

tional spaces where art can be made, where we can gain and sustain visibility, where progressive critical thought about art can emerge.

This culture of resistance must be manifest in critical writing. Unless there is collective recognition that there is an ongoing need to create contexts where more black folks from diverse class backgrounds are able to think and write about art, not enough African-Americans will receive the critical consideration their work merits.

Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary

GROWING UP in conservative working-class and poor Southern black communities, I had no notion that black folks were inherently more radical or "cool" than any other marginalized or oppressed group. While the folks I lived amongst were often militant in their condemnation of racism, they were pretty much in agreement with many of the other values that trickled down from the worlds of the conservative ruling classes, from the white or black bourgeois world. When it came to materialism, across class it was clear that success in diverse black communities was measured by having nice things. Whether or not something was perceived as "nice" depended on one's social environment.

One of the intense pressures I experienced as an adolescent was caused by my longing to cultivate my own style and taste, clashing with the pressure to conform to set bourgeois standards. Sarah Oldham, my mother's mother, was the "style radical." Her aesthetic sensibility was grounded in a more traditional appreciation for the natural world, for color and harmony. As a quiltmaker she was constantly creating new worlds, discovering new patterns, different shapes. To her it was the uniqueness of the individual body, look, and soul that mattered. From her I learned the appropriateness of being myself.

The example of personal freedom and creative courage set by my grandmother was constantly challenged by the bourgeois aspirations of my mother, whereby she insisted on conformity, on imitating acceptable appearances and styles. To my mother, "nice things" were not the earth, the sky, the eggs in the henhouse, a fishing worm uncovered in dark, moist dirt, the sight of a tomato growing on a vine; "nice things" were the objects seen in advertisements, on the screen, and in catalogues.

My grandmother and her daughter, my mother, did agree on the basic principle that beautiful objects enhanced life, even if their aesthetic standards differed. Although we came from a poor and working-class back-

ground, from a history of squatting, sharecropping, and working in white folks' houses, among the traditional Southern black folks I grew up around there was a shared belief in the idea that beautiful things, objects that could be considered luxurious, that were expensive and difficult to own, were necessary for the spirit. The more downtrodden and unfortunate the circumstances, the more "beauty" was needed to uplift, to offer a vision of hope, to transform. When it came to the issue of desiring and longing for the beautiful object, whether it was a house, a car, furniture, clothing, shoes, etc., everyone agreed, across class, that folks needed to be in touch with beauty. When I was a child, this did not seem to be a radical idea. It was such a common way of thinking about life it seemed "natural." There was never a need to make someone feel guilty when he or she did without the basic necessities of life in order to acquire an object deemed beautiful, healing to the spirit. At times those objects were luxury items, not intrinsically aesthetically beautiful, but desired because the culture of consumerism had deemed them lovely symbols of power and possibility. Even though folks sometimes laughed at the individual who bought a shiny car bigger than the wood frameshack he or she lived in, underneath the mockery was the understanding that this symbol of luxury was a balm to a depressed and wounded spirit. This stance was in every way oppositional.

The black elders in our community, like Sarah my grandmother and Gus my grandfather, believed it was better to seek beauty in a world that was not subject to monetary exchange. For Sarah, beauty was there in the growing of flowers in her elaborate garden, or in the making of her quilts. Alice Walker, in her insightful essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," acknowledges the way poor black women expressed their concern with beauty in the growing and arranging of flower gardens. Offering the example of her own mother, Walker declares: "Her face, as she prepared the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect of the possibilities—and the will to grasp them." This legacy had been handed down through generations in traditional Southern black folk culture. These were notions of beauty and wealth grounded in a worldview that was in opposition to excessive materialism.

Southern black males who had an oppositional aesthetic were often economically deprived but rich in spirit. When the forces of white

supremacy and capitalism denied them access to meaningful work, they cultivated ways to care for the soul that sustained them. For my grandfather, Daddy Gus, the will to create was life-sustaining. To him beauty was present in found objects, discarded objects that he rescued and restored because, as he put it, "spirits lived there." His room—a luxurious, welcoming place for us as children—was full of "treasures." Entering that sanctuary of precious "beautiful" objects, we were embraced by an atmosphere of peace and serenity. In *Shambala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Buddhist monk Chogyam Trungpa teaches that we create this atmosphere by expressing gentleness and precision in our environment: "You may live in a dirt hut with no floor and only one window, but if you regard that space as sacred, if you care for it with your heart and mind, then it will be a palace." This caretaking promotes "awareness and attention to detail." There can be a sacred place in everyone's life where beauty can be laid bare, where our spirits can be moved and lifted up by the creation and presence of a beautiful object.

When I first began to travel to different continents, I was fascinated by how, in most parts of the world, especially in places that the United States designates as "Third World," no matter how poor the surroundings, individuals create beautiful objects. In the deserts of North Africa, beautiful woven rugs were present in every abode, no matter how humble. In countries where folks are ravished by genocidal war and famine, suffering, anguished bodies shroud themselves in beautiful cloth. Indians in Mexico and the United States, living in various states of impoverishment, make clay pots that reveal artistic skill and vision.

In contrast, in the United States, contemporary African-Americans have been increasingly socialized by the mass media to leave behind attachments to the oppositional worldviews of our elders, especially to those having to do with beauty, and to assimilate into the mainstream. Hedonistic consumerism is offered as a replacement for healing and life-sustaining beauty. Unlike the global nonwhite poor, who manage to retain an awareness of the need for beauty despite imperialist devastation, the vast majority of the black poor in the United States do not harbor uplifting cultural objects in their homes. This group has been overwhelmingly encouraged to abandon, destroy, or sell artifacts from the past. And this destruction has brought in its wake the loss of an aesthetic sensibility that is redemptive. For example, today's concrete state-

designed and -operated homogenous housing for the poor takes away the opportunity for creativity that was characteristic of the rural shack, its porch and gardens.

Black liberation movement has not addressed the issue of aesthetics in everyday life. Militant black power movements in the 1960s and 1970s did not encourage a reclamation of attitudes about beauty common in traditional black folk culture. While obsessive materialism has been consistently critiqued in antiracist movements, as well as by radicals on the left, the issue of aesthetics has not received much attention, nor has the relationship between the desire for beauty and the longing for material goods.

At the outset of the contemporary feminist movement there was significant interrogation of consumerism, of women's addiction to materialism, and of the issue of money, both its distribution along gendered lines and its use. Early feminist anthologies such as *Women in Sexist Society*, edited by Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran, included discussions of consumerism and beauty in relation to appearances. An anonymous "red-stocking sister" made the useful point that feminist discussions of female obsession with consumerism would be useful if they began from a standpoint that depicted Americans as mere dupes of patriarchal advertising culture, "oppressed" by an infatuation with goods. She suggested: "The consumerism theory is the outgrowth of an aristocratic, European-oriented antimaterialism based on upperclass *ressentiment* against the rise of the vulgar bourgeois. Radical intellectuals have been attracted to this essentially reactionary position . . . because it appeals to both their dislike of capitalism and their feeling of superiority to the working class . . . Oddly, no one claims that the ruling class is oppressed by commodity choices; it seems that rich people consume out of free choice." As was the case in black liberation struggles, there was no discussion of aesthetics, of the place of beauty in everyday life, within feminist debates about materialism, money, etc. Progressive feminist thinkers are more likely to critique the dangers of excessive materialism without discussing in a concrete way how we can balance a desire for beauty or luxury within an anticapitalist, antisexist agenda.

As revolutionary and radical feminism becomes less visible, and as more reformist thinking, such as Naomi Wolf's *Fire with Fire*, prevails as the feminist order of the day, there is hardly any discussion among

feminists about the politics of materialism or money. Contemporary feminists, myself included, can receive more financial rewards for feminist work than has ever been possible, yet we remain relatively silent about these issues. Wolf is not silent. She advocates a brand of "power feminism" that sees nothing problematic about both pursuing and achieving wealth and opposing patriarchal domination. Certainly there is a distinction to be made between the processes by which material privilege can be acquired and wealth accumulated.

Most radical or revolutionary feminists continue to believe that living simply, the equitable distribution of resources, and communalism are necessary to the progressive struggle to end sexism while ending class exploitation. All too often in the past, living simply was made synonymous with a vulgar antimaterialism or anti-aestheticism that privileged living without attention to beauty, to decoration, either of one's person or one's space. Although nowadays the tendency seems to be toward the other extreme, toward indulging to excess, some radical feminists, myself included, grapple with the place of beauty in revolutionary struggle, with our materialism and with our longing for luxury. Just as my Southern black ancestors recognized that in the midst of exploitation and oppression suffering could be endured if transforming encounters with beauty took place, many revolutionary feminists recognize that we need these same values within the progressive feminist movement. Since it is so easy for those of us with material privilege to hoard resources, to have an attachment to wealth or privileged class power, we need to be vigilant in creating an ethical approach to consumerism that sustains and affirms radical agendas for social change.

Rather than surrendering our passion for the beautiful, for luxury, we need to envision ways those passions can be fulfilled that do not reinforce the structures of domination we seek to change. Hopefully, feminist thinkers will begin to engage in more discussion and theorizing about the place of beauty in revolutionary struggle. Many of us who have a degree of material privilege find that sharing resources, sharing objects we find beautiful that enhance our lives, is one way to resist falling into a privatized, hedonistic consumerism that is self-serving. Those of us who engage in barter, conscious gift giving, tithing, sharing of living space and money, celebrate the luxurious if that which we deem luxurious is not acquired by harming others.

Females in white-supremacist patriarchal society are most often socialized to consume in an unmindful manner. We are encouraged to value goods, especially luxury goods, over our well-being and safety. Many women remain in domestic situations where we are being hurt and even abused by sexist men because of an attachment to material wealth and privilege. While there are many poor women who remain in abusive households because they plainly lack the economic means to leave, there are also some women who remain in such settings because they fear leaving behind material abundance. This kind of thinking is life-threatening and must be challenged.

Beauty can be and is present in our lives irrespective of our class status. Learning to see and appreciate the presence of beauty is an act of resistance in a culture of domination that recognizes the production of a pervasive feeling of lack, both material and spiritual, as a useful colonizing strategy. Individuals who feel constant lack will consume more, will submit more readily. As feminist thinkers construct feminist theory and practice to guide us into a revolutionary, revitalized feminist future, we need to place aesthetics on our agenda. We need to theorize the meaning of beauty in our lives so that we can educate for critical consciousness, talking through the issues: how we acquire and spend money, how we feel about beauty, what the place of beauty is in our lives when we lack material privilege and even basic resources for living, the meaning and significance of luxury, and the politics of envy. Interrogating these issues will enable feminist thinkers to share certain strategies of resistance that will illuminate the ways we can create a balanced, harmonious life where we know the joy of collective, progressive struggle, where the presence of beauty uplifts and renews the spirit.

Women Artists: The Creative Process

I AM a girl who dreams of leisure, always have. Reverie has always been necessary to my existence. I have needed long hours where I am stretched out, wearing silks, satins, and cashmeres, just alone with myself, embraced by the beauty around me. I have always been a girl for fibers, for textiles, and for the feel of comforting cloth against my skin. When I have adorned myself just so, I am ready for the awesome task of just lingering, spending uninterrupted time with my thoughts, dreams, and intense yearnings, often the kind that, like unrequited love, go unfulfilled. Lately, in the midst of that solitude, I find myself writing, spinning words together in my head so as not to lose or forget the insights, the sharp moments of clarity that come during this quiet time, that surface amid the luxurious smells of expensive French lemon verbena soap and fruity perfume, a book in my hand.

More often than not I end up breaking the reverie to reach for pen and paper, to write. Writing for me is never a moment of reverie; it's always work. Writing is my passion. But it is not an easy passion. It does not shelter or comfort me. Words try me—work me as though I am caught in a moment of spirit possession where forces beyond my control inhabit and take me, sometimes against my will, to places, landscapes of thoughts and ideas, I never wanted to journey to or see. I have never been a girl for travel. Always one wedded to the couch, the back porch, the swing, I want to see the world standing still. My thoughts are movements, my ideas, my adventures. If I travel somewhere, it is often just too much; I feel bombarded, too many sensations, overloaded, I break down. "Girl," I tell my sweetest friend, who often worries about how much time I spend shut away, confined, in the midst of solitude, "I understand Emily [Dickinson]: she stayed home to collect her thoughts—to work undisturbed."

I think often and deeply about women and work, about what it means to have the luxury of time—time spent collecting one's thoughts, time