

Talk shows gap between black, white women

By **ROBIN BARKSDALE**
Chronicle Staff Writer

A discussion of race and gender Monday night yielded little evidence that the gap between Afro-American and white women can be narrowed in the near future.

Jacquelyn Wade, assistant professor of social work and director of women's research at Bennett College, was the special guest at the National Organization for Women's regular meeting. The topic for the evening was "The Intersection of Race and Gender: Ain't I A Woman," focusing on the power distribution and the pursuit of common ground between black women and white women. But Wade, an Afro-American, threw a stir into the crowd with her candid speech and suggestion that common ground cannot be found until both sides are willing to admit that they are different and understand one another's particular experiences.

Forgoing the usual speech from behind a lectern, Wade started the evening by engaging a companion, Yolanda Burwell, a professor of social work at UNC-G, in a colloquial discussion on what it means to be an Afro-American woman. Sitting in the middle of the group, the two talked to each other about their concerns as Afro-American women and about their pride in being Afro-American.

"Women of African heritage are the ultimately oppressed women of the world," Wade said during the conversation. "Other women are discriminated against by their men. He may be the only one she experiences discrimination from, whereas we are oppressed and -- out of that oppression -- we are expected to be the most understanding and the most compassionate."

Wade made frequent references to a poem which spoke of black women as a "bridge" to solving other people's problems and making them feel good about themselves. But Wade promised the group that she would not "be a bridge tonight."

She said that she felt that, as an Afro-American woman, she does not reap the full benefits of the women's rights struggle, despite the fact that she contributes much to it.

Rarely, she said, do Afro-American women enjoy the privilege of defining goals and issues. Rather, Wade pointed out, those women suffer the oppression of having their lives, concerns and hopes defined for them. Even the host group, she maintained, was guilty of that oppression.

"You can't talk about a coalition of women without first recognizing the differences in our heritage. Our oppressions are not the same," she said, commenting on the NOW group's invitation to join their upcoming march on Washington for pro-choice rights. "When I hear women's rights, the imagery doesn't look like me. It looks like

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-- Jacquelyn Wade

someone else and I have to tack on to it. For me, issues of reproductive rights may or may not be an issue, but you have already defined it as an issue for me without knowing. You always ask me to give up and let you do the deciding."

In their conversation, Wade and Burwell opined that white women do not always want to hear the truth about what causes the oppression felt by Afro-American women.

"When I tell them in ways that implicate them, they say, 'That's not the case,' or 'We had the same thing happen.' There is no such thing as them having the same situation," said Wade. "I won't join them in beating up white men. They are your men and you have worked along side them and reaped the benefits of their work."

Wade and Burwell spoke candidly about the oppression they felt they had experienced at the hands of the majority population. They said also that white women's failure to actively correct or address oppressive situations makes them equally oppressive.

Their remarks drew both adamant disagreement and nods of agreement from NOW members.

Some members took exception to Wade's comments that because of her African heritage she is viewed and treated different from white women. Those members refused to "accept responsibility" for the actions of their forefathers or for the actions and attitudes of the overall society. They contended that people should be judged as individuals and should work together on problems.

But Wade said that it was not her intention to say what would make the group "feel better" or "feel nice." Some of the NOW members contended that they have Afro-American friends and that they see no difference in people

based on skin color. But Wade maintained that they should see the difference because differences exist, no matter how well two people get along with one another. The purpose of the evening, she said, was to acknowledge that white women and black women have different experiences. She said, however, that their differences do not necessarily negate the possibility of their joining forces.

"I'm not asking anybody to go back to their past and take responsibility for anything," Wade said. "I am asking people to look at the reality of today and take responsibility for what is happening now."

Members of the National Council of Negro Women also attended the meeting to share their views with the group. Wade suggested that the mere fact that there was a need for two, separate groups to address the needs and concerns of women illustrated the differences.

Naomi Jones, an NCNW member and a member of the Black Political Awareness League, said she was shocked that some of the white women in the group could not see that there still are racial inequities in society.

"It was appalling to sit there and see that some people can feel that things have changed so much and that there is no problem," said Jones. "Nothing has changed. It's just a different setting. We always go that extra mile to them and they feel we still have to go another one. I think Dr. Wade's comments were right on target, but I think the meeting was good and there should be more of them."

Still, some at the event, both Afro-American and white, maintained that race should not be an issue and that Wade placed too much emphasis on color. One Afro-American woman hotly challenged Wade and accused her of "living in the past." Pointing a finger in disgust, she told Wade and Burwell that women such as the two of them were "causing all the problems because you don't want to get along with anybody."

One NOW member, who disagreed that white women have a part in oppressing Afro-American women, asked Wade what she would like for NOW members to do and what she, as an Afro-American woman, would consider an issue.

"An issue for me is that white women give up the privilege of being white," she said. "Give up where you live, where you work, the clothes you wear, where you shop. Give up the privilege of being white."

The group responded to her comments with expressions of confusion and with remarks that the possibilities of reaching common ground appeared slim. Some members of the NOW chapter asked Wade to outline for them a plan for establishing better relations with Afro-American women. One chapter member, appearing agitated that the group had not mended fences and moved on, urged Wade to drop the barbs and define a way by which Afro-American and white women can get to know one another. But Wade and Burwell said that the purpose of the evening was not to reach a revolutionary or miraculous conclusion.

"You first have to bear the pain of knowing. One thing I hope we do

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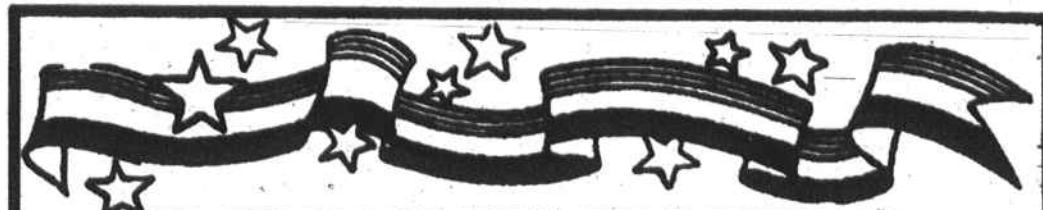
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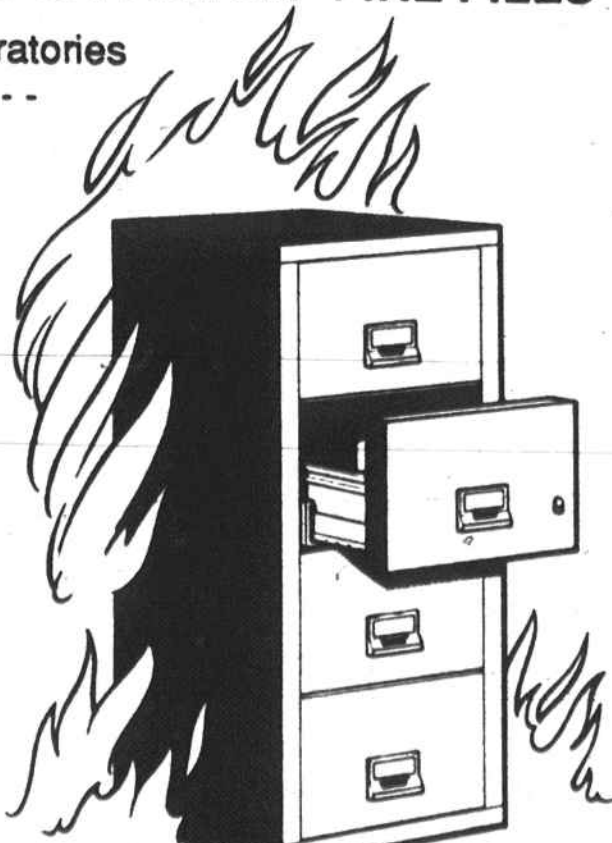
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