

# EQUALITY VS. LIBERATION

## RIGHTS, BUT AT WHAT COST?

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"History is his story, and my story is a mystery."

-Barbara Smith

April 5, 2001. Just when I thought I was gaining ground, I found myself having to prove my experience (not my opinion) to yet another white man. My own word about my own background was not enough. The same anger filled my brain when I found myself pouring through the shelves of Davis Library trying to find references to validate my own thoughts in a paper. Would my intellect be insufficient without the re-enforcement of a random professional white guy who writes for the Journal of "Everything that is Rational and Good?" Guess not. So, this last editorial is in honor of all the womyn of color who were and are just as intelligent and enlightened as Malcolm X and Gandhi; to all those sisters and mothers who spoke the theories of Marx, Rousseau and dare I say Jesus, but went unheard and unwritten. This piece is for you.

Black people, what exactly are we asking for when we demand equality? A job? ... working for whom? An education? ... learning what? The freedom to speak? ... to speak how? Let us focus in on this last one for a moment. You, the readers, will be lucky if you have the opportunity to read this in its true linguistic form. The all-knowing standard book of correct grammar prohibits it as always. But what exactly is the standard? Standard speech in the United States is typically spoken by an

upper class white man, or a black man imitating such. Even the latter has a term all its own in the Linguistics department, Black Accented English (BAE), or Black Vernacular English (BVE), if you want to get 'ghetto.' All variation black people make on the English language typically qualifies as 'slang,' and is looked down upon in so-called intellectual circles. (That is, of course, until it is co-opted, manipulated and sold back to us in an Uncle Tommy Hilfiger commercial.) What is this Standard English, and why is it so difficult for us to speak it? Some would argue that our brains are incapable, but I think it is just them. In fact, many who speak English only as a second language comment on how limited it is. A friend of mine once told me that there were at least five words in Hindi meaning five different and wonderful things, but in English, they could only be translated into one word, love. Black people have known this as well for a while now. When we're lost for words to describe a situation, when we change words to match the meaning behind them, when we stutter, it is not a disability but a signifier of the limited language we have been forced to speak in order to meet the standard.

The standard shows up in other places as well, like in school. For example, we could claim that originally there were no subjects, no specialized departments and no academic majors. Originally, we just learned. African American studies as well as all other 'ethnic' studies were history and culture. Geology was the world around us, and math was the

pyramid we built.

But before I take it too far, let me be concrete. When white men accuse people of color, immigrants and even white womyn for "stealing" their jobs and spots in college, we wonder who guaranteed those positions to them in the first place? When young black children are confronted with headlines reading that they are performing at sub-standard levels, and they are at the bottom of a gap between them and their white counterparts, we ask what is the standard? When in law school debating the interpretation of the First Amendment, ask what is the standard; because if the standard is a white man reading books by other white men, speaking white man talk and debating a law, that was not written for us, by us or with us in mind. If this is what the standard is, we will never meet the standard!

I am not suggesting even that we do better than 'the standard,' because it is not ours. Our standard is something completely different, 10 times taller and pointing in the other direction. Why attempt to meet a standard when in doing so you have to deny your own inherent intellect, beauty and talents? Yes. I am talking about those who are asking for a place in the market. I am talking about those of you who think that in assimilating, you are successful, and in doing so, you may one day be equal. Asking for equality is asking to meet that ambiguous and unattainable standard. However, asking for the freedom to achieve what we define as our own standard... now that is liberation, and liberation is what we must continue to demand.