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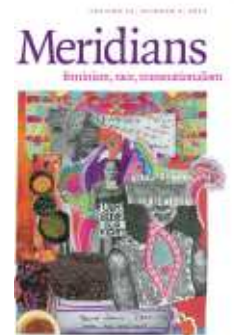
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## **Intersectionality in an Era of Globalization: The Implications of the UN World Conference against Racism for Transnational Feminist Practices—A Conference Report**

Maylei Blackwell, Nadine Naber

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## Intersectionality in an Era of Globalization The Implications of the UN World Conference against Racism for Transnational Feminist Practices—A Conference Report

MAYLEI BLACKWELL AND NADINE NABER

*As we prepared this report, we struggled to find the meaning of the UN World Conference against Racism (WCAR) buried under the rubble of the first week of the U.S. bombing campaign against Afghanistan and the devastation and massive loss of life at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania. Like a historic dividing line that bisects our hearts and sense of time—before September 11, 2001 and after—activists and organizers returned home from Durban to find that the political terrain had shifted beneath our feet in ways we might still be measuring for decades to come. Despite the difficulty of the times, we need the message and the lessons gleaned from this historic anti-racism gathering more than ever as accounts pour in from all over the country of the over 700 reported instances of hate crimes committed against Arab Americans and those who have been mistaken for them, mostly members of South Asian communities. The post-September 11 political context has not only witnessed an upsurge in racist violence, it has also seen the implementation of retrogressive policies, including indefinite detention and the renewal of anti-immigrant policies such as “secret evidence” as a basis for detention and deportation.*

### Confronting Racism in the Era of Globalization

Despite the virtual media silence, the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (WCAR) was a historic meeting of the global anti-racism

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movement in all of its diverse manifestations. While the twenty-first century began with the UN World Conference Against Racism (August 31–September 7, 2001) and the parallel Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum, UN attention to questions of racism and the ill-fated nature of the U.S. government's participation have a longer history. The UN General Assembly first designated 1971 as the International Year of Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, and prior to Durban, two UN World Conferences against Racism were held in Geneva in 1978 and 1983.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. boycotted both of them.

The NGO Forum in Durban attracted between 8,000–10,000 delegates from nations all over the world, the majority of whom were women. The conference dealt with themes such as colonialism, hate crimes and violence, ethnic cleansing, migration/refugees, slavery and slave trade, poverty and social exclusion, institutionalized racism, anti-Semitism, caste-based discrimination, gender, sexual orientation, youth, foreign occupation, environmental racism, religious intolerance, reparations, labor, trafficking, and globalization. As a venue, South Africa symbolized both a victory over apartheid and how tenacious aspects of this virulent form of systematic racism can be. In South Africa, anti-apartheid activists emphasized that, without economic justice, their movement continues to be an unfinished revolution and that there is still a long road to walk in creating true racial equality in the increasingly more difficult conditions created by globalization.

In fact the struggle against racism and globalization came to the fore in ways that many in the media missed or failed to report. Beyond the NGO Forum and the Governmental Conference, a third political arena emerged in the streets of Durban, ignited by a two-day general strike with mass marches led by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and an estimated one million workers marched in Johannesburg. Many NGO participants joined South African anti-globalization marchers in the streets to protest privatization. On August 31 over 30,000 people took to the streets for a march organized by the Durban Social Forum in solidarity with the landless movement, which lodged a critique of the ANC's failure to fulfill its promise of "land for those who use it." Because the WCAR was inaccessible to many South Africans, the streets were transformed into a multi-issue forum for international conference participants and local activists, where the role of class was front

and center in the ongoing conversations surrounding intersecting systems of oppression that compound racism.<sup>2</sup> The overarching nature of globalization and the conditions it creates—especially for poor people, women, and the racially marginalized—emerged as a guiding and principal undercurrent to the WCAR. As a key site for the continuation of a growing international anti-globalization movement, Durban was unique because, unlike the demonstrations against globalization held in Seattle (1999) and Genoa (2001), it attracted predominantly people of color and Third World peoples from the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands (Beal 2001). In Durban, grievances against globalization emphasized economic exploitation and racism simultaneously, not only in relation to transnational financial institutions, but in terms of how these institutions are also linked to persisting forms of colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid that are often excluded from ongoing anti-globalization debates.

We participated in the WCAR as members of a national delegation of community-based activists and scholars organized by the Women of Color Resource Center (WCRC) in Berkeley, California. Armed with an alternative report issued by the WCRC called *Time to Rise: U.S. Women of Color Issues and Strategies*, our primary critique was that U.S. policy circles tend to treat problems of violence, poverty, labor, and globalization as issues of international concern rather than immediate issues that profoundly impact women of color in our own, local communities (Blackwell, Burnham, and Choi 2001). In the pages that follow we frame key developments that went unrecognized by the U.S. media and point to the role the U.S. played, not only shaping the debates but policing the boundaries of what could be discussed and debated. U.S. threats to boycott the WCAR bordered on censorship in that they prevented some issues being broached and certain languages being used, as illustrated by efforts to undermine any attempt to define slavery as a crime against humanity or to name Zionism a form of racism. In this way, the U.S. shunned the global anti-racist movement as well as the rest of the world's governments. The U.S. governmental delegation did walk out on the fifth day of the UN World Conference Against Racism. In order to understand the complex maneuvering in Durban, it is crucial to realize that at the core of the WCAR was a discursive struggle, or a struggle over representation and the power to define, which has been a central feature of colonial domination and legitimization throughout history.

## Dangerous Crossing: Gender at the Intersections of Race and Poverty

After decades of struggle to gain recognition of the gendered impacts of racism, xenophobia, and violence, this meeting was the first UN-sponsored conference against racism to include “related intolerance,” or the ways that racism intersects with poverty, gender discrimination, and homophobia. The Women’s Caucus emphasized that without attention to gender, certain forms of racism would go undetected.<sup>3</sup> Gender was incorporated into several key arenas, such as the Globalization and Poverty Caucus, the Migrant Rights Working Group, the African and African-Descendants Caucus, and in Palestine solidarity work to name a few.

Testimonies by Filipina migrant workers, lesbian activists in South Africa, and Palestinian women living in refugee camps were a key in building feminist alliances. Viola Casares of Fuerza Unida, a Latina worker’s organization at the forefront of the early anti-globalization movement, gave testimony that the connections between globalization and racism create conditions in which,

...women of color, poor women, those that don’t have the right kind of education, those women stepped on, discriminated against, are oppressed as if they aren’t worth anything. We know that globalization increases the violence that happens in our communities, especially domestic violence and violence against children in communities of color.... I don’t want anyone to feel sorry...for us. We, and the other women we met [in Durban], are strong and will continue to fight...this is what I heard from all the women I met, from every part of the world. We are mothers, sisters, wives, partners, grandmothers, workers, daughters and *luchadoras*, that is, fighters.... We have understood the relationship between globalization and racism. Being at this conference made us stronger.... We will not give up our cultures and will not be divided by race. (Casares 2001, 10)

Learning about women’s participation in the South Africa landless movement, the Intifada, the Dalit Struggle, and the indigenous movements often reminded us that although we are the backbones of our struggles, women remain marginal within the masculinist politics of national liberation and community struggles against racism. While the

“related intolerance” framework opened up spaces for new alliances and more complex analyses in the struggle against racism, it was often critiqued by conservatives as a strategy for watering down the anti-racism agenda, and panels and workshops organized around gender were often marginalized in the larger debates on race. Despite these challenges, it was clear that women continue to stand on the front lines of struggle, strategy-building, and coalition, and that they are building a more integrated approach to anti-racist work globally.

## Who Bears History’s Burden? The Question of Reparations

The Africa and African-Descendants Caucus was united on a strategy aimed at influencing the WCAR on three issues: 1) the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and colonialism as crimes against humanity; 2) reparations for the victims of the slave trade, slavery, and colonialism; and 3) the economic base of racism. Most African countries remained committed to talking about reparations, despite attempts by the U.S. and the European Union to silence this discussion. While some governments insisted on focusing only on “modern-day racism” and not historic wrongs, many activists insisted that slavery is an ongoing, contemporary practice. U.S. prison rights activists cited the incarceration of people of color in U.S. prisons as a modern-day form of slavery. African women at a regional meeting of the “Gender Commission” added that modern slavery continues in the trafficking in women and young girls, who are used as sexual and work slaves in the most deplorable conditions without pay. These conditions, they argued, lead to statelessness and the spread of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS, often through sexual violence. They insisted that women are the most vulnerable group in the context of historical and contemporary forms of colonialism and slavery (Wandia and Chesoni 2001). Two months have passed since Durban, and the United Nations Secretariat has not yet released the final Declaration and Program of Action partly because of a dispute over States to acknowledge three paragraphs that call for the condemnation of and apologies for slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, apartheid, colonialism, and genocide, and partly to allow “concerned States to take appropriate remedial and other measures to halt and reverse the lasting consequences of those practices.” Despite these problems, a general consensus exists

among reparations activists that the conference was a resounding success which helped the U.S. movement to reorient a narrow national agenda towards a growing international movement.

### “S” Stands for Sovereignty: Indigenous Peoples and the WCAR

As a movement that has worked within the UN System for decades, the Indigenous Peoples Caucus was reduced to a struggle against racist and discriminatory double standards embodied by the letter S at the WCAR. Indigenous peoples have called for the use of the term “peoples” as opposed to “people” or “populations” because in international law, the term “peoples” triggers the right to self-determination. Yet, states used the WCAR to undermine the right to self-determination which would weaken the status and basic rights of the world’s estimated 300 million indigenous peoples. The Indigenous Peoples Caucus fought to ensure that the Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, a document that would establish international standards, not be a *regressive* document that would set back the international indigenous movement years, if not decades.<sup>4</sup>

At the WCAR the U.S. and other governments ultimately agreed to use the term Indigenous Peoples but only by stripping it of its meaning in relation to self-determination by stipulating that “The use of the term peoples in this document shall not be construed as having any implications in regards to the rights that may attach to the term under international law.”<sup>5</sup> This caveat implies that the human rights of indigenous people are not inherent and inalienable but predicated on domestic law, thereby creating different standards not applied to any other individuals or groups in the world.

Despite this, the meeting in Durban and the process of preparation for the WCAR showed a continued growth in international Indigenous organizing.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous women provided leadership linking international and community struggles. For example, the aim for indigenous women from Mexico was to bring their plight to the international arena after their Congress passed an Indian rights bill this past year that fails to comply with the most basic agreements of the San Andres Accords signed by the EZLN and the government in 1996. Cándida Jiménez, a Mixe organizer from the Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas of Mexico, who works on indigenous women’s autonomy and reproductive health,

emphasized that although indigenous peoples and their millennial cultures have survived colonialism and capitalism, there is a growing need to come together as indigenous peoples to challenge neo-liberal globalization. She reported that the indigenous movement in Mexico, a national expansion of the 1994 Chiapas uprising, is seeking new strategies of resistance after the betrayal of the San Andres Accords while at the same time confronting new forms of militarization and the growth of free trade zones as proposed in the Pueblo to Panama Plan.

## Zionism: The Forgotten-“ism”

Conference participants working on the Palestinian issue named Israel as a racist, exclusionary, apartheid state. They argued that the methods used to ensure racial dominance in the maintenance of the State of Israel as an exclusive state for “Jews only” included “ongoing dispossession and destruction of Palestinian land, agriculture and homes, denial of residency rights, separation of families and communities, severe restrictions on movement...and, more recently, virtual imprisonment through the use of trenches and iron gates with keys held by Israeli soldiers” (Palestinian NGO Media Team 2001, 3).

A key reason for the U.S. government’s threat to pull out of the conference was that the language in the proposed final document included a condemnation of Israel’s systematic violations of Palestinian rights, and because the conference agenda included discussions on Zionism as a form of racism. Zionist conference participants engaged in a media-oriented campaign of symbolic acts aimed at undermining Palestinian grievances against Israel, which included handing out white carnations and singing “Give Peace a Chance” on the day after the Israeli military assassinated a key civilian Palestinian leader.<sup>7</sup> Other tactics included disrupting panel discussions on Palestine with picket signs deploying racial stereotypes stating that Palestinians hijacked the conference along with public relations attempts to dismiss Palestinian issues as mere “politics” not central to the discussion of “racism.” Despite these actions, the Palestinian solidarity movement not only gained overwhelming support in Durban, it became the common ground for many solidarity and popular movements represented at the conference. From the COSATU march, where thousands of South African labor organizers participated in a call and response with the words “Viva Palestine,” to the conference grounds



where people passing by begged Palestinians for their kaffiyehs, buttons, t-shirts, and pens, an international multiracial consensus that Israel is a racist state emerged. As South Africans identify with Palestinians in terms of a shared history of living under apartheid and can recall Israeli support of South African apartheid historically and militarily, a communiqué issued by almost 3000 NGOs accused Israel of systematic perpetration of racist crimes, including war crimes, acts of genocide, and ethnic cleansing.

An early example of the Palestinian victory in Durban was when Manar, a teenage girl from the Palestinian refugee camp Dheisheh, overwhelmingly supported by delegates at the Youth Summit, publicly confronted Mary Robinson (the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) asking why she did not mention Palestine in the list of issues that would be raised at the conference. Mary Robinson then returned to the microphone and acknowledged that the suffering of the Palestinian people would be addressed at WCAR. On a panel on intersectionality and globalization, Palestinian women explained the impact of Israeli occupation on the fragmentation of Palestinian women's movements. On a panel about U.S. women of color, Arab American women argued that Zionism is the Forgotten-"ism" among U.S. feminist movements. They explained that they are racialized *vis-à-vis* the Zionist movement particularly when Zionist feminists strategically conflate anti-Zionism (a critique of Israeli state politics) with anti-Semitism. They added the demonization of Arab women within the Western media often serves to justify Israel's violence against Arab people (Arab Women's Solidarity Association 2001).

## New Trends/New Actors: Anti-Racist Struggles

"Related Intolerance" in Durban also meant the introduction of the idea of multiple oppressions in relation to sexual orientation and sexual rights among anti-racist activists (Shah et al. 2001). Although not a lot of progress was made in the document or the Platform for Action, the fact that the conversation happened puts new important coordinates on the global learning curve that will help Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, and Transgender activists continue to forge new dialogues on the way racism, class exploitation, gender, and homophobia intersect and are compounded by one another.<sup>8</sup> At the NGO Forum and the Governmental

Conference, there was a Sexual Orientation Commission as well as a Caucus along with several panels and workshops. A successful satellite conference was also organized by a coalition of African activists on September 1 entitled, "Homophobia—the Racism Within: Racism, Homophobia and Human Rights Abuses in Southern Africa."<sup>9</sup>

Because there is such heterogeneity in the ways race is structured around socioeconomic class, cultural patterns, regional differences, and shared and divergent colonial histories, a critical part of the conference was the global education activists gave one another on these diverse racial formations. Key actors to emerge on the world stage included the Dalits who, despite having been characterized historically as untouchables in India, showed us the complexity of various forms of racial discrimination in terms of caste discrimination. The Roma peoples called attention to discrimination caused by migration and xenophobia. The WCAR also included a global Youth Summit where youth from around the globe shared their histories and visions for a different world as well as expanded the WCAR agenda.

## Conclusions and Continuing Challenges

Will a Document, a Plan of Action, or Declaration end racism? What do such struggles over language, histories, and discourses mean in the end? The significance of the WCAR is that it helped to establish international norms to which States can be held accountable; assisted in creating dialogue around shared oppressions in an international context; and broadened our definition of racism and how racism intersects in its complexities with multiple forms of oppression. Yet the key to effective transnational organizing is to "bring it home"—that is our challenge and our lesson. The usefulness of the Declaration and Plan of Action is not that we leave them behind as empty words but that we use them in our daily struggles against racism and its complex intersections.

The Durban meeting was a key site for the growing anti-globalization movement and highlighted the many ways that globalization relies on racial stratification, gender discrimination, and class exploitation. As participants who navigated between the different sites of political action in Durban—the NGO Forum, the Governmental Conference, and the mass mobilizations outside in the streets—we were moved by the sense that there were different agendas, different constituencies and actors, as

well as different ways of enacting politics in each of these arenas. At the WCAR, these distinctive, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting “transnational movement logics” (Alvarez 2000) ranged from predominantly working-class anti-globalization mobilizations to the growing professionalization of social movements required to work in the UN structure. While historically providing a broader space for social movement participation, the NGO Forum in Durban was criticized for its weak infrastructure and organization, which led to a lack of political focus and efficacy. Activists critiqued the increasingly more professionalized and exclusionary nature of NGO structures and a NGO Forum that mirrored the Governmental Conference instead of providing an alternative sphere to dialogue and exert influence on States and their delegations.

If Durban is any indicator, perhaps it is “outside” the barricades of the formal UN structure where an alternative forum for mass action and participation is growing. The WCAR may also mark a growing trend toward the formation of alternative transnational counterpublics with their own constituencies, actors, agendas, and “logics.” While the multiplication of arenas of participation is a positive development, we should note that this growth was caused by blockages to full participation and a lack of access to traditional forums of political representation. Some of the persistent problems in transnational organizing were reflected at the WCAR in general, and the women’s forums in particular, as conference dynamics often reproduced North/South hierarchies and marginalized people on the basis of their linguistic backgrounds. Bridges have yet to be built between these distinct political arenas, which remain segregated along the lines of class and cultural capital. The multiple sites of resistance for women at this conference emerged in their complexities. We learned that effective transnational feminist coalitions must ground our increasingly global understanding of racism in both a larger view of globalization, colonialism, and imperialism, and a closer look at how race, class, and gender relations are continually entrapped in local histories, cultural formations, and relations of power.

#### NOTES

1. The UN General Assembly has declared three different Decades of Action to Combat Racism (1973–1983, 1983–1993, 1993–2003). It has also declared 2001 as the International Year of Mobilization Against Racism.
2. Thousands of local South Africans were refused entry into the NGO Forum and Conference or denied accommodations in Durban. For example, 350 South

- African women resorted to sleeping in a train under extreme conditions, sharing one toilet, even though they had registered for the conference in advance.
3. A Women's Caucus of more than forty NGOs representing all of the world regions formed at the First Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) of WCAR from May 1–5, 2000. For a discussion of gender and its intersection with racial oppression at the WCAR, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, "The Intersectionality of Race and Gender Discrimination," a Position Paper and Training Workshop of the African American Policy Forum; and the paper developed by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); "Integrating Gender into the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (South Africa 31 August–7 September 2001). Available at: <[http://www.unifem.und.org/hr\\_racism.html](http://www.unifem.und.org/hr_racism.html)>
  4. Five years after the first 1977 International Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Peoples in Geneva, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations was convened. The General Body of the UN set aside 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples and then 1995–2004 International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. A priority of the decade has been to establish a permanent forum for Indigenous Peoples within the United Nations which is designed to give Indigenous representatives a way to address the official UN body for the first time. For a historical account of these early developments, see Dunbar Ortiz, 1984.
  5. The term "Indigenous Peoples" is used without qualification or footnote in several UN conventions and the right to self-determination is recognized by various UN bodies; so many indigenous activists claimed that the fact that these developments are not represented in the WCAR documents jeopardizes the credibility of the Declaration.
  6. See for example, *Indigenous Peoples, Racism and the United Nations*, the report from the Regional Meeting of Indigenous Peoples on the World Conference against Racism hosted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in Sydney, Australia in February 2001 (Nakata 2001).
  7. While the world's attention was focused on Durban and a global effort to end racism, Israeli forces continued their attacks against Palestinian civilians throughout the conference period. Between August 27 and September 6, Israeli military forces assassinated Abu Ali Mustafa, a key civilian Palestinian political leader, led incursions into towns and villages, and killed and injured several youth and children.
  8. This work started early in the preparatory meetings with a satellite meeting on Racism, Discrimination, and Intolerance of Sexual Diversity in Quito, Ecuador in March of 2001, which was called by the Latin American South-South Dialogue, the International Lesbian and Gay Association's Andean Sub-region, and ALAI Women's Program. See <<http://www.hri.ca/racism/SUMMITTED/theme.gay.htm>> for the statement produced at this meeting. At the second prepcom meeting in Geneva much controversy was generated because the International Gay and Lesbian Association was denied observer status for the

- world gathering in a tie vote of 43 to 43 with 27 countries abstaining.
9. Organized by the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre, the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project, the Rainbow Project of Namibia, and Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe.

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