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Writing It All Down:  
An Overview of the Second NWSA Convention

By Catharine R. Stimpson

Few conventions about education have either much cheer or tenderness. Those of the National Women's Studies Association do. In this, too, NWSA is unusual. One of the many good events at the 1980 Convention at Indiana University in Bloomington was a workshop that Frances Doughty of the National Gay Task Force gave. She used letters, photographs, and other archival remnants to portray a "lesbian friendship group," women who were either friends or lovers for thirty years. The audience touched its past with blissful curiosity. Then Doughty told a story about a famous member of the group: Janet Flanner, the writer. Shortly before her death, someone asked Flanner if she had any messages for the next generation. "Write it all down," Flanner answered, "Write it all down."

Throughout the NWSA Convention, people were, if unknowingly, obeying Flanner's command. Many of the approximately 1,500 participants were keeping notebooks, journals, diaries, or their technological equivalents: photographs and tapes. It rained consistently in Bloomington from May 16 to 20. People who walked or jogged around the campus returned to their rooms with shoes or sneakers squelching. Recording events, codifying time, was almost as common an experience as being wet.

The sense of history was collective as well as personal. Significantly, this was the second NWSA national gathering, tangible proof that the organization could survive, a phenomenon that some observers might not have predicted, given NWSA's vulnerabilities. Structurally, it is a convoluted compound of caucuses, taskforces, committees, assemblies, and a national office. Financially, it is still fragile, particularly given the desire to respond to diverse constituencies. Neither birth, nor blood, nor age, nor specific occupation, nor geography unites its members. A cause does. Morally and politically, NWSA is hugely ambitious. The 1980 theme was "Educatiing for Change," but the change for which NWSA stands is nothing less than a series of transformations of public and private lives. That such a group could endure was cause for celebration and a sense of reassurance.

Having a past eased some things. At the first session of the 1980 Delegate Assembly, in a wood-paneled hall with chandeliers and crimson curtains, the Convention Coordinators spoke of their good fortune in having previous work on which to build. In 1979, the Assembly had passed scores of disparate, often unwieldy, resolutions. In 1980, NWSA members or delegates who wished to propose a recommendation or resolution were required to present its cost and a method of implementation as well.

The Convention self-consciously recognized that the women's movement to which NWSA adheres has its own past, too. A panel at the opening session was called "Sexual Politics: Ten Years Later." The 1979 meeting had occurred thirty years after the publication of another central feminist text: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. When Millett and de Beauvoir were writing their books, many of the Convention participants were adults, but many were unborn, babies, in primary school, or high schoolers. (Of the 796 people who filled out demographic data cards, 351 said they were between 25 and 34 years of age.) Women's studies, in brief, now has a multitude of unequally stored memory banks. Ironically, despite the fact that several Convention sessions took up the theme of "Mothers and Daughters," there were few, if any, mechanisms through which the memory banks in the NWSA itself might have been systematically tapped. Generations of work within the movement were only erratically drawn upon.

More often, two linked, subterranean feelings appeared to emerge, disappear, and then re-emerge. The first was some skepticism about the good faith of women in positions of authority, who both were and were not comparative old-timers in women's studies. NWSA must never embody the principle of blind obedience, of a bland stupor of the will. On the contrary, NWSA must persistently challenge authorities. At the panel at the opening session, Elizabeth Janeway lucidly outlined the process through which women reject weakness and come into their own strength. They begin, she said, with "mis­trust ... disbelief ... a refusal to accept orthodox myth, dictionary definitions, and standard explanations." They move next to a sharing of disbelief, and then, finally, to action. There they cease to be "angst-ridden victims and become members of a movement. . ." At the Convention, however, from time to time, mistrust seemed to leap too quickly and ferociously from woman to woman—for example, from a Delegate Assembly member to a Convention organizer over the issue of why only decaffeinated coffee from Nestlé, a company that the 1979 Delegate Assembly had voted to boycott, was available in the dormitory dining rooms.

The second feeling was some grumbling about Convention arrangements. Some participants grumped about registration lines, food, the campus bus service, the telephones. A little like dependent daughters who want perfect mothers, they tended to confuse a Convention and an organization with a home. They also were indifferent to the extraordinary efforts of the people who put on the Indiana hootenanny/celebration/campus camp/chauteauqa/academic gathering. Indiana University volunteers alone had labored for a total of 3,320 hours. If they had been paid at the new minimum wage rate, they would have earned about $10,000.

However, the Convention mood was mostly sturdy, spirited, and supportive. Because Indiana University is vast, an environment that embraces both bucolic lushness and high-rise buildings, living spaces and meeting places tended to be far away from each other. Good feelings, then, had to sustain
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themselves without relying on an excess of proximity. People were also energetic. The Convention program listed about 250 sessions, 40 meetings, 12 special events, sports and exercise classes, art exhibits, films, parties, and dances. Either "cornucopia" or "collage" would have been an appropriate metaphor for the schedule.

The quantity of events reflected the number of ends the Convention was to realize. First, it was to give people a chance to exchange pragmatic information, facts about a lot of things. Many sessions and workshops concerned building a women’s center, or conducting a class, or writing a grant proposal, or devising a political strategy. Second, the Convention was to be a scholarly forum. For better or worse, NWSA has yet to find an alternative to the academic paper as a scholarly medium. Unsurprisingly, people asked again those questions that have haunted engaged intellectuals since the 1960s. What is the proper relationship between activism and the academy? What are the best relationships among the various activists, with various causes, who wish to change the academy? Several plausible, sensible answers were given: we must simultaneously serve constituencies inside and outside of the academy; we must join coalitions and remember the principles we share; we must avoid the "priorization of oppression," as Martha Vicinus has put it, the game in which we say one group has suffered more, another less; and, if we can, we might think of educational centers as laboratories in which we experiment with reconciliations of activism and free-wheeling thought.

Despite an occasional session on Islam, Cuba, or cross-cultural feminism, the focus of scholars tended to be the United States. Once again, women’s studies veered toward the provincial. Fortunately, some of the most sophisticated papers defied such a pattern and showed the influence of contemporary European theories. Oddly, there was little history. Bloomington seemed to swerve away from one of the most fertile of women’s studies enterprises. Brooding about this, one of the most promising young historians of women wondered if it was an accident, or if scholars in general were not saving their papers for their disciplinary meetings and historians in particular for the Berkshire Conference.

Some of the greatest intellectual excitement appeared in two fields that have been historic antagonists: science and religion. The potential tensions between them for feminist scholars have yet to be articulated, let alone resolved. In part, the meetings about science were explosive deconstructions of dominant theories about the secular world. People asked how a patriarchal society might have shaped scientific inquiry and practice, and how, in turn, scientific theories about nature might have "produced sexist understandings." In contrast, the meetings about religion were, in part, controversial, conflicting reconstructions of pictures of a sacred world. Feminist theologicians disagreed about the usefulness of patriarchal traditions, and about the truth of certain female traditions. Hovering over both academic and nonacademic gatherings was a mythic presence, the figure of a goddess and her surrogates, which some worship but others find weird. For example, Sally Gearhart, after a reading of her fiction, casually remarked, "those into the craft, I mean witchcraft," and another woman advanced the claims of a "theosophic" approach to feminism and to life.

Still another purpose of the Convention was to assess NWSA’s structure and guiding principles, laws, and decisions. Once again, the relationship between NWSA and the United States Agency for International Development became a volatile test question for both internal governance and official morality. I cannot pretend to have a full understanding of the drama, but it seemed to provoke an argument about the relative powers of the Delegate Assembly and the Coordinating Council. In 1979, the Assembly had passed two resolutions (8 and 48) that had severed any connections between NWSA and AID. Later, the Council had concluded that because the resolutions were in some conflict with the NWSA Constitution, they could not be acted upon. In 1980, some Assembly members said that the Council had to be more responsive to Assembly decisions; that the Council could only set aside Assembly resolutions if they were patently, plainly unconstitutional.

The issue also involved NWSA’s commitment to politics other than those of the women’s movement. Nearly all, if not all, of the people at the Bloomington Convention would agree that
feminism is inseparable from other movements for social justice, in America and elsewhere. However, they might disagree about the necessity of banning AID as a Convention exhibit, or as a source of travel money that might bring Third World women to America to the NWSA or that might send NWSA representatives abroad. Ultimately, the Third World Caucus offered a resolution that suggested that AID involvement with NWSA violated that section of the NWSA Constitution that pledged the organization's support of the well-being of Third World women. The resolution also asked NWSA to study AID and to suspend any link with it until that research was completed and discussed.

It was important that the Third World Caucus should play such a role. The actual number of Third World women at the Convention was small. Of the 796 people who handed in the demographic data cards, 23 said they were Black; 17 Hispanic; 15 Native American; 9 Asian. Yet the Third World was a strong, palpable force. The Delegate Assembly happily learned that a "woman of color" would be a Coordinator of the 1981 Convention, at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, and that central themes would be race, racism, and the contributions of Black women.

Less happily, the Convention still showed the entanglements of feminism and racism. During a workshop about the chances of "sisterhood" between Black and white women, one of about 20 formal sessions on Third World matters, a Black woman asked if white women were prepared to let Black women lead them. She was never fully, honestly answered. At the same place, a white woman called for a "humanistic feminism." She said that "hu" was "hue," and that we were all women of color. Her pun insensitively ignored the years of effort within feminism to acknowledge the reality of differences among women, the consequences of race and class and sexual preference. Calmly, with patient courtesy, a Black woman told her that she could not so hastily wipe out the centuries of history that had forged the Black woman's collective experience. One evening, a play about Calamity Jane, who was a racist even according to the play's author, proved a torment for many in the audience.

A fourth and final purpose of Bloomington was to offer women a place in which to cultivate common ground. An NWSA meeting initiates and deepens conversations, friendships, and romances. It lets a woman who might be thought to be impolite, impolite, and freakish in her home community see human images similar to her own. She is no longer a solitary feminist or opponent of nuclear energy or lesbian. She has colleagues and peers. The Convention is both exhilarating and a profound relief.

Organized around the idea of change, the Convention participants displayed their own signs of change. The phrase "women of color" entered the language of many. The substitution of "wimmin" for "women" attracted some. Lesbians were a vigorous, vital group, but more men seemed to be wearing badges in Bloomington than in Lawrence, Kansas, and little boys lived in the dormitories and rode elevators that otherwise forbade men to be in them after 10 PM. One cannot have the comfort of illusions about the degree of change that NWSA has brought about in the world beyond its gatherings. We are still marginal, if illegitimately so, to many educational institutions and projects. We must still devour our dreams for sustenance. We still have our contradictions, unexamined actions, and bouts of pettiness. Yet we do educate. We do dream. Despite our frailities, we are energetic and alive. Bloomington was a part of the process of the creation of our history, even as other organizations, which may ignore or mock us, slouch toward obsolescence.

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Encounter with American Feminism:
A Muslim Woman’s View of Two Conferences

By Leila Ahmed

April 1980. The Barnard Conference, "The Scholar and the Feminist"—my first direct as opposed to page-mediated encounter with American feminism. And then it came home to me: how simple the one-dimensional experience of reading; how easy, ordered, and amenable to order it makes things seem—coherent and amenable to coherence. Sitting in that hall, listening to papers that often clearly drew on the rhetorical strategies of an oral tradition, quite different from those in scholarly writing, even in that feminist scholarship

self-consciously dismantling the rigidities of tradition; being aware of the responses of a highly—and diversely—responsive audience; straining to catch verbal short-cuts; sometimes clearly missing nuances that relied on a depth of American experience: all this makes it impossible to respond to the conference as a coherent event—not because it was incoherent, obviously, but precisely because there was such a sense of vitality, ferment, such a

richness and general manifoldness to it—and a sense too of the manifoldness of feminist stances in America.

My own interest being Third World women, I attended the workshop on "Class and Race Issues in Women's Studies." Angela Jorge, treating the topic experientially, described experiences of the Black Hispanic community and related them to Puerto Rican culture, and Florence Howe then outlined relevant developments in women's studies. Offered concurrently was "Perspectives on the Black and Hispanic Family," and, another I was sorry to miss, "Defining the Erotic" from a lesbian perspective.

Of course it is only in the academy, formally, that the discussion of such topics, relations between women, the erotic between women, is new. Women have been