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NWSA Convention at Storrs**

John Schilb

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## **“Being in a CR Group for One”: A Man’s Experience at the 1981 NWSA Convention at Storrs**

**John Schilb**

You stumble into the preregistration line, knowing you’re the only human being in the lobby with a beard, hoping no one will pay attention to your suddenly unique gender. Your mind flashes back to the Hartford airport a few hours ago: masses of tired businessmen being catered to in the cocktail lounge by “girls” wedged into tight white blouses and even tighter black hot pants and even tighter black high heels. As you sipped your Bloody Mary, you wondered if Susan Griffin had seen the place. But the present snaps you forward with the moment you’ve been nervously anticipating: a woman, in this instance one directly behind you, asks in a tone of forceful curiosity, “Do you teach women’s studies?” Gulp. Now you’re not just sweating from the heat or the crowd or the weight of the suitcases. You take a deep breath, slowly turn, and croak, “Yes.” Then, in a burst of compulsion, a desperate move to gain legitimacy, you whip out your credentials: courses taught, papers given, friendships achieved. Only after several minutes do you realize that she has pretty much accepted your right to be there, that she has replaced her furrowed brow with a smile—that, in fact, you’re being slightly ridiculous. She interrupts to let you know that she is a friend of your college’s president. Would you give him her regards?

The incident foreshadowed the rest of the Convention. As I went from auditorium to dining hall to classroom to book exhibit, acute self-consciousness went along with me, only to experience close encounters of the feminist kind. These exchanges of spirit and insight could never bestow calm upon me, but they enabled me to remember, when I was in danger of forgetting, the worth of a trek to Connecticut in the first place.

Being a man at the NWSA Convention does mean being in a CR group of one. Does mean feeling an obligation to steer clear of particular sessions, like the one on vaginal health—even if the diagram advertising it confronts you every time you line up at the door to the cafeteria. Does mean getting overlooked by certain women handing out leaflets. Does mean being cloistered on the top floor of a dormitory with only Paul Lauter and Florence Howe for company. Does mean fearing to make a comment or to raise a question because the rest of the audience might treat it with *ad hominem* contempt. Does mean not being able to share the special intimacy that can arise among women who attend.

However, the satisfactions are real and many. I could respond along with others to the passionate intelligence of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, the delightful artistry of Paule Marshall, the hypnotic beauty of Sweet Honey in the Rock. I could join others in examining racism as it operates within society and within myself. I could learn from the scholarship presented and apply it to my own teaching and living. Perhaps most important, I could build connections between my old friends and me, between my new friends and me.

So I’ll be back, trying to cough up the money for Humboldt somehow. At that Convention, I hope I’ll find the courage to speak up more. Mary Helen Washington said in one of the panels that, for her,

“white” had come to mean “lack of self-disclosure.” I suspect that the term “male” could describe the phenomenon as well; and, as much as I’ve tried to emerge from the web of traditional male values, I have yet to abandon aloofness as a weapon. I also hope that more men will participate. Not that I crave their support—I’ve proven to myself that I can survive at least a few days without it. Not that I think the Convention needs a “male point of view”—the people who come to it are, after all, fleeing patriarchy’s prolonged assault upon them. And not that I want so many men that NWSA turns into a colossal Rotary Club. Rather, I hope for more men because I believe—guess? wish?—that there are, indeed, men who could learn from and contribute to the proceedings, men who for one reason or another—yes, it’s probably their own willful ignorance—have yet to recognize the Association or its annual meeting as points toward which to travel. We may not like spending valuable time helping them on their way; still, let’s not forget their existence.

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## **“Once More into the Breach”**

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develop their own literary talent. Acquaintance with varied forms of rhyme and imagery, including those used by white women and by people of color, can only increase the literary talents of our students. I wondered aloud whether English scholars should really want to grant sociologists the exclusive right to teach the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks or the novels of Zora Neale Hurston. Surely as teachers of literature, we should be committed to using literature that will expand the imagination and the cultural understanding of our students by exposing them to new perspectives.

### **Some Observations on the Value of Obstacity**

In reviewing this conflict, I hope that feminists will obstinately continue to speak out. It is vital that we oppose our colleagues’ obeisance to the sacred bull that literary purity and excellence belong to a few great books taught frequently in the past. Silence allows conservatives to proceed too easily to rob us of our female heritage. Even one voice will encourage others to speak.

Placing Emily Dickinson in the core curriculum of Rhode Island College’s Western Literature course is a small—and almost absurd—victory. Who would imagine in this day and age that it would require a fight? But that course would now be composed entirely of white, male, European writers had scattered voices throughout the college been silent—rather than insistent that the works of their foremothers deserve to be read.

Although we were also vocal about literature by people of color, we have not as yet won that battle, perhaps because the few Black colleagues that we have did not join the argument. Now that Emily Dickinson is on our reading list, more people are suggesting that a Black writer be added also. We will continue to remind our primarily white, male colleagues that in ignoring white women and people of color they cheat themselves and their students as much as the Elizabethans were cheated when they ignored Chaucer.

*Carolyn Ruth Swift is Professor of English and teaches women’s studies at Rhode Island College.*