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PANEL REVIEW BY SUSAN MCKIBBEN

Contested Interventions

AND THE POLITICS OF RESCUE

KARINA EILERAAS, CSW Research Scholar and moderator of the panel, “Contested Interventions and the Politics of Rescue,” introduced it by outlining the contours of a familiar discourse in which Westerners are both able and obliged to rescue the people, particularly the women, of the Global South. Invoking the words of Leila Abu-Lughod, she asserted that it was imperative to consider not only the problematic construction of what these women were allegedly being saved from, but also what they were being saved to. The panel, then, was an invitation to reflect upon these constructions and an exploration of the possibilities available to us, given that the option not to intervene, not to practice the politics of

rescue, was already closed. The panel included presentations by Sandibel Borges from UC Santa Barbara, Oliver Ting from UC San Diego, and Erin Moore from the University of Chicago.

COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE

In her presentation “The Struggle Against the Victimization and Stigmatization of Sex Workers: The Colectivo Hetaira NGO in Madrid,” Sandibel Borges presented her thesis research with a Spanish feminist organization working to end the stigma around sex work and to promote the rights of sex workers. The group distinguishes itself from other such organizations by working *with* and not merely *for* sex workers, thus challenging both the societal

shaming of sex workers and feminist thinking that consistently defines sex work as a form of gendered violence.

As a feminist enterprise, said Borges, Hetaira supports women—including immigrant women—who consciously choose sex work, even as the group recognizes the economic violence that leads some women to migrate and enter exploitative industries which include, but are not restricted to, sex work. This stance leads Hetaira to reject victimizing and paternalizing practices and instead to collaborate with sex workers on public education and demonstrations for labor rights.

Borges also found that Hetaira, unlike many other groups doing similar work, explicitly

focuses on *normalization* and not merely *regulation* of sex work. While Colectivo Hetaira advocates rights and benefits for sex workers, the members' primary goal is to change social attitudes so that sex work can be viewed as a job like other jobs—though with its own particularity—and sex workers will not feel shame in their labor.

CHOOSING FREEDOM

Oliver Ting examined the relationship of the politics of rescue to global capitalist production using the case of Freeset, an NGO in Sonagacchi, Kolkata, India that “saves” women from sex work in general, and sex trafficking in particular, by training them to make crafts that are sold worldwide. These women, then, are rescued from their circumstances only by being integrated into a modern capitalist framework and produced as modern “productive” subjects. While Freeset’s rhetoric is that of freedom, Ting asserted that the organization commodifies that rhetoric by establishing itself as, in the words of the group’s website, “in business for freedom.”

Ting went on to interrogate the ideology of what he called the rescue industry and the way in which it produces subjects who can be saved by constructing the free subject as she who can own property. By deploying the rhetoric of choice—the women are forced, i.e. they do not choose sex work—women of color in the Global South become intelligible subjects within this discourse through a politics of voli-

tion: choosing freedom through the choice of a profession as craftswomen with Freeset. Thus, the “saved” woman becomes a modern subject through the exercise of reason and choice, defining herself as a woman who can accept the offer of integration into the chain of global capitalist production and can, therefore, be saved. Drawing on Mohanty and Spivak, Ting asserted that the racialized and gendered body becomes available as a site for the expropriation of labor value through its representation within a politics of rescue. To be free means to be rescued and redeemed through capitalism.

THE GIRL EFFECT



Jennifer Moore began her presentation, “Reviving Whom? The Invention, Intervention, and Exportation of the Adolescent Girl Crisis,” with the assertion that adolescent girls around the world have been pathologized as suffering a crisis of confidence. Though the period of adolescence has long been considered one of bio-cultural transition, Moore argued that specific eras in which girls have been so characterized coincide with other forms of socio-cultural change, particularly with waves of feminist intervention. To wit, a nineteenth-century crisis of anemia thought to stem from a girl’s excessive study or unbridled sexuality came to an end around the time of women’s suffrage. The discovery of a crisis of self esteem among girls was bracketed by Difference Feminism in the 1980s and the

publication of *Reviving Ophelia* in 1994. Finally, girls’ empowerment programs were exported to the Global South beginning around 2000, coinciding with the U.N. Millennium Development Goals that cast teen girls as indexes of development.

Moore then presented her own study of a sample population of young women at a private college and their responses to the Nike Foundation’s 2008 fundraising video, “The Girl Effect.” Presenting the video to the conference audience, she outlined the ways in which it positions the viewer/potential donor vis-à-vis its description of the unempowered girl from the Global South, and reflected upon the intertextuality of the video and the long-standing discourse of pathologizing adolescent girls. Rather than establishing the girl as a subject living up to her potential, Moore argued that the Nike Foundation’s discourse encouraged the viewer to realize his/her own potential as a supporter of girls’ empowerment. In fact, half of Moore’s study respondents gave feminist activism as their reason for sharing “The Girl Effect” through social media. Moore concluded that this act inserted the young women into a world of activism while maintaining the discursive distance established by the Nike Foundation between themselves and the girls described in “The Girl Effect.”

Susan McKibben is a graduate student in the Department of Education at UCLA.