



PROJECT MUSE[®]

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM AND CONTEXTUALIZED INTERSECTIONALITY AT THE 2001 WORLD CONFERENCE AGAINST RACISM

Sylvanna M. Falcón

This article examines the organizing efforts of North American feminists from Canada, the United States, and Mexico during the preparatory period prior to the 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa. Preparing for the world conference fostered a process where new transnational coalitions and new articulations of racism flourished; these often overlooked outcomes remain fundamental to understanding transnational feminist interventions at the UN world conference. A tremendous amount of strategizing and preparation preceded the successes that feminist activists achieved at the Durban conference. Based on qualitative methodology, which includes in-depth interviews and participant observation, my research shows that engaging with a contextualized form of intersectionality enables more complex dialogues about racism. Moreover, by highlighting women's activism in three distinct social locations, this article also encapsulates how national contexts shape feminist activists' goals and experiences in transnational spaces.

Globalization, with the internationalization of the labor force, the reduction of the role of states, the increase of economic power of private, non-state actors, and the absence of international laws that promote codes of conduct and the right of association and expression [has] institutionalized racism and as a consequence led to a greater marginalization and racial discrimination against women, indigenous peoples, blacks and migrants.

—Indigenous Women's statement for the
2001 UN World Conference Against Racism

Feminists of color had an opportunity to expand the conversation about racism at the United Nations (UN) level in the early 2000s. By this time, a number of critical shifts had taken place prior to the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (WCAR), held in Durban, South Africa. The end of South African apartheid in the mid-1990s allowed activists an opportunity to broaden

the discourse on racism; Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and a strong supporter of civil society organizations, received an appointment as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1997 and became president of the 2001 Durban conference in 1998; and the UN Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination (CERD) issued its pivotal statement on gendered dimensions to racial discrimination in 2000.¹

Most people are unfamiliar with the outcomes of the 2001 WCAR because the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States occurred a mere few days after the conference's conclusion. As such, the stories of the 2001 WCAR, where women advanced a feminist analysis of racism and articulated transnational links amongst various justice-oriented struggles remain largely untold. Having recently passed the ten-year anniversary of the 2001 WCAR in September 2011, the Durban conference remains the largest and most important UN gathering to date on the topic of racism.

The opening quote of this article is part of a political document issued by indigenous women's organizations and their supporters from the Americas as a result of the 2001 WCAR. This document should be read as one of several transnational feminist interventions that emerged out of the world conference where activists espoused a critical analysis of their respective communities' parallel social conditions as byproducts of neocolonialism, globalism, and racism. The endorsers of the document, more importantly, recognize the effects of these byproducts as having broader implications beyond indigenous struggles; hence these indigenous women activists linked their marginalization to those of other communities such as African descendants and migrants.

A tremendous amount of strategizing and preparation preceded the successes that feminist activists achieved at the Durban conference. This preparatory period provided women with opportunities to form new transnational coalitions and develop collective strategies on how to most effectively lobby their advocacy positions against racism at a global level.² As Margaret, a young African Canadian feminist activist stated in our interview, preparing for a world conference is a "moment in time that focuses people."³ The transnational coalitions that developed and the new articulations of particular issues that resulted had an impact not only on the written documents issued after the conference—the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA)—but also on the activists themselves. These outcomes, often invisible, remain fundamental to understanding transnational feminist interventions in UN forums or world conferences. The process of preparing for the Durban conference, and world conferences in general, serves, according to the political scientist and ethnic studies scholar Charles Henry, "as a place of discovery, of expressing meanings and creating new identities."⁴

My research question centers on how feminist activists utilize international antiracism forums as an opportunity to increase global recognition of gendered racism.⁵ In this article, I explore this question by examining the organizing efforts of North American feminists from Canada, the United States, and Mexico facilitated by the occasion of the Durban conference.⁶ During the meetings that led up to the world conference, feminists from the region advocated for an expanded approach to overcoming racism that directly addressed the particular needs of women in their communities, an approach I refer to as *contextualized intersectionality*.

Intersectionality captures the experiences, perspectives, and even bodies that are being overlooked by activists, advocates, and other stakeholders committed to identifying remedies for racial injustice. My research shows that engaging with a contextualized form of intersectionality allows activists to avoid promoting agendas that, as the cultural studies scholar Ella Shohat states, “paper over global asymmetries.”⁷ Intersectionality instead enables complex dialogues about racism. Moreover, by highlighting women’s activism in three distinct social locations, this article also encapsulates how national contexts shape activists’ goals and experiences in transnational spaces, such as ones that can be found in a world conference setting.

Contextualized Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical concept that signifies the indivisibility of interlocking forms of oppression that can exist at the level of an individual’s identity or can reference structural forms of subordination that exist in society at large.⁸ Intersectionality has been widely adopted by scholars to examine the particularities of gendered and raced subordination in the United States. The term can refer to the moment in which racism, sexism, and classism collide to form a “matrix of domination”; it can also refer to how race, class, gender, and sexuality (among other social locations) influence the structural forms of subordination.⁹ In the former, the language of “double discrimination” or “multiple jeopardy” is commonly used. The latter assesses how the “systematic forces” of racism, classism, and sexism “shape societies”; here the term offers an understanding of racialization as a structure and system rather than situating racialization as being about individuals or groups of people.¹⁰

Offering a precise definition of intersectionality becomes complicated in a comparative research context because multidirectional power processes coexist in international settings and because identity categories are shaped by distinct histories and regional contexts. For the concept of intersectionality to have transnational salience, an awareness of social location and power relationships must be incorporated into its application. Thus while

intersectionality may have a different meaning in Canada or the United States than it has in Mexico, multiple understandings of intersectionality can meaningfully coexist. In fact, diverse invocations of intersectionality at the transnational level present ideal opportunities for cross-border tactics that draw on regional intersectional thinking and processes.

For many antiracist and postcolonial feminist scholars and activists, identity categories “shift with a changing context.”¹¹ An essentialist conceptualization of, for example, anti-black racism is problematic because anti-black racism in the United States is entirely different from anti-black racism in Mexico because these discourses are situated “at the crossroads of different systems of power and domination.”¹² Working “at the crossroads” can present opportunities for new feminist coalitions, as was the case for the women I discuss in this article. The 2001 WCAR and its corresponding Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum Against Racism each offer a venue in which to understand how transnational and intersectional feminist relationships formed, evolved, and were even contested. The Canadian education scholar Jennifer Chan-Tiberghien argues that feminists at the Durban conference introduced a “gender-as-intersectionality” paradigm that was informed by a “‘difference’ and ‘differences’ strategy” and represented the diversity of women’s experiences “in their specific racial or other locations.”¹³

My intention here is to not impose a U.S.-based framework of intersectionality on the realities of women from the Americas region. I believe, however, that the impetus for intersectionality—the understanding that women’s lives cannot be reduced to a universal approach to gender-based discrimination or about isolated issues distinct from gender processes and norms—is particularly useful for grasping at complexity. In other words, a number of forces and factors that have never been singular in nature and often operate simultaneously shape women’s lives. It is within this spirit of being cautious and wary about decontextualized essentialisms and universalisms that I utilize a contextualized intersectionality lens to discuss the activist work of the women included in my research.

The North American Context

Canadian activists function within a space where multiculturalism as a discourse and public policy is celebrated, which preempts honest discussions about racism. Martha, an interviewee from the Human Rights Commission of British Columbia, pointed out that “multiculturalism here in Canada has been perceived to be all about food and dance. And when it comes to talking about sharing power and sharing money and making the

society more egalitarian ... multiculturalism hasn't helped that discourse of talking about antiracism."¹⁴

In Mexico, the framework for understanding racism is narrowed to its *de jure* form. Because legal segregation never occurred in Mexico (as it did in the United States), the position of the Mexican government is that the nation does not have a "race problem" and the prevailing discourse denies the very existence of racism. Discourse on race is dominated by discussions of *mestizaje*—the Spanish term for racial mixing. In Mexico, *mestizaje* refers to the mixing of Spanish and indigenous peoples following Spain's conquest of Mexico. These discussions have failed to acknowledge that conflicts concerning indigenous peoples can be "race-based," and it has made invisible the existence of Afro-Mexicans.¹⁵ Discussions of *mestizaje* tend to underscore national universalisms as well—"we are all Mexicans"—which produces a challenging environment for antiracist activists who contend that people are socially stratified based on racial and ethnic, as well as gender, differences. Mexican women's movements have not necessarily been overtly antiracist either.¹⁶

The United States resides, both literally and figuratively, between the Canadian and Mexican national contexts. The U.S. attitude toward racism embraces neither the full acceptance of multiculturalism found in Canada nor the negation of racism's existence that is prevalent in Mexico. Although the widely accepted "melting pot" and "salad bowl" models of national identity recognize, albeit awkwardly, the multicultural and multiracial nature of U.S. society, the theories are not translated into a sustained commitment to combating racism and other inequalities.

Unlike the governments of Mexico, or even Canada, the U.S. government played a particularly deliberate role in undermining the 2001 WCAR's proceedings, which complicated the work of the feminists I interviewed. As much as the U.S. government tried to publicly distance itself from the WCAR, it remained deeply invested in controlling the language of the conference and the discourses emanating from it.¹⁷ This was tacit acknowledgment that the conference's outcomes were not limited to the texts included in the DDPA; more important were the new coalitions formed among activists and allied Third World government delegations, voices that could challenge the power of the United States.

Interviews with feminist activists from the Americas suggest that national contexts shaped their objectives for the 2001 WCAR. Women from Canada planned to counter the false image of domestic racial harmony in Canada that originated from the discourse of multiculturalism by spotlighting gendered racism at the international level. Women of color in the United States had to be mindful of national privilege—hence, they had to be particularly attentive to not control the political discussions with other

activists so as to avoid replicating the tendency of the United States government to dictate and dominate. For Mexican women, as a result of many Mexican women's groups not actively engaging in the Durban proceedings, the women I interviewed largely worked in isolation from feminist organizations based in Mexico. Rather, they had to foster transnational collaborations with other regional networks—such as those centered on the rights of gays, lesbians, and indigenous peoples. The national milieu of Mexico was not conducive to nationally-based antiracist feminist organizing.

The Canadian Paradox

A wide array of Canadian activists became involved in the 2001 WCAR, beginning with conference planning in the late 1990s. These women attempted to reveal the falsity of the racial harmony imagery produced by the government and transmitted globally. Andrea from Quebec Native Women and Margaret from the Students Commission were just two of the many women I interviewed who were committed to disrupting the illusion of racial democracy, a task that was undertaken in coalition with members of other domestic and international activist communities and networks. Their goal was to develop a new framework with which to understand the plight of indigenous and African Canadian women.

The UN has hailed Canada's multiculturalism legislation as a global model, in part because it is viewed as being in compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) of which Canada is a signatory.¹⁸ Canada's multiculturalism policy, first adopted in 1971, was intended to encourage the full realization of the multicultural nature of Canadian society through programs designed to promote the preservation and sharing of ethno-cultural heritages. The programs were to facilitate mutual understanding and appreciation among all Canadians. This policy was the forerunner of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which became law in 1988. For people of color, referred to as "visible minorities" in Canada, their struggles were not about culture but about race. In other words, recognizing or even celebrating aspects of different cultures is not simultaneous with dismantling structural racism and inequality.¹⁹

Andrea stood out as a forceful and knowledgeable voice on the issue of Aboriginal women, and the Canadian government invited her to join the official government delegation. Accepting this position, in her view, was crucial for facilitating activists' access to decision makers from the Canadian government as well as the UN. Her presence on the delegation confused others from the NGO community, however, with many thinking she was working *for* the government. When she realized that misinformation was circulating about her role on the delegation, Andrea quickly worked to

counter it by facilitating introductions between Native activists and the powerful people that they wanted to lobby. Andrea understood that her privileged position on the Canadian delegation should be used to help not only her organization Quebec Native Women but also as many indigenous communities as possible. Andrea's experience on the government delegation was a mixed bag, especially since she said government delegates treated her as "a secretary" until she asserted her role as clearly as possible to her fellow government delegates: "I'm here also on behalf of Aboriginal women in Quebec, so I have to do my job." For her, this meant repeatedly raising the issues faced by Aboriginal women in Canada to anyone who would listen to her, whether they were members of the Canadian delegation, other government delegates, UN officials, or other activists.

During preparations for the conference, Andrea realized that her work on behalf of Aboriginal women necessitated tending to the intra-gender dynamics of her own community. For example, she experienced considerable personal conflict with her National Chief, one of the respected leaders from her indigenous community, during one of the Preparatory Commission planning meetings (known as Prep Coms) for the 2001 WCAR held in Santiago, Chile in December 2000.²⁰ Andrea noted that indigenous peoples were drafting an NGO declaration for Durban, but that "nothing was there for Aboriginal women, nothing was mentioned that we have to protect our women." During a meeting with indigenous community members to discuss the text of the declaration, she pointed out that the document implicitly emphasized the experiences of men. She related her concern by saying that substantively, the declaration "was built on a male perspective" to the people gathered at the meeting. She continued, "[It] would be nice [if] the first paragraph introducing [the] declaration...mentioned that every article ... [applies] equally to indigenous women and indigenous men regardless... of religion or sex or whatever."²¹

Shortly after making these points, Andrea's National Chief approached her and they had the following uncomfortable exchange:

National Chief: How come every time I speak for Canada ... or outside of Canada, you're always after me? Do you have something against me?

Andrea: [You think] that I have something against you? No way. You're our National Chief.

National Chief: No? You always bring up the women ... every time I speak. ... You have something against me.

Andrea: But in fact and in the reality—on a day-to-day [basis] ... on a reserve or a community, do you think that women are equal to men? [The] rights are there, you know, the human rights declaration, the international conventions are saying that, yes, we're equal, but in fact, [that's not] the reality.

National Chief: Well, you'll have all the gay people, lesbian people ... the young people, and [other] people, [who will] all want their space in that declaration.

Andrea: Well, why not? I don't mind. I'm open [to it]. They're not here today. They [couldn't] afford to come and ... claim their [space] or whatever, [to tell us] what they need. [But] I am here.

Initially stunned that a modest suggestion to modify the opening lines from the introductory paragraph of the declaration could lead to such an exchange with her National Chief, Andrea soon had to acknowledge that her attempt to incorporate a gender analysis into matters of indigenous rights was going to be more difficult because some members of her own community were vehemently opposed to such an expansion.

The internal dynamics experienced by Andrea were not unique to the indigenous communities of Canada. African Canadians also experienced internal strife in relation to matters of funding, determining an agenda, and mobilizing the broader black community. Nonetheless, African Canadian women worked, with varying success, to incorporate gender issues into the overall agenda.

Margaret, from the Students Commission, an NGO committed to the empowerment of Canadian youth, understood that the significance of the preparatory period was to network, build coalitions, and begin early lobbying efforts with Canadian government delegates. The opportunity to participate in a forum in which she could apply her intersectional analysis thrilled her. Margaret had prior experience working at the UN level, and she saw herself as a mentor to other youth, in particular young women of color, who shared the goal of making the world conference work for their needs. As she became further involved with organizing youth for the 2001 WCAR, Margaret began to work with a group of young Canadian women of color. She said, "The group of women I came to surround myself with in [the national preparatory] process were predominantly black. They were young women of color, very strong, very knowledgeable about the issues."

Margaret attended the 2001 WCAR as part of a program for young women that she helped build within the Students Commission. The program's objective is to bring young women in Canada together to talk about "life at the intersection of race and gender, particularly in the areas of violence and poverty." This perspective on intersectionality translated into Margaret's other areas of work, primarily with the African descendant community. Margaret and many of the other black women from Canada that I interviewed had become involved in the reparations movement, for instance, because reparations became an issue that united African Canadians. As such, she felt the organizing efforts with regards to reparations would be an "important starting point" for inserting a "gender component"

into analyses of black racism in Canada, especially because the reparations movement merged “economic dimensions, youth, [and] gender.”²²

The political realities these feminists experienced show that the process of forming coalitions is less about concrete outcomes and more about building a structure for fostering a dialogue about intersectionality among activists, which allows them to conceptualize issues in a new way. Social movements in Canada, including those for labor, youth, and women, “are quite progressive,” according to Margaret, but incorporating matters of race within them can be extremely difficult. Margaret said that it is “the hardest” element to incorporate, “the one we pay the most lip service to and actually never do anything [about], and the most divisive.” She had hopes in making further “headway” on matters of race and racism. Regardless though, for her, the 2001 WCAR provided key opportunities to work with other Canadian-based progressive social movements that had not grappled adequately with antiracism.

Canadian activists preparing for the Durban conference were just as focused on participation as they were on stimulating an overdue national dialogue about gender and race in Canada. The months of preparation gave feminists an opportunity to think about how to articulate the intersection of race and gender within a Canadian context and to do so in coalitions that were neither exclusively feminist nor made up of only women. The discourse of multiculturalism that focuses on less-threatening aspects of culture and subsequently silences critical discussions about racism, moreover, undermined the work of the women I interviewed.

Grappling with the Breadth of U.S. Power

The socio-political position of U.S. feminist activists, who routinely outnumber participants from other countries at world conferences, was unique in relation to the Durban proceedings because of the explicit and aggressive nature of the U.S. government’s efforts to undermine the conference. Unlike the Canadian government which initially openly supported the 2001 WCAR, by providing substantial sponsorship for several activists to travel to Durban and hosting national consultations throughout the country, the U.S. government was not enthusiastic about the occasion of a world conference focused on the subject of racism.²³ This hostility stemming from the U.S. government produced a unique situation for U.S. people of color who identified as antiracist activists and as critics of the United States government; they found themselves on the receiving end of the anger of other activists as a result of the United States’ actions throughout the world.

A number of feminists of color, some of whom had gone to the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing or had participated in other

UN world conferences or meetings, had some understanding of the challenges they would face as U.S. women at the Durban conference. The lack of a comprehensive and critical analysis or awareness about the violent aspects of U.S. foreign policies is intimately linked to U.S. national privilege. In other words, U.S. national privilege can make one oblivious to the unseen suffering of others throughout the world due to the actions of the U.S. government and its policies—it is ultimately a form of entitlement. Thus U.S. women of color had to consider how their privileged status based on nationality distinctively situated them in relation to other participants at the Durban conference because, to put it frankly, U.S. participants in international arenas can lack a full appreciation about the impact of and profound anger about U.S. foreign policies as well as cultural symbols of U.S. power and culture.

Forming coalitions proved enormously challenging for U.S. racial justice activists who did not interrogate the link between national privilege and global manifestations of racism, further undermining potential transnational alliances. Jodi, an Asian American feminist who led a racially diverse delegation of women to the Durban conference, stated, “[We] don’t want to think about [ourselves] as American[s] but [we] are. Even though [we] are [people] of color and [we] identify as a person of color who is racially oppressed, [we] are American[s] and that means something when [we] are going outside of the country. And that means something about the way people perceive [us] and that means something about how [we] behave in being real conscious about the national privilege [we] have as an American citizen. I think that stuff informs the way that people interact with each other in both direct and indirect ways.”²⁴

The taint of entitlement became evident when activists, consciously or not, invoked U.S. national privilege. For instance, during an NGO session about youth at the NGO Forum Against Racism, translators never arrived at the session. A couple of African American youth who were on the panel asked how many people in the audience spoke English. When over half of the participants raised their hands, they concluded the session should “just be in English then.” The tent full of people began to boo and hiss. The U.S. panelists had, inadvertently perhaps, revealed their lack of knowledge about how the symbol or power of U.S. culture vis-à-vis language is received globally, and they likely did not anticipate the strong reaction to their assumption that speaking in English would be perceived as a hostile attitude about multilingualism. In fact, this assumption of the English language’s primacy is one of the symbols of U.S. imperialism that left a number of participants increasingly frustrated as conference organizers had to cut translation services due to the limitation of funding.

In essence, U.S. activists of color were caught between a rock and a hard place, constantly having to negotiate their positionality in every organizing space. Yet many U.S. activists of color were not sensitive to or conscious of national privilege. The feminist legal scholar Lisa Crooms who attended the Durban conference as part of the Women's Institute for Leadership Development (WILD) for Human Rights delegation, states that "as feminists of color, many of us failed to be reflexive, opting, instead, to re-create hierarchy by not relinquishing our privilege vis-à-vis our sisters from the global South. Many of us clung to the fallacious notion of our own universal and permanent victim status in a context where we were often oppressive."²⁵ A few negative encounters with U.S. activists triggered resentment, unfortunately, creating difficulties for others. For many activist and advocate delegations, U.S. people of color embodied and represented U.S. power.

The realities of being from the U.S. and the maneuverings of the U.S. government to weaken the Durban conference played a role in determining the content of some of the training sessions for U.S. NGO delegations. Organizations like the now defunct Women of Color Resource Center (WCRC) of Oakland, California, and MADRE, an international human rights organization based in New York City, extended enormous organizational resources to prepare their NGO delegations. Since the staff of these two organizations had prior experience working at the UN level they understood the long-term benefits in having coordinated and organized delegations. They also knew that entering a global space without a consciousness about how the U.S. is perceived internationally would hinder the formation of transnational coalitions. The WCRC's training sessions, which focused on "meeting political objectives as a delegation and helping people meet their individual goals at the conference," aided their members tremendously.²⁶ For MADRE's leadership, training U.S. participants to better "understand the UN system ... [and] the difference between one [UN] body and another" was critical, particularly because the MADRE organizers wanted their delegates to "understand the relationship between issues of economic justice and issues of gender, and the intersection of those issues" in conversation with aspects of the UN system that could be useful for their organizing efforts.

In addition to preparing their delegates for the conference, U.S. groups also organized sessions, workshops, and human rights hearings to advance an intersectional analysis in their work during the NGO Forum and the world conference. For instance, WILD for Human Rights organized a two-hour forum on September 1, 2001 titled "Jeopardizing Human Rights: Revealing the Racist Links in U.S. Foreign and Domestic Policy." The objective was to show how seemingly distinct policy issues are actually interconnected and relational in the global context. Speakers addressed the "systematic and

structural nature and effects of racism," emphasizing the interconnectedness of civil, political, and economic rights. The session juxtaposed domestic and international issues by coupling U.S. and international speakers. In one pairing, Rinku Sen of Applied Research Center (Oakland, California), spoke on the consequences of public benefit restrictions in U.S. welfare reform and Sarah Mukasa of Akina wa Mama Africa (based in the United Kingdom, with regional offices in Uganda and Nigeria), discussed the impact of structural adjustment programs on women in Africa. In doing so, Sen and Mukasa revealed how these different policies about poverty are strikingly similar in objective and intent. In another pairing, Manuel Piño, an environmental activist and director of Indian studies at Scottsdale Community College (Scottsdale, Arizona), spoke of the environmental degradation resulting from uranium mining near the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico and Wassan Al-Khudairi, an Iraqi woman living in the United States, described how the uranium extracted from U.S. Native reservations was then used in bombs dropped over Baghdad and other parts of Iraq. The other two pairings in the forum dealt with the assault on reproductive rights in the United States and its parallel connection to the prohibition of expanding family planning programs in Third World countries and the links to be made about U.S. state-sanctioned violence directed at the criminalization of U.S. youth on the U.S. mainland and the years of mistreatment for the people of Vieques, Puerto Rico, due to extensive U.S. military training on the island.²⁷

By showing that domestic and foreign policies do not operate in isolation, the WILD for Human Rights forum encouraged participants to think creatively about local-global coalitions. In making the case that, for example, discussions about U.S. welfare reform should occur in relation to structural adjustment policies or that the diminishment of reproductive rights in the United States should be considered in relation to the cutting of funds for family planning programs in the Third World, the WILD forum illuminated possibilities for new feminist alliances. Their forum revealed how seemingly dissimilar issues can be differently contextualized when an intersectional lens is utilized because it uncovers relationships in policies that have been previously overlooked.

For WILD for Human Rights, the hearing was one of their "greatest achievements" in Durban. For my interviewee, the significance of the hearing was in getting members of the WILD delegation to really "understand the [transnational] links" as a way to reinforce their goals from the nearly eighteen-month training period. She said that the hearing advanced an important feminist analytical perspective that "re-creates human rights" and that the limitations of human rights stem, in part, from how the discourse of human rights is misused politically through an overemphasis on civil and political rights. One of the goals of the hearing was to elevate a racial

and gendered analysis that places the social and economic dimensions of human rights at the center of discussion.

The Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) also organized a human rights hearing, with an approach to intersectionality that centered on the complex subjectivities of women. Titled "Women at the Intersection: Indivisible Rights, Identities, and Oppressions," it investigated three topics: bodily integrity and sexuality, migration and immigration, and war, conflict, and genocide. Women from every region of the world provided moving testimonies of their experiences. CWGL has a solid record for organizing these hearings at world conferences where, according to my interviewee, every CWGL hearing has been about the intersection of racism and sexism: "To me, if you are bringing women together from around the world, dimensions of race and class and other issues are always present." The purpose of CWGL's hearing was to explicitly highlight the intersectional dimension. Organizers of the hearing "worked intuitively for awhile" as they obtained testimonials for the hearing, but they knew that the issue of racism and ethnic conflict, migration, and the intersection of racism and violence against women would be part of the hearing. Intersectionality would be, as my interviewee stated, "the focus of the stories told."

During the course of the hearing, intersectionality became more than a theoretical or political approach. The women's moving testimonies transformed the issue into a matter of urgency because they revealed how frequently the role of gender was ignored or invalidated in conversations about race. One example was the negation of gender's role in understanding racialized violence. Maria Toj Mendoza from Kiche, Guatemala, relayed her story about military and state-sponsored violence:

What happened to me took place in 1982, when we were attacked by the army. I was in Joyabaj, in Kiche province. When they saw us from a distance, they began to fire grenades with shrapnel at us. When one of them exploded, the left side of my body was hit. My ear was affected. I fainted, and when I regained consciousness I was covered with blood and a lot of matter was coming out of my ear.

My whole family was separated by the war. I didn't see two of my sons for seven years. Can you imagine what it would be like to not see your children, not to know how they are, not to see them grow up, not to be able to give them a mother's love and affection? I had to separate from my husband. I was alone in my community. The women of the community helped me when they found me abandoned. It is thanks to them that I had the strength to recuperate from those difficult moments. Although I did not die, I did not completely recover. I remained deaf in one ear. And more than anything else, I remained traumatized.²⁸

The room remained completely silent during Maria's testimony; people also quietly listened to the testimonies from the other women who had similarly devastating experiences. Many of us in the audience were visibly shaken. The format of hearings is powerful precisely because the stories are so moving, and because they stay with the audience long after the hearing's conclusion.

Although it was not mentioned in Maria's testimony, it is impossible to ignore the association between what she experienced at the hands of the Guatemalan army and the U.S. support for the Guatemalan military at that time. Government documents declassified in the late 1990s revealed that the U.S. government was fully aware of the massacre and abuses aimed at the indigenous peoples of Guatemala; thus U.S. citizens, as a result of violently aggressive U.S. foreign policies, were arguably complicit in Maria's suffering.²⁹

For U.S. activists, grappling with the breadth of U.S. power was utterly essential for deciphering how to develop sustainable transnational coalitions and even to fully understand the extent and depth to which U.S. foreign policies impacted people's lives, often times without U.S. citizens even knowing about it until decades later. As such, the approach of contextualized intersectionality can prove useful for uncovering not only the scope of U.S. power but also how national privilege can obscure or even skew our approaches to racism at the global level. The events organized by WILD for Human Rights and the CWGL reveal the benefits of intersectionality for illuminating the links—such as the relationship between domestic and U.S. foreign policies—and experiences with racially motivated violence that cannot be conceptualized as simply a matter of gender-based discrimination, as evidenced by the story of Maria during the CWGL hearing.

Challenging the Denial of Racism's Existence: The Case of Mexico

The 2001 WCAR offered feminists the opportunity to rupture the silence about racism in Mexico upheld by the *mestizaje* nationalist discourse. In 2000, the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos (Mexican Academy of Human Rights) and the Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum (Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation) hosted, respectively, a cross-regional NGO conference on racism across Mexico and Central America and a meeting for indigenous Mexican youth in Mexico City. Most speakers at the Academia Mexicana conference sought to highlight the racial injustices faced by indigenous groups and immigrants and to an extent, the discussions acknowledged women experience racial injustice differently than men, but a Mexican feminist organization, El Closet de Sor Juana (The Closet of Sor Juana), wanted

to foster a deeper understanding of racism by uncovering the intersection of racism and sexuality.³⁰

El Closet de Sor Juana is a lesbian feminist organization founded in the late 1970s in Mexico City. It functions as a resource center that collects and distributes videos and other educational materials on sexual orientation and sexual rights. Eva, the co-coordinator of the group, talked with me about her participation in meetings that led up to the Durban conference. During these international gatherings she was able to garner support for her work on lesbian rights. For example, she attended the regional Prep Com meeting in Santiago, Chile, in December 2000. There she became involved in an alliance between feminists and gay and lesbian networks. She also connected to a coalition of organizations from throughout Mexico and other parts of Latin America that drafted an NGO declaration about the intersection of racism and sexual orientation at the Foro de las Americas (Americas Forum), held in Quito, Ecuador, before the 2001 WCAR. Directed at the UN, UN Member States, and other NGOs, the declaration urged governments to incorporate sexual orientation in final WCAR documents and to investigate and prosecute acts of violence directed at gay and lesbian communities of color. The declaration also called on NGOs to “create gathering spaces, reflection, analysis and action, that permits understanding and deconstructing the connections among diverse forms of discrimination and intolerance.”³¹

The declaration further emphasized that gay and lesbian NGOs from the Global North, should “promote an analysis and critique about sexual orientation rights from the Global South’s perspective” stating that this Global South’s perspective is aligned with the themes of “democracy, development, and human rights.”³² This Global South declaration did not include a narrow construction of sexual rights for activists, but was fundamentally about, as the statement said, “democracy, development, and human rights.” The efforts by feminist lesbian activists, like Eva, therefore, did not seek to separate themselves from other social movements, but rather to think of inter-connections with other social movements.

It was during the several months of meetings prior to the 2001 WCAR that “the process became very, very rich,” according to Eva. Seeking networks outside of Mexico helped Eva realize her shortcomings as a Mexican feminist in regard to antiracism. Eva realized how the formation of alliances could be deployed effectively in a world conference setting because of the multiple social movements and governments engaged in the process. She pointed out how the work of feminist alliances influenced conference proceedings, saying, “We managed to impact very strongly and effectively other social movements [in Santiago] and even at the WCAR itself: the governments of Brazil and Canada were raising the issues of gender and sexual diversity constantly. So those successes were the best that we’ve ever had in

our history as lesbians."³³ Indeed, an articulation about the intersection of racism and sexuality or sexual diversity had never occurred before at the UN.

The Mexican organizations and the feminist presence overall were considerably smaller than the presence of Canadian and U.S. feminist organizations. Yet the actual numbers matter less than the intervention. The preparatory period enabled activists and advocates from Mexico to begin long overdue dialogues about racism, both nationally within Mexico and regionally as well. The participation of organizations like El Closet de Sor Juana was notable because they contributed their somewhat provocative perspectives on sexuality and engaged advocacy in an antiracism forum. In some respects, the Durban conference itself, while relevant, was not as critical for Eva as the preparatory gatherings, like the one in Santiago, where she managed to become part of some impactful international alliances to advance an understanding about racism that considered, among other issues, sexuality and sexual diversity as important aspects of the conversations about race and racism.

Conclusion: Making the Transnational Feminist Connections

Transnational feminism is a theory and practice that underscores lines of connection that considers the multidirectional flow of power because transnational feminists "are linked *both* by relations of power *and* by bonds of solidarity."³⁴ Together with a contextualized approach to intersectionality, transnational feminism can be especially instructive for unpacking the intersection of racism and sexism at the local level to eventually consider this inter-relationship at the transnational level. In the many months leading up to the 2001 WCAR, the efforts by women to globally contextualize intersectionality advanced critical conversations about racism, gender, sexuality, and human rights.³⁵

The full story of Durban cannot be understood solely through its final document, the DDPA. At Durban, feminists began to articulate the linking of human rights with gender as well as race, and it was the preparatory process that mattered a great deal to the women activists from the Americas. They formed various networks—for youth, women, indigenous and African descendant peoples—at local, national, and regional levels; in some cases, the newly formed networks conjured up tensions. In establishing these networks, activist groups were able to reconceptualize human rights from the vantage point of their new coalitions. Although building new coalitions can be difficult for people who have not worked together before, especially when time is limited, the problems that arise can be productive. An occasion like the world conference forced activists to consider how to translate and

consolidate their agendas, requiring them to conceptualize their strategies more clearly and define their platforms against racism more broadly.

In this article, I analyzed three cases of transnational feminist organizing based in North America, which began in the late 1990s as feminist activists anticipated and prepared for the 2001 WCAR in Durban, South Africa. For Canadian feminists of color like Andrea and Margaret, the occasion of the Durban conference presented them and their colleagues with an important opportunity to disrupt the national discourse of multiculturalism, which stifled their work. Whether it be by raising concerns over the neglect of issues facing indigenous women in a global document meant to be inclusive and subsequently experiencing backlash from a community member, or having the prospect of merging political interests ranging from youth, women, and African descendants in new activist spaces, feminists of color from Canada situated intersectionality based primarily on subjectivities informed by the national context. This approach proved effective for working domestically and then translating those agendas internationally.

U.S. activists, not surprisingly, were the most widely represented of all national constituencies in the 2001 WCAR. This disproportionately high representation, coupled with the U.S. government's efforts to dilute the UN's antiracism agenda, meant that other participants frequently regarded U.S. feminists as privileged. U.S. participants had to negotiate multiple pluralities and subjectivities within a transnational space because inequalities (both perceived and real) alter at the global level because the power dynamics of "being" from the U.S. tended to overshadow the power dynamics of being from Canada or Mexico.³⁶ U.S. activists, in particular, received a lesson about how international realities can affect personal involvement. In the Durban process, everyone had to step outside their comfort zones and question the location of power in regard to racism.

The preconference period proved to be a critical time for U.S. feminist activists. Efforts by groups like WILD for Human Rights, CWGL, MADRE, and WCRC were instrumental in contending with the complexity of issues that dealt with race and U.S. national privilege and in advancing a perspective on intersectionality that looked beyond U.S. national interests. WILD for Human Rights organized a hearing to illustrate the links between U.S. foreign and domestic policies and CWGL organized a hearing based on testimonies of women literally living "at the intersection." Both addressed local and global human rights violations perpetrated by U.S. policies. For U.S. feminists, approaching intersectionality based on subjectivities and structural policies presented an important moment to advance a new image of U.S. activism—U.S. women conscious of the ways U.S. foreign and domestic policies exacerbated global racism and of how the U.S. government intentionally undermined transnational spaces in which activists convened

to advance a more progressive antiracist agenda at the UN. It is within this national context that U.S. feminist activists must negotiate their positionality in their advocacy in the transnational domain today.

In the case of Mexico, it was the intervention, more so than the number of participants, that was significant. El Closet's approach to intersectionality resided in the inter-relationship between sexuality and racism, and linking to other feminist and gay and lesbian networks validated their efforts. Even though no mention of sexual diversity can be found in the DDPA, Eva was able to pursue her agenda in satisfying ways by forming coalitions outside of Mexico. In other words, it was the formation of new coalitions that proved critical to these activists because coalitions can be maintained long after a world conference has concluded. Intersectional subjectivities, more importantly, were linked to projects of democracy and human rights, meaning that sexual rights has less to do with the individual person and more about changing societal institutions and structures in solidarity with other social movements.

Taken together and based on their national contexts, each case offers different approaches to intersectionality centered on intersectional subjectivities or intersectional structures (i.e., overlapping social policies) to expose experiences and perspectives that would be missed when an intersectional approach is lacking. Furthermore, identifying the links is so critical for fostering a transnational feminist community that embodies a sense of hope. The conclusion of Maria's testimony from the CWGL's hearing relates how she found her inspiration from other women from inside and outside of Guatemala in what many of us might consider a hopeless situation; she attributed her ability to retain hope to the examples of dignity shown by women throughout the world. She stated:

Even after all that has happened, I still have hope. And when people ask me how it is possible to have hope, I answer that I don't feel alone. There are women who have helped me very much through their example. They are the Mayan women of Guatemala and the women of civil society. But they are also you. They are the South African women who have given us an example of struggle and of hope. They are the Palestinian women, the women of Nicaragua and of Vietnam. And they are the indigenous women, like the Samis, the Kunas, the Miskitas, and all the women of Asia, of the Americas, of Europe and of Africa that inspire me and fill me with hope to be able to struggle to achieve a truly dignified and human future with real diversity and with all our rights assured for ourselves, for our daughters and sons and for our granddaughters and grandsons.

In her powerful closing, Maria communicated a transnational feminist solidarity of hope inspired by the resilience of women. In doing so, Maria linked her own survival from a horrific situation with those of other women from the Americas region and beyond. As such, she situated her story within a genealogy of women's struggles against state violence and military occupation.

Recognition that racism can in fact be gendered was built on several years of advocacy at the UN level and transnational feminists had an opportunity to build and solidify this perspective during the 2001 WCAR proceedings. To no longer work in isolation from each other's social movements and to sustain broad transnational-based coalitions remains the unfinished work of the 2001 WCAR in part because of the events of September 11. Thus the unfinished work must be re-visited anew because the inclusion and adoption of an intersectional approach was not limited to the activists; the official conference documents for the first time included new issues that reflected women's experiences entirely absent from prior WCARs.

NOTES

The University of California's MEXUS Dissertation Research Grant, the University of California's Pacific Rim Research Mini Grant, and the University of California Santa Barbara's Humanities and Social Science Research Grant and Graduate Research Mentorship Fellowship provided funding for this research. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of this article, Jean Quataert, Benita Roth, Molly Talcott, Sharmila Lodhia, and Dana Collins for their feedback on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank the women I interviewed for this research who have taught me so much about engaged human rights activism.

¹CERD General Recommendation 25 (2000) is entitled "Gender related dimensions of racial discrimination." To read the recommendation in its entirety, please go to <http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/76a293e49a88bd23802568bd00538d83?OpenDocument> (last access 10 April 2012).

²Sylvanna M. Falcón, "Invoking Human Rights and Transnational Activism in Racial Justice Struggles at Home: U.S. Antiracist Activists and the UN Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination," *Societies Without Borders* 4 (2009): 295–316.

³I use pseudonyms throughout the article even though many of these interviewees are public activists. I do use the name of the actual organizations included in this research. Personal interview, Toronto, Canada, 29 March 2004.

⁴Charles P. Henry, *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations*, (New York: New York University, 2009), 8.

⁵See Falcón, "Invoking Human Rights and Transnational Activism in Racial Justice Struggles at Home."

⁶Personal interviews conducted in the U.S., Canada, and México occurred during 2003–2004. I focus on a select number of interviews for the purposes of this article. I initially identified participants by using a list generated by the United Nations of accredited NGOs registered for the Durban conference. After finding a number of errors using this list (i.e., I would contact an organization and no one on their staff participated in the conference), I began to ask the interviewees to send me the names of others I could interview. Since all of these activists worked in networks or coalitions, I often interviewed women who participated in the Durban conference who had an affiliation with an NGO that was not listed on the participant list. During interviews, some activists would provide me with the advocacy documents that reflected their various advocacy positions. The document referenced at the beginning was given to me by MADRE. After transcribing the interviews (either personally or through a transcription service), I coded and analyzed the transcripts using a qualitative research software program.

⁷Ella Shohat, "Introduction," in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 1–64, quotation on page 38.

⁸Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *The Public Nature of Private Violence: The Discovery of Domestic Abuse*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk (New York: Routledge, 1994), 93–120; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); Lisa A. Crooms, "Indivisible Rights and Intersectional Identities or, What do Women's Human Rights Have To Do With the Race Convention?" *Howard Law Journal* 40, no. 3 (1997): 619–40; Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771–1800; Nira Yuval-Davis, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 193–209; Maylei Blackwell and Nadine Naber, "Intersectionality in an Era of Globalization: The Implications of the UN World Conference Against Racism for Transnational Feminist Practices," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 2, no. 2 (2002): 237–48.

⁹Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

¹⁰Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42–72; Anastasia Vakulenko, "'Islamic Headscarves' and the European Convention on Human Rights: An Intersectional Perspective," *Social and Legal Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 183–189, quotation on 185.

¹¹Susan Stranford Friedman, "Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21, no. 1 (1995): 1–49, quotation on 17.

¹²Daiva K. Stasiulus, "Relational Positionalities of Nationalisms, Racisms, and Feminisms," in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, ed. Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, and Mino Moallem, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 182–218, quotation on 194.

¹³Jennifer Chan-Tiberghien, "Gender-Skepticism or Gender Boom? Post-structural Feminists, Transnational Feminisms and the World Conference Against Racism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6, no. 3 (2004): 454–484, quotations on 460, 477.

¹⁴Phone interview conducted on 24 May 2005.

¹⁵Bobby Vaughn, "Afro-Mexico: Blacks, Indígenas, Politics, and the Greater Diaspora," in *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, and Afro-Latinos*, ed. Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler, 117–36 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

¹⁶Teresa Carrillo, "Cross-Border Talk: Transnational Perspectives on Labor, Race, and Sexuality," in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 391–411.

¹⁷U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, *A Discussion on the U.N. World Conference Against Racism* [2001, Serial No. 107–36].

¹⁸In my dissertation research, I reviewed all of the submitted reports by the Canadian government to the CERD committee for review about their compliance with ICERD. In the Concluding Observations from those hearings, the committee found the multiculturalism policies to be a model for others. See "Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Canada," 1 November 2002, Doc. No. A/57/18, para. 320, which states "The Committee notes the central importance and significance of the Multiculturalism Act and the relevant policy developed by the State party, which includes measures to protect and promote cultural diversity."

¹⁹Juliet Hooker. *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁰Prep Com meetings refer to preparatory commission meetings, which are international and regional meetings that occur to negotiate the text of the official conference documents. NGO activists are known to attend these meetings to both lobby and network.

²¹Phone interview, 23 July 2004.

²²Personal interviews, Toronto, Canada, March and April 2004.

²³Interviewees told me that Canadians were eligible to apply for up to \$7500 USD of travel funds for attending the 2001 WCAR.

²⁴Personal interview, Oakland, California, 13 January 2004.

²⁵Lisa A. Crooms, "'To Establish My Legitimate Name Inside the Consciousness of Strangers': Critical Race Praxis, Progressive Women-of-Color Theorizing, and Human Rights," *Howard Law Journal* 46 (2003): 229–268, quotation on 253.

²⁶Personal interview, Oakland, California, 13 January 2004.

²⁷Barreto, Amílcar Antonio. *Vieques, the Navy, and Puerto Rican Politics*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002; McCaffrey, Katherine T. *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*. New Brunswick, NC: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

²⁸The Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) published a book and produced a video about the hearing. See *Women at the Intersection: Indivisible Rights, Identities, and Oppressions*, eds. Rita Raj, Charlotte Bunch and Elmira Nazombe (New Brunswick: Center for Women's Global Leadership, 2002). The book contains all of the testimonies given at the CWGL hearing in Durban; I was also in attendance at the hearing and can attest to the emotional scene for the audience members. To read the full testimony, please see "Guatemala: Genocide and Ethnocide of Indigenous People by Maria Toj Mendoz," in *Women at the Intersection: Indivisible Rights, Identities, and Oppressions*, ed. Rita Raj, Charlotte Bunch, and Elmira Nazombe (New Brunswick: Center for Women's Global Leadership, 2002), 70–73.

²⁹Farah, Douglas, "Papers Show U.S. Role in Guatemalan Abuses," *The Washington Post*, 11 March 1999, A26. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/march99/guatemala11.htm> (last accessed on 16 February 2012).

³⁰Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, *Foro Regional de México y Centroamérica Sobre Racismo Discriminación e Intolerancia* (Ciudad de México: Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, 2001).

³¹This quote comes from a pamphlet issued on 13 March 2001, titled "Declaration of the Satellite Meeting on Racism, Discrimination and Intolerance of Sexual Diversity," from an NGO meeting held in Quito, Ecuador. I received a copy of the pamphlet from an interviewee.

³²Another Americas regional meeting took place in Quito, Ecuador on 13–16 March 2001 for the Foro de las Americas por la Diversidad y la Pluralidad (The Americas Forum for Diversity and Plurality) and in the meeting's "plan of action," the issue of discrimination based on sexual orientation is integrated throughout the document (Plan of Action can be accessed at http://movimientos.org/dhpluralforo-racismo/plan_final1.phtml).

³³Other interviews I conducted in Lima, Perú, with a lesbian feminist group for the larger research project corroborated my Mexican interviewee's perspective about the Durban conference resulting in a major success for lesbians, not in terms of preferred text for the official conference documents, but in terms of the process of preparing, organizing, and mobilization for the occasion of the conference.

³⁴Millie Thayer, *Making Transnational Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), quotation on 7.

³⁵See Dana Collins, Sylvanna Falcón, Sharmila Lodhia, and Molly Talcott, "New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12, no. 3/4 (2010): 298–318.

³⁶I do not contend that power dynamics did not exist amongst the Canadian and Mexican participants in my research; in fact, many Canadian and Mexican interviewees also had to wrestle with their own questions of power because of their access to resources, which facilitated their involvement with the Durban proceedings.