Fall 1981

NWSA as Metaphor for the United States

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Recommended Citation

NiCharthaigh, Dearbhal, "NWSA as Metaphor for the United States" (1981). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/512

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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 re-surfaced thereafter throughout the Convention, but rarely to make the point that it was revealing of the specificity and limenedness 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 prejudged 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 prejudged 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.

KRISHNA LAHIRI, AN HISTORIAN, TEACHES AT ROSEMONT COLLEGE. LAST YEAR SHE DIRECTED A CONFERENCE ON ASIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN WHICH TOOK PLACE IN PHILADELPHIA.

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

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must work within the structures of the professional associations of their disciplines. This would prevent issues such as racism from being studied in the most comprehensive and appropriate manner, i.e., through interdisciplinary inquiry. The broad range of Convention sessions this year, while representing many fields and styles, did not, I feel, provide for the kinds of research papers which are necessary for the advancement of women's studies and which should go hand in hand with our community and activist studies.

The scale of the enterprise was, nevertheless, something I had not previously experienced. The program was an embarrassment of riches which could only be sampled by the individual participant. The task of selection was therefore an important one, not made easier by the fact that the program was not made available before the Convention began....

Like the balloons at Storrs proclaiming "We are everywhere," I wished I could be omnipresent; I found, however, that the program listings themselves succeeded in informing me of the issues and concerns of feminists in the United States. ....

The most valuable experience for me was without question the opportunity to meet with, to network with so many feminists, both American and European. Nouns such as "network" are slower to become verbs in Ireland than in the United States. Possibly because we lacked the verb, the process of networking has been slower to develop also.

My contacts at the Convention were both informative and inspirational. People were more than willing to share ideas and knowledge and seemed genuinely interested in developments in Ireland. Fortunately, I was able to take up some of the many invitations I received to visit centers and institutions during my subsequent travels.

The NWSA Convention will remain for me a metaphor for the United States: vast, complex, and diverse, demonstrating that "pluribus unum" describes not a state but a process.

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Remarks on Two Literary Sessions at the NWSA Convention
Jo Gillikin

... On Tuesday afternoon I attended a session entitled "The Fragmented Ethnic Woman Writer," which included an expert analysis of the search for identity in Crossings, a little-known, though clearly worthy-of-being-fully-known, novel by Chuang Hua (a pseudonym). The main character struggles between two countries—China and America—seeking her identity. As the middle child of seven children, she also struggles for personhood, a true sense of self. In The Narrowes, by Ann Petry, Abbie Crunch, a seventy-year-old Black woman, transcends the moral bankruptcy of her time and place through charity. The last presentation of the session, "From Fragmentation to Fulfillment," described what it means to be a Black feminist lesbian literary critic: pulled into too many pieces. Yet wholeness comes through in suggested approaches to literary criticism: Be inclusive. Be more visionary than reactionary. Recognize that all literature and criticism are subjective. Don't limit literature, particularly Black literature, to sociological thinking about the world: deal with the literary aspects of Black writing as well....

Wednesday morning found me in the session entitled "Forms and Motifs in Ethnic Women's Literature," where a graduate student presented her paper on the journey motif in Pierce's Woman on the Edge of Time. Most discussion-provoking was the presentation on kitchens in literature, based on the symbolic use of kitchens in such works as Anzia Yezierska's The Open Cage and Bread Givers; Stern's "My Mother and I"; and Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones. Are women born with kitchens as they are born with wombs? For a woman, is her kitchen a symbol of her "making it" in America? What does a woman gain if she goes from the small, cluttered, roach-infested, peeling, flowerless kitchen of the slums to the filled-with-light, silled-with-red-geraniums kitchen of suburbia? Does she lose self and human relationship in obtaining the dream of the everyday housewife Glen Campbell sings of? Can we go beyond the kitchen, go on to women as more than preparers and as symbols of food? Can women feed themselves and others outside the kitchen? Can we say that we are tired of being eaten? Can we not cook up some aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual food, too? ...

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Reflections on the Birth and Coming of Age of NWSA
Virginia Cyrus

Having survived my fourth NWSA Delegate Assembly, as I drove home from Storrs, I felt a real sense of personal accomplishment. At the same time I wondered why, since I am not usually masochistic, I had endured those meetings. Suddenly I realized that my participation produced the same gratifications and frustrations that one gets from mothering a gifted, but somewhat unruly, child. This insight led in turn to my seeing in those four Delegate Assemblies developmental stages not unlike those that are needed to produce a valuable, mature individual. ....

Although the organization was dreamed of and desired before the 1977 San Francisco Convention, it was there that the actual conception of the entity took place. The organizational structure and the Constitution developed there established NWSA's "genetic code," which determines its character, its limitations, and its potential.

When, after a thirty-month gestation, NWSA's birth took place at Lawrence, Kansas, in 1979, all of us shared the sense that we were witnessing a joyous and awesome miracle. However, the overwhelming chaos of that Delegate Assembly and the multitude of seemingly random resolutions and recommendations disheartened many of us who were conscious of the tenuousness of an infant organization's chances for survival in the harsh world of bills and cash flow. ....

As we continued to shape our organizational character at Bloomington, Indiana, in 1980, we displayed a growing sense of self-control. We monitored our ideological declarations with financial impact statements and considered implementation procedures.... We were growing up.