

# Nurturing People of Color

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## *Interview with Anita Mendes-Lopes by Marsha Holliday*

### 1. What special challenges are there for People of Color?

With racism comes embarrassment, shame, and disconnection from others. In high school, for example, I was not allowed in the college preparation curriculum, even though I had strong skills in writing, and dreams to travel. I was told that I needed a trade so I would be able to get a job when my husband left me. I could only take courses from the business curriculum. I was even denied access to a general education so that I could access college through the back door. I had so much rage about this that I unwittingly smashed all the business machines, trying to play them like a piano. And I do not consider myself to be a violent person.

A special challenge to People of Color has to do with not becoming competitors of other People of Color. We need to support each other. I am determined that I am not going to make it harder for People of Color by partnering with the establishment so it can be easier for me. If I did that, I would hurt other People of Color. And, in the long run, hurting myself. No one gets away with feeling like a fraud. We need to address how People of Color accept the problem of racism as separate from ourselves\_ as outside ourselves. How do we keep from internalizing racism? This is something we can change for ourselves.

Denial is yet another problem. Often we tell ourselves, "I don't believe it is happening. Maybe I made it up. I'd rather think myself 'crazy' than think that the things that have happened to me and my family are true."

### 2. What can FGC do to nurture People of Color?

One thing FGC has done really well is to give People of Color space to talk to each other by themselves\_ in a situation that is sealed off to white participants. At the first workshop I gave at the Gathering, a very well meaning white man came and sat in my workshop, marked for People of Color only. We immediately asked him, "What makes you think that you have the answers for us?" When a white person sits in my workshop, he or she is saying, "You need to understand me; you don't need to understand yourselves. You don't have the ability to understand and take care of yourselves. We can help you do it." (This is known as dominance and subordination.)

Give People of Color a safe space to work on our own internal racial, power and control issues. We get together without the greater community calling us troublemakers. At FGC we can talk without saying "poor me." When you say "poor you/poor me" you chip away at the soul. The "I" of you and me.

### 3. If everyone were middle class, would racism still be a problem?

Yes. In class issues, the question becomes who is in control. Who has a place in society? Who manages economic resources? In our society, those who manage economic resources are in control.

Recently I went with my daughter to the Holocaust Museum. A Jewish woman from Israel stood in line with me and said, "Why are you here?" I said, "I am Black, but also a social worker. As such, I have power and expertise. I can influence people. If I don't learn about oppression and how it has happened in history, then I won't be able to help others. The Holocaust is not about being Jewish. It's about who holds the power-who's in control.

#### 4. What can white people do to help?

First, People of Color need more equitable resources so that we have a way to support ourselves. I am not talking only of money here. Whites can really help reduce suffering and persecution among People of Color by making society overall more equitable. We need to see People of Color in decision-making positions, making outreach to other People of Color.

We also need to keep talking to each other. When People of Color hear racists things, they could just say, "I didn't get that. Would you tell me more?" We do not have to label people racists. As we continue in conversation, someone of the offending person's color will often become uncomfortable (where there is conscience) and confront that person. We must not cut each other off. We must stay in dialogue.

**Anita Mendes-Lopes** grew up in Massachusetts. She is second generation Cape Verdean. Cape Verde is an archipelago, 450 miles west of West Africa, an island African nation. It was the first of Portugal's colonies and the last to gain its independence. The Portuguese used Cape Verde to hold slaves in pens, selling them to European and American countries. Cape Verdeans have a strong Portuguese cultural influence that has historically (before independence) separated its darker brothers and sisters from its lighter ones.

Anita now lives in New Hampshire where she has been told there is no racism because there aren't any Blacks. She is a member of Monadnock Monthly Meeting in Jaffrey, NH and New England Yearly Meeting. She will be leading a workshop at the Nurturing the Nurturer's Conference called "Nurturing People of Color." See page 4 for details.

**Marsha Holliday** is a member of Langley Hill Monthly Meeting, Baltimore Yearly Meeting.