Epilogue

Sisters Beneath the Skin

It is easy to identify how others with more power discriminate against you. What is harder to realize is how you, by virtue of your membership in some privileged group in society, may discriminate against others. Only when we finally work to bring an end to even those types of discrimination that don't personally affect us, will we truly be sisters beneath the skin.

-Midge Wilson, 1995

SISTERS

Sisters in Joy,
Sisters in Sorrow,
Sisters Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow.
Strong, Determined,
Spirited and Unshaken.
Through our differences we find commonality,
Through our weaknesses we find greatness.
Black Women, White Women
Reach deep within.
As we build our sacred trust
We are Sisters Beneath the Skin.

-Kathy Russell, 1995

As any marriage counselor, labor mediator, or peace negotiator will tell you, in order to begin the work of repairing relations between two parties in conflict, it is first necessary to catalogue the reasons for their strife. That has been the intent of this book-to describe the various tensions that continue to exist between Black women and White women. The issues are real and are not subject to quick fixes. Spouting platitudes such as "sisterhood is global" and issuing desperate pleas to "just get along" do little to change Black and White women's realities. Real work must be done if progress is to be made in cross-race relations, and the process should begin with naming the problem, as we've attempted to do here. Beyond that, what steps must be taken to bridge the gap between Black and White women in this country?

Beginning in elementary school, more material about the history of women's cross-race relations must be presented. Although great strides have been made in recent years to change and improve school curricula, nonetheless the history of women and the history of Blacks are still treated as parallels, with little understanding of where they converge. The result is that few girls graduate from high school knowing anything about the issues of racism, gender, and equality that have affected Black women and White women from the antebellum South through the discriminatory practices of the abolitionist and suffragist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fewer yet know about the interracial tensions that erupted during this country's second wave of feminism, and how those tensions linger to this day, affecting women of different races as they work on political initiatives.

How can we rectify this? First, concerned parents can become involved in their local school boards and demand that the interplay of Black women and White women's lives be better covered in school. After all, "those who do not learn from 'herstory' are doomed to repeat it."

Parents can also try to encourage their daughters' interracial same-sex friendships. Since playing with dolls continues to be a popular activity for young girls of both races, one thing that parents can do is buy dolls of other races in addition to those of their own. Dolls can help get girls to open up about their feelings of guilt, confusion, and resentment, and serve as a springboard to discussions about race and racism. Most important, parents can examine their own attitudes and casual pronouncements about race, as racial prejudice often begins in the home.

Parents can also teach their daughters to become more critical consumers of the media. As long as the images of girls and women in children's books, on television, and in films and in magazines focus on racial and gender stereotypes, the attitudes and perspectives of the past will be perpetuated. Children should be encouraged to question why the female characters in stories and shows are more vain or less heroic than their male counterparts, and why Black female characters, in particular, are either missing or given lesser billing.

Finally, parents can actively seek out material that tries to overcome the usual gender and racial stereotypes. There is a growing collection of children's books that do just this. Among books for four- to eight-year-old readers that specifically address girls' interracial relationships are Black Like Kyra and White Like Me (1992) by Judith Vigna, Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman, and The Story of Ruby Bridges (1993) by Dr. Robert Coles. And for older girls, there is Jacqueline Woodson's I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This (1994), about two girls' cautiously developing interracial friendship.
Because African American girls grow up learning the customs and culture of an America that is still predominantly White, Whites need to make a greater effort to learn about the culture of African Americans. For example, most Black girls who have never had a White girlfriend still know about White beauty habits, but few White girls who have not had a Black girl-friend know anything about why she might perm, dreadlock, and hot comb her hair.

The college dormitory is a place where White women and Black women are often thrown together for the first time, and as we've seen, ignorance of each other's culture can lead to fear and alienation. It is also a place where constructive measures can be taken to improve women's cross-race relations. During orientation-week activities, a gender-segregated session should be scheduled so that Black and White women can be encouraged by trained group leaders to openly and honestly discuss everything from beauty practices to intersexual attraction and jealousy. These sessions can be ongoing, designed to promote more cross-race friendships among women in college.

For those women who do not attend college, other outlets, from reading groups to community seminars, are available to educate each other. Sharing activist commitments can be another source of connection and empowerment among women of the two races.

In the past, many White female activists made the mistake of equating their own issues of feminism with those of Black women, to the disdain and fury of Black feminists. Mindful of this history, today's White feminists are often paralyzed with indecision about how to work together.

Such concern was evident at a Chicago Women's Action Coalition (WAC) meeting in the spring of 1994. Although the meeting was open to all women, and scheduled in a part of the city that was accessible to women of different racial and ethnic groups, only about thirty White women were present. Sincere in their efforts to make the world a better place for women, these concerned White women discussed and planned various action projects. One issue up for discussion that night was what could be done to help raise awareness about the rape of Bosnian women in the former Yugoslavia. One of the White women mentioned that there were Black women being raped by rival Black male gang leaders right here in Chicago, for reasons not unlike those of the Serbian men. Discussion quickly segued into what could be done to help. Clearly, a group of White women marching into a Black neighborhood carrying signs that read "Stop the rape of Black women" would be met with outrage rather than appreciation. In the end, they could think of nothing to do that would be positively received, so they returned to their original discussion and mission to help White women who were thousands of miles away.

What can women do to help other women who are disadvantaged, whatever their race? How can White women, in particular, assist without appearing patronizing when those they seek to help are Black? To begin, White women, no matter how well intentioned, must realize that one-time interventions do not work and may leave them open to accusations of grandstanding by African Americans in need of real aid. White women who truly, want to make a difference must be willing to develop long-term relationships with local community groups and organizations that are already in touch with the cultural needs of those they are meant to serve.

This was but one of the many lessons learned by a White artist and activist named Carmella Saraceno when she tried to help poor inner-city women living in two racially mixed neighborhoods, one in New York and the other in Chicago. While living in Manhattan, Carmella tried to build a multi-use cultural space for the Black residents of a neighborhood in the South Bronx. Although she did not realize it at first, there were political, economic, and social forces at work against the proposal. These forces were not insurmountable, but because Carmella did not actually live in the affected neighborhood, she was unable to move the project forward, and it failed. Learning from her mistake, when Carmella moved to Chicago, she and her husband bought housing in a racially mixed gang-populated neighborhood on the West Side. Because she was then a resident of the neighborhood that she wanted to improve, Carmella was able gradually to earn the trust of her neighbors, many of whom now regularly come to her for assistance in dealing with White-run agencies. Carmella also has been instrumental in helping her mostly Black and Hispanic neighbors organize a community policing program to eradicate gang activity and stop drug selling on nearby corners. And, finally, she founded an organization called Artists and Children Create Together (ACCT) to help divert young children from joining gangs by getting them involved in community-based art projects.

While few of us can make the kind of sacrifices that Carmella has, there is no doubt something that every woman can do to help her sisters. It may entail speaking up about racism in the workplace or helping to elect more African American women into positions of power and influence. It may involve assisting a co-worker who is struggling with her communication skills. Both Black and White women must come to view helping those who are less privileged as a positive thing, and if necessary to ignore criticism from other members of their community for doing so.

As we mentioned in the opening pages of this book, the slogan "sisters beneath the skin" was criticized by many as a simplistic color-blind notion of race relations that had failed women in the past. Yet we cautiously and optimistically return to this notion, while acknowledging the important differences of skin color among women, both as a reality and a symbol of cultural difference. Despite our embattled history, White women and Black women are connected by the fact that they are women. We have the ability - and the need - to move beyond the notion of sisters who are divided to become sisters who are united.

Black women and White women can no longer afford to waste time bickering among themselves. Now, more than ever, we must come together to fight racial inequality, preserve the ideals of affirmative action, and give children of all backgrounds the necessary educational and financial tools to prosper and grow. Some political leaders envision a return to a mythical time when every family was a happy two-parent unit, and Mom stayed home to take care of the children. Such representations are disrespectful of all mothers who help work children from this country who must pitch in financially to help their families survive. Too many politicians today are determined to undermine the fragile support systems that allow single, financially disadvantaged mothers to take care of their children at home. Rather, we need to work together for adequate day care facilities and after-school programs to assist women of all economic backgrounds to better care for their children. To prevent the erosion of the rights and address the particular concerns of women in government, we must
change the face of Congress so that it more closely resembles the overall gender and racial makeup of the citizens of this country. But for that to happen, women of all races must pitch in as the sisters they are, as the sisters they need to be.

There is reason to hope that women's cross-race relations are on the path to improvement. The media themselves are sources of renewed optimism. As this book goes to press, the first interracial on-the-road female buddy film, *Boys on the Side* (1995), starring Whoopi Goldberg, Mary-Louise Parker, and Drew Barrymore, is doing well at the box office. The movie tells the story of a loving cross-race friendship among three women, and for once, the African American female lead is not in service to any of the White women. And a growing number of commercials and television programs portray White and Black women in a more even and positive light. In recent years, the multicultural educational movement has done much to educate scholars, politicians, teachers, and ordinary people alike to the issues of race and equality.

Clearly, there is a revolution going on in this country regarding race and gender. Relations between the races and the sexes have undeniably changed in the past two decades, and there is no going back. It is our belief that these forces for understanding and change will prevail, and women, in all their diversity, will lead the way together into the twenty-first century.