An Overview of the Third Annual NSWA Convention: A Time for Confrontation

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I am a Lesbian woman of Color whose children eat regularly because I work in a university. If their full bellies make me fail to recognize my commonality with a woman of Color whose children do not eat because she cannot find work, or who has no children because her insides are rotted from home abortions and sterilization; if I fail to recognize the Lesbian who chooses not to have children, the woman who remains closeted because her homophobic community is her only life support, the woman who chooses silence instead of another death, the woman who is terrified lest my anger trigger the explosion of hers; if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own, and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment, not for evasion by guilt or for further separation. I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you.

I speak here as a woman of Color who is not bent upon destruction, but upon survival. No woman is responsible for altering the psyche of her oppressor, even when that psyche is embodied in another woman. I have suckled the wolf’s lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter. We are not goddesses or matriarchs or edifices of divine forgiveness; we are not fiery fingers of judgment or instruments of flagellation; we are women always forced back upon our woman’s power. We have learned to use anger as we have learned to use the dead flesh of animals; and bruised, battered, and changing, we have survived and grown and, in Angela Wilson’s words, we are moving on. With or without uncolored women. We use whatever strengths we have fought for, including anger, to help define and fashion a world where all our sisters can grow, where our children can love, and where the power of touching and meeting another woman’s difference and wonder will eventually transcend the need for destruction.

For it is not the anger of Black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets, spends over sixty thousand dollars a second on missiles and other agents of war and death, pushes opera singers off rooftops, slaughters children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth. It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon the annihilation of us all unless we meet it with what we have, our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices.

We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt.

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Audre Lorde’s Chosen Poems and her “bio-myth-ography” entitled I’ve Been Standing on This Street Corner a Hell of a Long Time will be out in 1982.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THIRD ANNUAL NSWA CONVENTION

A Time for Confrontation
Deborah S. Rosenfelt

If exhilaration characterized the first annual NWSA Convention in Lawrence, Kansas, and consolidation the second in Bloomington, this third Convention on “Women Respond to Racism” was a time for confrontation. That word, of course, can imply either a squaring-off-against or a facing-together-with. Both processes were enacted at the Convention, perhaps inevitably, given a theme that acknowledged and permitted a certain kind of political struggle. The tone was set in opening addresses by Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, which prepared us for the necessary, painful, yet productive expression of anger. Some were disheartened by the speeches, feeling that in these days of the primacy of the New Right and the Moral Majority, anger among women who are essentially allies is a luxury we can little afford. Others saw the speeches as essential renderings of the complexity of relations between women of color and white women, something that has to be acknowledged before and during the larger undertakings on which we work together.

The Convention program included more than 200 workshops, panels, and roundtables on topics ranging from theory about the intersections of sex, race, class, and affectional preference in society and culture, to strategies for institutional change; from the history and literature of women of color and that of their relationship with white women, to discussions of the issues now faced by women trying to work together in multiethnic programs and projects; from developing multicultural curricula in various educational contexts, to analyzing the roles of women in Third World countries. These international panels, by all accounts, were some of the better-attended and more exciting of the sessions. One Convention-goer, by careful timing, managed to hear Johnetta Cole and Sonia Alvarez speak on “Sex, Race, and Socialist Transformation in Cuba and Nicaragua”; catch Stephanie Urdang in another session on “Women and Anti-Colonial Struggles”; and take in a bit of a panel on “International Women Respond to Racism,” moderated by Aziza al-Hibri, before participating in her own session on “The Role of Women in National Development and Revolution in the Third World.” The Convention program alone...
helped nudge those of us who tend to focus on women's studies in the Anglo-American tradition away from our ethnocentrism. Such nudging, of course, was a major purpose of the Convention.

For some of us, the readings and performances alone were enough to justify our presence at Storrs. We listened with delight to Paule Marshall's witty reading from *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, soon to be reprinted by The Feminist Press. A multiethnic lesbian poetry reading included Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Doris Davenport, Joan Larkin, Judith McDaniel, Cherrie Moraga, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Adrienne Rich, and Michele Cliff. On Monday night, Vinie Burrows performed *Sister! Sister!* On Tuesday night, following a spectacular performance by the Artist Collective Repertory Dance Company and Percussion Ensemble, eight of the authors of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, now out from Persephone Press, gave us the gift of a collective reading. And on Wednesday night, Sweet Honey in the Rock filled the auditorium with their passionate, perfectionist *a capella* artistry. These were the moments of celebration that validated our bonds with one another.

A special time was set aside each day for consciousness-raising sessions, a new component of the program. Sadly but predictably, they became a focal point of controversy. The planners of these sessions, basing their work on a model used successfully in the New England region, decided to have separate groups for white women and for women of color. At registration, white women registered for groups under such categories as women of working-class backgrounds, women of immigrant families, and middle-class women; women of color were to meet to decide what additional categories they wished to create. This arrangement was based on the belief that we can work on racism more honestly if we are among peers, and that women of color should not be subjected to the pain of watching white women confront their own racism. Unfortunately, this rationale—a controversial one in itself—was not made sufficiently clear, and many women of color and white women objected to the arrangement. Finally, mixed groups were created to facilitate cross-racial interaction. The groups themselves will be discussed elsewhere in this issue, but whatever controversy they generated, and whatever their limitations, they represented a crucial effort on a national level to confront racism not just "out there" but among ourselves.

The more difficult confrontations, however, occurred outside the CR groups, in the larger context of the Convention itself. Ironically, the heart of the larger confrontation, at least from my perspective as a white woman long associated with the institutional development of women's studies, was not so much over the issue of racism as over the nature and future of the NWSA itself. Many participants seemed to recognize that NWSA, though itself part of and therefore reflective of a racist society, is at least trying to change that society. When Bernice Reagon of Sweet Honey thanked the Convention organizers and NWSA on the final night, she acknowledged the Association's unique willingness to take a risk.

Certainly, those of us who came to the Convention came because we share essentially the same belief in a pluralist, nonoppressive, fully egalitarian society, and the same commitment to implement that belief. But many women's studies practitioners, perhaps less willing to engage in confrontation than those who attended, did not come to the Convention at all: attendance fell 1,000 short of the expected. And among those who attended, expectations and understandings of what NWSA can and should do differed. The differences matter because NWSA is virtually the only professional association in the United States that attempts to meet the needs of many different constituencies in a genuinely democratic way.

Old labels like "liberal" versus "radical," "reformist" versus "revolutionary," or even "academic" versus "activist" seem to me inadequate to define the terms of the central debate at this Convention, though these dichotomies, cumulatively, are suggestive. The real debate, rather, represented two categories of concern in relation to NWSA itself: the pragmatic and the ideological.

The pragmatists, in this context, are those whose first concern is above all else the survival of NWSA. For them, "confrontation" means not facing other feminists but rather facing the hard financial and organizational problems now threatening the Association, problems not helped by the relatively low attendance at the Convention. The pragmatists feel that if NWSA is to survive at all, it must enlarge its membership base among the academic women's studies programs and instructors whose needs it was originally created to serve and whose support is now needed by the Association. Talk of waiving Convention and membership fees for low-income women, for example, seems unimaginably unrealistic to the pragmatists, given the hard fact that NWSA is now some $40,000 in debt.

The ideologues, in this context, are those who feel that the organization is not worth preserving unless it gives first priority to the range of political issues, like racism, that affect women's lives; unless it becomes, very quickly, more representative of racial minorities and community women; and unless it makes financial arrangements to ensure the participation of low-income women as members and Convention-goers.

The polarization between these two stances peaked at the speakout before the Delegate Assembly, when the ideologues were at their angriest and most rhetorical and the pragmatists at their most defensive and frustrated. Both here and in the Delegate Assembly, the tensions focused on a heated debate over the site of next year's Convention. The Steering Committee had selected Humboldt State University in California, six hours north of San Francisco by car or bus, as the site. This choice enraged those who saw this locale as virtually inaccessible, especially for low-income women, as well as frightening to women of color because of its isolation. The pragmatists pointed out that the package offered by Humboldt was superior to that of the two other competing campuses. Humboldt offered a Women's Studies Program willing to coordinate both local arrangements and the program, an eager and supportive conference center, relatively low fees, and a strong women's community already gearing up to receive the influx of feminists next year. The second afternoon of the Delegate Assembly was devoted substantially to this discussion, other items having already been referred to the Coordinating Council for decision making and implementation.

Some saw the discussion as a waste of time, given the choice of Humboldt as a fait accompli. I think they missed the point. Beneath the anger of the Third World Caucus and others who shared their reaction to Humboldt, and beneath the sometimes defensive explanations of those who had selected the Humboldt site, ran another discourse, more crucial to the future of NWSA than the site of a single Convention. This discourse involved the attempt of the pragmatists and the ideologues to find a common ground on which they could stand together and acknowledge the legitimacy of each of their stances. It involved an attempt, in fact, to shed the roles enforced by their polarization and arrive at an acceptable conclusion. For on some level the pragmatists needed...
to be reminded of the vision women's studies exists to serve, just as the ideologues needed the reminder that NWSA is one of the few organizations that exists to serve it.

The Third World Caucus and its supporters were asking, in effect: Does NWSA care about us? Will NWSA consult with and consider us in its decisions? Is NWSA really committed to a definition of feminism that includes combatting racism? And how will NWSA prove it? Those who defended Humboldt as a Convention site were not only acknowledging the practical imperatives of that choice. They were also asking of those who opposed the site: What is your commitment to the survival of NWSA? Will you serve only in an oppositional role, or will you help with memberships, organizational work, programming, and committee work, so that eventually the choice of Convention sites need not be made solely on the basis of what is least costly for the Association? Will you stay, will you work with us in the nondramatic moments between Conventions to do the work that keeps NWSA alive?

It was, I think, the major achievement of the Convention that these questions were answered affirmatively on both sides as the afternoon wore on. There were no boycotts, no condemnatory resolutions. Ultimately, the Assembly agreed that each region would designate someone on the spot to be in charge of fundraising to support the participation and attendance of low-income women, especially women of color, at Humboldt in 1982. All but one region has now done so. Members of the Third World Caucus committed themselves to generate programming on race-related issues and scholarship; the Women's Studies Program at San Francisco State University promised to raise money to help support a coordinator for such programming.

The Convention, of course, left unresolved the basic question which is raised in a different way by each Convention: Can NWSA go on being all things to all people, and survive? Can it maintain its uniqueness as an organization that bridges the academy and the community, the professional and the political? Will its diverse constituencies ultimately shake it to pieces, as some drop away, disillusioned; or will it somehow find a way to accommodate the differences, continuing to offer a new model for a professional association? The answer to these questions depends, quite literally, on all of us. As one women's studies program coordinator who is also a longtime political activist put it, as feminists we're so used to opposing and challenging the institutions we work in, we forget sometimes that NWSA is us. Those of us who want NWSA to survive cannot afford to forget this simple equation.

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NWSA Coordinating Council members at the opening Convention party held in the University of Connecticut Women's Center. Photo on left, left to right: Lucy Freibert, Eleanor Smith. Photo on right, left to right: Virginia Cyrus, Charol Shakeshaft, Kathy Amato von-Hemert, Clare Bright.