



An Open Letter to the organisers of the second International Girls Studies Association [IGSA] conference at Notre Dame.

This is Rozena Maart; I am writing to express my dismay at the manner in which, yet again, the young and very new, International Girls Studies Association [IGSA], have gone about advertising its second conference using images that are enormously offensive and which, in their depiction of Black women and Muslim girls and boys, seem to be consistent with past behaviour of overlooking inquiries into the manner in which in the organising of the conference – as such the key players who determine the direction of the conference and the agents of scholarship who entrench an already established White mythology – seem to continue with their colonial and imperial mastery and remain oblivious to the fact that their racism is unwanted, old and outdated and highly problematic even if disguised as feeble feminist fumbling of freedom of expression.

I'm absolutely appalled at the main poster, and the image which opens on the IGSA website, both of which act as an advertisement of the second international Girls Studies Association conference that is to be held at the University of Notre Dame from February 28th until March 2nd 2019. I am gobsmacked, actually. The first image above is used for the promotion of the conference. The Black woman's face forms the central and main image, which looks almost tattooed in some parts (reminiscent of South Pacific cultures), as the ethnic ensemble of images of women are spread across and around the squared canvas, all cast at the backdrop of variations of purple within which the Black woman is cast. The poster, with images and text advertising the conference, is encased in the colour purple and draws on a presumptuousness of a book title – from 1982 by that name – which depicts Black women who challenge authority, particularly Black male authority, which since its release as a film became a stepping stone for White feminists to declare their newly depicted, fully licensed, now well justified rage against Black men to utilise the colour to convey a suggestiveness of a feminist solidarity that did not exist then and certainly does not exist now! At the first International Girls Studies Association conference, there were three White women keynote speakers; as for Black women and women of colour . . . we could count one another almost on one hand amid a crowd of close to one hundred White women, if not more, who remained oblivious to this very glaring sight for sore eyes in 2016, the year that Trump triumphed.

A week prior to the first International Girls Studies Association conference in 2016, which was hosted in Norwich, UK, I checked through the draft programme that included the names of presenters and discussed the matter with Melinda de Jesus, a friend and colleague for more than thirty years, who like me had severe concerns about the contents that the titles (and abstracts) suggested especially after we googled the presenters' names and checked their biographical information as well as their scholarly work.

We each thought since both of us had similar concerns we should request a meeting with the organisers and keynote speakers to address these concerns. Our joint concerns were with the manner in which the conference drew White women, primarily, the panel and presentation titles which suggested that Black women and women of colour did not exist, the clear and obvious lists of White women scholars whose biographical information we googled, the absence of titles of papers that even suggested that race and/or racism would be discussed. At the time of the email exchanges, I asked the organisers and keynote speakers to get together to address the issue of representation and what it meant to have an international event with so few women of colour invited and/or who were presenting, which was then half-heartedly agreed upon. In the meeting, Melinda de Jesus and I had to listen to comments about how all the White women present were either "anti-racist" or very aware of the work on racism that was going on in their respective cities and countries . . . the US, Australia and Canada. We were treated as though we tried to chasten them – the punishment that we had apparently inflicted was the meeting itself, for which we were rebuked,

as gently and sweetly as possible. They had for the most part refused to take responsibility for their White presence, and that all of the ways in which they proceeded with the organising had excluded Black women and women of colour.

Now let me address the upcoming conference: your steering committee is composed of White women who work in English literature, Gender and Women's Studies, primarily. You cannot just claim images which do not resemble you or your existential experience of the world because you feel like it even though you have asked a Black woman to be a keynote speaker this year, just one, much like you asked me in 2016, and much to your disapproval I acted like an ungrateful Black, not satisfied with the invitation. In the 2016 IGSA there were three White women keynote speakers, which then ended up being two White women keynote speakers and a White women keynote panel. Now, as expected, there will be a White woman keynote speaker again because scholarship cannot be furthered without the presence of a White woman keynote speaker!

It is not a question of reaching out to Black women and women of colour—it should be a matter of reaching within. Black women and women of colour are not hiding within universities – we are everywhere. If you have to “reach us” it means that you are still holding the forts of White Supremacy, being gatekeepers of departments and academic schools without the realisation that your so-called anti-racist practices are just as racist as they were before you upped the anti.

With regards to the second image above. This image is on the website of IGSA. It shows young Muslim girls, staring up at someone . . . presumably someone who is not from their community, taking liberties, photographing children without the permission of their parents . . . I immediately get the image of an Oxfam handout, or an American care package that had just been delivered, the scene of the crime now erased with a picture perfect poster to restore inhuman humanitarianism. This is the perverse pleasure of killing people, the massacre of the parents but the reverence of the innocence of children, happy at the White camerawoman and White cameraman, the capturer of the image and the people, who has come to take photos of them and make them famous!

To show Muslim children – to exhibit them – as an interest, a care, a consideration, and to perform this exhibition of an image, captured, at the very process where the tilting of their heads are so spectacularly poised that the capturer is warranted the appropriate gleeful consideration, a genuflection of sorts, the kind I find gut-wrenchingly disturbing and highly problematic. Was the image captured after their homes were bombed or just before?

Exhibiting scarved, Muslim girls, so dutifully wrapped in their oppression – is exactly how images are read when paraded at the backdrop of a vision of the world – gender studies now girl studies – which is not part of your

identity but the identity that you choose to exhibit, to draw into a colour scheme, an aesthetic, a palette of colour of the oppressed, which you get to gaze at, display, as part of your ownership but which does not reflect membership of your organisation nor the framework of analysis you depart with where you draw yourself into the very realm you depict – that is, as the coloniser who constantly colonises with the intent to showcase her prowess.

As a Black South African woman who grew up in a Christian-Hindu-Muslim home, and who went to Madressa with my cousin Amina – as she was older and had to watch over me – I find both the images out of context and suggestive of a depiction of what you regard as important within the imagined girls' studies agenda but which you have not cultivated. Let me state for the record: one does not have to be Black, a woman, a woman of colour or Muslim or any of the above combined identities to find your images offensive. Just because as White women of the United States, you have usurped, bombed, colonised and captured, while calling yourselves feminists does not give you the right to take images of Black women and women of colour into your realm of ownership and exhibit us like playthings in your glorious noble imagination.

Each and every time I use my phrase, coined in Canada in 1999, "pornography of the poor," White women rush to claim it because they think it is "cool" and must be about other White women – not them – and now, yet again, I find myself extremely bothered that I am at this place again, this place of incomprehensible anger and frustration of trying to understand why White women just don't get it. What is this incessant need to put Black women on posters, to gaze it, who do not speak back at the creator of the image, to remain the static, beautiful, regal, Black woman who is part of the White imagination, postcard perfect, happy and devoid of the trauma of racism and happily waiting to be captured, as an image, to be adorned on the walls of White Women Studies? This is where my position on "pornography of the poor" comes in. How one always sees images of poor women, Black women, Native women, bare breasted and feeding babies, adorning the walls of Women's Studies for the sole purpose of pleasing the White women professors who clearly need the seduction of these images in order to fulfil their teaching objectives – a reward of sorts – as they walk the corridors to their classrooms. Who gives conference organisers, the license to have loss of memory, so quickly, and not reflect on how they conducted the last meeting? Do we really need another White woman keynote speaker? Really? Seriously? I feel ill! The thought of being in the same room with the same people who "graced" the halls of the last conference, oblivious, ignorant, arrogant, and full of themselves, so smug, and so petty in their attempts at paying lip service to the dismantling of White Supremacy, makes me determined not to enter a space like that again, with the same lies, the same bullshit, the same faces, the same people pimping out their principles for the sake of having a conference listed on their CV . . . the same people who have little ethical basis to be with women of colour to begin with and who confuse historical racism with the liberty of showing Black women and Muslim children on posters as a means of reminding

themselves of their prowess, and pat themselves on the back for having the guts to display their White privilege so openly and so freely that surely Black people and people of colour would read their actions as noble, generous and anti-racist, allowing a poster to advertise their good intentions. I'm not interested in anyone's intentions! I'm interested in a programme of political action that addresses racism head-on, and speaks to your agency!

One does not have to be a Black person, a person of colour, a woman, a Muslim or any of the above to find these images offensive or to oppose the constant construction of a scholarly agenda that constructs itself from the veins of White Supremacy whilst displaying its capturing of Black people and Muslim people as images which erroneously show solidarity even after the bombs have dropped.

Rozena Maart, January 2019
Durban, South Africa.

Postscript: As a South African, I use spelling that is consistent with my education and have not converted to United States spelling to ease readers from that region into the reading of my letter. The length of my letter has been cut short in an attempt to contain my contempt. Whilst I am accustomed to writing long letters when expressing my discontent – usually due to the vastness of racism and its growing intersecting forms – I have refrained from offering further details that suggest my utter dismay at the ways in which White women scholarship of the kind I have witnessed among the attendees of the first International Girls Studies Association and the foreplay to the second, have disgusted me. I am uncertain as to whether it will encourage further papers on an area I work on, such as Philosophy of Disgust. I am however certain that the dwindling levels of consciousness of educated White women on matters pertaining to their White privilege is part and parcel of a larger process of a kind of perverted liberalism that has offered White women victim status from which they will never remerge as agents of racism responsible for the continued construction of White Supremacy as their White fathers, brothers, sons and lovers. In South Africa, White women were active agents of usurpation, settler colonialism and apartheid; after the first democratic elections in 1994, the constitution offered White women double jeopardy: the recognition of their past as beneficiaries of apartheid, then declaring their gendered identities as central to the process of transformation of that role as one which suffered under White male patriarchy and therefore oppressed, alongside the rest of the oppressed masses under a system of White domination they participated in and benefitted from, and from which they are now able to seek refuge. It is no wonder that the fight against racism and White Supremacy is so twisted. If we cannot call out White women as beneficiaries of racism and hold them accountable for their continued perpetuation, maintenance and reproduction of the system of White domination because we are afraid that we will go against a perverse and pathologically flawed South African constitution, much the same way we applaud anything in the world –the United States and Hollywood in particular – that has the word “woman”

attached to it as a sign of progress, we are failing hopelessly at fighting the very system of racism and White Supremacy we claim to be against.