Fall 1981

An Asian-American Perspective on the NWSA Convention

Krishna Lahiri

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq
Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/513

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
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 barely 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 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).

Leila Ahmed teaches women's studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

---

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.

---

NWSA as Metaphor for the United States

Dearbhál NiCharthaigh

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

---

Women’s Studies Quarterly 9:3 (Fall 1981) 17