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Introduction

We have to believe we can help in the creation of a new culture which is biophilic, a civilization which is not dying to be victorious but which is keen to live. (Bhasin 1994, p. 12)

The call for papers for this conference invited us to propose symposia which present “diverse or conflicting perspectives on a compelling topic or issue that *is or should be* of concern to adult education researchers” (emphasis in the original). The presumption here is that the best way to develop our knowledge and understanding is through the cut and thrust of debate across sharp disagreement and incompatible positions. This symposium proceeds from the different presumption that – though such debate may be useful in revealing weaknesses in espoused positions – advances in knowledge are best achieved through challenging and sympathetic dialogue among those with compatible if not fully shared approaches/perspectives /values/analyses who bring diverse locations, experience, foci, priorities, points of departure to the discussion.

The presenters in this symposium are drawing on practice/ experience/ research with diverse groups of women and others in very varied settings:

Women’s groups and feminists worldwide whose global transformative agenda is in danger of being denuded of politics as the human capital view of the relation between education and development prevails and welfare to work (in the economic North) and microenterprises (in the South) incorporate poor women into the global economy as cheap

labour (Sallie Westwood)¹

Aboriginal women whose “experiences and voices are contextualized by an immediate and daily interface with ‘colonial mentality’.... as they move wisely towards visioning for the future...(drawing on) a combination of Aboriginal and feminist anti-racist philosophies and pedagogies in Eurocentric patriarchal contexts” (Fyre Jean Graveline).

The many people, especially the poor indigenous people, marginal people, women, and Mother Earth [for whom] the very mention of the word development is ominous, deathly. Development for them has meant and continues to mean colonization, taking away of their lands, forests, minerals; it means destruction of their culture, religion, their very lifestyles,...the very large number of people [for whom] development has meant extinction (Kamla Bhasin).

The men and children as well as women who are living in poverty (in the U.S.) and are affected by ‘welfare reform’ whose language (defining them as ‘lazy,’ ‘shiftless,’ ‘lacking morals,’ ‘cheaters,’ ‘irresponsible parents,’ ‘deadbeat fathers,’) is one powerful mechanism through which they are deprived of voice in defining who they are and framing the issues based on their own lived experience (Vanessa Sheared).

Working class women in Northern Ireland whose lives have been inextricably caught up in ‘the troubles’ over the last thirty years in ways that have

left none of them untouched by the politics of poverty, social exclusion, sectarian conflict and all kinds of male violence (domestic, state, and paramilitary) (Jane Thompson).

Poor solo mothers in racially segregated Chicago's inner city, or anywhere, living in public housing ghettos which have become jobless ghettos as well, dependent on public aid;...mother-activists for whom learning and teaching from life-affirming perspectives is an integral part of their everyday experience, values and political strategies (Mechthild Hart).

Though the concerns of the presenters overlap to a remarkable degree, their priorities and the populations and challenges they focus on vary significantly. We expect that this heterogeneity will stretch/ inspire all those involved (as presenters and/ or audience) as they encounter others who are intensively involved in places and on issues that have not been priorities in their own work. The symposium thus aims, not only to present established transformative feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, indigenous perspectives but to contribute to their development. It seeks to model the process of multi-centred creation of new knowledge that the work of the presenters supports, contributes to and calls for.

In this period of neo-liberal triumphalism, the exigencies of global competition and the global market are used everywhere to enforce policies that put priority on unfettered transnational profit-making at the expense of people and the planet. All over the world, governments are cutting back social services, privatizing public goods, offering tax concessions to business, subsidizing highly capital intensive production by large corporations, weakening environmental and labour laws, and deregulating industry while wages fall, workforces are 'downsized' and de-skilled, people are robbed of their subsistence, and the gap between those who have and those who have not widens.

In this context "dominant and emerging discourses in adult learning and research are increasingly being constructed by the academy in service to government and business interests" (Thompson). Mainstream education becomes increasingly a business of human capital formation (Cunningham, 1996). Women and other 'others' are seen mainly as disempowered, underdeveloped, uneducated, and illiterate. That is, as "the backward element in the modernization of the economy and the state" (Westwood). Their cultures, traditions,

knowledge, work and values are ignored/ despised as they are 'educated' for integration into development for participation in the world market. The spectre of debt and deficit is used to justify and impose these policies called Stabilization or Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the South and Restructuring in the North and to reinforce the already hegemonic preeminence of capital.

The pressures on critical and transformative Adult Education in this period are enormous. At the same time, however, the destructive human and ecological consequences of global economic growth are becoming all too evident. The dark side of 'modernization' and 'development' is looming clearly into view even in the North and among the populations who have been longest and most thoroughly insulated from their harmful impact. Received notions of 'progress' and the presumed superiority of 'modern' Western science and knowledge are shaken:

We cannot walk into the 21st century without asking and answering questions like – do we need more development and progress of the kind we have had or less of it? Who should lead the way now – the 'developed' people and nations, or the 'underdeveloped' people and nations? In our race for survival who is ahead? Who needs to be educated, lectured, the 'rich' or the 'poor?' (Bhasin, 1994, p. 7)

The firm divisions in the dominant Western worldview between humanity and nature (or more accurately 'man' and nature) and between individual ('man') and community, construct 'individual rational man' as quintessential human being and knower. He claims his neutral, linear, masterful/mastering scientific reason, separate from the emotional, the spiritual, and the physical/bodily as the sole source of universal knowledge. Women are relegated to these devalued realms. All non-Western, non-modern cultures, knowledges, and social arrangements not (yet) blessed by these separations are perceived as backward. So women, indigenous peoples, and all manner of marginal groups become deficient 'others' to a white male Western 'centre' which claims universal validity for its own knowledge and values in contrast to the particularity of all 'others.'

Adult Education in this period which aspires to do more than fulfill increasing government and corporate training needs in support of the destructive neo-liberal economic agenda is challenged to:

- 1) move beyond these false (patriarchal, colonial,

ethnocentric, racist and anthropocentric) claims of universalism without succumbing to debilitating particularism or relativism;

2) “offer alternative accounts of development” (Westwood);

3) pose/ foster alternatives to dominant profit-centred logics.

To all these ends, adult educators must find ways to support and embrace many equal and varied centres of knowledge creation while aspiring to identify, build, and act upon common values, general concerns and common understandings across huge divides. For the multiple voices of those who have been defined as ‘other’ and deficient that are emerging today in social movement and in academe are crucial sources of new understandings and new possibilities (Miles, 1996):

The old categories, the old concepts have become insufficient; they are almost unable to grasp the violence of the times. While we need to extend the horizons and to deepen the existing human rights discourse, we need too, a new generation of human rights. We need to urge the passing of a paradigm that has understood human rights as the rights of the powerful: we need to listen to the voices of those who do not share that power. To see these violations through the eyes of the victims – victims of development, of progress, of technical fixes – through the eyes of those who have been denied privileges and power in the system....Through the eyes of the South in the South; of the South in the North; through the eyes of women.

Because they will tell us a very different story.... (Corinne Kumar cited as the frontispiece in Christiansen-Ruffman, 1998)

The transformative feminist adult education agendas reflected in the presentations in this symposium are multi-faceted, involving among other things, working within and across specific communities to recognize and build critical analyses, to resist dominant definitions, affirm identities, and articulate alternative values and possibilities. In all these presentations the articulation of specific group identities and interests and the affirmation of particular communities, cultures and knowledges is seen to contribute to general understanding. Community/group empowerment and identity provides a basis for broader alliances and struggle. Connections are thus

made through affirming differences rather than denying them. As varied marginal groups of women and others find the space and power to name their own particular worlds and needs, we can see that their histories, lives and work offer resources for articulating alternative values and priorities grounded in their specific vulnerabilities to power and nourished by their specific cultural traditions and specific responsibilities for sustaining human and non-human, individual and community life:

Traditional indigenous cultures and epistemologies carry life-centred world views of immanence, balance and connectedness (Graveline).

Poor mothers...have salvaged a life-affirming perspective. Women/mothers have a visceral sense of what endangers their children and their community, and the corresponding political actions against hunger or unhealthy, unsafe living spaces draw on the body as a source of knowledge. Mother-activists engage in a politics of the flesh, working on and pointing to the need for profound change (Hart).

The survival of billions of peasant families is intertwined with the survival of nature. No wonder women have been in the forefront of the environment movements the world over. Women are the last bastions of sanity. They can offer solutions because they are ‘backward,’ they are not ‘integrated’ not ‘educated’ because they have not ‘progressed’ too much on the wrong paths. So today we need to talk to women not because they need our help, but because we need women’s help to save the world (Bhasin).

The voices of these women and indigenous and Black and Third world communities are crucial. Transformative adult education must honour, support and learn from these groups to resist “the incorporation of women (and others) into the neo-liberal agenda as clients rather than citizens” (Westwood) and to propose alternative agendas. There is an “urgent need to articulate alternative meanings and realities and to recognize alternative voices” (Thompson).

All the presenters agree that in this educational work:

Both critical analysis and cultural renaissance are necessary strategies in the struggle to advance tradi-

tional [and women's and marginal] worldviews in the contemporary age of areocentric [capitalist, male] domination (Grapevine, bracketed words added).

And that:

Theory cannot be separated from practice – discourses constructed in the academy without any engagement with the struggles of ordinary women [and others] lack credibility. Education can only contribute to empowerment and social change if it recognizes the significance of collective as distinct from individual learning (Thompson).

The symposium will provide an opportunity for the presenters in various ways to share their own experience and theories and to explore (among other things):

- what education looks like that doesn't serve 'development' and the market;
- the power of the forces of containment that undermine transformative education and politics. The ways women's struggle for education rights can come to serve 'development' and the feminist agenda of women's groups worldwide be robbed of its politics to serve policies of incorporation for women (Westwood);
- the ways a womanist framework can help us listen to those in poverty and support them in reframing issues based on their lived experiences (Sheared);
- how transformational popular learning explodes the frequently convenient myths of women's apathy, personal deficiency and pathology and the implicit authority of teachers/researchers (Thompson);
- how to acknowledge and support the subversive and visionary learning and teaching that goes on in the everyday life of community and "learn from and support [educational and] political work that places the well-being of a future generation above everything else" (Hart);
- how voice, experience, ceremony, humour, visioning and relational work are used in the classroom to raise consciousness, revitalize Aboriginal identity, build community and oppose oppressive structures (Grapevine);
- how progressive educators can aspire to more than non-violence through the positive value of love and can promote light rather than only fighting darkness (Bhasin).

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¹The bracketed last name of a presenter indicates either a paraphrase or direct quotation from the Abstract of their presentation for this Symposium.