

Introduction

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The First International Conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: bridges across activism and the academy was a title that drew several hundred participants from far and near to the university town of Nsukka in eastern Nigeria (the erstwhile Biafra) in July 1992. Don’t be misled by the term “university town” into imagining a town like Heidelberg or Cambridge or Stellenbosch (or even Alice): Nsukka is a tiny village restrainedly described as “most remote” by Lumka Funani (1992: 68), who makes the point that “Conferences [are] held in glittery towns [but] such a venue would have been entirely inappropriate to this context . . .”.

The moving spirit behind the Conference, Obioma Nnaemeka, an academic in the United States, had obviously selected the site because it was her own home town (and the Conference must have provided a welcome injection of foreign capital into the local economy); Nsukka also gave First World conference-goers a glimpse of the real living conditions of poor people in Africa. Dollars and foreign passports cushioned the actual experience for the visitors. Most of us, including Funani, were housed in relatively clean and luxurious Holiday Inn-type accommodation, refurbished in anticipation of the Conference, and if the goat-meat stew failed to come up to Holiday Inn standards we could comfort ourselves that it was only for a week.

Participants were drawn from various African countries – Ghana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Côte d’Ivoire, Uganda, Kenya, Zaïre, Burundi, South Africa and of course Nigeria – as well as from Barbados, the United Kingdom, Canada, Finland, Germany, India and Australia. There was also a large and vocal contingent from the United States, almost all of them African-Americans who identified with the African diaspora. Bedizened with video cameras and with plenty of money to spend on tailor-made *Roots*-type ethnic outfits at the local market, many of them showed an excitement at the discovery of their ancestral continent which was palpable and moving – and undoubtedly contributed to the heightened emotions that underlay the Conference.

As a black Englishwoman remarked, most of us had different ideas of what the Conference was about. Donna Flynn, a young white American anthropologist, later wrote (1992) that “a small group of African-American women . . . apparently had the mistaken belief that this conference about black women was also restricted to participation by black women. . . [T]heir attempt to appropriate the WAAD conference as a political forum [to empower black women to speak for themselves] was unfortunate.” Flynn here appears not to allow for differing perceptions and interpretations, which *all*

the South Africans, coming perhaps from a more tenuous social order, did. None of us described another as “mistaken”, although it was clear that even after the event the dynamics of the Conference were interpreted differently by different people, whether they had been present or not (among published comments see De Jong 1992; Flynn 1992; Fouché 1993; Funani 1992; Ryan & Welz 1992; Thompson 1992).

There were also various interpretations of the Conference title, and here the organisers were not blameless. Although the advertising in South Africa appears to have used the term “African”, at least some of the American advertising referred to “black” women (and indeed Nnaemeka made it clear from the podium that “this Conference is about black women”). These differing interpretations led to very different expectations and agendas. One very obvious interpretation was of “African” as a “racial” category, excluding whites and “Euro-Africans”.¹ This was extrapolated to mean that non-Africans were not welcome and/or should not have a voice (although what this said about the position of African-Americans, many of whom were less “black” than many “Euro-Africans”, remained unclear). The question may be asked: To what extent was this the view of one or more South Africans present at the Conference? During the hours of discussion as to a way forward among the South Africans in general this view was not articulated, although it emerges clearly from the resentful tone of Funani’s initial article (1992).

It was, therefore, a disparate and disunited group that gathered for the opening of the Conference, and contributing to the confusion was the arrival – given the exigencies of Nigerian transport – in dribs and drabs of additional participants over the succeeding few days. From the chaos that is probably an inevitable part of organising a large, formal gathering at a venue lacking the conveniences of modern industrialised life that most of the participants would normally have taken for granted (such as operative telephones), something quickly bubbled to the surface. At the instance of a number of African-American women, the organising committee aborted the scheduled activities and threw the Conference open to the floor in an emotion-charged session which moved through three distinct phases:

- all whites must get out
- all whites presenting papers about black women must get out
- all white South Africans must get out

It was mainly black women of various nationalities who spoke and even those white women who still felt they had a right to be at the Conference mostly held their peace. Let some of the participants speak for themselves:

A Nigerian woman:

I hope the white South African women who are here have not been sent by their government but have come as individuals. I see them as people who are on our side – I don’t think they should be sent away – we should allow them to stay – we are all women (*loud applause*).

An African-American woman:

A black South African sister was in tears [because] white women from South

Africa are going to present [papers]. We were all slaves, on the African continent and in the United States. We are permitting Europeans to drive a wedge between us once again. If these white women are honourable white women they will step back and go back to South Africa and tell Botha [*sic*] to let our people go [*some applause*]. To let white women still divide us means we're still slaves.

A white Bulgarian woman who had been working in Nigeria for 21 years:
A bit embarrassing for me – exclude white women? A lot of slaves were sold by their compatriots – and now? We don't need to go back and blame them. African women need all the help they can get . . . [*screams of "Sit down!"*] Chairperson restored order with some difficulty, insisting that all be given a hearing.]

A woman from the organising committee:

I understand there are three [*actually eight*] white South Africans who want to make presentations. I don't know what they want to talk about [*since their names and the titles of their papers had mysteriously disappeared from the working programme which was updated from time to time (the final programme was distributed at the closing ceremony of the Conference) this was hardly surprising, even though the woman speaking was a member of the organising committee*] – whether it is to express solidarity with the 54 people who were killed . . . [*an apparent reference to the recent Boipatong massacre which had been prominently featured in the world press*].

A black woman speaking with a British accent:

White women and all men [should] acknowledge [black women's] need for our own space and stop encroaching on it.

A Nigerian man (a teacher in the United States):

I appreciate the issue being raised but I do not think the exclusion of white women from this Conference is the solution. It will be in the criticism that we can express our differences.

An African-American woman:

I feel a connection with my ancestors who guide me and take care of me. We from the United States came assuming this Conference was one thing . . . The issue is assumptive domination – the habit of taking over . . . I want to know my folks . . . I feel like I've been a stranger so long . . .

A Nigerian woman:

Is this a conference of men-haters? I appeal to men to do something to help us solve our problems.

An African-American woman:

First shock: we expected the Conference to be black women only. Second shock: when we realised white women were presenting papers. First suggestion: that their papers not be presented but only published. Second suggestion: that their papers be withdrawn.

An African-American woman:

A lot have come here looking for themselves . . . a child looking for her mother, for affirmation. They're looking for their identity. Want time set aside so that women of African descent . . .

An expatriate Nigerian woman:

. . . saddens me – almost going to erode the reason why we are here. It is not proper for us to say the white women must leave. If it is a hegemonic paper . . . rethink. Discuss how to build bridges.

As the session continued, emotions were expressed even more rawly. An African-American woman stepped forward and read a poem:

I am sad . . .

Their arrogance is unforgivable . . . denigrating . . . oppressing

I hate the way they undermine our intelligence . . .

By the end of the session the focus of the hostility had quite clearly narrowed to the white South African women present. One of the dozen or so non-South African white women observed later that they acted as a lightning conductor, deflecting attention from the other white participants (from North America, Europe and Australia), who by any rational definition of the Conference theme had the least right of any to participate. It was here that black South Africans indicated quite clearly that they saw this as a South African concern which should be dealt with by the South Africans themselves. As Hlengiwe Mkhize told the Conference, "The white people from South Africa who are here are familiar with the issue. The reality is we are all there. I don't have solutions . . ." and Gertrude Fester affirmed strongly that "South Africans should discuss it." "There was no way," she later (1993) explained, "in which I as a South African was going to take up a position that was not decided by the South Africans present (albeit a disparate and unmandated group) in conjunction with the organisers and the conference as a whole (as opposed to a small group of vociferous African-American women)."

A voice rose above the ensuing hubbub: it was Nnaemeka, the chairperson, who had had enough. She led the chant in Ibo: "We will accept them!" Flynn (1992) puts it rather prissily: "Dr Nnaemeka used her executive authority." In the end it was the high cultural value Nigerians put on hospitality that won out over what Flynn (1992) describes as "[t]he display of American racial politics [which] presented an embarrassing example of American arrogance and self-righteousness". As the white South African women left the hall, many "reduced to weeping" (Thompson 1992: 62), they were hugged to comforting Nigerian bosoms.

But this was a South African issue and South Africans had to hammer it out among themselves. Funani (1992: 67) rather strangely asserts that "Objection to the consensus [i.e. the statement reproduced below that came out of the first meeting of South Africans] was seen to be unscientific. I never can compromise my principles – in actual fact I did not." This would seem to indicate that she objected to it and made her objection known. In fact, at the "South African caucus" meeting, attended by Conference participants and a

number of young South Africans from the MK camps who were now studying at the university in Nsukka, each participant in turn was asked to signify her or his reaction to the statement which was put together painful sentence by painful sentence at the meeting with Mkhize acting as chief crafter and scribe. Funani did not indicate disagreement and is pictured smiling in the centre of the group in the post-caucus snapshots. This claim of Funani's, like much else in her initial article (1992), is incomprehensible at least to Welz, who was by definition not present at any separate "black caucus" meetings.

But on the surface consensus was reached and articulated in a formal statement read by Mkhize to a plenary session and vigorously and spontaneously supported by the newly arrived leader of the official Namibian delegation. The sort of suggestions that were made in the "South African caucus" discussion about an appropriate role for white women academics included terms such as "stepping back", "facilitating", "empowering" and "twinning".² (This is, of course, not an original notion: compare, for instance, Pityana [1992: 73]: "It is an indictment on the (predominantly white) enlightened sections of [the research] community because with all their well intended efforts they have done little to impart enabling skills, but have been content with using their research positions and intellectual prowess to produce and generate ideas and knowledge for blacks.") Given the absence of typewriters, photocopiers and even carbon paper, there was only one copy of the statement and this seems now to be untraceable. Funani gives a version which is perhaps a little different from the recollection of Pamela Ryan and Betty Welz (1992: 14) that "[t]his declaration stated that in full knowledge of our differences and with a consciousness of the complexities of our situation in South Africa, the South African caucus had unanimously agreed to present our papers":

South African participants deliberated privately on whether white South Africans should be afforded the opportunity to read their papers during the Conference. After a careful examination of the problem the following observations were made:

- (1) That, due to the effects of the policy of racial classification in South Africa, women stand in different positions and are accorded different statuses depending on their race and class. The group articulated advantages and disadvantages that go with each position. For instance, it was noticed that white women over a long period of time have had access to resources such as computers, electricity, offices, international networks, which are essential in the act of contending knowledge and writing.
- (2) That it is imperative for feminists and all other progressive scholars to move towards the transformation of the practices of male and western hegemony which have a history of being discriminatory. The trend should be to begin to create a space for and to facilitate the visibility of women who previously have been discriminated against.
- (3) That academics in particular have to move beyond rhetorics which are often made in international conferences about and on behalf of black women. A specific suggestion was that they should devise strategies which will close the gap between academics and activism by facilitating the oppressed women's need to tell their own stories.

- (4) That a significant number of white scholars have made a tremendous contribution in the transformation of society.

CONCLUSION: Taking into consideration political developments in South Africa and also realising the inherent contradictions in this issue, the group suggests that all South Africans, irrespective of race, should be permitted to participate fully in this Conference (Funani 1992: 66–67).

It had been a surprise to some of the black South Africans at the Conference that so many white South African women were present. Most of them were funded by their universities and this caused some resentment, since most of the black participants had had major problems getting sponsorship to come, and were insecure right up to a week before the Conference as to whether they were ever going to reach Nigeria. But as Mkhize comments, in the belief that it is futile to break down instead of building, the black South Africans made a *conscious* decision not to climb on the bandwagon of those who wished to exclude the white South Africans, the challenge being to push the debate forward, to look at where we are and to confront people on specifics and not start off by denigrating each other. The difficult part, of course, always comes afterwards and Ryan and Welz's (1992: 14) comment that "we succeeded in building bridges across activism and the academy in our own country even though we had to go as far as Nigeria to do so" seems from the vantage-point of a few months later hopelessly overoptimistic and naive. Margaret Daymond (1993: 12) appears more realistic when she berates herself as "simple-minded" for having assumed that such dialogue was possible in her discussion of the "life-stories of . . . black women activists in South Africa" as a "white academic woman . . . in an attempt to contribute to the bridge-building that has been given as the focus of this conference . . .". Some white frustration resulted from the feeling that one can never explain, because no explanation would be good enough anyway.

That race, and not gender, was the dividing line, appeared genuinely to amaze many white participants: Flynn (1992), for instance, comments (not quite accurately) that "oddly enough, objections to male participants – black and white – were never raised". To whites who have never been subjected to the reality of racial oppression this might well seem odd. In fact, there were very few men present, only two or three of whom were white, and by and large they stayed out of the controversy.

It was the distinguished Ghanaian novelist Ama Ata Aidoo who had the stature to shift the focus of the Conference to women and put up a spirited defence of feminism, so often denigrated as a white women's concern. "There is bad news here for a women's conference," she said. "In the audience are one or two very young African men who will, in an effort to silence the African women present, say something terrifyingly destructive.

"The African woman is a cliché of western photojournalism: old beyond her years; half naked; a baby on her arm; flies around the eyes of her children. This is what the African woman has come to, the daughter of proud and brave warriors.

“It is common [among Africans] to hear feminism airily dismissed as a foreign ideology. [Later in the Conference Welz listened with some alarm to a rabble-rousing paper/diatribes on this point from Clenora Hudson-Weems, an African-American who was trying to sell her antifeminist (and explicitly antiwhite) notion of ‘Africana Womanism’ – black women to her being warm, outgoing, family- and community-centred and white women cold, inward-turning, egotistical, individualistic and so on.] It is also easy to maintain airily that we don’t need feminism. But it is true to say that African women were feminists before feminism. [Here Aidoo was apparently referring to the ancient African tradition of matriarchal queens, warriors and politicians.] African women in some countries are expected to go on their knees to offer food to their husbands and others. When people ask me whether I am a feminist, I answer yes; but I also insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist (especially if they wish to alleviate our burden). It is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without insisting on absolute equality.”

This argument white women could by and large go along with, but by a passing remark in her address Aidoo alienated many: “This continent is woefully underpopulated.” In her latest novel *Changes* (sa: 15) she expands on this point:

... the way population ... was being handled in relation to Africans left her frightened. It seemed to her that any time someone else showed such a keen interest in your not making children, then for sure, he is not just interested in your good health, your prosperity, and the good health and prosperity of your children.

This was the sort of thinking that many whites (from all over the world) found disturbingly foreign to their own constructions of reality and therefore dismissed without further thought. And if it did not manage the “indepth intellectual X-ray on the problems of women in Africa and the African Diaspora” promised in her opening address by the Chairperson of the Better Life Programme and wife of the Enugu State Governor (Nwodo 1992: 1), what, if anything, did the Conference achieve?

Marianne de Jong (1992: 162) suggests that the experience of the Conference (which, as she makes clear, she did not attend) confirms that modern black women’s rejection of “othering” “is achieved at the cost of the initiation of a new marginalisation, i.e. of the white women present at the conference”. She adds that “one can only speculate about the questions the white South Africans asked themselves and their black compatriots before finally returning [from their caucus] to the conference. One such question might have been: am I privileged, or is it rather my black women compatriots in South Africa who have not had access to normal social, educational and other modes of existence? Is it privilege which should be eradicated, or is it the unjust difference “privilege” marks? If social action is required and demanded to eradicate privilege as difference, how can women embark upon it without solidarity and how can there be solidarity within new marginalisations?” But she concludes

(1992: 163), "As long as it leads to more effective communication, confrontation should perhaps not be avoided."

Besides the white women's disputed presence, contention arose because most of their papers focused on black women. We agree with Kedibone Letlaka-Rennert's assertion that if we are to proceed with the Women's Movement we need more straight talk (Mofokeng 1992). As Nontobeko Mofokeng (1992) writes, "I sensed a bit of that in Nigeria. We did not mince our words about our discontentment at their continued 'objectification' of us. We need more information from white communities in order to have a balanced picture of the extent of patriarchy in our country. Then, as women activists, involved in particular in women's struggles, we'll jointly attack patriarchy as we have done with other forms of domination. We acknowledge the work [white women] have done in black communities . . . in the absence of black scholars but now we can relieve them."

This is, of course, the issue that threatened to tear apart the pioneering but flawed Women and Gender in Southern Africa Conference at the University of Natal, Durban, in January-February 1991 (see discussion in for instance Gardner 1991: 203-204; Ballantine 1991: 21; Letlaka-Rennert 1991: 22-23; Hofmeyr 1991: 23) and has been debated recently in the literature (by among others Nkululeko 1987: 88-106; Pityana 1982: 72-77; Hassim & Walker 1992: 78-87; Gouws 1993: 67-70). Cheryl Walker (1990: 5-6) acknowledges as editor that all the contributors to her book *Women and gender in Southern Africa to 1945* "are white. That this should be so is an unfortunate but nonetheless explicit reflection of race and gender oppression in [South Africa] generally and their manifestation in the academic discipline of history more particularly."

As Judy Gardner points out (1991: 178), "For a long time the only 'acceptable' currency in respect of literary criticism has been that of whites: they wrote about, thought, spoke and criticised on behalf of blacks. This is especially noticeable in the case of white and black women, since the latter have been discriminated against so severely that their development, education, participation in life as a whole have been seriously curtailed by the powers that be. White women have consequently taken it upon themselves to speak and think on behalf of their black counterparts." According to Letlaka-Rennert (Gardner 1991: 202), "In South African literary circles, gender subordination is focused on and targeted as a joint form of oppression that both Black and White women can fight against. Such a focus, however, ignores the existence of yet another form of oppression within the female gender, that of racial subordination." While Walker (1990: 6) acknowledges that "the racial . . . identity of . . . authors affects their choice and treatment of their subjects", she argues that "this is not to say it predetermines their work, nor does it automatically invalidate their conclusions". Walker is herself a white academic and a not unreasonable response to this might be "Well, she would say that, wouldn't she?" Walker goes on to take issue with Dabi Nkululeko (1987), a reading of whose early article we would suggest is essential to the attempted understanding of this debate. Nkululeko "very clearly defines self-determination for an oppressed nation, the exact nature of

the oppression suffered by women in countries such as Azania and the relationship between white settler women and indigenous African women" (Qunta 1987: 16). The question Nkululeko (1987: 88) poses (and which came out very clearly in Nigeria) is:

Can an oppressed nation or segment of it, engaged in a struggle for liberation from its oppressors, rely on knowledge produced, researched and theorized by others, no matter how progressive, who are members of the oppressor nation? The same question put in another way is: can the right of a people to self-determination in the production of knowledge be overlooked and liberation attained for them through knowledge produced by others?

The force of Nkululeko's argument depends on the validity of her settler/indigenous dichotomy. If one accepts that "[t]he integrationists want to cover up national oppression by artificially integrating the oppressor and the oppressed into a democratic alliance before national oppression has been eliminated" (Nkululeko 1987: 103), then it follows that:

The history of Azanian women has also been written by alien researchers. . . . African women either do not have the necessary educational background and/or the funds needed to do research and determine priority questions to be investigated.

The result of this is that alien scholars, mainly female, still examine, report and analyse the role of the Azanian woman, focusing on whichever of the forms of oppression they saw as important for themselves and harping on that until the other forms were forgotten by all except those who suffered them.

The over-emphasis on apartheid, to the exclusion of colonialism, class exploitation and sex oppression, is an example of this practice. The anti-apartheid movement forced its own views and theories about the oppression of women in Azania in order to shift the emphasis away from the anti-colonial strategy, with repossession of the territory and the right of self-determination, to one of reformism . . .

(Nkululeko 1987: 97)

At some stage we are going to have to break out of the vicious circle of black/white accusation and counter-accusation (exemplified by Funani 1992; Fouché 1993; Funani 1993, who talk past each other fluently with their ears apparently blocked). As Hassim and Walker (1992: 80) point out, "[t]he denial of 'race' can become dangerously self-serving for whites" but also "there are major problems with the way in which 'race' is being used by some black feminists".

Sisi Maqagi (1990: 23) takes the argument further and challenges Cecily Lockett's view (1990: 17) that "Perhaps we [white women?] will have to develop a more sympathetic womanist discourse for considering the work of black women in this country in place of the current feminist paradigms which only tend to condemn and silence black women writers":

Her prescriptive suggestion . . . will be as effective in silencing the works of black women as are "the current feminist paradigms". The very fact that the discourse

will be a “sympathetic” one indicates that it will not have arisen from within. The word “sympathetic” seems to suggest some kind of tolerance for something that is not quite up to the mark. [Maqagi’s comment would appear to be supported by Lockett’s (1990: 19) assertion that “black women’s [literary] work is seldom aesthetically pleasing to the Western reader”.]

The impulse to assume initiative becomes apparent again when she definitively asserts that “it is our [white women’s] place as educationally and institutionally privileged critics to listen to their [black women’s] voices as we formulate approaches to their work” (Lockett 1990: 19). This assertion puts white women in the patriarchal position of “self” and black women in the powerless position of the “other”, where the “self” is the rational power that systematises and arranges into a coherent whole the chaos of the “other’s” unschooled views of art. . . . It seems to me that the prerogative to theorise about black women’s works should not be snatched out of their [own] hands, even if they seem rather tardy about it.

What role – if any – does this leave for white women? Do they find themselves where Nadine Gordimer placed them nearly half a century ago?

At 18 she had written a short story, *Ah, Woe is Me*, in which a white housewife describes her old black cook who had worked all her life to educate her children. It ends with the brightest daughter explaining that her mother was too ill to keep her at school. “What could I do for her, what could I do? Here . . . I said. Here take this, and gave her my handkerchief” (Sampson 1993: 98).

The point, surely, is that while the “old black cook” was voiceless and powerless in her situation then, black women have today found their voices and are in the process of reappropriating their power. As Toni Morrison (Gates 1993: 44) says, “Our silence has been long and deep. In canonical literature we have always been spoken for. Or we have been spoken *to*. Or we have appeared as jokes or as flat figures suggesting sensuality. Today we are taking back the narrative, telling our story.”

Notes

1. Funani’s (1992: 66) preferred term for people the South African government calls “coloured”. Funani is in fact referring to Fester, “the Euro-African woman”, whom she claims “imposed ANC political philosophy . . . , which is nondiscriminatory, [and which] was supportive of the fact that white women should participate”. It is worth placing on record that in the opinion of Mkhize and Welz, Fester, although a forceful debater, neither sought to nor succeeded in “imposing” a viewpoint. The actual wording of the consensus statement finally arrived at by the South Africans present was largely Mkhize’s.
2. “Twinning” – the idea of two women with different skills pooling their resources with the aim of producing a superior research product – had in fact been applied in the paper prepared by Sizakele Mkhize and Wendy Annecke. The concept, and its execution by Annecke and Mkhize, is bitterly attacked as “well-meaning but idiotic” by Thompson (1992: 62) but was in fact endorsed by the “caucus”.

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