

Woman Now! Hudson's Later!

Lisa Nowak James

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You know what, J.L., you're right. Now is a great time to be a woman, but make no mistake about it, we see right through your plastic sales pitch. The soft music and cellophane baubles, the WOMAN NOW placards and flower emblems, the buttons, bumper stickers and billboards don't fool us. We see right past that phony Frenchman on the first floor, painting women's faces in his own image. We see right through the come-ons and not-so-hidden persuaders in every ad and in every corner of your store.

We see right over your heavily laden, brightly lit counters and into your well-filled cash registers. Because that's what all this is about. What you mean when you say it's a great time to be a woman is that these times are great because there's so much more you can sell us. There's so much more we can do-to ourselves to make us look better, smell better and feel better to men. And you, of course, are only too eager to help us out by filling our shopping bags and taking our money.

What a horrible experience your store must be for a woman on A.D.C. She digs panty hose and perfume too but her rent has to be paid and her kids have to be fed and all of it has to come from the meager allowance tossed her way each month by the state. What there is for her as a woman now is not the glamour, excitement and added sexual allure promised by aisle after aisle of the J.L. Hudson dream factory, but drudgery, unpaid bills, poor health care, bad schools for her kids and continued self-denial. Yet she, like the rest of us, is subject to the same constant, blatant pressure to buy, buy, buy...the unsubtle implication being that her identity and success as a woman depend upon it.

And that brings us to the thoroughly rotten core of your bright little apple, Mr. Hudson. WOMAN NOW feeds upon and perpetuates a female identity based upon male needs, while, at the same time, it exploits the growing need of women to liberate themselves from that identity, borrowing from and playing upon the women's liberation movement. You and your sick, slick media men aren't fooling us with those word games—the glossy photographs of vacuum cleaners that are supposed to “do their thing” while we “take care of the important”; the appliances which will allow us to “delegate the detail work.” Delegate it to whom?

You may think it rather clever to lift our rhetoric, co-opt our demands and even incorporate the name of one of our organizations (NOW, National Organization of Women) in your promotional frenzy, but what you've really done is reveal your own inhumanity, greed and corruption by using the struggle against our oppression to pad your profits.

And while we're on the subject of women, Mr. Hudson, what about the women who work in your store? The J.L. Hudson Company ranks among the top employers in the city of Detroit and most of its employees are women. Do they have daycare facilities? No. Do they have a union? No, and every attempt to organize one has met with hostility and intimidation from the executives (male) and supervisors (mostly male) who run your store.

Do they have health care? Sort of. After working in your store for a year, they are given minimal Blue Cross-Blue Shield coverage (on which one can't afford to get sick anyway). They have a 20% sales discount, you say? You and I both know what that means.

It means more profit for you and double exploitation of your employees, who need that discount if they are to survive on the wages you pay them.

The fact that you've pasted up WOMAN NOW signs on every counter hasn't changed anything for the women who stand behind them all day. You still call them "girls," even though some of those grey-haired "girls" have been around longer to sell your goods than you've been around to collect the profits. You still delegate the high commission sales jobs (furniture, carpets, appliances, etc.) to men, and it's very clear that the show in your arena is run by and for men.

But, you know what? We don't want your show and we don't want to run it either. We're discovering ourselves at long last and we don't need Hudson's "aisles of beauty" to help us. We're finding out what and who we are and moving in the direction of our own identity, an identity formed not by male desires but by our own. The development of that identity is teaching us the real nature of our own oppression, and we are beginning to understand that it is no accident.

Sexism, like racism, is a source of economic profit to the system. Where would you be, Mr. Hudson, if all the women you have exploited so long walked off their jobs and left your store? Where would you be, Mr. Hudson, if the women customers you have duped so continuously and unscrupulously into domestic slavery, were to stop buying your fancy vacuum cleaners and all the other symbols of their oppression? Where, in fact would you be without the oppression of women? Without a store, that's where.

Finally, Mr. Hudson, more and more of us are beginning to understand the links between our struggle and that of the total struggle against the corrupt, abusive inhumanity of this system. It's clear to a lot of us that destroying you will not be enough and that chauvinism, like racism will not be eliminated within this system, but without it. You and the system will have to go and you and it won't be missed.

The shattering realization of this is what it means to be a woman at this moment. The anger each of us feels about our oppression and that of our sisters; the power of that anger to cleanse us from the strangleholds of myths like sexual polarity and male gallantry and all the other myths that have been used to keep it in hand; the excitement of discovering ourselves and our sisters; the knowledge that we are part of a larger struggle that will liberate both men and women and probably destroy you—that, Mr. Hudson, is what it means to be a WOMAN NOW!

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