Marlene, just introduced above, predicted, "I would expect a certain level of resistance [from African-American lesbians] to becoming friends. Sometimes that means I don't push as hard. I try to give it time. Their experience would suggest they would be wary of my motives. . . . [W]hat is different about me? . . . [W]hy should they get into something [with someone White when] they've probably been hurt by [one] before?" Similarly, Connie, a forty-four-year-old White lesbian, described friendship initiation with an African-American lesbian as follows:

I would expect her to be cautious, possibly suspicious about my trustworthiness, particularly around race issues. . . . She probably wouldn't trust White people. . . . She might be sensitive, guarded, waiting to see how I respond to a Black perspective. . . . She may have various "tests" for me that might involve finding out what my views are about different issues, especially regarding my possible response to acts of discrimination against Black people. . . . She might want to know if I am an advocate for people of color. . . . She might see me as having little to offer her on a personal level.

Likewise, Dana Long (White, aged twenty-one) reported, "I've never had a Black lesbian initiate a friendship. . . . I usually approach them in a political context to develop a friendship, as I did with Tamara. I had to prove to her that I was interested in fighting racism and have the friendship develop out of that. . . . Most Black lesbians will stand back and see where you are. Of course, that's self-defense. As a lesbian, I do the same thing with gay men."

As a friendship develops, similarities of attitudes and values become more important. The similarities facilitate communication, influence how much emotional support friends will be able to give each other on issues they care about, and affect whether the companionship provided will be fulfilling. Being at a similar level of racial awareness was seen as providing the basis for communication, emotional support, and companionship. African-American lesbians were

more stringent about applying the racial awareness test than White women, although both groups mentioned its significance. For instance, Tonya (African-American, aged twenty-two) explained:

I have more stringent guidelines for White people as friends. I'm not as naive and uneducated as I used to be. I still feel race should not prohibit friendships, but many White people *and* Black people would never think of callin' up a person of another race. I don't trust White people as quickly as I have in the past. I am constantly questioning. I would be more apt to let an African-American woman come to me with a clean slate. The White person's slate would be blotted. I would have to know she liked me for me—no ulterior motive. Because of the world we live in, I have to use stricter guidelines. But once they are my friend, I trust them implicitly.

Lynn (aged sixty-one), another African-American lesbian, echoed the above sentiments: "What political views she holds are important. Is she educated as to the cultural difference [between Blacks and Whites]? Does she realize racism is alive and well? Is she a civil rights activist? I don't want to hear statements like, 'Is it true all Black people [whatever]?' How the fuck do I know? I'm not all Black people." Similarly, Alicia would want to know, "Does she know anything about race? I won't want to know her if she's totally ignorant. Can she think? Has she fooled herself into thinking she's more in tune with her racism than she really is? Has she ever had any Black friends before and what were they like?"

It also was quite important to African-American lesbians that the White woman respond empathically to people of color's experiences with racism. Deborah Clayton [aged forty-plus], an African-American, indicated that a White lesbian who wanted to be friends "has to be able to realize that we are in two entirely different worlds. People will respond to me differently [than to] her." A similar point was made by Renee (African-American, aged thirty-one): "Is she able to go to an Anita Baker concert and be a minority? Is she able to see what it's like for me in her world?" Current events sometimes set the stage for revealing White women's attitudes. For Renee, "Rodney King was a litmus test. . . . A lot of Whites don't understand Black America's viewpoint. It's been a loss for me to realize they weren't as cool as I thought. [Some White lesbians said], 'He's a criminal. He shouldn't have run. Don't you think he deserved it? White people

get beat up, too.' But not by Black cops. To have to explain [to them] why he might have run! . . . I've lost friends since [the King case]."

White lesbians also looked for racial awareness in cross-race friends, but identifying as a feminist activist was seen as being equally important. Other research also has reported that White lesbians place strong emphasis on the "feminist" criterion in choosing friends, even to the extent that many actively avoid friendships with nonfeminist women (see, e.g., Rose and Roades, 1987). For example, Laura Ann Moore (aged forty-seven) stated, "Their politics are most important to me. I would want them to be able to articulate their oppression as women of color, as a lesbian in the world at large, as a woman, and to be aware of class issues, too." Andy (aged forty-one) said, "I look at their ethics, politics, and sense of humor. It's important that we have shared politics—a respect for a sense of justice, a craving for a different kind of world." According to Connie, a potential African-American friend would have to "be proud of her race," as well as be a feminist activist. However, Connie indicated that the standards of feminism she applied to African-American lesbians might differ from those applied to White lesbians, in recognition of the cultural differences in how feminism is defined by the two groups.

Black women are less likely to be tolerant of White lesbian separatist views, for instance. They cannot afford to be isolated from the Black community as a whole. Also, Black women may not identify with White feminist priorities. School desegregation or employment discrimination are more likely to be major concerns for them. White lesbians are often uninterested in those problems or unsympathetic to them—in fact, White lesbians sometimes contribute to those forms of oppression! What I look for in a Black woman, then, is whether she supports issues that bridge the race gap, like reproductive freedom and equal educational opportunities.

In summary, initiating cross-race friendships appeared to add another level of complexity to the usual process of friendship development. The assumption that White women were unlikely to be racially aware inhibited African-American lesbians' interest in establishing friendships with them. White lesbians' standards for feminist commitment, along with their lack of knowledge about African-American women's experiences, made them more tentative about pursuing

cross-race relations. As a result, the process of friendship formation was much more gradual than it would be for same-race friendships.

Establishing Trust

Questions about how to establish trust in cross-race friendships formed a second major theme of the interviews. Trust is necessary for close relationships to develop. According to Holmes and Rempel (1989), "Issues of trust have their origins in the dialectic between people's hopes and fears as close relationships develop" (p. 187). As people become more intimate, they become more vulnerable to one another. Trust requires reciprocity and equity (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992). Reciprocity is present when both people are equally involved in the relationship; equity exists when both are equally benefited by it. Holmes and Rempel (1989) proposed that trust also is based on the belief that your partner will be responsive and even, at times, sacrifice her own self-interest in order to help you. The process of building trust in friendship is fostered by self-disclosure and intimate communications, as well as the buildup of consistent behaviors (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992). Over time, friends become increasingly secure with each other and reassured about the partner's intentions.

The lesbians we interviewed indicated that the most effective way to build trust in cross-race friendships was to become *allies* against racism. Such an alliance signaled that the two women viewed each other as equal partners in the relationship and that each would keep the lines of communication open about race issues. Little extra effort was required from African-American lesbians to signal their commitment to antiracism, because their involvement in that work typically was obvious. White lesbians, however, had to work to establish their status as allies. They could begin by taking responsibility for their own education about race. To be an ally also required White lesbians to take both public and private stands against racist attitudes and acts, even at the expense of alienating other White people. These actions provided the reassurance African-American lesbians were looking for in cross-race friendships.

The ability of White women to listen nondefensively to African-American lesbians' views of race was considered a hallmark of an ally. For example, Tonya indicated that she knew a White lesbian was a potential friend when she (Tonya) had made a comment about all the Black men on TV being in handcuffs and the woman replied, "That's really fucked up." The woman's lack of defensiveness about hearing racism mentioned was interpreted as a positive sign that the friendship could go forward. Similarly, Lynn, an African-American lesbian, said, "I want respect first, trust later. White lesbians have to learn to hear what Black people are saying. When a woman of color says, 'This is a racist statement,' don't go all defensive. Find out why she said that." Alicia, also an African-American lesbian, echoed that sentiment: "White people aren't used to having to listen and learn from a Black person—they resent being in the 'inferior' position of student. It's important that [potential friends] don't act like they know it all. They need to do a lot of listening."

White lesbians indicated that they were able to establish trust with African-American lesbian friends by developing their listening skills and by not abandoning the relationship as soon as the conversation became uncomfortable. Dana, a White lesbian, explained:

The first thing in building trust is that there has to be a level of openness and honesty . . . some understanding that who you are—who I am—is based on race and class and that it affects every dynamic between you and another person. There has to be a willingness to talk about those things. . . . Concretely, this means, in my friendship with Tamara [an African-American lesbian], that we have many discussions about fighting racism. . . . We disagree a lot, but I am not willing to retreat from argument because of guilt or fear. This is part of the foundation of trust between us.

Another White lesbian, Janey, also pointed out the importance of responsiveness:

It's important that I be open and honest about myself and my ideas. . . . I might not necessarily agree with a Black friend about them. I know not to shut them [Black lesbians] off. I've learned from African-Americans that I'm not always right. It's important to enjoy each other's company and not have to screen for race. Just to have a free flow. If race comes up, to be able to say it. . . . What I've been hearing lately from Black friends is to be myself. I now don't always have the need to take a particular stand. I own up to who I am and be White.

Responsiveness was seen by White lesbians as extending to the political arena. Most felt strongly that the lack of participation by African-American lesbians in lesbian, gay, and feminist political activities was due to the failure of the (mostly White) organizations who sponsor them to address the concerns of people of color. Marlene, a White lesbian, explained:

It's actually been hard to involve some friends of color in [lesbian and gay] political work. . . . There's a certain lack of trust from Black women friends. . . . Their issues aren't being addressed. We [the gay community] are leaving people out. I've learned that from my Black friends. I've heard them say, "The Amendment Coalition [to repeal gay/lesbian civil rights] isn't gonna affect me one way or the other. I'm more interested in how much I'm gonna make per hour than worrying about rights I already don't have. Getting involved isn't gonna take care of them." They feel pretty betrayed. That's taught me that we White people really don't get it—we don't get it that it isn't possible to build coalitions without making social change.

A willingness to confront White privilege in oneself or in other White people also was a major indicator that a White lesbian could be trusted. White privilege refers to the advantages that unfairly accrue to White people as a result of racism (McIntosh, 1989). These advantages can range from being served more quickly in a restaurant to getting a job, mortgage, or housing more easily. For Deborah, an African-American lesbian, "The bottom line is for a White lesbian to admit that she has an advantage over me in this society and that it's not fair. . . . In our daily struggle as lesbians, the only thing a White lesbian has to do is put her arm through that of a White man and she has all the benefits and status White society has to offer."

White lesbians were well aware of the requirement that they address their White privilege if they hoped to make cross-race friends. According to Connie, "The White woman must take the lead in building trust. For instance, try not to act White all the time. That is, if something goes wrong, don't take charge because you're used to taking charge as a White person." For Laura, a White lesbian, only a strong personal commitment allows trust to be established:

Trust comes about by being there when people express that they need support, by challenging racism wherever you see it. If you are a poor

person or a person of color, you don't know if the other [White] person is really on your team. Will she walk away when the comfort zone gets too hot? That's why, when I'm committed, I stay with the program. I've made a long-term commitment to social change. For eight years, I've been involved in housing and health care issues for the poor. You build trust by showing that you're steadfast. You have to show you have a personal stake in it.

In general, White lesbians felt that trust was enhanced when the White person took the initiator role in establishing the friendship; being the initiator also was viewed as well worth the effort. As Dana explained:

There has to be a more conscious attempt to build friendships with African-American lesbians. "I have to work a lot harder to be your friend," I tell my African-American friends. . . . I think that continues to be true [in the relationship]. Even when intimacy is there, it is still a fight to maintain the friendship, because there are so many ways society tries to divide us. You constantly have to bridge the gap. . . . The friendship is constantly being tested. . . . In personal terms, the payoff is worth it—you have the feeling you can really trust someone. . . . My relationships with other White lesbians have been more comfortable, but not as deep.

Another White lesbian, Janey, concurred with Dana. "It's a different kind of trust. Once they're formed, there's a good amount of trust in both White and Black friendships, but there is less screening with White people. Race adds another dimension. I have to work harder at the trust and for a longer time than with White lesbians, especially at the beginning. . . . But I'm looking at that more—easy doesn't mean better."

Race was not always the singular focus for developing trust. Participants recognized the need to establish other common interests. Several African-American lesbians questioned the relevance of race. For instance, Jeanette (aged fifty-six), an African-American lesbian, claimed:

I can't assume anything on the basis of race. You have to remember that I'm fifty-six [years old]. I look for different things in people than when I was twenty, thirty, or forty. . . . I listen to my innards—whether I feel this is a good or bad space or person. I'm extremely trusting of a person who makes me feel good . . . a comfort level. . . . I will pursue that person's friendship. There has to be mutual respect . . . enjoying the same types of things or, if the things we enjoy are different, at least we can respect each

other's territory. I prefer friendships where race is not the basis for it. Race is insignificant to me. I don't want to be described as a Black friend—I'd rather be described just as a friend.

Two other African-American lesbians, Deborah and Tonya, also pointed out the need to judge people on an individual basis. Deborah asserted, "There are some White women I would trust before Black women. My brother was killed by a Black cop. Witnesses wouldn't come forward. . . . I learned you can't trust anybody just because they're Black. You can't hate anybody just because they're White. . . . You have to have openness and honesty in any friendship." Tonya also wished not to be judged or judge others based on race, while recognizing that it was not easy to surmount the color barrier:

I would really like [to see] the day when we don't see color. I don't think race should be a criterion for friendship. It's very possible to have cross-race friendships. I know it's possible, because I have one, Sandra. I've known her for five years. She is the dearest friend. We've been through lots of shit together. It's not easy. It's easier for me to be friends with other African-American lesbians who grew up poor. It's definitely harder to be friends with someone of another race. If you can be friends across race lines, you are really doin' something big.

The path to establishing trust was not always smooth, however. Three inequities or conflicts were identified as common in cross-race friendships, including expectations for African-American lesbians to fill a "nurturer" role, cultural misunderstandings, and racial segregation of social activities. First, a racial dynamic originating in the era of slavery—the expectation that African-American women would fulfill a supportive, nurturing "nanny" role in relation to White women—continued to permeate and cause conflict in African-American and White women's relationships. Renee, an African-American lesbian, explained:

African-American women have always been the mother figure, the peacekeeper. They have always bounced from one race or class to another. . . . Black women have always been educators, caretakers. We have been able to make Whites feel comfortable. . . . I get angry when I have to soothe them [Whites] to make them comfortable. Why don't I get to be comfortable? . . . We've always been entrusted with White people's children. Even my employer wants me to babysit his kids. History is full of Black women taking care of someone else's business. African-American

lesbian to the rescue! . . . I am a walking, talking example. I'm not a threat to have as a friend. If you had a Black friend, she would be like Renee. . . . I can work it if I have to.

The nurturing role also was imposed on African-American lesbians when it was assumed they would be responsible for teaching White women about race. The inequity of the teacher-student relationship made the African-American lesbians feel "used" and underbenefited in the relationship. As Lynn explained, "The woman of color does most of the education or work [on race issues]. I don't want to do that education." Alicia made a similar point:

I would have to be ready to commit a certain amount of energy to teaching about race relations in order to be comfortable. . . . I don't expect White people to know a lot about race, but if I have to teach them everything, it's boring. If I was going to get a lot from the relationship, I would be willing to do it—if, for example, they were really trustworthy, a *really* good listener, or owned a ranch with horses. . . . In general, I don't think White women care about having any friends of color. . . . I don't even think they think about it. . . . White women don't want Black women around. It makes things difficult. It makes them uncomfortable. They only want us around if they have certain politics. . . . Then, it's a show of power to have Black friends. It shows they're an expansive person.

White lesbians responded to this issue in their cross-race friendships by assuming responsibility for their own education about race. According to Connie, this could be done by "educating yourself about Black culture—not assuming she sees things the way you do—and getting that across to her." However, this sometimes proved to be difficult, as Janey indicated: "One of my Black friends says [for White people] not to come empty [to the relationship]. I still feel like when I'm myself, I'm coming empty, because that's what it means to be White."

A second source of problems in trust-building pertained to incidents in which White lesbians did something that was interpreted as racist by African-American lesbians. Usually, the incident itself was identified as less important than the resistance the White woman typically had to hearing the African-American lesbian's point of view. Cultural differences in attitudes concerning women's roles, in the use of slang, or in food and clothing preferences all were potential

sources of misunderstanding. For example, Lynn, an African-American lesbian, remarked: "One of the major problems I have to deal with [in cross-race friendships] is that I was raised as a free female. I can express my thoughts. A lot of White women can't express their feelings, especially anger, and they don't want me to either. . . . What I think about them is 'You've already got problems with who you are. Why do you want me to be like you?'" Tonya elaborated on the cultural gap:

I'm frustrated when I have to explain everything because there's a language difference. Black folks have a totally different vocabulary. I mean a word I use to be good, but White people may think it's bad or else they don't understand it *at all!* Or, here I've been saying the same phrase the same way for fifteen years and they correct me because they want me to use 'proper' English. . . . When White people do recognize a cultural difference, it is usually stereotypic. They automatically assume that because I'm Black, I like fried foods, or that I can sing, or that I really must love Anita Baker, or that I know every Black author.

Another African-American lesbian, Jeanette, pointed out problems that sometimes arise when the White friend makes assumptions about how African-Americans have been treated:

It's irritating when a person assumes I'm going to react a certain way to a situation . . . when they don't take me for my human value. One friend has assumed I wouldn't be offended by a racial slur. Her son called me a racial slur and she corrected him, saying to me, "I know you're used to being called that, but I don't like hearing it." I said, "No, I'm not [used to it]. This is the first time I've ever been called that to my face."

Problems like the ones mentioned above were only resolvable if addressed directly. Several participants mentioned that bringing such incidents to the attention of the friend had led to some very interesting discussions about race stereotypes and cultural racism, as well as to greater intimacy.

A third area of conflict had to do with bridging the social gap between African-Americans and Whites. African-American lesbians perceived White lesbians who failed to extend the friendship from the political to the social arena as being insincere about the friendship. For example, one African-American lesbian, Renee, said:

I have a problem with them [White lesbians] if they don't introduce me to their family . . . if I hear them talking about certain [White] friends, but I never get to meet them . . . if they have a party, but I'm not invited. Don't just invite me to a meeting or workshop, but into your house. . . . What really ticks me off is when White lesbian activists say Black lesbians aren't doing enough politically. It's only been the past two years that they've wanted to include us. You would think that because we're all lesbians we would have a common bond . . . but if you're White, you may get a job before I do. I tell some White women they should check their racism. White lesbians are very defensive. They say, "I could never be racist. I'm a lesbian!" I say, "Sorry, that is not a 'Get out of jail free' card." If you only come to us [Black lesbians] to fulfill your fantasy of diversity, but keep us out of your inner circle, you are a racist lesbian.

However, Renee admitted that it was not always easy to cross the race barrier socially: "I walk the wire with White lesbian friends. I feel more safe with Black lesbian friends. I have had parties where I've invited both worlds. I have to be a little bumblebee between the two. I'm always on this big educational trip, telling each that the other won't bite."

White lesbians sometimes had to make intentional efforts to bridge the social divide. "Many public events are same-race," stated Andy, a White lesbian. "If I go to one of the lesbian dances, it'll be mostly White women. They [the dances] don't attract Black women as much. It's not easy to maintain the social contact. We have to be conscious about partying and playing together. There has to be a deliberate effort to socialize." Socializing together served to solidify cross-race ties. Two White participants specifically mentioned how attending a funeral had positively affected friendships. "A Black friend's father passed away recently," remarked Andy. "Having lost both my parents, it was important for me to go to the funeral. That required moving into her community . . . being one of the few White people there." Likewise, Janey remarked, "My friend Gloria just died. I was the only White person at the gathering after her funeral. I was very accepted. I felt our friendship made that happen. We never skirted race." Another White lesbian, Laura, stressed the importance of mutual efforts to build social ties:

By struggling together about the differences you have, you come to understand, if not accept, those differences. Working and playing together—

getting to know each other as human beings. Knowing they will be there for you, too—that you don't live on a one-way street.

On occasion, cross-race mingling placed the friends in situations where others were hostile or discriminating toward one of the pair. This usually served as a consciousness-raising experience for the White lesbian. Andy, a White lesbian, addressed this issue:

A main problem with socializing together is the general racism . . . how people may respond to you when you go somewhere [with an African-American friend]. At a restaurant, the [White] waiter may talk to me, not the African-American friend I'm with It also exposes me to the general level of trauma, stress, and crises that are part and parcel of the lives of several African-American friends . . . of the destruction caused by race and class oppression. Also, within the lesbian community, people feel they have to tell you they're not racist. So it changes the entire dynamic of the friendship. It shuts down the African-American lesbian and some White lesbians, too.

Another White lesbian, Dana, reported similar experiences:

For most people, seeing an integrated group of people is a rare occurrence, so being with an African-American friend means I have to feel on a practical level the racism any African-American experiences all the time. We can go into a place and be ignored for fifteen minutes by service staff. I never before experienced that at all. It was a shocking experience the first time. You can't take it for granted that you can go to the same places you would with White friends.

The inequities or conflicts described above could be difficult to negotiate because participants often were unsure of the degree to which race, as opposed to individual personality, was a factor. Marlene, a White lesbian, mentioned, "I have to work at deciphering whether a friend's specific response to something is a personal quirk or if it's a cultural difference. If the person is White, I might just assume it's a personality thing. But if the friend is a different race, I might pause." According to Connie, the less familiar territory of cross-race friendships "might look calm, but land mines could be lurking underneath" that could result in both friends being hurt. However, friendships that survived the conflicts were greatly improved. "When the friendship is built across race, it's stronger," Marlene explained. "You're conscious of it. In same-race friendships,

there's a lot of unexamined assumptions that may fall apart. There's not the same thoughtful attention to building [a friendship] that will enable you to get through a crisis."

In summary, the foremost way to build trust between African-American and White lesbians was for a White lesbian to demonstrate that she was a racially aware ally of women of color. Both African-American and White lesbians viewed it as necessary for the White woman to initiate the trust-building process in order to balance the inequities created by historic racism. White lesbians also had to be willing to remain loyal to African-American friends, even if it meant confronting other White people. Although other factors besides race were recognized as playing a role in friendship, most participants believed that race and racism would have to be addressed at some point in any cross-race friendship. The consensus was that a cross-race friendship was indeed subject to unique problems but that, if weathered, they often served to strengthen the friendship.

Rewards of Cross-Race Friendships

Friendship research indicates that "somebody to talk to and confide in" and "to be there when you need them" are the primary and interrelated rewards of adult friendship (Rawlins, 1992). It is apparent from the preceding section on building trust that our participants endorsed similar views with a novel twist. The expectations for cross-race friendship required that friends display special sensitivity and loyalty around race matters; these qualities also were perceived to be among the major rewards. However, because of their commitment to antiracist and feminist work, the participants we interviewed went further in assessing their friendships than most people typically do: they also evaluated them from multicultural and political standpoints. Using these broader perspectives, two additional rewards of cross-race friendships were identified: their contribution to (1) developing a greater appreciation for cultural diversity and (2) more effective political organizing. The first reward is one often associated with being at the most advanced level of racial identity development, when cross-cultural interactions are sought out as opportunities for

personal growth (Helms, 1990). The second reward was in keeping with the racially inclusive, feminist philosophy espoused by participants.

The first reward, appreciation of cultural diversity, was described as being highly personal in nature. Participants spoke of the impact cross-race friends had on them in tender, serious, and sometimes humorous tones. The exposure to unfamiliar aspects of White culture was especially noted as a reward by African-American lesbians; being able to benefit occasionally from White privilege by being associated with a White person was mentioned as well. For example, in response to the question, "What are the rewards, if any, of cross-race friendships," Renee, an African-American lesbian, replied:

Hockey tickets. I never went to a hockey game with Black lesbians. They don't do hockey. I get to share more with White lesbians without being downtrodden. I've been told [by White friends] that I have this or that quality and that I should pursue it—not to let skin color hold me back. It's uplifting. They help me recover from being mistreated for being Black. Also, White people talk about things Black people don't. I wouldn't be playing softball, or have joined the — organizing committee, gone to New York for Stonewall or to the March on Washington. I wouldn't be involved in the political scene. To boil it down, I've gotten a sense of acceptance from White lesbian friends. . . . I feel that I'm bilingual. I can communicate in both communities.

Three other African-American lesbians, Lynn, Tonya, and Jeanette, expanded on the value of being exposed to another culture and sometimes being able to tap White resources through affiliation. According to Lynn, "One advantage of friendships with White lesbians is that you get to have contact with another culture, to know how the other half exists. There might be other advantages, depending on your needs. White financial resources can help. If you want to get into a job, you have to go that way, use your contacts." Similarly, Tonya noted four advantages:

The first advantage is learning about another culture. It's so weird how differently you [Blacks and Whites] do things. Neither is better. It's good to know how others live and think. Second, having a different perspective is like having a second mind. It's really neat to have two different opinions. Third, it's important for me to have diversity in my life—to not be sheltered. Fourth, to have access to the power White people have: the

White person has the power position and you're their friend. It's like having the inside scoop. They have things I don't have. It's an inside door. It's good.

Jeanette's remarks continued in the same vein:

[One reward is that] sometimes you get the better tables in restaurants. Also, any of the social things. . . . Sometimes if you are shopping, for example, salespeople will treat you differently than if you are alone or with a Black friend. Also, the White friend will know a different set of people, who will introduce you to even more people. There is more sharing in some areas. I enjoy good literature, symphonic music, good musicals. Most African-American women I know don't like that. . . . But, a main advantage is getting a good table at a restaurant and better service from waiters and waitresses.

For White lesbians, appreciation of cultural diversity facilitated a "paradigm shift" in their way of thinking about themselves and the world. "The advantage is in not compartmentalizing yourself—shutting yourself off," insisted Marlene, a White lesbian. "I cannot imagine life in that kind of all-White vacuum anymore." Another White lesbian, Connie, agreed:

My friendships with African-American lesbians have only increased my admiration for African-Americans' cultural and economic contribution to our society. The [African-American] friends I have are so vibrant, wise, and loving that it has made me aware—and sometimes deeply ashamed—of how much being White has cut me off from what is truly significant in life—from seeing our common humanity, as well as from learning to negotiate our differences and, if possible, to love and value them.

Other White lesbians provided specific examples of how exposure to African-American culture had affected them. For Andy:

One advantage is that it expands my community and my understanding of the world we live in and how we got to where we are. I get to rub my fingers through some really cool hair. I find that African-American lesbians are more physically affectionate [than White lesbians]. It's not sexual. That has been one of the wonderful advantages. I have created with these women a different sense of space—physicality—and I love it and them. I appreciate being challenged. I love spending time with them. That's not specific to race.

Laura also identified cultural awareness as being among the most important advantages of cross-race friendships:

They [cross-race friendships] have given me a lot of opportunities to learn and grow. I would never have had the experience of going into a Baptist church and hearing the preacher and the singing and seeing the type of support it [church] provides if I didn't have African-American friends—or of knowing the meaning of Kwanza as a celebration—or of going into African-American bars and understanding butch-femme roles when I came out. They're definitely different from White bars. . . . There also is a certain amount of strength to know it's okay to get loud and express yourself with a certain amount of passion. It gives you a clearer understanding of what's at stake and gives you reinforcement to get in the face of who is opposing you.

The enjoyment associated with learning about others was apparent in Janey's description of advantages as well:

The biggest advantage has been learning from other people's culture. It's enriched my friendships. I've had the same kinds of friendships with [White] people like me for years. . . . I really have enjoyed learning the differences in family—celebration, rules, structure, what people talk about at family gatherings, how they play. The most recent incident was when I went to Valerie's family's—her cousin's—house. I was worried about what I was going to eat (I'm a vegetarian) and not offend her family. So Valerie calls her cousin and says for my benefit, "Well, what kind of food are you going to have?" "Well," responded her cousin, "Black folks' food. What do you think?" Basically, it was nothing I could eat. Then Valerie said, "Oh, I was asking for Janey, 'cuz she's a vegetarian." Then her cousin mentioned a couple of things she'd be having that I could eat. She didn't try to change anything to please me. I thought about White gatherings and how I would've expected my family to fix individual things. I enjoyed her response—she didn't tiptoe around. She just said, "Black folks' food." They were very welcoming. They just did whatever they intended to do. I enjoyed being let into their community.

The second major reward related specifically to cross-race friendships had to do with their positive effect on participants' political work. African-American lesbians reported that such ties made a significant difference in terms of how connected they felt to mixed-race organizations. As Tonya stated, "It's always good to have a White person sitting beside you, thinking the same way, trying to convince White and Black folks of the importance of antiracist work." Likewise, as Lynn, also an African-American lesbian, pointed out, "If there is a friendship at all, it must've happened during the political process, when you saw eye to eye. But if there is a power struggle,

there could be problems. The people in the two antiracism groups I've been in have been loving, caring. They wanted to effect change. They weren't involved in a power struggle."

Alternatively, working together promoted opportunities for friendship. "Political work has made the friendships more secure," explained Jeanette, an African-American lesbian. "Our topic is antiracism. We can talk about things that really hurt—what we feel. That makes us feel good. The antiracism group helps to seal friendships. Some people who came in the beginning were standoffish, especially White women. They've really changed—they see we're not so different after all." Deborah, also African-American, described similar advantages of friendships with White lesbians. "There are obvious political advantages," she explained, "but friendships are so valuable, regardless of where you get them. . . . It helps the organization if there is a friendship. You just need a common goal. My political work has helped form friendships. I don't want to use the line, 'One of my best friends is a White woman,' but one of my best friends is Pam [a White woman]. I know if I call her, she'll be there." Appreciation for White women's political contribution also was a consequence of shared political work for one African-American lesbian, Renee, who asserted, "These White ladies have been doing this political work for a long time. They have tools and knowledge. I can show up with my two cents and I don't have to start from scratch. Don't throw out what they have done. They need our validity, our new blood. I want to add to that."

White lesbians reported tremendous enthusiasm concerning how cross-race friendships had affected their political involvement, too, or at the very least, added to their understanding of why racial integration was difficult to achieve in the political arena. Janey, a White lesbian, elaborated:

In the past, my political work has suffered from not having real, honest, and long-term relationships with people from different races. That's why I stepped back for a few years; it's part of the reason I wanted to join an antiracism group. I operated as the Great White Hope. I read, I knew, I could change things. One-light-bulb-changes-the-world type of thing. I would read a lot about African-American history and culture and would assume what I was doing politically was right. But the piece I was missing

was real friendships and real collaborative work with African-American lesbians. How the friendships affect my political work. . . . That's probably the biggest area that was missing. The friendships I have now give me the information, impetus, motivation to do better political work—more honest political work. And to be able to have friendships beyond political work! . . . I'm finding that I value that more. Friendship enables it all to come together.

Andy reported a similar effect on her activism: "My cross-race friendships and my political work are totally interconnected. That's true of all my friendships. . . . Working in a multiracial organization has only improved the political work that I'm involved in. It has certainly challenged this White girl to look at things that I had no idea about. It's scary *and* exciting. It's moving me toward the world I want to see." However, another White lesbian, Laura, was more tempered in her assessment of the connection between friendship and politics:

I would like to say that it has strengthened some of the work I do, but I often don't believe that's true. I now am more understanding about why African-American lesbians fail to be politically committed in the way I think they should. I understand their hesitation to jump in the middle of a bunch of White people and be tokenized. I wish more people of color would come forward and kick the asses of White lesbians and gay men and take their rightful place, but I understand that they don't.

Overall, the lesbians interviewed perceived that cross-race friendships had contributed to both their personal and political growth. Personal growth was reflected primarily in terms of enhancing awareness of cultural diversity, including being exposed to the other race's tastes, interests, social patterns, and (in the case of Whites) privileges. Political growth accompanied the friendships in terms of increased commitment to individuals and organizations promoting antiracist, multicultural social agendas.

Conclusions

The way cross-race friendships operated for our participants appears to be an excellent example of the feminist slogan, "The personal is political," in action. The lesbians we interviewed took seriously the idea that racism affected both African-American and White people.

The effects of racism on African-Americans included prejudice and discrimination on an economic, social, and cultural level. For Whites, racism resulted in being miseducated about the contributions of African-Americans, being denied the opportunity to appreciate other cultures without a false sense of superiority (e.g., "White is right"), and seeing oneself as having an individual identity, but not a racial identity (see, e.g., Katz, 1978). At their best, cross-race friendships were seen as healing some of the pain of racism for African-American lesbians, or at least providing a temporary reprieve from it, as well as playing an important role in developing White lesbians' awareness of their racial identity and the privileges and cultural limitations associated with it.

According to Pat O'Connor (1992, p. 21), friendship research has described the ways in which friendships not only meet individual needs but also create "a moral discourse between friends." Applied to the cross-race friendships examined here, the moral discourse of racial equality contributed to creating a universe where participants could enact their vision on both a personal and political level. Thus, our research provides evidence that the feminist notion of sisterhood, if realized, could challenge traditional status hierarchies concerning race. However, it is also apparent from our interviews that the path to such relationships is arduous. One could not simply decide to seek out a cross-race friendship in order to achieve the rewards described here. Cross-race friendships have additional responsibilities associated with them that are not present in same-race friendships. For the African-American lesbians in our sample, they required a willingness to assume, if not a nurturer-teacher role, at least a more patient commitment to the friendship. The White lesbians we interviewed who wanted cross-race friends had to assume the initiator role in the friendship and a significant amount of responsibility for educating themselves about their own racism and racial identity.

Our results suggest that women's cross-race friendships potentially have the power, as Janice Raymond (1986, p. 339) has suggested, "to help tie women's lives together, to make connections that have not been made, and to provide a unifying and directing influence in all other areas of female existence in this world." They also illustrate

that “both politics and friendship are restored to a deeper meaning when they are brought together,” that is, “when political activity proceeds from a shared affection, vision, and spirit, and when friendship has a more expansive political effect” (p. 339). Clearly, “sisterhood”—if obtained—is powerful. Whether we obtain it, on either an individual or larger political scale, however, is up to us.

NOTES

1. Gratitude is extended to the members of the St. Louis Anti-Racism Group and other community participants and to the Association for Women in Psychology, for creating a space to confront and challenge racism.
2. If a participant is initially identified by her full name, the name is authentic. If initial identification is by first name only, it is a pseudonym.

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