

Mike

December 7, 1978

Dear Inez:

I don't know whether you can help me, whether, that is to say, you are good at keeping documents, and whether you have any remembrance of the following happening in 1952 probably (but it may have been early 1953). Perhaps I had better send a copy of this letter also to Bessie. In any case dig deep into your boxes and documents and see whether the following story rings a bell:

When Simone DeBeauvoir's The Second Sex was first published in English it naturally caused quite a stir. CLR and I and probably Grace, and perhaps even Selma though I do not recall her, were having a discussion about the book and we had decided to test our attitude and the general attitude with those of Black working women. Two factory workers were brought to my home in New York and I presented, objectively, what it was that Simone DeBeauvoir had said, stressing two factors: 1) that the one the bourgeois press was singling out was that she was too explicit in her sex analysis and then there would be some cracks about the fact that anyway she was a woman who "kissed and told"; 2) a much deeper question occurred us and that one was that at the end of the book, she concludes that since man had done all the oppression of women and it's their fault why we women are not as great as they, it's up to them to free us.

Now the Black women showed great amazement, not on the sexual question but at the fact that somebody so learned would come up with such a dumb conclusion and that in fact, to them, it sounded like what, as Blacks, they always heard from whites as their burden; that as far as they were concerned no one gives you freedom, you either fight for it or you won't get it; self-emancipation is the answer.

My question to you is, have you heard me tell this story? Is it possible that I referred to a letter I had written reporting it? Is there a possibility that either in some fight on the "woman question" either in the SWP or the WP I had used that to show some sort of direction? Or could it be that it was written up in one form or another in the mimeographed copies of Co Correspondence? We didn't then have a paper, but we did an awful lot of writing of letters and we did have the mimeographed "practice" of Correspondence.

It is most crucial that if there is such a document, letter, random notes that anybody has ever seen, that I get it. I know it happened, and of course I can tell the story. But there is no substitute for the fresh way one tells it when it's a mere description of what just took place. Please don't go by first reactions and say, "Well, of course, I wouldn't know about it." I'm sure there was nothing secret about it. I'm sure I was quite elated by the profundity of the remarks of the Black women, and I even remember that when CLR first began to play up Selma, as the greatest contributor on the Woman Question, even before she wrote A Woman's Place, he would mention that she really inspired Chapter 6 of Mariners, Renegades and Castaways. That is to say, that she was so moved by the first five chapters that she asked a simple question: And now I want to know about the genius who wrote all this. Supposedly meaning Melville, but actually meaning CLR who was writing this about Melville. In any case, suddenly he said: You know that I have such full confidence in Selma that I am sure she could wipe up the floor with Simone DeBeauvoir. She would use the Black women's attitude as her ground. Let's sponsor a debate between Selma and Simone DeB.

Yours,

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