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# Labor Relations AND Subaltern Sex

## LABOR RELATIONS

Despite Barack Obama's appearance on the UCLA campus that afternoon, the post-lunch session panel, "Labor Relations: Theory and Practice," was well attended by an attentive audience. Dr. Kelly Lytle Hernández, Assistant Professor of History at UCLA, moderated the three person panel consisting of Munia Bhaumik (Comparative Literature, UC Berkeley), Suyapa G. Portillo Villeda (History, Cornell), and Magalí Rabasa (Cultural Studies, UC Davis). Using distinct disciplinary frameworks, the three presenters explored neoliberalism and its effects on labor and resistance in three Latin American countries.

Munia Bhaumik opened the panel with her presentation, "Molina's Touch and Dorda's Music: The Schizophrenia of

Gender in Post-dictatorial Argentine Fiction." Her paper examined the work of two Argentine authors, *Plata Quemada* (*Burnt Money*) by Ricardo Piglia and *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* (*The Kiss of the Spider Woman*) by Manuel Puig, which both take place against the backdrop of Argentina's transition from a dictatorship to a democracy in the 1980s. However, as Bhaumik notes, the transition is not from one political system to another, but from a political dictatorship to an economic one. Argentina's "democracy" consisted of imported neoliberal economic policies which opened Argentina to a flurry of foreign business and investment; the population became a new market for products and in turn they became regulated by their consumer desires and consumption habits. The main characters in Piglia and Puig's novel disrupt the narrative of the seemingly seamless transition between the dictatorship and "democracy."

In *Plata Quemada*, Dorda is a schizophrenic, queer bank robber who falls in love with his partner-in-crime; his sexual desires merge with economic ones. In *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*, Molina, a gay cross-dresser, and Valentín, a Marxist revolutionary, meet in a prison cell. Their confinement results in a mutually transforming encounter in which they end up as lovers. The characters' queerness and schizophrenia counter the normalizing narratives of neoliberalism and the implementation of "democracy" and speak to the alternate ways in which desire and subjectivity are produced outside of consumptive habits and the marketplace.

Suyapa G. Portillo Villeda continued the conversation with her paper on "Campeñas y Compañeras: Gen-

dered Roles and Worker Identity in the North Coast of 1950s Honduras.” Villeda’s work examines the new social and economic spaces carved out by working class women within the banana fields of the United Fruit Company in Honduras. She looks at the role of the *patronas*, women bosses who ran their own eatery businesses in the *campos bananeros*, banana fields. She argues that their work in providing subsistence to the male laborers was instrumental not only to labor production but also to the formation of working class identity. *Patronas* occupied a unique space that allowed a certain amount of economic and social mobility very uncharacteristic for any group of women at the time, particularly middle-class women. The *patronas* operated in-house eating establishments which created an informal economy within the formal economy of the United Fruit Company’s banana fields in which their male counterparts worked. The informal economy served women in that they could determine their workflow and business negotiations without the interference of the government or company; some even earned more money than men. Despite this, women were able to maintain more egalitarian relationships with male labor-

ers than the laborers could with their male bosses due to a shared class background. Women were able to occupy this intimate social space with men without the stigma of “loose” sexuality because they were performing a purportedly “feminine” task of helping provide food and a certain form of companionship. Due to their close proximity to the fields and living quarters of workers, *patronas* were most familiar with men’s working conditions. Indeed, they were on the front lines of the 1954 strike not only providing food but also preventing the military from shooting the striking workers. During this time, the men became dependent on the *patronas* for subsistence; the *patronas* supplied food, not out of altruism, but out of a notion of reciprocity with the knowledge that their work would be remunerated at the end of the strike. Villeda’s research on this segment of women workers provided an insightful look at the ways in which women negotiate neocolonial economic conditions and complicate traditional notions of femininity.

Magalí Rabasa concluded the conversation with her paper “Remembering Fanon: Zapatista Women and the Labor of Disalienation” which discussed the ways

in which indigenous Zapatista women not only resist traditional gender roles, but actively create new female subjectivities. She began her presentation with a quote by Homi Bhabha: “Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never quite an act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (from “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition”). In this quote, Bhabha references Fanon’s idea of disalienation, the rejection of the internalization of the oppressive dynamic between the colonial subject and the colonizer. The process of disalienation is a crucial step in anti-colonialization processes and movements, such as that of the Zapatistas who struggle and resist the neocolonial effects of neoliberal economic policies placed on their communities as a result of NAFTA. Zapatista women, who face a triple marginalization through gender, class, and status as a (neo)colonial subject, particularly embody the process of critical “re-membering” of consciousness and identity through their work of *conscientización*, or consciousness-raising, among

themselves and in public declarations such as the Revolutionary Women's Law. As Rabasa's work shows, an application of Fanon's concept of disalienation deepens our understanding of the ideological labor that Zapatista women produce. Conversely, moderator Hernandez provocatively asked, "How can Zapatista women's work deepen our understanding of Fanon?"

### **SUBALTERN SEX**

"Subaltern Sex," one of the last panels of the day, explored the constructions of female sexualities in distinct historical moments and geographical contexts. This panel was moderated by Dr. Tamara Ho, Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at UC Riverside and consisted of Yuning Chen and Monghwa Chin (Institute of Technology Law, National Chiao Tun University in Taiwan), You-Sun Crystal Chung (History and Women's Studies, University of Michigan), Lena McQuade (Women's Studies, UC Santa Barbara), and Christina Owens (Cultural Studies, UC Davis).

Yuning Chen and Monghwa Chin began the session with their joint paper on "The Role Replaced: Unmarried

Taiwanese Women and Foreign Brides." Their work examines the ways in which Taiwanese societal attitudes are gradually becoming more accepting of these two populations of women and provides policy suggestions that might expedite an ideological shift in the negative conception of these women. Due to more opportunities in the workforce, more Taiwanese women are opting out of marriage because there is no financial impetus; however, they are subject to societal censure for not becoming "complete" women through marriage. Conversely, the population of women that comes from Southeast Asia to Taiwan as brides, primarily because it is more cost-effective for men to marry women than to hire them as domestic workers, are highly stigmatized because they are thought to bring diseases to the country. There are no integration programs for these new immigrant women and their isolation is sometimes augmented by domestic violence situations. Chen and Chin advocate for laws and other structural changes that would provide accessible outlets for immigrant women in domestic violence households as well as a deconstruction of the social system through education that would de-stigmatize unmarried women

and foreign brides. In the meantime, citizens have formed education centers to assist foreign brides with cultural adjustment and integration, which speaks to the changing attitudes in society that has prompted people to reach out to these women.

You-Sun Crystal Chung continued the discussion of changing societal conceptions of women's sexualities with her paper, "Representation and Its Discomforts: Writing a Subaltern History of the 'Comfort Women'" in which she looks at the competing claims to victimhood and who has the power to re-write the past. Korean state discourse around 'comfort women' has changed, especially with the U.S. House of Representatives 2007 Resolution 121 that calls for Japan to issue an apology for its sexual enslavement of women during World War Two. The Korean government has newly revered the former comfort women and adopted them as "grandmothers." The former comfort women foreground their work productivity as proof of their being contributing members of society; they accept the term of grandmother and adopt a pronounced asexual identity. The bitter irony is that they are decidedly not grandmothers and

were denied the opportunity to become one. However, this is not acknowledged in official discourse around the former comfort women. Chung is critical of the ways in which the Korean government appropriates the comfort women discourse and cautions against the state using the issue as part of a nationalist project that elevates male honor in seeking justice for the former comfort women. She argues that self-representation is most critical to writing a subaltern history.

Lena McQuade's paper, "Reframing Reproductive Oppression: Medical Research into Mortality at San Juan Pueblo," uses a reproductive justice framework to examine the ways in which female sexualities are mutually constructed in opposition to one another on the basis of class and race. Dr. Sophie D. Aberle, a white middle-class woman who completed her Ph.D. at Stanford in 1927 and medical school at Harvard in 1927, received funding from the Rockefellers to conduct research on mortality rates among the indigenous women in San Juan Pueblo, New Mexico. She was the first scientist to publish on this subject; as such, she was instrumental to the construction of the racialized sexual identities and reproduc-

tive capacities of San Juan indigenous women. Her research found that San Juan women had the same fertility rates as white women, but twice as high mortality rates. This disproved the idea the supposed correlation between "civilized" societies and fecundity, but provided the basis for the belief that cultural "inferiority" caused mortality, as opposed to vast inequities in the public health system. While Dr. Aberle was marginalized in her field due to her gender, she occupied a position of power in relation to the women she was studying. Her research and its outcomes speak to ways in which white women are implicated in colonial processes and scientific endeavors. McQuade emphasizes that it is crucial to understand this historical moment within a reproductive justice framework that recognizes the attack on the reproductive capacity of women as part of a larger colonial, genocidal project. The struggle for reproductive justice is not centered solely on gender, but is intimately linked to other social justice struggles, such as land and development rights.

In the final presentation of the panel, Christina Owens discussed the racialized sexuality of Japanese women in her paper "Liberal Intimacy and Racialized Women:

Constructing the Japanese Female Child Abductor." Owens focuses on the Children's Rights Network (CRN) founded by American fathers whose children have been supposedly "abducted" and taken back to Japan by their Japanese wives. Using the CRN website as her site of analysis, she examines the way in which the Japanese woman child abductor is constructed as being inextricably tied to and driven by her genealogy vis-à-vis her partner, a (presumably white) male individual. CRN posits that Japanese wives try to recreate the close relation they shared with their mothers through kidnapping their children. These "kidnappings," or breaches of father's rights, are framed within a Liberal legalistic framework that invokes science (Parental Alienation Syndrome) and vocabulary around rights of the individual – the rights of the father to see his child and the rights of the children to be loved by both their parents. Within this framework, Japanese women are constructed as being bound to their genealogical ties; race and purported social norms are conflated with one another and are seen as inherent in the biology of Japanese women. Reasons (i.e. domestic violence) as to why a woman might leave her part-

ner with their child are notably absent from the discussion. Owen's analysis of gendered, racialized identities constructed in opposition to one another in the case of the Children's Rights Network deepens our understanding of the long legacy of the ways in which America positions itself against the Eastern "Other."

While the panels spanned a wide range of theoretical ground, historical moments, social contexts and geographical boundaries, each presentation cogently and insightfully demonstrated the fluidity of gendered relations that are in constant flux. As evidenced by the aforementioned research projects, the inherent instability of constructed categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, provides fertile grounds for rich research, analysis, learning and ultimately, growth.

**T-Kay Sangwand** is currently a Master's student in the Information Studies and Latin American Studies joint degree program at UCLA. Her research interests include oral history, audiovisual and community based archives, and hip-hop as a form of oral history and its relevance to the archive, particularly within the Cuban and Brazilian context. She is currently working on CSW's Mazer Project.

## Thinking Gender 2009 is February 6

