

# Productive Invisibilities

In investigating the tensions between visibility and invisibility, each of the presenters on the Productive Invisibilities panel took up related arguments regarding the politics of subjectivity, representation, and hegemonic discourse. One of the most salient connections among panelists was their congruent interrogation of the way in which feminist analytical and theoretical demands for intersectionality and differentiated inclusion get homogenized and rearticulated in hegemonic discourse. For example, Evangeline Heiliger questioned the way in which the profound atrocities related to the HIV and AIDS epidemic become commodified by international nongovernmental organizations through the production of ‘ethical consumerism.’ Kolleen Duley investigated the way

in which feminist demands for gender responsiveness in California’s women’s prisons have been taken up by the state and by feminist actors in order to expand the prison industrial complex and to legitimize the racism of the criminal justice system. Similarly, Nisha Kommatta examined lesbian women in Kerala, India in order to complicate the ‘globalization’ of queer discourses that demand visibility. And finally, Nicole Wilmms investigated the way in which the visibility of Japanese American basketball players upsets hegemonic representations of Asian people as “weak and feminine.” While each paper reflected varying epistemological and methodological trajectories, panelists were able to disrupt and challenge popular notions of visibility, ultimately suggesting that visibility is an uneven, contest-

able, and differentiated process that need not be embraced unilaterally throughout feminist praxis.

Evangeline Heiliger’s paper “Ado(red), Abhor(red), Disappea(red): Re-Scripting Race, Poverty and Morality under Product (Red)<sup>TM</sup>” contested the merits of “ethical” capitalism. Heiliger, a UCLA Women’s Studies doctoral student, discussed (Product) Red,<sup>TM</sup> a marketing campaign put forth by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria ostensibly aimed at providing relief for HIV/AIDS affected women and children throughout the continent of Africa. One of her central questions asks, “what are the implications for ‘ethical’ consumers and producers of (Red)<sup>TM</sup> products, and those who receive (Red)<sup>TM</sup> aid?” Ultimately, she argued, “(Red)<sup>TM</sup> sets up a continuum of

human valuation whereby certain gendered and racialized bodies have access to commodified social justice while others are ignored, made invisible, or left off the spectrum completely.” Heiliger questioned the use of consumerism as a path to justice when it is used by corporations in positions of power.

UCLA Women’s Studies doctoral student Kolleen Duley presented the paper “Revealing and Concealing: The Gender Responsive Prison, Race Formations, and State Interest.” This paper explored the state’s recapitulation of feminist demands for gender consciousness in California’s prisons and related efforts to isolate gender difference and to establish gender conscious remedies within the criminal justice system. Duley suggested that such policies preclude a more accurate analysis of the intersectional power relations and structural inequalities upon which mass incarceration relies. Perhaps most problematic, she argued, is that the state reformulates such singular demands for gender responsiveness in order to expand the prison system and to legitimize state authority while the very real suffering of women prisoners remains unaddressed. In response to this dangerous paradox,

Duley examined possibilities for race and conscious remedies based on a platform of intersectional and prison abolitionist thinking and organizing.

Nisha Kommatta, of the department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, presented “Parasyamaaya Rahasyam/The Public Secret: Figurations of Female Same-Sex Desire In Kerala, India.” Her paper debated familiar and highly contentious issues of visibility in a new provocative context. One of her questions regarding the visibility of Lesbian women living in Kerala, India asked, “Is negative representation better than no representation at all?” She suggested that unlike ‘mainstream’ US LGBT “coming out” discourses, where visibility is a laudable goal, visibility is dangerous in Kerala. Although Kerala is considered “highly progressive” in that it is home to many women’s programs and it has the highest literacy and education rates in the country, it also has the highest rate of suicide for lesbian women. In an effort to address violence, international NGO’s have sensationalized these women’s stories, often deploying pathological negative stereotypes that perpetuate violence. Kommatta suggested that because

increased visibility renders lesbian women more vulnerable to violence, invisibility might be considered a method of resistance. This type of intentional strategic act, she argued, should be coupled with other forms of action located outside the visibility paradigm.

USC Sociology doctoral student, Nicole Willms presented the paper, “Japanese American Sports Icons and the Question of Gender.” Willms explored the prominence of Japanese women as icons in Los Angeles Japanese American sports. Here, she suggested that the Japanese American communities’ focus on basketball should be seen as a reclamation of a “strong” masculine identity denied from Asian men who are represented as “weak and feminine” in popular discourse. In the attempt to look at the intersections of race and gender, she examined San-Tai-San, an annual basketball tournament Little Tokyo. She suggested that their choosing of Japanese American women basketball players as “special guests,” indeed any representation of a successful Asian athlete, serves as a useful counterpoint to popular negative stereotyping of Asians as weak and feminine.

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