What about "The Rest of Us?"

Leila Ahmed
THE NWSA CONVENTION: CR SESSIONS

An Asian-American Woman’s View of the CR Sessions

Alice Chai

As a resident of Hawaii for almost twenty years and the only Asian and woman of color on the faculty of the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Hawaii, I have been isolated from both mainland and Third World, especially Asian, women’s studies academicians. Consequently, when I went to the first meeting of a “women of color” consciousness-raising group, I looked for Asians and was disappointed to find only a few others. There were only six at the “Asian Women Only” workshop, and we formed the Asian caucus.

The first item brought up among us was the fact that the Convention was mainly focused on white and Black women. We also noticed that every Asian woman who attended the Convention was a presenter of a workshop. Upon learning that the decision to form separate CR groups for “white women” and “women of color” had been made by Third World women in the New England region, and after observing that it was unfair that the “white women” category was broken down into several choices of subcategories, while “women of color” failed to reflect our diverse racial, ethnic, class, and national backgrounds, we voted nevertheless to continue with our group.

We then divided into eight random groups consisting of eight members each. However, we could only devote half an hour to consciousness raising due to limited time on the first day.

On the second day, some of us felt that we were concerned with special issues and formed three more small groups: (1) immigration, (2) racism/se.xism, and (3) how we perceived one another among ourselves as women of color. After about an hour, all the small groups came together to share their experiences as women of color. We came to feel a strong sense of solidarity through the realization of having had the common experience of multiple oppressions. As a result, a solidarity group of women of color, based on a female culture of nurturance and mutual support, was formed. A proposal to have an international Third World women’s conference was unanimously accepted. On the third day, we discussed strategies for planning and organizing such a conference under the leadership of women of color and elected ten secretariats.

It is ironic that although some of us did not like to be labeled as “women of color” in the beginning, later it became a unifying symbol. I sincerely hope that we do not repeat the same mistakes as white and Black women in planning and organizing our conference, because many of the Third World women’s conferences which I have attended in the United States have been dominated by U.S.-born Blacks and Hispanics, and many of the Pacific/Asian women’s conferences which I have attended have been dominated by U.S.-born Japanese and Chinese.

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Members of the Third World Caucus, including Alice Chai, second from left, leaving a workshop.

IMPRESSIONS OF THE CONVENTION

What About “The Rest of Us?”*

Leila Ahmed

One had assumed that it was well known that American history with respect to slavery and race was (apart from South Africa) uniquely racist, and that people from, for instance, Asia or the Middle East perceive human races, human complexions and their significances, in ways that differ profoundly from American perceptions and understandings of race. And so one had assumed too that at a feminist conference on racism, it would not be we non Western peoples who must unlearn our attitudes and speak of races in the terminology of the currently globally powerful and dominant Americans.

Sadly these proved unfounded assumptions, as one incident in particular brought home. An Indian who had come to America specifically to attend the NWSA Convention, shocked at being required to register for workshops according to her color, declared...
that she was not Colored. This was not taken for what it was, a refusal to define herself in the terminology developed from within a racist society but was taken as an inability on her part to recognize herself for what she was—to respond, that is, to the name with which Americans had named her.

The remark surfaced and resurfaced thereafter throughout the Convention, but rarely to make the point that it was revealing of the specificity and limitedness of the American experience. As well as suggesting how even well-meaning “antiracist” ideas about race conceived within a racist society can still reflect and even insidiously reiterate that society’s racist assumptions, the incident and its afterlife at the Convention also suggest the extent of American ethnocentrism and disregard for (as well as ignorance of) the nature and history of non-Western societies.

An international perspective, I believe, does more than fundamentally challenge American racist perceptions and notions, including those that manifest themselves in American “antiracism”: it also represents, and offers, an alternative and fundamentally nonracist way of perceiving, of being aware of the varieties of human complexions. It seems a pity then that so many American feminists prejuged the “Third World” as of no interest to them, and evidently believed that they had nothing to learn from it about American racism; or at least one assumes, from the fact that sessions relating to the “Third World” were so poorly attended, that they had so prejuged it. (One panel, for instance, of five international feminists, including feminists who in Copenhagen and in London had filled huge halls, failed between them at Storrs to fill half a lecture room.) It is a pity too that greater links were not forged between “Third World” women and Black Americans.

There were misunderstandings at the NWSA Convention, and there were exchanges which signaled how we have still to find a language in which to communicate. And this could not have been otherwise, in an area of human discourse and in territories of experience which are only now, at the NWSA Convention, for instance, beginning to be charted. And that was the Convention’s achievement. Through it American feminists, themselves an embattled minority surrounded by a culture and language profoundly hostile to them (as feminists are the world over), nevertheless succeeded in creating a space within which, precisely, this essential discourse could take place; and thus provided apparently too the only such space specifically dedicated to addressing racism in a society that otherwise seems to be drifting into a callous obliviousness of unmistakable signs that racism is once more, in America and the West, on the rise.

*The phrase is from Chinweizu, The West and the Rest of Us (New York, 1975)—first borrowed, in a way similar to my borrowing of it, by Rayna Rapp, in “Anthropology.” Signs 4:3 (Spring 1979).

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An Asian-American Perspective on the NWSA Convention

Krishna Lahiri

Undoubtedly what Asian-American women found most disheartening at the Convention was their lack of visibility. Women of Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Southeast and South Asian heritage clearly felt that they were merely on the periphery of the major issues emphasized. As one woman remarked, “We feel terribly left out.”

The critical remark centered around the fact that the Convention planners had failed to motivate representative groups of Asian women to attend. Those Asian women who did attend—and they were not more than thirty in number—were not representative of the entire population of Asian women in America. For example, the Pacific Islanders were conspicuous by their absence.

A second source of discontent among Asian American women was that the printed program did not adequately represent the offerings that were of special interest to them. Because of printing lapses, two important sessions were not known to many Asian women, and hence were only attended by a few.

One session, on “Perspectives on the Role of Women in National Development and Revolution in the Third World,” was canceled without notice, disappointing a number of would-be enthusiastic participants.

There were, however, some very well attended sessions which focused on the traditions and heritage of Asian-American women. One point that it would have been worthwhile to emphasize is that Asian women immigrants to the United States were not frozen imports but dynamic people who brought with them their lifestyles, customs, and mores. For example, in one session which focused on Islamic dress and addressed the issue of whether the custom of veiling impaired participation in the feminist movement, the point to underscore should have been how Islamic women are adjusting to Americanization. . . .

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NWSA as Metaphor for the United States

Dearbhal NicCharthaigh

The Convention at Storrs was not only my first experience of the NWSA in action but also my first experience of the United States. Having followed Storrs with trips to women's studies centers in New York, Washington, and Boston, I found two facts emerging:

1. There are three estates of persons in the United States: taxi drivers, hotel workers, and feminists. This last is by far the largest of the three.

2. There are very few men in America. So much for cross-cultural perspectives!

In Irish society there is little racial diversity, though much latent racism. "Otherness" is defined more by national, political, linguistic, and religious differences than by color. I was therefore ill-prepared to enter a new category of "otherness" at Storrs, that of "white women." Other white women at the Convention whose origins provide experience of political or religious oppression may also have felt ill at ease in this large and undifferentiated category. Indeed, they may well have identified more strongly as women with oppressed racial minorities than with the guilt of "white women."

For scholars, the challenge of issues such as these emphasizes once more the need for interdisciplinary approaches in feminist research. . . . If the NWSA cannot provide an interdisciplinary forum for scholars, they