

# **A Letter to the Sydney Women's Liberation House Collective**

2.5.1999

Dear WL House Collective,

Why on earth did you print that dreadful racist and anti-feminist thing in your May, 1992, Newsletter? I am referring to the article, 'The Good Fight Can Be a Battle' by Cathy Young, which was first printed in *The Washington Post* and re-printed in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Louise has told me that it was included in the WL Newsletter to provoke discussion, and she agrees that it is dreadful. But I do think that you might have said so, rather than letting something like that go uncommented upon. It is sure to give women the wrong idea, and I wouldn't blame anyone for thinking that the WL collective is a bunch of racist ignoramuses.

That silly Young woman starts off by arguing that sometimes multiculturalism can come into conflict with feminism, because there are some cultures which have values antithetical to feminist values, and multiculturalism requires that all cultures be treated equally. But Young made three mistakes: she got her facts wrong, she asserted the superiority of 'the West' over other cultures, and she asserted that feminism belonged exclusively to 'the West'.

In her argument, she gave two examples of what she obviously thought were cultural values peculiar to the cultures in question (Chinese and Saudi Arabian), which were in contradiction to feminism and which were not to be found in 'the West'. The first example concerned the legal defence of a immigrant Chinese man in the US who was accused of murder because he bashed his wife to death with a hammer when he found out that she had had an affaire with another man. The defence called an anthropologist who argued for leniency on the grounds that Chinese culture placed an especially high value on 'family life', and that therefore the accused's shame and humiliation at his wife's 'infidelity' had made him lose control. The court found the accused guilty of the lesser charge of manslaughter and released him on five years' probation.

Where Young got her facts wrong is in her assertion that that kind of defence could not be used by men of 'the West' who are accused of murdering their wives. But it is, all the time, and successfully. Any

man can plead that he was driven beyond endurance by his wife's 'flaunting' her 'infidelity', and get let off with a bond. The fragility of the male ego and its dependence on sexual possession of a woman or women is not specific to Chinese culture. It is endemic throughout 'the West' too. There is nothing peculiarly Chinese about a man beating his wife to death with a hammer and then arguing that it was her fault for driving him to it.

Young's second example was just as erroneous and just as offensive. She contrasted the 'veiled and silent women of Saudi Arabia' with the 'Western female soldiers working alongside the men'. That 'the West' (in actual fact, the US) had female soldiers was, for Young, evidence that 'the West' was superior to Saudi Arabia, and more in tune with feminist values, since the female soldiers were 'equal' to the men. But in the first place, the existence of 'female soldiers' is itself antithetical to feminism. Young obviously thinks that feminism is only about equality between the sexes, whereas in fact feminism is opposed to the male values of militarism, whether those values are upheld by men or women. And 'the West' has its own equivalent of 'veiled and silent women'. There are many ways of ensuring that women remain silent and enclosed in 'the West' too--confined to domesticity, shut up in private with violent men, afraid to walk the streets for fear of male attack, refused access to the public media, etc. Of course, that is not the whole story of women in 'the West', who often resist, challenge and contest male supremacy, individually and collectively. But neither is it the whole story of women in Saudi Arabia either, I suspect. Although I know very little about the Gulf war, I do remember hearing about the organised and vocal resistance of women in the Middle East against the war.

Young got it so wrong on so many levels that I suspect that her article was just one more ploy in the backlash against feminism. The boys are adept at co-opting feminist language and women themselves to do their dirty work for them. The article was a cunning example of divide and conquer tactics. If feminism is confined to 'the West', and 'the West' is 'superior' to other cultures, then not only is feminism of no relevance to women of other cultures, those women would be quite justified in resenting the supposed 'superiority' of Western women, defining Western women as 'the enemy', and finding no common cause with them and no grounds for shared oppression. And that is an outcome which would please the white male supremacists mightily, since it is completely in their interests

Letter to Sydney WL Newsletter - *Denise Thompson*

to divide women from each other and have us squabbling amongst ourselves.

Well, I have said my bit. Your inclusion of Young's article served its intended purpose in that it riled me sufficiently to respond. But I think you were playing a dangerous game by including such an anti-feminist piece without making your own objections clear. As it is, the article sits there in one single issue of the Newsletter, without comment or criticism, and hence with an implicit feminist imprimatur. And that is worrying.

Denise Thompson