American Indian Women Meet in Lawrence

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ambitious and successful series of sessions. Yet, as a feminist and a long-time supporter of women’s studies, I also came away with an uneasy feeling.

My disquiet derives in part from the program itself. As at the Berkshire History Conference, many participants were unknown scholars presenting their new ideas and research. Unfortunately, too many sessions were scheduled opposite each other. For example, “Chicana Feminism: Conflict of Interest?” competed directly with thirteen other sessions. Furthermore, caucus and regional meetings ran simultaneously throughout the day, which made choices even harder for those participating in the business affairs of caucuses and regions. Moreover, the attempt to provide something for everyone meant that the quality of sessions varied tremendously. Despite the number of sessions, very few dealt with how to expand the horizons of women’s studies programs, for example, to engage science departments. To be sure, none of these particular problems should be insurmountable.

As a member of the Third World Caucus, my level of frustration and disappointment grew as I observed how some Third World women were treated. Many Americans of color found themselves congratulated for speaking good English or having a good grasp of the subject matter. These comments were undoubtedly intended as compliments, but most of us felt they were simply “pats on the head.” Similar kinds of condescending attitudes sometimes surfaced in the sessions. Moreover, some members of the Third World Caucus felt that many international delegates, such as the Thai, Indian, or African delegates, were overshadowed by the Chinese delegates and thus did not receive proper recognition.

Next May, when NWSA holds its Second Convention, perhaps we can profit from a close assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this year’s conference. We need more round table discussions, more workshops, separate time slots for caucus and regional activities (maybe at night). We also need to create a climate which is culturally enlightened and sensitive to diversity.

Nupur Chaudhuri is editor of the Conference Group in Women’s History Newsletter.

American Indian Women Meet in Lawrence

By Rayna Green

Twelve American Indian women held a special meeting at the NWSA Convention, partly to participate in a symposium on Indian women, and partly to formalize the organization of a network of academic Indian women. Not only did the Convention bring together some of the most active and distinguished Indian women in the country, but it offered a framework for discussion and planning that will have a positive impact on women’s studies and Native American studies.

When, with Peg Strobel’s strong encouragement and support, Clara Sue Kidwell (Chippewa-Chocotaw) and I (Cherokee) began to plan the state-of-the-art symposium on Indian women, we decided to make of it not merely an ordinary academic event but one that would accrue to the long-term benefit of Indian women and that would contribute to our colleagues’ increased understanding of who and what we are. Certainly, our planning was informed by a strong sense of our relative invisibility as scholars, feminists, and activists, but more importantly, by our sense of the general lack and inaccuracy of most scholarship on Native American people, male and female. In that light, we determined to do at least three things: to identify and create a network of Indian women scholars and academics; to produce a definitive bibliography of works on and by Native American women; and to determine whether the NWSA would offer a sympathetic and useful context in which to operate as Indians and scholars. We feel we’ve made a good beginning on the first two tasks and reached a positive determination on the third. Moreover, other tasks have arisen out of the activities built around the symposium and the Convention.

We now have a list of over 125 names, with others coming in from colleagues every day. Two earlier bibliographies have been combined and roughly 200 more items — many of them works by Indian women scholars themselves — have been added to the bibliography which we plan to annotate and evaluate. We are discussing, among those who have communicated with us, projects for research and publication. And we are sharing ideas about participation and the need for involvement in national and local women’s studies activities.

At Lawrence, the symposium participants — Clara Sue
Reflections on the Convention

By Christine Grella

Looking back at the Convention, I find myself exhilarated — but also confronted with questions that were raised. Would our differences divide us irreparably, or would they be our source of strength? Could we attain our stated purpose of encompassing the needs of diverse groups: community educators, elementary and secondary school teachers, staff, students, community and four-year college instructors — each with different experiences of women's studies?

From discussions at dinner, to sharing our music and poetry, we exchanged ideas and impressions. Socialist-novelist Meridel Le Sueur spun her incredible life for us, embodying so many of the themes I felt at the Convention — the legacy of her own mother’s struggle as a suffragist, the importance of form and language in shaping and changing our realities. In “Feminist Psychology,” I saw women active in the field I intend to pursue in graduate school next year. I sensed a commitment to helping women grow and a challenge to this discipline, which is often used to control women. In “International Women’s Studies,” a South African woman spoke of progress for women in her country — but with no mention of which women. We denounced her, we denounced each other for not reacting quickly enough, we denounced AIDS’s presence at the Convention, we denounced the Convention for not having more women attending the panel confirmed our feeling that Indians are, in general, a mystery to most people. Disappointing as that realization always is, we concluded that the panel offered a much-needed general education about Indian people to a receptive audience.

In short, the Convention and our participation in it had several positive effects. It galvanized our own network and outlined tasks that will contribute to a needed revision of the scholarship on Indian women. It underlined a clear need for our presence and involvement in contexts which require and are amenable to changed views of Indian women, as subjects of research and as scholars. While most of the women in our group felt a real distance between their goals of activist commitment and their work within a non-Indian scholarly Association representing the women’s studies movement, they did feel an enormous potential in NWSA. While they felt that the women they talked with at Lawrence needed to be educated about Indian people, they also sensed a willingness to learn. We determined to explore that willingness next year with increased participation in the NWSA Convention in Bloomington.

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Christine Grella has been secretary for the UCLA Women’s Studies Program for three years.