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A Journalist’s Personal View of the NWSA Convention

By Ann Colbert

For me, the National Women’s Studies Association Convention this May was many things: for me as an Indiana University News Bureau writer, it was a chance to generate publicity both about the Convention and about the university; for me as a member of the Women’s Studies Program Coordinating Committee, it was the culmination of a great deal of hard work which began last fall and continued through the Convention; for me as a returning woman student, it was an affirmation of much that had helped me grow into an effective human being. When asked to write about the Convention, I decided to write part of my story—an eclectic look at what had led me to women’s studies and how the Convention represented much that had changed my life.

When I made the decision to return to school two years ago, I believed myself a casualty. I was 36 years old and divorced; I had two children to support and had not had a “real” job in years; I had just recently spent several months in an institution for “depression”—the label given to the cumulative effects of having taken too much valium, having drunk too much for too long, and having tried unsuccessfully to make an abusive home situation tolerable.

Finally, I was hired as a part-time writer with the IU News Bureau and decided to return to school because (1) the managing editor told me I needed a degree to achieve professional status and encouraged me to take classes; and (2) a part-time salary would not support me and my family, and I found out I could borrow money to go back to school. So the decision was a pragmatic one, though one I assumed would destine me for another failure.

In my capacity as writer for the News Bureau, I had become aware of the existence of women’s studies, and, quite frankly, I thought the whole scene was a bit strange. Nevertheless, I was beginning to see that my feelings of inadequacy were related to the way I viewed myself in the world and to the way others viewed me because I was a woman. I thought I would try the courses as long as they met other departmental requirements.

Such words reflect the potential impact of involvement in the NWSA of public school teachers. They also attest to the importance of efforts to include preK-12 teachers in future NWSA Conventions through programming, financial support for Convention attendance, and the offering of graduate credit in education. Programming sensitive to preK-12 issues alone will not attract teachers to NWSA, for three reasons. First, the Convention is scheduled during the public school year and, hence, teachers need paid release time to attend. Second, unlike many academics, public school teachers rarely receive financial support from their schools for conference attendance. Finally, the enticement of paid graduate credit which allows teachers to make salary schedule advancements seems vital in attracting teachers who would not otherwise attend the Convention and be exposed to its content.

The 12 Lilly Scholarship teachers will return to Indiana University in November for a one-day followup conference. There, the Convention, the scholarship program design, and the teachers’ efforts to integrate their Convention experiences into their classrooms and curricula will be evaluated, and a networking effort will be launched. In addition, during the school year, each teacher will receive TABS and Ms. for her school library as well as $20.00 worth of teacher-selected books from The Feminist Press.

PreK-12 teacher outreach must continue to be a priority of NWSA. Our efforts represent one model for involving public school educators in the National Convention. NWSA needs contact with grassroots feminist educators who work in educational settings that the university does not touch. Teachers’ pragmatic activism and firm sense of the realities of the struggle enrich the Association and demonstrate the importance of such outreach efforts.

Sue Elwell and Patti Lather, who designed and coordinated the graduate credit program for teachers at the 1980 NWSA Convention, are graduate students in the School of Education, Indiana University.

The first semester I took a course on Androgyny in Literature and another on Sociology of Sex Roles; and I think that for the first time I began to question seriously the ways I had examined my world. It became increasingly clear to me that the problems I had had were not my problems alone, that perhaps instead of my not fitting into the world, the world was not accommodating me. I had always felt guilty about not being able to find contentment in the traditional female roles. Slowly, but surely, my guilt began to change into understanding and anger.

I began to see that popular culture, history, literature, and art simply reinforced the popular myth that Betty Friedan had so aptly described. (Curiously, I had read The Feminine Mystique shortly after it was published, and my reaction to it then had been, “That will never happen to me.”)

As I continued to work toward my degree, I took several other women’s studies courses, and each has helped to give life to the placid, Renoir-like images I had had of my foremothers. They have come alive as hardworking, competent, caring persons. My respect for members of my sex has grown and the old paranoia I used to feel at being reduced to conversation with “the girls” has gone. Women have a lot to say and a lot to share. The NWSA Convention simply affirmed my growing love and respect for myself and my sisters.
The end of May is a time I look forward to: finals are over, summer school is yet to begin, and the quiet IU campus is made more beautiful by the abundance of trees and flowers in bloom.

This year, though, spring downpours were late, arriving the same week as the Convention. The usually unperturbed Bloomington campus was a squall of rain, buses, taxis, and T-shirts with feminist messages. As I watched woman after woman, old and young, arrive in the rain and get settled in, excitement and anticipation began to grow.

I was especially gratified that efforts to attract press people seemed to be paying off. There were several representatives from newspapers and radio stations in Indiana, and it was a pleasure for me to meet and talk with Ruth Sullivan, Ms. editor, and Janet Hook, assistant editor for the Chronicle of Higher Education. Our organization needs media exposure. If we hope to be successful in changing the nature of education and the world, we must not forget the importance of spreading the news of what we are doing.

If I am beginning to sound polemical, it is because I believe that many times we in women’s studies forget that the vast majority of the reading public see our efforts as either ridiculous or arcane. Again and again in dealing with representatives of the press, I find myself having to answer the

POETRY READING: THIRD WORLD WOMEN POETS

One of several poetry readings at the 1980 NWSA Convention included the following poems:

**Of Course**

"My roots have been yanked out, sold by the pound and expected to sprout in a vacuum world."

Of course
I resent/repress and resist
Groping dark
In this place of acid light
Where the stench of burning roots
Is perfumed with jasmine
And everything is freedom, fraternity
And fraudulent

Of course
I resent/repress and resist.
I also cry.

—Mary E. Gibson

**Noni Daylight Remembers the Future**

"We are closer than blood," Noni Daylight tells her. "It isn’t Oklahoma or the tribal blood but something that we speak."

(The otherself knows and whispers to herself.)

The air could choke, could kill, the way it tempts Noni to violence, this morning. But she needs the feel of danger, for life.

(It helps her remember.)

One morning memory came to her in saguaro. It was early spring west of Tucson, her other home, saguaro forest. She talked with the old ones, ancient saguaro people, who spoke from underground roots that burrow into a dry darkness to drink.

"The dreamers will survive," they said.

"the many changes."

—Joy Harjo

**Love Story**

He called her "Reina"
And in it thought himself kingly.
He gave eight children to serve her
While he traveled summers and falls
Leaving her with purpose—
Food to be found,
Garments to fashion.

Old, he stayed home
That she might bathe his arthritic legs,
Listen to his last breath.
Later she told her daughter
That he had loved her, "Reina,
In my own way." And that
Was enough for the queen she was.

—Antonia Quintana Pigno

Mary E. Gibson is a Social Service Consultant in the Indianapolis School System. Her poems have appeared in several journals and in Poems by Blacks, Vol. II. Joy Harjo is Creek; she edits the newsletter for the New Mexico Indian Environmental Education Project in Albuquerque. Her work includes two collections of poetry, What Moon Drove Me to This and She Had Some Horses. Antonia Quintana Pigno directs the Minorities Resource/Research Center at Kansas State University. Her poems have appeared in Rocky Mountain Review, Writer’s Forum, and other journals.
I cannot stress how important for . . . the future of human experience it is to take the development and exploration of a feminine perspective in . . . research seriously and to devote all our talents and energies collectively to its accomplishment.

—Jane Anton

As research on women has increased, researchers have become increasingly concerned about how appropriate the existing research methodologies are for the study of women. In one of the earliest critiques, Rae Carlson argued that current research paradigms, which she characterized as involving manipulation, quantification, and control, not only impose restraints on the understanding of female psychology, but also lead to a general impoverishment in the capacity to say anything meaningful about human personality. Concomitantly, feminists began to question the widespread use of socioeconomic status as an independent variable. Marie R. Haug, for instance, pointed out that traditional measures of social class misclassify about a third of all families because the characteristics of women, particularly working wives, are neglected in the allocation of class position to individuals and families.

Barbara Lloyd documented the impact of societal norms on the definition of sex differences in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. She emphasized a number of methodological issues: the survival of spurious facts through repeated publication, the failure to report sex differences, and the consequences of employing the traditional null-hypothesis strategy. Jane Anton echoed the inappropriateness of the null hypothesis for the study of sex differences:

In the null hypothesis, we assume things are the same and are surprised if they turn out to be different. In research on sex differences, we should be surprised if they turn out to be the same. We should talk about not one normal distribution, but two; and develop quantitative methods for comparing, contrasting, finding, and proving similarity rather than proving differences.

Thus, within a number of disciplines researchers are rejecting present methodologies for conducting research on women. Participants in this methodological journey were represented at seven sessions at the 1980 National Women's Studies Association Convention, where they met to share ideas of alternatives to male-defined research models.

The seven sessions on feminist research methods were: Research Methods in Psychology: Are They Anti-Feminist?: The Discovery of Feminist Theory: Applications of Qualitative Methods and Analysis; Workshop: Research Methods for Non-Social Scientists; A Workshop on Feminist Fieldwork: Issues for Social Scientists; Feminist Methodology: Feminism and Scientific Inquiry; Women's Studies: Methodology and Research. More than thirty researchers participated in these seven sessions.

A thread running through the seven sessions was the emphasis on qualitative research, that is, research which may be characterized by sustained contact between the researcher and the subjects, research that is built on direct experience, and research that produces data descriptive of events, people, places, and conversations. Many of the papers called for research in which women's experiences are taken into account so that theories will be grounded in them.

Another point of agreement echoed throughout the sessions was that feminist work is for, rather than about or on, women. The former suggests the importance of research in social change, while the latter may be used by feminists for social change, but may not have been undertaken explicitly for this purpose.

Other aspects of a feminist methodology that were discussed in the sessions were an emphasis on hypothesis generation rather than hypothesis testing; the need for the research to grow out of the personal experiences, feelings, and needs of the researcher; the necessity for truth to be reinvested in those on whom the research is being conducted; the need for a heavy reliance on the oral tradition, rather than the written one, both in gathering data and in reporting the results; and the use of research as an instrument for social change.

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NOTES


5Anton, op. cit.