Inside Women's Studies

The charges of oppression that privileged white feminists once leveled indiscriminately at men ended up being turned back on them by women of color.

Betty Friedan

This essay is from The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Birth of the Woke Ideology, by Bruce Bawer (Bombardier Books, 272 pages, $18.99.)

by Bruce Bawer

The setting: Town Hall in New York City on the evening of April 30, 1971. The event: a debate about "Women's Liberation," occasioned by Norman Mailer's new book, *The Prisoner of Sex,* and featuring Mailer himself as moderator. His gruff, snarky opening remarks are followed by four talks in widely differing styles: an earnest, deadly dry

presentation of the feminist ideology of the day by Jacqueline Ceballos, a commissar-like representative of the National Organization for Women; a barbed, witty attack on Mailer, the nuclear family, and much else (not to mention praise for Mao Zedong's "analysis of society") by the glamorous Australian author Germaine Greer, who's riding high with her bestselling *The Female Eunuch*, and whose irreverence and unabashed sexiness set her apart from other superstars of Women's Lib, a movement already notorious for its humorlessness; a sober, dispassionate analysis of '70s feminism by New York intellectual doyenne Diana Trilling, a voice for reason and pre-New Left liberalism; and *Village Voice* scribe Jill Johnston.

Johnston's contribution? Apparently channeling Gertrude Stein, she provides a dose of far-out performance art, telling the audience of upper-middle-class Manhattanites: "All women are lesbians except those who don't know it, naturally. They are but don't know it yet. I am a woman and, therefore, a lesbian. I am a woman who is a lesbian because I am a woman and a woman who loves herself naturally." Warning that "unless a woman be born again, she cannot see the Kingdom of Goddess," Johnston speaks of "the gay gay gayness of being gay" and describes lesbianism itself (not lesbian rights) as a movement: "Until all women are lesbians there can be no true political revolution." When Mailer cuts her off for exceeding her allotted time, Johnston joins two other women in a group hug and then a lusty roll on the floor.

Mailer is irked: "Either play with the team or pick up your marbles and go home," he growls at Johnston. "Come on, Jill, be a lady."

"What's the matter Mailer," she snaps back, "you threatened because you got a woman you can't fuck?"

"Hey, cunty," he replies, "I've been threatened all my life."

As the evening progresses, the salty language flows freely. One has a sense that at least some of the participants (excluding the ladylike Trilling) are having fun getting away with the use of gutter language at a respectable place like Town Hall, something that would have been unimaginable only a few years earlier. Indeed, you can cut the ’60s atmosphere with a knife. Ceballos, Greer, and Johnston are plainly convinced that they’re on the cutting edge of history, that they’re in fact making history, preparing the ground for a social upheaval of extraordinary dimensions; they’re also convinced that they are, in a word, oppressed. When Trilling, the voice of the older generation, disagrees with something Greer has said, the stunningly elegant Greer—the very picture of self-assured, jet-set privilege—purrs chidingly that “oppressed people always argue with each other” (to which Trilling neatly lobs back: “I don’t feel as oppressed as you do”). Mailer, for his part, dismisses the feminists’ line as “just old socialism”: “It isn’t just a simple matter of men tyrannizing women.” Among those who take part in the Q&A are Betty Friedan, author of the Women’s Liberation manifesto *The Feminine Mystique*, and New York intellectuals Susan Sontag, Cynthia Ozick, and Elizabeth Hardwick, all eager to get in their two cents.

Viewed on film more than 50 years later, the spectacle of these people passionately exchanging ideas—and, for all the blue language and lesbian antics, there are, in fact, real ideas being exchanged here—constitutes a nostalgic reminder that there once was, indeed, such a thing as a New York intellectual scene, and that Mailer and his women were stars, of a sort, whose opinions actually mattered. Even now, one can feel the electricity in the air, the rage, the sense that the entire social order is at stake: at several points, audience members jump to their feet, shout furiously at the stage, and stomp out.

For anybody who lived through the ’60s, this debate,

immortalized on celluloid under the title "Town Bloody Hall," makes the whole moment in history come flooding back: Archie Bunker and "Maude," male chauvinists and bra burners, Helen Reddy's hit-cum-anthem "I Am Woman" and the birth of the honorific (and magazine) *Ms.*

Johnston's high jinks, meanwhile, underscore the fact that yesterday's shock is today's bore, and the failure of the participants to get their knickers in a twist over Mailer's deployment of the c-word reminds one that in 1971, for all the radicalism on display at events like this, today's familiar, reflexive PC constraints did not yet apply. (Nowadays, of course, Mailer's suggestion that Johnston act like "a lady" would be more than enough to arouse feminist ire.) Given all the passionate talk about oppression and equality by Greer, Sontag, and company, moreover, the 21st-century viewer of "Town Bloody Hall" cannot help noticing something that perhaps nobody even thought about that evening: every last one of the panelists and Q&A participants was white.

bell hooks, 1996. Karjean Levine/Getty Images

Welcome to 21st-Century Feminism

The setting: the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel on the morning of Thursday, November 11, 2010. It's the first day of the 31st annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association, which has dubbed this year's gathering "Difficult Dialogues II." (The 2009 conference, in Atlanta, was called "Difficult Dialogues.") Near the front of the program, which contains no fewer than 218 closely printed, double-column pages, is a statement of welcome by the association's outgoing president, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, who reminds us of the NWSA's commitment to "sharing the latest intersectional feminist scholarship" and to "building a vibrant multi-racial, multiethnic feminist community." Guy-Sheftall's face stares out from the page. She's black. Later in the program, there's a picture of the NWSA's incoming president, Bonnie Thornton Dill. She's black, too, and in addition to being the chair (not chairman, of course) of the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland, she's the founding director of that institution's "Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity." Closing the program, one notices that in the picture on the cover, which shows part of an enthusiastic audience at (one assumes) some earlier NWSA conclave, most of the faces are nonwhite.

Welcome to 21st-century feminism—and Women's Studies—in which the keyword is *intersectionality.* Intersectionality is, to be sure, a key concept throughout identity studies nowadays, but nowhere does it play a bigger role than in Women's Studies. (In a vivid demonstration of this fact, all but one of the five main "session themes"—"Indigenous Feminisms," "Complicating the Queer," "The Politics of Nations," " 'Outsider' Feminisms," and "The Critical and the Creative"—point away from women's rights). This conference will go on for four days, each lasting from early morning to early evening, and will include a total of 349 sessions, often several dozen at a time, including panels, roundtables, workshops, and plenary sessions. Among the attractions are a

large exhibit hall filled with elaborate displays by book publishers (some three dozen authors will be signing their books) and a "recovery/sharing room for those in recovery and/or coping with addictions." (For the duration, by the way, the Sheraton has graciously relabeled the men's rooms in the sprawling conference area as "gender-neutral.")

The sheer hugeness of this event serves as a powerful reminder that in the decades since that now quaint-seeming Town Hall debate, ground zero for feminism has shifted from the salons and auditoriums of New York (and perhaps one or two other metropolises) to campuses around the country. Indeed, Women's Studies is now by far the biggest of all identity studies. At the same time, however, it's the one that most often appears to have the least to do with its ostensible subject.

To attend a Women's Studies convention is to feel light-years removed from the laser-focused feminism of "Town Bloody Hall"—for in this brave new world, the once-singular imperative of universal sisterly solidarity has been diluted and distorted, complicated and compromised by a variety of postmodern impulses, such as Queer Theory, postcolonialism, and transnational feminism, as well as by a host of competing oppressions and victimologies, so that the focus is often at least as much on race, class, and sexual orientation as on the battle of the sexes. The leading figures are not privileged white writers like Greer and Friedan but nonwhite, multidisciplinary academics like Gloria Anzaldúa (Queer, Cultural, Chicano) and bell hooks (Black), both of whom published books in 1981 that helped reorient the focus of Women's Studies: Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and hooks' *Ain't I a Woman?*

"Feminism," wrote hooks in *Ain't I a Woman?*, serving up a definition that at once repudiated Greer, Friedan, and other pioneers and helped establish a new way of thinking, "is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that

permeates western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class . . . and a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires." Note that this definition, while broadening feminism's topical concerns, also narrows its geographical boundaries, excluding from its purview women in the non-Western world.

And let's not forget social constructionism, which figures in all identity studies but plays an especially significant role in Women's Studies—after all, a key tenet of the discipline is that gender itself is a social construction. But Women's Studies deploys social constructionism in a highly selective and self-serving way: as Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge note in *Professing Feminism*, "It's as if everything they dislike about 'women' gets dismissed as social construction, while all the rest is the Real Thing. As for men, most everything about them is not socially constructed, since that would, in some sense, let them off the hook, so men get heavy doses of essentialist attributions while the students imagine they're espousing a straight constructionist line of analysis."

Michel Foucault's notion of hegemony—the claim that power in a democracy like America is more potent than power in a dictatorship because it's invisible—is also a critical element of Women's Studies ideology. The irony is that while the power of the U.S. government is not, in fact, a good example of "hegemony" as described by Foucault, many Women's Studies programs *are*: on the surface, there's plenty of pretty rhetoric about women's mutual support and nurturing and openness to diversity; the underlying reality, however, is one of hard-core ideological indoctrination and enforcement. As one Women's Studies professor told Patai and Koertge,

> *'feminist process' in the classroom winds up being . . . a push toward conformism and toward silencing dissent. It's all done under the rubric of being nice and open, and not being an authoritarian, old-fashioned type of teacher. But this*

winds up being tremendously more coercive. Because with authoritarian teachers you know they're being authoritarian, and you can resist. You know who's doing what to you. But the other way is manipulation, which is far worse than straight coercion, because students are being led someplace without any clarity as to who's accountable for what and who's leading them there.

You could hardly come up with a more nearly perfect description of Foucault-style hegemony.

Mary Wollstonecraft. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Is This All?

The feminism that was on display at Town Hall on that boisterous evening way back in 1971 is now known as second-wave feminism; its current intersectional, multicultural incarnation, is third-wave feminism. The first wave, which flourished mainly in England and America and focused largely on suffrage, may be said to have begun in 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft, the wife of anarchist William Godwin and mother of the author of *Frankenstein,* Mary Shelley,

published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Wollstonecraft made the then-revolutionary argument that women are by nature every bit as gifted as men, that what may seem their inferiority is a result of their subordination, and that if they enjoyed equal rights they would boast equal accomplishments.

The first major work by an important male writer in support of this proposition was *The Subjection of Women* (1869), in which John Stuart Mill argued that women might not be as good as men at everything, but that if women's rights were expanded, it would soon be clear what exactly women were good at that had been denied to them, and that permitting them to engage in these activities as full and active members of society would be to everyone's benefit.

Meanwhile, in the United States, feminist pioneers like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone were making the case for women's suffrage, which a now-legendary 1848 convention in Seneca Falls, New York, put on the national agenda. In most Western countries, however, women would not win the right to vote until around the time of World War I—in Britain, 1918; in America, 1920. Following this triumph, the women's movement went into abeyance; as Kate Millett would later put it, "when the ballot was won, the feminist movement collapsed in what can only be described as exhaustion."

The 1920s—the "Jazz Age"—transformed female lives: only yesterday, in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, women and girls had been protected, patronized, and put on pedestals; now young ladies were smoking, dating, dancing, bobbing their hair, and gulping cocktails at speakeasies. The Depression (and the repeal of Prohibition) put an end to all that, and though World War II saw millions of women taking up traditionally male jobs freed up by men who were off at war, when the soldiers came back the women married, followed their husbands to newly built suburbs, and began lives as homemakers (then called housewives) and as mothers to the baby boom.

Those postwar years were a quiet time for feminism. One blip was the 1949 publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*—though the book, now regarded as a founding document of modern feminism, was not very widely read in the United States until its resurrection in the late 1960s.

Beauvoir's *chef d'oeuvre* covers a lot of territory—it seeks to provide an exhaustive, definitive account of women's status throughout human history, the stages of female growth and self-awareness from infancy onward, the depiction of women in literature, and much else. The nature of Beauvoir's particular blindness—one she shared with other icons of second-wave feminism—is summed up in a single sentence, written when Stalinism was in full flower: "It is in Soviet Russia that the feminist movement has made the most sweeping advances."

Then along came Betty Friedan. A Marxist and self-described "bad-tempered bitch" who had written for women's magazines as well as trade union journals, Friedan inaugurated the second wave in 1963 with her jeremiad *The Feminine Mystique*. If the first wave had been about equal rights, the second was about "liberation"—Women's Lib. The book begins at Smith, the "Seven Sisters" college whose student body (especially back then) was overwhelmingly composed of the daughters of privilege. Friedan was a Smith girl, and in 1957, 15 years after her graduation, she sent her classmates a questionnaire, asking how satisfied they were with their lives. The answers, she wrote in the preface to *The Feminine Mystique,*

> *simply did not fit the image of the modern American woman as she was written about in women's magazines, studied and analyzed in classrooms and clinics, praised and damned in a ceaseless barrage of words ever since the end of World War II. There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique.*

What Friedan discovered was that these women—white, upper-middle class, most of them now suburban wives and mothers—felt a secret discontent with their lives as homemakers, that they felt guilty about it, that they thought they were alone in their dissatisfaction, and that they believed this meant there was something wrong with *them.* Which brings us to the opening paragraph of the book proper—a ringing, dramatic statement about what Friedan portentously called "the problem that has no name":

> *The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?'*

Those three words—"Is this all?"—would ignite a revolution. Friedan's point was simple: women had been stifled by a narrow image of their sex. They'd been told they were more delicate and sensitive than men, and thus less suited to careers than to homemaking. This, Friedan argued, was a betrayal of everything that Wollstonecraft, Stanton, and others had worked for, and it betrayed the example set by the innumerable women who, in the 1920s, had rejected traditional roles and opted to shape their own lives. She invoked Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who leaves her husband and children, dismissing his argument that she is primarily a wife and mother and insisting, rather, that above all she is "a reasonable human being."

After Friedan came the deluge. In 1970, there was Kate Millett's bestselling *Sexual Politics*, which drew heavily on *The Second Sex*: like Beauvoir, Millett peered at women

through the lenses of history, biology, anthropology, psychology, literature, and politics. (Like Beauvoir, too, curiously enough, she wrote about the sexually puerile Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence as if they were representative males.) "[O]ur society . . . is a patriarchy," diagnosed Millett, who pronounced that "[t]he chief weakness of the movement's concentration on suffrage" during its first wave "lay in its failure to challenge patriarchal ideology at a sufficiently deep and radical level to break the conditioning processes of status, temperament and role." Patriarchy: no word more neatly summed up the second-wave sensibility.

Like Friedan, Millett admired Marxism: she endorsed Engels' proposal that the state, not the mother, should be a child's primary caregiver, and praised Lenin for seeking "to terminate patriarchy and restructure its most basic institution—the family." Though Lenin's effort to "restructure" the family was, of course, part of the larger Soviet project to crush all institutions that threatened the absolute power of the totalitarian communist state, Millett described it as having represented a promise of an advance for women's freedom; apropos of Lenin's failure to pull off the "restructuring," Millett lamented that "[a] population so recently freed did not know how to use its freedom." This was no slip of the pen: Millett referred repeatedly to the "new freedoms" and "new liberties" purportedly introduced by the Bolsheviks in Russia. (Millett was also impressed by Mao's China, which, she wrote, "is said to be the only country in the world which has no prostitution.")

The year 1970 also saw the publication of Greer's *The Female Eunuch,* in which the author—who over the years has identified herself variously as an anarchist, Marxist, and communist—described women as masochistically collaborating in their own oppression and encouraged them to practice "delinquency" by rejecting the nuclear family. While urging women to stop seeing themselves as erotic objects, Greer was

not above using her own considerable sex appeal to maximum effect: she equated libertinism with liberation and made no secret of the fact that she regarded many of her fellow feminists as anti-sex, or as sexually repressed, and therefore not authentically liberated. At least in part for these reasons, *The Female Eunuch*, though perhaps the single biggest sensation of the second wave, is today, as her biographer Christine Wallace has observed, "essentially invisible on reading lists for women's studies courses."

Friedan, Millett, and Greer: these were among second-wave feminism's leading lights. To read their books in the context of their Marxist sympathies is to recognize that second-wave feminism was, to no small degree, rooted in its leaders' ideological identification with America's Cold War adversaries. After all, to attack the suburban comforts that capitalism made possible—comforts beyond even the dreams of most Soviet subjects—was to attack capitalism itself (When Mailer said it was all "just old socialism," in short, he wasn't entirely wrong.) As second-wave pioneer Phyllis Chesler acknowledged years later, second-wave feminism was a "cult" whose members all shared the same views about "capitalism, colonialism, imperialism," and so forth. They had a motto: "The personal is political." There were, however, two small problems with the linkage of Marxism and women's liberation: first, the "subordination" of women could hardly be attributed to capitalism, since the former predated the latter; and second, Marx's theories had absolutely nothing to do with liberating women from that "subordination."

Still, despite their missteps, misunderstandings, and excesses, the leading figures of second-wave feminism merit a degree of respect. They may have gone astray in many ways, but so do all pioneers when feeling their way into uncharted territory. At least Friedan and company were the real thing. Far from being careerists mouthing slogans to get ahead, they took serious personal and professional risks to speak their

minds. And they could write.

The influence of second-wave feminism on Western culture was profound. A range of phenomena viewed as scandalous when Friedan wrote her book—including abortion, single motherhood, and stay-at-home dads—are now considered thoroughly unremarkable. In the 1950s, Western popular culture communicated the idea that Father knew best and that Mother belonged in the kitchen; now we've had at least a generation of TV series, commercials, and the like in which Dad is an idiot and Mom is a sage. Today, from kindergarten onward, children are taught not to think in terms of stereotypical gender roles—even though it's widely acknowledged (except in Women's Studies) that certain gender-distinct interests are, in fact, innate. On such matters, feminism has been self-contradictory, one minute fiercely denying any natural biological tendency for boys and girls to have different interests or strengths, the next celebrating women's supposedly distinct—and, of course, always superior—"ways of knowing." Meanwhile, there has been increasing concern about boys raised in a feminist society. Christina Hoff Sommers speaks of the "war against boys," who grow up being told by teachers and textbooks that they are intrinsically violent, and that in a world without men there would be no war.

The great irony here is that even as feminists continue to paint men as oppressors, women are now, as Hanna Rosin noted in the *Atlantic* in 2010, "the majority of the workforce." Far more women than men get college degrees. We are living in a world-historic moment: "Man has been the dominant sex since, well, the dawn of mankind. But for the first time in human history, that is changing—and with shocking speed." Even in places like India, China, and Southeast Asia, male domination is crumbling. (The major exception, of course, is the Muslim world.)

In explaining this revolution, Rosin invokes gender essentialism: we live at "the end of the manufacturing era,"

and “[t]he attributes that are most valuable today—social intelligence, open communication, the ability to sit still and focus—are, at a minimum, not predominantly male. . . . [S]chools, like the economy, now value the self-control, focus, and verbal aptitude that seem to come more easily to young girls.” These passages illustrate the double standard feminism has implanted in Western society: while it’s perfectly acceptable to say that men are worse than women at certain things, to suggest the inverse is to reap the whirlwind. (Just ask Lawrence Summers, who lost his job as president of Harvard because he suggested that men might be more predisposed than women to success in science.)

The success of a movement can be measured by the degree to which it withers away as its goals are achieved. Hence, as feminist attitudes became absorbed into mainstream American culture, the movement itself steadily waned. The National Organization for Women, once a powerhouse, declined in profile and influence. Though more and more young women attended college, pursued careers, and led independent lives—embodying the foremost ideals of second-wave feminism—more and more of them, as noted at that Beijing +15 panel, rejected the label feminist—which, in their minds, conjured up images not of worthy activism on behalf of social and legal equality but of shrill man-hatred.

The Rise of Women’s Studies

Yet even as feminist ideas became mainstream ideas, and feminist self-identification and explicit feminist activism faded away in American society at large, feminism became an increasingly visible presence at colleges and universities. While the movement itself shriveled, in short, Women’s Studies grew apace. It began with isolated courses in English or social science departments; then interdisciplinary programs (drawing on faculty members from a variety of humanities and social science disciplines) began to spring up; then full-

fledged Women's Studies departments were formed, some of which at first offered only minors; over the years, more and more of these departments offered majors, then master's degrees, then doctorates.

On that long-ago night at Town Hall, as noted, there wasn't a black person in sight. Women's Studies today is a different world. Certainly, for feminism to be taken seriously, it had to look beyond the often frivolous-seeming complaints of upper-middle-class white women and recognize the grievances of millions of poor black women. When the movement began to take into account the lives of women of color, moreover, second-wave feminist dogma about rape required adjustment. "Whereas the official feminist analysis held that there is a very strong presumption that any female who alleges rape is telling the truth," note Patai and Koertge, "black women remembered too many cases in which black men had been lynched as rapists simply on the say-so of a white woman." All these years later, race is firmly privileged over everything else—gender included.

The scale of this transformation can hardly be overstated. White men may still be attacked with impunity as patriarchal oppressors, but a white woman cannot level charges of oppression against a man of color. Indeed, many black women in Women's Studies describe themselves not as "feminists" but (employing a term popularized by the novelist Alice Walker) as "womanists," indicating that they're at least as concerned about racial oppression as about sexual oppression. Black women in Women's Studies, though more than fairly represented in the field, nonetheless often describe themselves as living under the thumb of not only male power but also white female power. One way of looking at all this is that the Friedans and Greers ended up being hoisted by their own petard: the charges of oppression that privileged white women once leveled indiscriminately at men ended up being turned back on them by women of color.

Sex workers pose in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2004. Palani Mohan/Getty Images

“Saving the Brown Woman From the Brown Man”

By far the most admirable aspect of second-wave feminism was the very real, even passionate concern that many Western feminists displayed for women who experienced subjection and abuse in cultures and subcultures far removed from the privileges of the Western middle class. Yet as feminism fell increasingly under the influence of multiculturalism and postcolonialism, it became politically incorrect to criticize Third World men for oppressing Third World women, or even to call that oppression by its true name—for the relationship between men and women in non-Western cultures was an intrinsic aspect of those cultures, and therefore off-limits for Western critics. Thus was female solidarity trumped by “respect for other cultures.”

A couple of sessions at the 2010 NWSA convention exemplify Women’s Studies’ betrayal of the world’s truly exploited women. One of them features three white female panelists and

bears the tongue-twisting title “Situated Feminisms, Production of Knowledges & Transnational Feminist Challenges to U.S. Rescue Narratives of Women.” The “rescue narratives” in question involve women in non-Western countries who have been pressed into working as prostitutes and saved from this misfortune by Americans participating in what’s called the “anti-trafficking movement.” These acts of liberation sound admirable, but not to Carrie Baker, a young white woman from Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia, who explains that the rescuers are driven by execrable religious, imperialist, nationalist, and patriarchal motives, and that, far from saving the women in question, they are disempowering them. Baker complains that much of the “rescue narrative” rhetoric represents trafficked girls as perhaps not even recognizing their own victimhood until the rescuers illuminate them on this score. An odd complaint, perhaps, given that feminism seeks to raise women’s awareness of their own supposed victimhood—but this consciousness-raising isn’t kosher, obviously, when the women in question are dark-skinned non-Westerners and the consciousness-raisers are white Western men.

Baker complains that the anti-trafficking movement is riddled with a disgusting “rhetoric of imperialist salvation,” not to mention “chivalrous masculinity.” The audience laughs merrily along with Baker at the “hyper-masculine images of men” and the representation of white men as “defenders” on movement websites. (“Even the font” at defendersusa.com, Baker nags, “is masculine!”)

Baker goes on to accuse the anti-trafficking movement of using “the imagery of the sex industry to recruit men into opposing the sex industry”: the movement’s promotional materials, she says, depict “disempowered young women” who are “often sexualized,” as well as older women—“faded beauties”—with long, frizzy hair. Baker even sneers about the use of the word *defender,* because, she insists, this word is usually used

to refer to the defense of animals. When she tells us that *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof bought two girls from Cambodia out of sex slavery and that one of them went back, resulting in a column in which he observed that it would be good if slaves always wanted to be freed from slavery, the audience bursts into scornful laughter at the patriarchal audacity with which Kristof, like other "privileged white Western men," presumed to decide what was best for Cambodian girls. These self-styled "saviors," rages Baker (who is on fire about all of this), are only out to "reinstate traditional sex roles" and to "reproduce traditional gender ideologies."

Baker calls for accounts of sex slavery that don't "deprive women of agency"—as if it were Western accounts of slavery and not *slavery itself* that "deprive" Asian slaves of "agency"! One cannot help recalling a passage from Chesler's book *The Death of Feminism* in which she notes that "[p]ostmodernist ways of thinking" have "led feminists to believe that confronting narratives on the academic page is as important and world-shattering as confronting jihadists in the flesh and rescuing living beings from captivity."

Chesler cites the claim by the Palestinian American writer Suha Sabbagh that Western feminists, simply by writing about Muslim women, exert "a greater degree of domination" over those women "than that actually exercised by men over women within Muslim culture." A brown woman in (say) some Pakistani village, then, is actually more oppressed by some white woman tapping away at a computer at some American university she's never heard of than by the man who's beating and raping her in her home. For white Western women like Baker to actually think they wield such power, of course, is a species of hubris—a sign of narcissism and disconnection from reality. So what is Baker's solution to all this? She turns out not to have much to offer—just a few feeble sentences about the need to address structural problems and globalization, to "foreground . . .

the agency of women," to take a "transnational feminist perspective," and so forth. "We need to be attentive to how we frame the issue," she concludes, "so we don't disempower women." As if the words of some professor giving a paper at a conference in a luxurious Denver hotel could contribute to the disempowerment of some teenage girl held in bondage in Cambodia.

Autumn Marie Reed of the University of Maryland is another young white woman who professes to be worried about Western rhetoric that "disempowers" non-Western women. Her topic: honor killing in Pakistan. She explains that when she watched TV news coverage of "honor-based violence" in the United States (she says she prefers that term to "honor killing," but doesn't explain why), she was troubled by the networks' "Orientalist" discourse. On the one hand, "as an activist I felt coverage would help," but "the more critically I watched . . . and thought about Orientalism and postcolonial feminist theory . . . the more uncomfortable I felt." Why? Because while honor-based violence is, well, violent, the manner in which honor-based violence is discussed in the West "is also violent"—it involves "demonization of Muslim men"; it construes Third World women as "homogeneous and powerless"; and it implies, unforgivably, that the United States is "superior" to countries like Pakistan.

Western rhetoric about honor killing is about "saving the brown woman from the brown man" and is used as a "way to demonstrate Muslim inferiority." Reed's reference to "saving the brown woman from the brown man" isn't original; it originated with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as a way of scorning Western feminist solidarity with non-Western women who suffer abuse at the hands of their fathers, husbands, and sons. Instead of celebrating that solidarity, Spivak has characterized it as racist, colonialist, and imperialist. The phrase has since been echoed by countless Women's Studies figures who are eager to show that they're not racist,

colonialist, and imperialist.

As Reed makes her comment about “saving the brown women,” she emits—incongruously—a condescending little laugh. She’s not alone. Throughout her presentation, the women in the audience laugh merrily in sympathy with her sardonic comments. The laughter is disturbing. Reed is talking, after all, about girls and women being beheaded by their fathers and husbands—but she transforms this horrific reality into numbingly familiar abstract rhetoric about imperialism, American supremacism, and so on. Reed maintains that while the media insist on associating honor killing with Islam, it takes place in “all religions” (an assertion that neatly skirts the fact that its frequency among Muslims is sky-high, while its incidence in other faiths, especially outside Arab and Muslim-dominated countries, is minimal). She talks about 9/11, the Times Square bomber, and other Muslim terrorist acts—but her focus is not on these acts themselves but on their representation by such media figures as Bill O’Reilly, who, she charges, present offensive images of “savage Muslim men infiltrating an orderly and morally superior U.S.”

As she builds her case, flippantly tossing off references to murderous atrocities, Reed keeps emitting that superior little chuckle. She’s so brainwashed that she can’t even see what the real story is here. And the same goes for the women in the audience, who are full of lofty, gleeful disdain for the U.S. media. The woman sitting beside me snorts contemptuously over the news reports quoted by Reed, which have the audacity to suggest links between the beheading of women and the Muslim religion and which, in Reed’s view, depict Muslim men as uniformly, monolithically dangerous. “This discourse degrades the Muslim community,” Reed charges, and is used to justify U.S. violence (that is, war) in and exploitation of the Muslim world. She asks: “Is there an alternate feminist method” of addressing honor-based violence?

In a tone dripping with venom, she mentions Chesler, whose

principled attention to honor killing in recent years has made her a pariah among the multicultural-minded feminist mainstream. “She positions herself as such a feminist,” Reed sneers, but Chesler’s work, in her view, only goes to show that any concern for the victims of honor killing “needs to be positioned within a transnational postcolonial feminist perspective” rather than within “white Western hegemonic feminist positions.” What we need, Reed argues, are “coalitions between women” in the West and those living under honor codes. She adds that we must also recognize that violence is everywhere and be sensitive to the “damage of racism and Islamophobia.”

As I walk numbly out of the room, I reflect that unlike Chesler—whose righteous rage about the subjection and abuse of women under Islam is rooted in her own harrowing experiences as the young bride of a Muslim man in Afghanistan and has flowered into decades of hands-on, productive activism on behalf of women in similar circumstances—these privileged white American girls are floating on clouds of theory; in some sense, the terrible things they’re pontificating about aren’t real to them at all.

Women’s Studies has not taught them to bravely and usefully address the problems of real women in the real world; it’s taught them a lot of jargon that pretends to be about those people and their problems but, in the end, serves to uphold a discipline focused solely on itself.

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