

# WOMEN AND UNIVERSITIES

## One Flower Never Makes a Spring

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From where I was stranded in Europe, following the tragic events of September 11th, I began to wonder if this conference would take place. I hoped that it would, for there are critical connections between what we will be wrestling with this afternoon and tomorrow, and some fundamental issues that are writ ever so large by the terrorism of last Tuesday, and the aftermath of it all. In a statement delivered on September 11th, sister President Ruth Simmons of Brown University put the connection in these stunning terms. She said:

At moments like this I become aware more than ever that access to education in its broadest sense can make an immense difference in the future of our civilization. We can focus on educating ourselves about ourselves, if we so desire, but far more important is to educate ourselves about others. There are regions of the world that we understand not. There are peoples of the world that we care not to know. There are communities in our

very midst from which we turn away. Turning away is not a solution. While it is too early to say who is to blame for the horror visited upon the nation today, we can surmise that this horror is the result of a misbegotten scheme to call attention to some cause, some offense, some grievance. One of the powerful things that we can do to counter this kind of event is to use peaceful venues of debate and grievance. We can make every effort to learn how to abate conflict and how to repair breaches in human accord.

Sister presidents Nan Keohane and Nancy Vickers and I agreed on what each of us would cover in our individual presentations before opening up for a discussion. The major point that I am to make is that, of course, gender matters. And it matters immensely in terms of how universities are organized, what is taught, by whom and to whom. In our colleges and universities, it is women who are consistently underrepresented, often underpaid, and frequently subjected to situations that range from a chilly climate to blatant sexual harassment.

However, the sister presidents and I insist, if you have seen one woman, you have not seen us all! And thus to say that gender matters but to ignore other markers of difference such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation is to act as if a puzzle is done once a large piece is in place.

Audre Lorde more eloquently than anyone I know spoke and wrote about the problem of difference within her own personal life, within the academy, within American society, and indeed in the world. Here are her words:

As a 49-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two . . . I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong. . . . Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical* norm. Each one of us within our hearts knows “that is not me.” In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this

mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. . . . By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist. . . . Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implication of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power. As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define WOMAN in terms of their own experience alone, then women of color become the “other,” the outsider whose experience and tradition is too “alien” to comprehend. . . . The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.

While it is clearly the case that White women are not treated equally with men in appointments to administrative posts, in the awarding of rank and tenure, or in the degree to which their realities are infused throughout the curriculum, women of color experience even greater inequality.

Because it is an improvement over the term “minority women,” I use the term “women of color.” But I am very aware of inherent difficulties with it, the most obvious of which is that the term obscures differences among and within large segments of the female population—that is, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, and African American women and “women of color” outside the United States.

In acknowledging the significance of race and ethnicity among women in the academy we must also guard against the false assumption that White or Euro-American women are a monolithic group.

Pinpointing the group I know best—African American women—it is clear that we are a complex, enormously diverse

group. Class, color, regional, generational and sexual preference and other differences characterize who we are. And yet, we should not focus so much on differences that we ignore the common experiences among us. In her book, *Black Women in the Academy* (1997), Benjamin captures some of that shared experience when she notes that “In the ivory tower, the voices of [black women] are shrouded beneath a racist and sexist cloud that is often chilly at white institutions and lukewarm, at best, in black ones” (211).

In the academy and throughout American society, White women have benefited from affirmative action far more than people of color. Now that this means to redress past and present inequities has been rolled back in state after state, our colleges and universities are at risk of returning to their “old ways” of privileging White men in the admissions of students and in recruiting, promoting and retaining faculty.

As we prepared for this panel, we challenged ourselves to invoke what I call the Noah principle. That is, there will be no more credit for predicting the rain; it is time to build the arks. In that spirit, when we open up for the discussion period, we need to imagine and to talk about the kinds of programs that can help colleges and universities—including Yale—to be more attentive to the diversity among us womenfolks, a diversity that is a great resource. For the view from within any particular group of women can only be partial. The more eyes there are, the more complete our collective vision will be. Or in the words of a Chinese saying: One flower never makes a spring.