Summer 1979

Impressions of Kansas

MaryJo Wagner

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Wagner, MaryJo, "Impressions of Kansas" (1979). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/365

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
In Defense of AID
By Kathleen A. Staudt

The trashing of the Agency for International Development and the public scapegoating by my "sisters" at the National Women's Studies Association Convention is an experience which must, I feel, be noted in the annals of the conference.

Recognizing that U.S. women's studies programs tend to be relatively parochial, AID's and, in particular, the Women in Development office's concern was to bring an international development dimension, including the participation of Third World women, to the wide array of panels. On one panel — "U.S. and Third World Women: What Are the Connections?" — were researchers who discussed women in multinational corporations, the changing sex division of labor in agricultural economies, female-headed households, and the decolonialization of research on women. The second panel — "Broadening Women's Studies: Developing World Dimensions" — built on the first, with participants discussing models of existing international women's studies programs both inside and outside the U.S., and resources available for networking among women within and across campuses. As with all other panels, our proposal was approved by the Convention Coordinators. Both panels were well received by the attendees, partly because, as chair, I structured presentations and discussion toward content, to avoid disruption.

However, in other panels and elsewhere at the Convention, an overgeneralized, late 1960s-style critique was made of the agency. Simplistic and single-minded attacks were made that the agency was an "oppressor," "enslaver," and "forcible sterilizer of millions of women." Scare-tactic stories circulated about giant IUD insertions and about "pushing women into the marketplace." The hostility directed against this convenient symbol — the agency (and me, the scapegoat) — was something I had not witnessed for a decade. The international women were personally harassed — attacked as being "coopted" and working as "agents." Our photographic display of women around the world was nearly trashed. A resolution was referred to the NWSA Coordinating Council recommending that AID's participation be banned from future conferences. Nevertheless, our research panel contained papers with a complex and sophisticated consideration of the inequitable international economic order and the position of women within it. Ironically, an international issues taskforce and an international panels committee for next year's Convention were both set up.

As I returned home to reflect on this painful experience, I wondered: are people completely unaware that the Women in Development office was set up to lessen the damage done to women in the development process, and to ensure more access for women in the projects designed? Do people not know about new directions in foreign aid emphasizing basic human needs with rural health clinics, water, and small farmer credit projects, among others? Do people realize that Congress sets overall agency priorities and budgets? Aren't people aware of the day-to-day frustrations of working within a massive bureaucracy — not only male-dominated, but beset with a myriad of regulations which make change difficult? Are people so unaware of Third World women's work in some areas, where a tradition of "marketplace" activities has existed for centuries (and in part accounts for the greater sexual egalitarianism of those societies compared to ours)? I am not oblivious, of course, to the criticisms that could and should be made of this agency, other government agencies, universities, and women's studies programs, for that matter. Working within any institution requires some accommodation and retreat from ideological purity. Is the only acceptable option a withdrawal from those institutions capable of fostering change?

At the abstract level, I realize that the Association is a new one, bound to have a good deal of political volatility as groups jockey for power within it. I also recognize the pattern of relatively powerless people directing their power against one another in social movement-type organizations. What I personally feel and remember, however, is that women directed that power against other women and against me, and I am very alienated from it all.

Kathleen A. Staudt, University of Texas at El Paso, is currently on leave, under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, with the Office of Women in Development, U.S. Agency for International Development. Views represent those of the author, and not those of the Agency for International Development.

Impressions of Kansas
By MaryJo Wagner

Those of us involved in the machinery and politics of the Convention and of our regions were the ones to whom complaints were registered. We were the ones who heard the concerns of caucuses, the ones who listened anxiously to angry voices at the microphones during the Delegate Assembly, the ones who took notes at the final evaluation session. Distressed by the anger we heard and exhausted from the hectic pace, we reacted defensively. After all, we had worked hard. We deserved strokes, not
criticism. Maybe the Convention was not perfect, but we did try, and it was, after all, the First Convention.

We are still discussing what went wrong and why, what can be improved and how, and what was a success. How can we get a larger participation of Third World women? Whose responsibility is that? Were the academic and disciplinary concerns of university women addressed? Should they be? Why did some of the older women feel alienated? How can the Association raise more money and, when it does, how should that money be spent?

Now that several weeks have passed, the dissension seems positive, indicative of the purpose and the potential strength of the NWSA. If our goal is to reach "every educational level and every educational setting," dissension remains an inevitable consequence of this diversity. If we define women's studies as including everything from formal women's studies programs at large universities to collectively-run lesbian-feminist bookstores, we will argue. It was certainly apparent at Kansas that our arguments stemmed not from trying to reach a consensus among a small, single-minded group of feminists, but rather from trying to understand our very profound differences.

The NWSA profited from these arguments. Most of us left with an ongoing commitment to the inclusion of as wide a participation as possible, and the knowledge that we still are not quite sure how to go about this task.

MaryJo Wagner, formerly a member of the staff of the Indiana Historical Society, and Coordinating Council representative from the North Central region, has been appointed women's studies coordinator at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

Was the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?
A Report on PreK-12 at Kansas

By Anne Chapman

Most people are familiar with the multistable image: what you look at remains the same but your perception of it changes. Some people have trouble "seeing" the alternative image, until it is pointed out to them; thereafter, their vision will switch between the two images.

For preK-12 teachers, the NWSA Convention was an experience in multistability. Nine sessions listed in the program dealt specifically with curriculum, methods, and approaches at the precollege level; and seven were actually held. Most were scheduled when public school teachers were free to attend. A few drew audiences of nearly twenty people. Yet of the fifteen people attending caucus sessions, only five were actually teachers of preK-12 students.

These figures may not be an accurate reflection of the number of preK-12 teachers at the Convention. Nevertheless, what I saw was clearly a less than impressive presence, while promising breadth in their titles, in fact tended toward the "show-and-tell." While interesting in that they gave some idea of individual activity in various specific niches, on the whole they failed to offer widely applicable or adaptable principles or techniques.

Perhaps the most fundamental theme explored in various contexts during the Convention was the notion that what we see is not necessarily what is there; that reality reaches each of us through various filters, which affect what we see. This theme, which had some far-reaching implications, surfaced, for example, in a session on sociobiology: "Aggression [the main behavioral difference between the sexes that is claimed to be biologically determined] is in the eye of the beholder" — what is seen as aggression is that which men do; women then, of course, are not aggressive. In a session on women's culture, speakers explored new images in art that allow women a positive view of their bodies and themselves as they are, instead of as the media suggest they should be — an issue further explored in one of the 59 films shown during the Convention: "Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women." In the context of feminist self-defense, the audience heard: "Neither ignore footsteps behind you, nor panic and run before turning to look. Learn to see reality as it is — not as you fear it to be, nor as you wish it to be."