Resisting Arrest

BY ANN FILEMYR

This essay is divided into six sections. The first five relate a series of disturbing encounters in a mid-sized midwestern city where two private citizens found themselves repeatedly mistreated by law enforcement officers. Though these moments occurred in a specific place at a specific time, I do not believe their specificity makes them unique or remarkable. Instead I began to discover how widespread, socially acceptable, even mundane and predictable these encounters were to many, many people in communities across the country. That they are common daily occurrences for so many makes them particularly horrifying. Their ordinariness makes them no less terrifying to those who are the targets.

Through examining each of the experiences I am about to share, I began to understand in a visceral way concepts which had been previously important but merely abstract ideas: concepts such as white privilege, power, and the construction of race. And what is perhaps most important to me was the discovery of how my own silence contributed to police brutality. My social training included a certain middle-class posturing, an assumption of superiority combined with deadening guilt which kept me from expressing my anger and outrage. After all, I had certain privileges besides my socio-economic class—my white skin.

I learned slowly over the course of these events that thinking or believing or hoping or praying or wanting was not enough. I needed to act if I wanted to live in a world where my lover and I and our son would be safe from police harassment. I had to break out of the ice of my own guilt and fear, to move beyond its limits, to refuse to be arrested in my own growth and development. It is not enough to ask the questions. Nor enough to demand the answers. I had to learn to take action.

If my actions succeed, they will help create a world where a white woman and a Black woman can live together as lovers, raise a family, make a home, contribute to their communities, and not fear for their lives. Writing this essay is part of that action.

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Breaking Ice

The first incident occurred in the summer of 1982. We had just returned from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, an open air arts and music festival celebrating women's contributions to the arts. The notorious Michigan weather had been perfect. We had danced late and stayed up talking with friends from across the country who come each year to celebrate this annual event. Essie was a festie-virgin, attending for her first time, and I was an old festie-goer. For us, new in our relationship, it was idyllic and romantic, the closest thing to a lesbian honeymoon.

I tell you this to explain the indulgent peacefulness we were experiencing that Sunday afternoon in late August after our return. It was a lazy, bright afternoon and we were giggling and giddy from lovemaking, happy for uninterrupted time together, content in the lilac afterglow of our passion when a fist pounding on the front door disrupted our reverie.

Essie rushed into clothes, shushing me, as the pounding shook the old wooden door in its frame. A male voice blasted out, "Police! Open up!"

Busted for lesbian love—sex criminals! flashed through my mind, but anger froze the lines on Essie's gentle face. "Stay here," she ordered me and with a final tug to her sweatshirt she moved to the front of the house carefully closing the bedroom door behind her.

I was completely unprepared for any encounter with law enforcement.

Chiding myself I jumped out of bed to pull on clothes. Then despite Essie's command to stay put, I tiptoed to the front door full of curiosity and questions. Could we be arrested for making love? Did sodomy apply to lesbians? Did they have any proof? A hidden camera? Was the house bugged? Did they know we had gone to the festival? Didn't we have any right to privacy?

By the time I arrived to peer through the screen door, Essie had maneuvered the policeman so that he stood with his back to the house. If there had been someone inside, someone who wanted to escape the law, the officer would never have known it. The outlaw would have easily slipped out the back door and disappeared down the alley. The Outlaw? Lesbians live outside the law, with no state-sanctioned recognition of their lives, no opportunity for lawful

marriage, no legal protection from discrimination in housing or employment, no Civil Rights. Suddenly I felt like the rebel dyke, the lavender menace, the lesbian threat. Should I run out the back door?

His full attention was on her as she leaned away from him. He wagged a finger in her face repeating, "Your name or I'm gonna haul you downtown." He clutched a pair of handcuffs in his other hand.

She stood defiantly, legs spread apart, refusing to cooperate. She held her hands behind her back so he couldn't cuff them. She was resolute, "I don't have to give you my name."

"Your name! Give me your name!" he hollered at her as if she were deaf. His face was red, his voice trembled with hostility, "You're going down."

Our neighbors had gathered on the porch directly across the street and stood watching. Our landlord, a thirty-something white man in a tee shirt and jeans, came over offering to help, but the officer barked at him, "Are you the husband? No? Get back across the street." And meekly, despite the fact that this was happening on his property, our landlord turned and left, leaving Essie alone again on the front porch with an angry man in a blue uniform.

I've got to do something. But what? I can't call the police. These are the police! And if he drags her into his squad car, he could do anything to her—*anything*. My white girl paralysis, the ice that keeps good middle-class girls frozen, cracked under the pressure of a dawning realization. He was a white police officer, and she was a Black lesbian mother. He could do anything to her and probably get away with it; she could do nothing and lose her life. She was being threatened by the very people I had been raised to believe provided my protection. What should I do?

As the officer sputtered, spitting into her face, she remained rigid, refusing to flinch, her eyes fixed on his, unwavering. I swallowed, fear pumping through me, and tentatively pushed open the door. I said in my best dumb-blonde voice, "Excuse me, officer, is there a problem?"

He whirled toward me as I spotted another officer, a Black man half-hidden in the bushes beside the house with his rifle trained on Essie. I moved to stand directly in front of her meeting eyes with the officer on the ground before turning to the one on the porch.

"Who are you? Do you live here?" the white officer shouted at me.

I followed Essie's lead and did not answer his question, repeating my own instead, "What seems to be the problem here?"

I tried to use what privilege my white skin offered by being a body barricade between the bullet on the one side and the handcuffs on the other. I had no idea what was really going on, what crime committed, what had we done, had she done, to provoke this attack. Random violence I accepted as part of urban life but random police violence? The thought had never occurred to me before.

I could barely comprehend the bizarre drama. Without thinking, I had entered it by playing the role of a stereotypically passive white female. How many times had I witnessed friends, aunts, cousins, sisters, playing exactly this role to avert men's anger from erupting into violence aimed at them and their children. It wasn't the anger of white men that I was a stranger to, it was the official sanction of the state which supports racist policing that I had never experienced.

It was strange to be simultaneously in and completely removed from my body. I was terrified, trembling, but outwardly sweet, steady, calm. I kept my voice low, even smiled. I didn't know who I was or perhaps the masquerade of appearing to be completely non-threatening, docile, even stupid, was a white woman's survival tool—a Marilyn Monroe technique to disarm the enemy. But it also sickened me. Especially against the rock of resistance which my shy, sensitive lover had become. I didn't know her like this, had never seen a soft beach of sand burned to sheer glass by a single lightning strike. She was so smooth, so completely sealed up and self-protected, he couldn't even gain a toehold. She was in complete control, and he was losing it. I could feel his desperate anger clawing at her.

We were locked in position: a Black officer with his finger on a trigger aimed at a Black lesbian barefoot on her front porch; a white officer clutching handcuffs pressing against a white lesbian shielding the body of her lover with her life. No one moved for a moment. Then the crackle of his walkie-talkie shattered the still air. He grabbed it, muttered a few words, then called to his partner, "Wrong address! The murderer's ten blocks over!" The officers broke their poses and jumped into the squad car without apology or explanation.

"Nice meeting you," the white one sneered at us as they left.

We stood stripped of safety, of home, of tranquillity, as they sped off down the sun-beaten street.

The children on the block were the first to respond. They rushed out from their hiding places. "Bang! Bang!" they shot at each other with pointed fingers, screeching and rolling in the grass on our front lawn. The adults were slower in their approach. Did they think we were criminals? Or victims? Or in the twisted logic of power, both criminal and victim? Were we to be treated as criminals for being a biracial lesbian couple? What exactly caused our victimization and isolation on that narrow wooden porch in the horizontal forest called the city?

In the long conversations that followed this incident, Essie and I analyzed every aspect of what had happened in order to understand why our responses were so different. This was the beginning of my education.

She told me about the curfew enforced in her neighborhood following the late 1960s urban rebellions labeled riots by the media. She described being a little girl and watching from the living room window as her fourteen-year-old brother was shot at by a white police officer for coming home fifteen minutes after the 6 p.m. curfew. She described the constant harassment her older brother suffered as one of the few Black boys growing up in the increasingly segregated city under the scrutiny of a white police officer who told him when he was only eight years old, "I'm gonna get you, boy."

She talked about the summer trips to Mississippi to visit family. How her grandfather kept a rifle under the front seat of the van. How he took off the license plates that revealed they were from the north. How he never drove over the speed limit. How he behaved whenever a policeman was present. She had never seen a Black police officer until she was an adult. For her parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, as well as her brothers and sisters, policemen were white, wicked, capable of killing, beating, maiming, raping, without recourse. They were free to do whatever they wanted to a Black person. They were the violent club of white society. They existed to protect white people's property from Black people. They existed as an armed force, a landed military, to patrol them. They were deeply hated, feared, and never, ever trusted. To live under the presence of

this constant surveillance requires stealth, imagination, tremendous courage and resilience.

Clearly I was completely unprepared. Like ice, I had crystallized certain concepts which prevented me from seeing what was really going on around me. I had imagined our sexual orientation to be under attack, but though this also marginalized us, the source of the fury I was to encounter over the next eight years in that city living with her was not based on our identity as lesbians or our gender as women but on the simple fact of race-based policing.

The solid blocks of ice I had used to build my world view became slippery with tears as they melted away. Her social conditioning taught her to fear police and to resist them. The politics and practice of white supremacy, she knew, were exemplified in the policing of her family, community, neighborhood. And as a newcomer, I didn't know this. I didn't know how to behave. My shock at witnessing racist policing left me unprepared to respond—frozen and ineffective.

When I came out on the porch, I thought I was doing the right thing. Essie disagreed. She thought I put us in more jeopardy by revealing to the police that a white woman and a Black woman lived together in that first floor flat. She thought I was wrong to put myself in the middle of a situation which she felt she was handling competently. She was protecting us. She had prevented the officer from entering our home which he had demanded when she came to the door. Instead she had asked to see a search warrant. He didn't have one, so she refused to let him in. She went out onto the porch to turn his back to the house so he wouldn't be able to see inside our home; so he wouldn't be able to glimpse her paintings of women or the symbols of feminist liberation and lesbian solidarity on our walls. She was protecting me, she was protecting us, and she knew exactly what she was doing.

The idea that I was using my privilege to protect her she interpreted as ludicrous and condescending. By inserting myself into the middle of the altercation, I was pretending to be some kind of hero. I fancied my privilege as an advantage to her. Isn't this the basic fantasy of those with privilege? Why do we believe so-called *under*privileged persons want or need us? Doesn't this attitude keep power in place? Either out of guilt or a sincere desire to 'do-good'

we think it is our duty to help those who face discrimination when really we know nothing about it.

Essie pointed this out to me. She asked me to seriously reflect on the reasons why I put myself in the middle of the situation when she had specifically requested that I not make myself visible. She felt I had put our lives in much greater danger by making my presence known. She said, "You know, that's one of the things that bothers me about white people. They always think they are right, that they know what to do and what is best, even when they have no idea what is actually going on. They have a really hard time believing brown-skinned people have any knowledge—practical, philosophical, or otherwise."

We had been living together for about six months at the time this happened, and she knew despite my good intentions, I was still basically ignorant when it came to racism.

Jamaican Mama

This happened when I was out of town for the weekend to do a poetry reading at a small liberal arts college in the midwest. It was a Sunday night, about 8:30 p.m., and her son, who was nine years old, had already fallen asleep. Essie had to work first shift at the hospital which meant she had to leave home at 5 a.m. but the car was about out of gas. Nothing would be open that early so she decided to make a quick run to the corner gas station before settling in for the night.

As she was pulling out of the gas station, she saw her sister-in-law walking alone on the sidewalk. She pulled over to let her in. She could smell that her sister-in-law had been smoking pot. Apparently the police saw her pull over and let a woman into her car. They started trailing them. Essie drove carefully. She wanted to make it home without being stopped.

She was only half a block away when they pulled her over. They accused her of smoking marijuana in the car. She denied it. They searched the car and found nothing. They ran her license number and then told her she had seven unpaid parking tickets, which was the minimum number of tickets required for the police to lock you up. She knew she didn't have any tickets, but they called in a paddy wagon to haul her downtown. They let her sister-in-law go. Essie

asked her to go and stay with her son until she could get home. She knew now she was unfree until they let her go.

The paddy wagon arrived with four more white officers in it. Two in the front and two in the back. Now there were six white policemen surrounding her. One of the two officers who had stopped her pushed her into the back of the paddy wagon and climbed in next to her. Two others joined him. One officer locked the back and then left in the squad car.

Essie turned to steel. She told me, "The one in the front turned around and said to the one in the back, *Hey Joe, where you going for vacation?* And he said, *Gonna get me some Jamaican Mamas. Yeah, get me some.* The others laughed and started talking crazy. *I wanna get me some Jamaican mamas, yeah, get me some, too.*

"I was seething but I stayed cool. I wouldn't look at them. The one next to me tried to get into my face. Two were directly across from me. I kept my mind focused. I never said a word to any of them. I wouldn't meet their eyes, but I saw all of them—the one with glasses, the one with the blonde curly hair, the short, dark-haired one who was flat-footed. I would know them now if I saw them.

"They knew who I was. They knew I wasn't a throw-away. They had my driver's license, my social security number. They knew I didn't have seven unpaid parking tickets.

"They kept it up driving around the inner city, driving in circles. I knew they weren't headed directly downtown. I know those streets by heart. *Yeah we're gonna get us some Jamaican mamas. Get me some like I never had before. Get me some.* And they would laugh like it was great fun, a big party, with me as the main course, the sacrifice to their fantasies.

"No matter what they said, I stayed clear. I kept thinking, You're going to be sorry if you hurt me. You can't touch me you goddamn bastards. I was thinking of my brother. He was like my personal savior. I knew what he would do if these officers hurt me, and I wouldn't stop him. I was thinking, you fuck with me and you're dead. That's all.

"I stayed in my corner in the back of that paddy wagon. I never lost my focus. I heard everything and saw everyone with perfect clarity. I listened to their words and stared right through them. They couldn't touch me. To me, they didn't have that much power. They wanted to rape me—gang rape—a police gang rape. I mean, why

frame me? Why take me down on fake charges? Why call a paddy wagon? Why lock me in the back of it with three of them? Why five white men to take down one Black woman? What else were they planning to do? Rape and kill me and dump me by the side of the road. Another casualty of gang violence.

"My mind remained focused. I sat very still. Like this. I didn't panic. I didn't show them fear or plead with them not to hurt me. The whole time I was communicating one single clear message: Mess with me and you die. I didn't move. I didn't speak. My whole being concentrated on this one message. Maybe they felt something they couldn't name and it kept them from touching me. Maybe they felt my Ancestors surrounding me. I could tell it was torturing them because they couldn't get me the way they'd planned.

"I have been made hostile. I have learned to kill with my mind by keeping my eyes open and not moving a muscle. I hate the police. I hate them."

Finally they pulled into the underground parking lot of the jail, took her in and booked her with unpaid parking tickets. She was locked up in a cell with vomit in the toilet; it was filthy and stunk. She couldn't see the other women on the cell block so she started to sing. She was locked up for five hours, and she told me she just kept singing the whole time. No one was going to forget she was there. When they finally gave her the phone, she called Daddy Son and he came down with her brother and paid for seven parking tickets in order to get her out of jail. She got home just in time to leave for work.

When she appeared in court a month later, the judge simply stated she only owed for two parking tickets and the rest should be paid back. She wasn't allowed to speak because it would be considered contempt of court.

There is no method of measuring the impact of this daily grinding violence. The doctors working in neighborhood clinics can measure the high blood pressure of children as they watch the exacting cost of continual stress and pressure destroying the health of individual bodies. But what about the health of the community? The cumulative affect on the African American community is only made apparent during periods of great civil unrest, riots, rebellions. What is understood about collective grief and rage? How do you heal scars which remain permanently beneath the skin?

Police Arithmetic: White + Black = Drug Deal

At Daddy Son's funeral, we were all dressed in black. Black silk blouses. Black satin skirts. Black nylon stockings and black pumps. Black leather handbags and black wool coats. Black seersucker suits and straight black ties stark as exclamation points against starched white shirts.

Everyone gathered around Granny like birds at a winter feeder. Keening for the loss of an elder, the young kneeled together and then lifted their heads to sing in one voice, "Amazing Grace, how sweet it is that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was born but now I'm free."

Daddy Son was a working man. He had been a truckdriver traveling coast to coast with his Black cat in the cab. He had lived in workcamps where white employers kept Black employees behind barbed wire fences living in tents cordoned off from local inhabitants, prevented from moving into these white communities by very real barriers. He had worked in factories and lived in these temporary tent camps in Washington state, in Louisiana, in Arkansas.

At last he had joined the Union in Milwaukee, bought a home, made a life for the next three generations by pulling double shifts most of the year just so he could take a month off every summer to go fishing with his wife, grandchildren and great-grands. When he retired after thirty years, they gave him a small metal shovel mounted on pressed wood and painted it with his union number. It makes me sick deep in the pit of my stomach to think how much money white men have made from Daddy Son's long life of labor.

Daddy Son was a dark Black man. Granny would get that teasing look in her eyes and say in a sing-song way, *"The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice."* But Daddy Son also held a startling secret. One that could only be revealed by looking into his eyes. For this reason, he kept his eyes behind dark glasses, shaded from the peering, prying questions which would never be asked aloud.

I knew him for over a year before I ever saw him without his sunglasses. He wore those dark glasses in the kitchen, in front of the t.v. or in his favorite place, the bench beside the garage where he could rest between yard work or while polishing his van or boat. The wooden picnic table bench was painted white and placed next to the

chain link fence so he could rest his back while telling stories with his men friends in the warm afternoon sun.

The day he took off his glasses in front of me was also the day after his return from the hospital. We had come over to help Granny with housework, grocery shopping, and check in on both of them. He was stretched out in bed, very unusual for this active man. He was quiet. When I poked my head in the door, I thought he might be asleep, but he waved me in and I sat gingerly on the foot of the bed because it felt awkward to stand over him and the room was small without any chairs. He started talking to me about the travels he'd taken, about the friends he'd known, about the work he'd done, about the fish he'd caught on the Great Mississippi and the Fox River and on Lake Winnebago before it got so filthy from the paper factories that you couldn't stand the smell of the water for miles around.

He'd never really spoken to me before, not like this. He was always warm to me and pleasant. He'd taken all the herbal remedies I'd made for him, and he credited me with the positive response from his doctor about his kidney. Maybe I'd become a type of lay-doctor, the kind he trusted, like the mothers and grandmothers in his life from down south who believed in plants and trusted their own hands over the technology of the sterile machines and cold white corridors. He'd asked to come home to die.

This was the first time I really looked into his eyes. While he talked, animated, inspired to answer my inquisitive nods with more details, I noticed his twinkling eyes were a solid, unblemished, bright blue. This ink-black man had bluer eyes than mine. They were astonishing and beautiful. In his face, they told the whole story of Africa in the Americas without a single word.

Essie commented to me many times how happy she was that the only father she'd ever known had taken me into his confidence that day. She had never heard him talk so long about himself before. He was generally a man of few words. His strength subsided slowly, and he grew smaller and weaker over the next days and weeks. We stood by his bed, and I held one of his hands, once strong and masculine, now fragile bones held together in a web of thin flesh, and told him quietly that it was okay. We would be okay. We would take care of Granny. He could go when he was ready. There were people waiting for him. Ancestors. We could feel them all around us.

At the funeral, brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and nieces and nephews and children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren gathered and wept in the wet grass around the grave. As we left the cemetery, I was driving Essie and her cousin from down south and her cousin's husband back to Granny's house where the food we'd prepared for all the guests would be served. Many of them had made the long journey from Greenville, Mississippi to say their last good-byes. As we pulled out, the funeral procession disbanded, and we turned left to make a quick stop at a grocery store to pick up some more milk for all the great-grandchildren who had been so still and polite and silent and wide-eyed throughout the services.

As I drove, I realized we were being followed by the police.

"Shit," I whispered under my breath, "not again."

"What?" asked Essie, and I nodded to the rearview mirror.

Her cousin's husband sighed and stated gravely, "Same thing up here as down South. Same thing everywhere. Police arithmetic: Black + White = Drugs."

Essie and I said simultaneously, "Is that what it is?"

"That's it," her cousin responded. "They stop us everytime we get together with one of our white friends. We get pulled over and they search us and search the car. Never found anything on us but that doesn't ever stop them from trying. We just can't drive together anymore."

Fighting Back

On an unseasonably warm Sunday morning in late September near the end of harvest season, we drove to the local farmer's market for some fresh vegetables. We picked up the Sunday paper on the way. We turned off North Avenue to circle the pavilion where the farmers set up tables for the day. It was empty. Did we have the wrong day or was the season over? Disappointed we went around the block. A police car passed us in the opposite lane. As we headed home, we noticed the police car turn around to follow us with its flashing red light and squealing siren.

I pulled over to the curb. "Maybe they got a call—" my obnoxious effort at pollyannaism fell flat.

"It's us alright," Essie countered as a white officer in his late fifties tapped on the glass of my window with his ticket book. Slowly I rolled it down.

"Driver's license and registration," the officer snapped.

As I was digging through my wallet, I asked him, "Is there a reason you pulled me over?"

"Yeah, there's a reason," Essie replied wearily. Then she leaned over, "Right officer? You stopped us because she's white and I'm Black."

"Shut-up, bitch," he retorted.

Essie's hand tightened around the Sunday paper rolled up in her lap. Before I could respond, she reacted. The door of our little brown pinto flew open and the thick Sunday morning edition of the Milwaukee Journal was flung directly at the officer's head.

His fingers locked around the butt of his gun as he yanked it from his holster. *He's going to kill her.*

I threw the weight of my body against the car door as I pushed it open hoping to knock him off his feet.

As he caught himself, I jumped out of the car and into his face yelling at the top of my lungs, "What the fuck are you doing?"

Essie circled the front of the car demanding a response, "What did you call me?"

He backed up, one hand on his gun, my driver's license in his other hand. People on the sidewalk ducked into the shadow of doorways watching. A group of young black men lined up against the side of a building in the yellow morning light.

"Give me my license!" I yelled.

Essie and I walked side by side about a foot from him. He held his gun in his hand, but we didn't let up. I shouted his name aloud reading it from his badge. We backed him up to the door of his squad car, and he slid in. His white partner sat silently watching from the passenger's side. Essie and I pounded on the windshield directly in front of him, "Give me back my driver's license!" I yelled.

He grabbed his loudspeaker broadcasting to the entire block, "Girls! Girls! Get back in the car. Girls, get back in your car!"

He yelled like he thought he was our daddy, like we should obey him, like he was protected from our outrage by his blue-suited authority. We kept beating on the windows of the police car.

"Give me back my license!" I shouted again and again.

"This is my last warning," the officer threatened us like a man to his children before he raises his hand to strike them down.

"Come on," said Essie, "let's report this."

Essie drove to the precinct headquarters since I couldn't drive without my license. They ignored us, denied us a hearing, told us that what we said happened didn't happen. We took down a list of names and badge numbers fuming.

Monday morning I went downtown to report it to the Fire and Police Commission. At the main desk I was told I couldn't get my license back since a report had been filed that I had falsified an accident report.

"There was no accident," I told the officer in charge.

"That's what you say," he replied.

I typed up a detailed report. The African American man at the Commission was interested and investigated. It was not the first report against this officer. It was written up and put in his file. Nothing more.

It still took me six weeks to clear my record and get my driver's license back. No apology was ever issued.

I keep worrying: What else has this coward in a blue suit done? Who else has he harassed? How many other times has he falsified reports? What other Black women has he raised his gun to shoot without just cause? Who sits in jail today to satisfy his uneasy quest to dominate and oppress? What else could I have done to get him off the street?

Truck Camouflage

Essie was working as a carpenter when I got a new job as a visual arts exhibit coordinator. One of my new tasks involved hanging traveling shows of original art in institutions serving the elderly, disabled, and institutionalized. In order to transport the large paintings and sculpture, I needed a bigger vehicle. Essie had been looking at trucks so she could carry wood, drywall and other supplies to work.

Essie located a good deal on a pickup and we bought our first new car. We were so excited we chose to ignore the curious eyes on

us at the dealership. We chose a honey-colored Toyota pickup truck with a white cab. What a difference that truck made.

Once we started driving around town in that Toyota pickup truck we were never again stopped by the police. Why? Were we protected by the class privilege broadcast by a new vehicle? Or by the male privilege signified by driving a working man's vehicle? Or was it heterosexual privilege which now protected us as we could pass on the streets as the wives of working men? Or was it white privilege as few African Americans bought pickup trucks? As a marker of male, heterosexual, white privilege, the truck provided us protection we had never known before. We were free of police harassment. We couldn't believe it. If only we had known earlier.

We told our friends. Lesbians all over town started buying trucks—Latina, Jew, Indian, Black and White, Chrysler, Ford, Nissan, Dodge. On the streets in front of our parties, it looked like a get together of good ole boys, and the police didn't bother us. We could play our music louder and stay out later. No one stopped us. No one bothered us. That's what privilege is. The power to blend in, to move freely and not draw unwanted attention to yourself. To fit in easily and enjoy simple anonymity. To drive across town without police harassment. To be judged not by your difference but by your presence. To eat in a restaurant without worrying that the cooks or waiters will spit in your food. To love the one you love without fear of recrimination. Simple things, really. To desire these simple things, to live in peace, as a lesbian, as a partner to an African American lesbian, as a co-mother of an African American son, means I must be willing to wage war against a system of domination which denies even the simplest desire.

Anger as Fuel for Action

I have heard the refusal to close the gap between white women and women of color rationalized by white women because women of color "are too angry" (meaning they express anger about white privilege) or "they judge me for being white" (meaning they express anger about white privilege) or "they're always upset about something" (meaning they express anger about white privilege) or "they're hostile" (meaning they express anger about white privilege). Why shouldn't women of color, particularly

African American women, express anger about white privilege? It confines and suffocates their families and communities. It dogs them. It is a constant haunting by an unwanted ghost. It cannot be escaped. Racism permeates institutions and saturates relationships repeating a deadly dogma predicated upon a myth of superiority/inferiority. And it is terribly, terrifyingly successful at keeping us separate when we have so much more to gain by being together.

White middle-class women must come to terms with anger if they hope to work in close coalition with women of color. Anger takes up space. Anger demands respect. It refuses pity. It reduces fear. It affirms self-respect and self-worth. It is uncompromising. It demands to be recognized. I have learned through my friendship and association with women of color to embrace anger, my own and others, as a tool against injustice.

When white women 'sit with' the rage expressed by women of color and grapple with it, we are transformed. Rather than avoiding the pain of this encounter, sequestering ourselves in the paralysis of guilt, or simply turning away, I urge us to listen and to learn. As we begin to see the multiple ways in which white privilege has been used to silence us and keep us in our place, we can begin to speak out and to act. Then, and not before, will we be ready to join with women and men of color and build alliances to challenge racist policing in all of its forms. Together we can begin to articulate the society in which we want our children to live, free of the triple threats of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Free of the crippling of joy.