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A Third World Woman's View of the Convention

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IMPRESSIONS OF THE FIRST NWSA CONVENTION

Some Thoughts on the Integration of Diversity

By Elizabeth Schultz and Janet Sharistanian

In contrast to the 1977 Founding Conference, when a much smaller number of participants concentrated, of necessity, on structural and definitional issues, the Lawrence Convention offered 246 sessions on an impressively wide range of topics to over 1,000 participants from most states and several countries. With twelve or more sessions running simultaneously at any time, the program could and did reflect the diverse constituencies within the NWSA.

Sometimes, indeed, it almost seemed that there was too much diversity; those working backstage were chagrined to see how often individual lifestyles and preferences were translated into demands for alterations in practical arrangements which were exceedingly difficult to honor, given our shoestring budget. At other times, and depending upon one's perspective, it seemed that there was not enough diversity. For instance, women representing community programs sometimes regarded academic women as narcissistically lost in their own research and careers. Some Third World women said that they felt undervalued and underrepresented, and insisted that for the Association to eradicate its own racism, they would need to hold power in excess of their numbers. The few men present, not represented by any caucus, were sometimes treated like second-class citizens, with some women questioning their right to any involvement in the proceedings. Married women, particularly those who brought children, often received condescension or disapproval from their more separatist sisters.

At times, the Convention seemed more an exercise in majority-minority relations than anything else, with many seemingly feeling they were in some kind of minority yearning to be in the majority — a peculiar phenomenon in an Association all of whose subgroups define themselves as being, in some crucial way, outside of and in opposition to conventional attitudes toward women. It was in the context of majority-minority relations, in fact, rather than in its intended context of literary criticism, that we found ourselves applying Annette Kolodny's paper on feminist criticism, with its vigorous defense not only of the need for critical pluralism, but also of the inevitability of diverse and sometimes contradictory responses even among feminists.

For us, then, the Convention raised a question about the future of the Association: to what extent will it be necessary or possible for diverse constituencies within the NWSA to agree not to disagree sufficiently to allow the Association to serve those diverse interests? More broadly, in what ways can the Association, like the larger women's movement, renew its commitment to acknowledging distinctions among various political and individual perspectives, and at the same time seek to transcend those distinctions for the common benefit of women? This is a question which will probably take different forms at different conventions. Perhaps it also ought to be an issue to which we explicitly address ourselves in our future annual meetings.

Elizabeth Schultz and Janet Sharistanian, both at the University of Kansas, were involved in behind-the-scenes Convention planning.

A Third World Woman's View of the Convention

By Nupur Chaudhuri

By most accepted criteria, the First NWSA Convention qualifies as a resounding success. The more than 1,000 people who attended could select from 246 sessions representing a wide range of topics in two general groups: (a) women's studies research in literature, feminist theory, art, etc.; (b) issues for women's programs and pedagogy, including teaching and curriculum administration. The Program Committee (Emily Abel, Deborah Rosenfelt, and Peg Strobel) put together an
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-Choctaw) 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

Some of the Native American women at the Convention.