

\*Jan Adams & Rebecca Gordon, 'The Wackos at the Anti-Racism Conference' scan From LesCon, Winter, 1992. (Newspaper no longer exists.)

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# Race & Racism

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## The Wackos at the Anti-Racism Conference

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by Rebecca Gordon and Jan Adams

**L**ONGTIME READERS OF LESCON MAY RECALL THE adventures of those loveable Wackos, Camshaft and Barkdust. In years past they've explored such feminist and progressive phenomena as the need to choosing a proper feminist name for oneself, and etiquette for mass arrests at the Federal Building.

Recently the Wackos found themselves at the *Reclaiming Our Guilt* conference. Organizers divided the assembled feminists into several groups. Camshaft and Barkdust met with a small group of other white women. Our heroines were very impressed by the passion and commitment of the other group members. Still, they found themselves a little bemused...

**Facilitator:** Let's unfold the chairs that are leaning against that wall and put them in a circle. Our Sisters of Color want to use this room in an hour, so we need to get started.

**Lisa:** (to Barkdust) How many anti-racism workshops have you been to? This is my 13th. It's taken a while, but I'm finally really getting in touch with my grief and anger about racism.

**Barkdust:** Well, I've never been to a workshop before, but I'm working on the Campaign to —

**Jennifer:** (overhearing) This is your *first* workshop? You're so lucky! You're going to love it. I cried for a week after my first one. It was so cleansing.

**Facilitator:** (to Camshaft) What's that pile of orange papers you have there?

**Camshaft:** Oh, I brought some flyers for everyone about Saturday's meeting to protest police brutality. People are going to be there from all over the city: the Black Community Forum, the Chicano Committee for Action, the Lesbian Political Caucus, the —

**Facilitator:** Oh dear, didn't you read your packet? You can't bring political flyers to the workshop. This is supposed to be a safe space. Some women feel threatened when people tell them they *ought* to go to an event. Working on racism is hard enough, without extra pressures of "shoulds."

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**Camshaft:** Packet? Oh, is *that* what those women were collating when I tried to register? Well, I'll just leave these on the table then. Women who want them can take them.

**Facilitator:** But don't you see that just having to look at a pile of flyers could make some women feel guilty? We're trying to get rid of our guilt here. This is your first workshop, isn't it? I know it's hard to understand in the beginning. I'll be glad to talk with you about your personal issues after the session, if you'd like.

**Barkdust:** (overhearing) Better not. Camshaft doesn't feel safe in one-on-one situations. (To Camshaft) Don't worry. Maybe we can put them in the bathroom later.

**Facilitator:** Okay, let's get started. We'll begin by going around the circle and telling how far we've come in our unlearning racism process and why we're here today.

**Jennifer:** This is my seventh anti-racism workshop. I'm here because I need a safe space to heal from my racism. At my last workshop I got in touch with some pretty heavy feelings. I guess what I want to get out of today's workshop is to learn to really *listen* to women of color when they ask us to deal with our racism, instead of always hearing some other message. I guess that's it for now.

**Susan:** Well, this is my *eighth* workshop. I really need these safe spaces to talk about my feelings. If it weren't for conferences like this I would never have gotten this far dealing with my racism. Now I never feel scared when I walk down a dark street alone at night. I'm completely over my guilt about getting mugged last year. Who's next?

**Barkdust:** This is my first workshop and—

**Everyone (except Camshaft):** Your *first*? Wow!

**Lisa:** Welcome, sister. It's really hard work, but you'll feel so much better once you've done it.

**Barkdust:** Well, I guess so. Anyway, I was hoping to get some ideas from other women about what I can do about racism where I work. I'm a secretary at a construction company. My office doesn't have an affirmative action program, and some of us want them to *make one*. We can probably bully management into writing something nice on a piece of paper, but I don't know how to make them really put it into practice, so—

**Nancy:** You're new to this process. After a few workshops you'll learn not to intellectualize so much. It's okay. It took me years to realize that by focusing on surface issues, I was avoiding dealing with my deep-rooted racism. You're doing the same thing, see?

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**Barkdust** (doubtfully): I think so.

**Facilitator:** Let's try not to interrupt each other.

**Nancy:** But we have to interrupt racism!

**Facilitator:** Well, that's true. Do you want to go next?

**Nancy:** Okay. This is my *tenth* workshop. This has been a tremendous growth process for me. I feel like I'm ready to take the next step in dealing with racism and start facilitating groups myself. I guess that's all for now. How many workshops have *you* been to?

**Camshaft:** This is my first workshop. I came because I've been working on this police brutality campaign and—

**Lisa, Susan and Jennifer:** No intellectualizing! Talk about how it *feels*.

**Lisa:** (in tears) I'm just so tired of hearing white women *talk* and *talk* about racism, like it was just another subject to discuss—

**Barkdust:** Yeah, we need to *do* something about it—

**Lisa:** Right, like learn to feel it in our guts, not our brains. Really take some risks.

A knock on the door. Someone passes a note to the Facilitator.

**Facilitator:** The Sisters of Color have decided to hold a rally at City Hall tomorrow to protest race and sex discrimination in the Fire Department. They're asking us to send a speaker. What do women think?

**Lisa:** I'm really tired of white women speaking *for* women of color.

**Barkdust** (whispering to Camshaft): But didn't they *ask* for a speaker?

**Nancy:** I don't think I'd feel safe speaking in public. My racism might come out and I might say something that offended people of color by mistake. I know I still have a lot of work to do.

**Susan:** I agree with Nancy and Lisa. It's time for white women to let

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women of color speak for themselves. We still have a lot of self-educating to do.

**Camshaft and Barkdust:** But—

General commotion and conversation ensue. The door opens again and Christine, an African American woman, comes in.

**Christine:** Hi, folks. If you're just about done, would you please stack the chairs against this wall? We're going to need this room in about five minutes.

**Camshaft** (to Jennifer): I didn't catch that. What did she say?

**Jennifer:** I think she said she's tired of five hundred years of white women's racism and she wants us to keep working on it!

**Barkdust:** Cam, I'm really hungry. Let's go get a burrito.

*(Note: The authors swear that they have heard some version of each of these exchanges in one feminist conference or another. Only the names have been changed to protect the guilty.)* ♦

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