Fall 1981

Reflections on the Birth and Coming of Age of NWSA

Virginia Cyrus

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

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/511
must work within the structures of the professional associations of their disciplines. This would prevent issues such as racism from being studied in the most comprehensive and appropriate manner, i.e., through interdisciplinary inquiry. The broad range of Convention sessions this year, while representing many fields and styles, did not, I feel, provide for the kinds of research papers which are necessary for the advancement of women’s studies and which should go hand in hand with our community and activist studies.

The scale of the enterprise was, nevertheless, something I had not previously experienced. The program was an embarrassment of riches which could only be sampled by the individual participant. The task of selection was therefore an important one, not made easier by the fact that the program was not made available before the Convention began. . . .

Like the balloons at Storrs proclaiming “We are everywhere,” I wished I could be omnipresent; I found, however, that the program listings themselves succeeded in informing me of the issues and concerns of feminists in the United States. . . .

The most valuable experience for me was without question the opportunity to meet with, to network with so many feminists, both American and European. Nouns such as “network” are slower to become verbs in Ireland than in the United States. Possibly because we lacked the verb, the process of networking has been slower to develop also.

My contacts at the Convention were both informative and inspirational. People were more than willing to share ideas and knowledge and seemed genuinely interested in developments in Ireland. Fortunately, I was able to take up some of the many invitations I received to visit centers and institutions during my subsequent travels.

The NWSA Convention will remain for me a metaphor for the United States: vast, complex, and diverse, demonstrating that e pluribus unum describes not a state but a process.

Dearbhal NiCharthaigh teaches at Thomond College of Education, Castleroy, Limerick, Ireland.

Remarks on Two Literary Sessions at the NWSA Convention
Jo Gillikin

... On Tuesday afternoon I attended a session entitled “The Fragmented Ethnic Woman Writer,” which included an expert analysis of the search for identity in Crossings, a little-known, though clearly worthy-of-being-fully-known, novel by Chuang Hua (a pseudonym). The main character struggles between two countries—China and America—seeking her identity. As the middle child of seven children, she also struggles for personhood, a true sense of self. In The Narrows, by Ann Petry, Abbie Crunch, a seventy-year-old Black woman, transcends the moral bankruptcy of her time and place through charity. The last presentation of the session, “From Fragmentation to Fulfillment,” described what it means to be a Black feminist lesbian literary critic: pulled into too many pieces. Yet wholeness comes through in suggested approaches to literary criticism: Be inclusive. Be more visionary than reactionary. Recognize that all literature and criticism is subjective. Don’t limit literature, particularly Black literature, to sociological thinking about the world: deal with the literary aspects of Black writing as well. . . .

Wednesday morning found me in the session entitled “Forms and Motifs in Ethnic Women’s Literature,” where a graduate student presented her paper on the journey motif in Pierce’s Woman on the Edge of Time. Most discussion-provoking was the presentation on kitchens in literature, based on the symbolic use of kitchens in such works as Anzia Yezierska’s The Open Cage and Bread Givers; Stern’s “My Mother and I”; and Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones. Are women born with kitchens as they are born with wombs? For a woman, is her kitchen a symbol of her “making it” in America? What does a woman gain if she goes from the small, cluttered, roach-infested, peeling, flowerless kitchen of the slums to the filled-with-light, silled-with-red-geraniums kitchen of suburbia? Does she lose self and human relationship in obtaining the dream of the everyday housewife Glen Campbell sings of? Can we go beyond the kitchen, go on to women as more than preparers and as symbols of food? Can

women feed themselves and others outside the kitchen? Can we say that we are tired of being eaten? Can we not cook up some aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual food, too? . . .

Jo Gillikin teaches English at the College of Staten Island/CUNY.

Reflections on the Birth and Coming of Age of NWSA
Virginia Cyrus

Having survived my fourth NWSA Delegate Assembly, as I drove home from Storrs, I felt a real sense of personal accomplishment. At the same time I wondered why, since I am not usually masochistic, I had endured those meetings. Suddenly I realized that my participation produced the same gratifications and frustrations that one gets from mothering a gifted, but somewhat unready, child. This insight led in turn to my seeing in those four Delegate Assemblies developmental stages not unlike those that are needed to produce a valuable, mature individual. . . .

Although the organization was dreamed of and desired before the 1977 San Francisco Convention, it was there that the actual conception of the entity took place. The organizational structure and the Constitution developed there established NWSA’s “genetic code,” which determines its character, its limitations, and its potential.

When, after a thirty-month gestation, NWSA’s birth took place at Lawrence, Kansas, in 1979, all of us shared the sense that we were witnessing a joyful and awesome miracle. However, the overwhelming chaos of that Delegate Assembly and the multitude of seemingly random resolutions and recommendations disheartened many of us who were conscious of the tenuousness of an infant organization’s chances for survival in the harsh world of bills and cash flow. . . .

As we continued to shape our organizational character at Bloomington, Indiana, in 1980, we displayed a growing sense of self-control. We monitored our ideological declarations with financial impact statements and considered implementation procedures. . . . We were growing up.
The 1981 Storrs Convention signals, to my mind, NWSA's coming of age. For the first time the Delegate Assembly, indeed the entire organization, has come to grips with the fact that even the most worthy expenditures of either time or money depend on available resources. Before, like a kid in a candy store, we had concentrated on the most satisfying ways to spend; now we are mature enough collectively to face fiscal limitations. Rather than be discouraged by financial responsibility, however, we are accepting it as a challenge which we are self-reliant enough to meet.,.,.,

Virginia Cyrus, a member of the NWSA Coordinating Council, teaches English and women's studies at Rider College.

Feminist Community Education at the NWSA Convention

Betsy Brinson

As a community organizer, I came to Storrs to meet others committed to feminist education in the community. At the same time I hoped to learn from the research and reflections of feminist sisters who teach in college programs and in our public school system.,.,.

Films offer a vehicle for community education. In "Fundii" I viewed the story of Ella Baker, a Black woman organizer who has been influential in civil rights struggles since the 1920s. Funded by a variety of sources described in one of the Convention workshops, this documentary can be used as an educational tool to stimulate discussion of organizing techniques and leadership roles at the grassroots level.

In a second workshop, "Community Organizations and Community Education: Urban, Rural, and Suburban Programs," I heard librarians discuss the development of community reading and discussion programs in feminist education, such as the Women in Literature project funded by the Vermont State Humanities Foundation. This weekly book discussion program reaches over 1,200 women statewide at a cost of 40¢ per person. (Project director Pat Bates, Rutland Free Library, Court Street, Rutland, VT 05701, has packet material available for those wishing to conduct similar discussion groups elsewhere.)

Other workshop panelists presented information on community education projects offered by the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, a Brooklyn-based organization founded in 1975 to build a network to provide information, support, recognition, and technical assistance for low- and moderate-income women. A major component of the program is the community-based college which offers special curricula and courses on family life, neighborhood studies, ethnic cultural heritage, labor history, and women's leadership. Most courses are interdisciplinary and problem-oriented, relating theoretical materials to concrete personal, family, and community needs. Students are granted academic credit for a degree-granting AA program through the local community college. (For more information, write to NCNW, 11029 Catherine Street, Brooklyn, NY 1121.)

A similar program based in California is the 8-month, 18-credit program offered by the Center for Self-Reliant Education that focuses on training women for community organizing through short, intense learning experiences on domestic abuse, legal concerns, housing issues, peer support, and other feminist educational concerns. (Contact Celeste Brody, 850 West McKinley, Sunnyvale, CA 94086.)

As a result of this session, a network of community educators within NWSA was begun, with representatives of twenty-two organizations present. (Others wishing to participate are invited to contact Betsy Brinson, 1525 Westbury Drive, Richmond, VA 23229.)

Finally, in the workshop "Racism in Labor Education," NWSA Convention participants joined with sisters attending the first national women's meeting of the International Service Employees Union, also meeting on campus. The workshop panelists gave presentations on the historical contributions of Black women to the trade union movement, information on current strategies for dealing with racism and sexism in trade unions, and women's courses being developed in labor settings to assist women in networking.

Following the panel presentations, the group shared painful understanding, tears, anger, and finally their resolution to confront openly the racism and sexism within their own organization. When I left, they were engaged in preparing resolutions and strategies for a free conference meeting that afternoon.....

Betsy Brinson, a member of the NWSA Coordinating Council, works with the ACLU Women's Rights Project.