In Storrs, Connecticut, Without a Pass, or Why High School Teachers Need NWSA

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PROLOGUE: May 28, 1981. I am standing in the office of my school principal, trying to explain NWSA in terms that will be understandable to him, but not too threatening. I am trying to convince the administration to give me four days of professional leave to attend the Convention. On the desk before me is a two-page letter in which I have stated, as "professionally" as possible, my reasons for wanting these four days of leave—the ideas and materials that the Convention will give me for my twelfth-grade women's studies class (an English elective which will continue to be offered next year in spite of the changes brought about by the passage of Proposition 2½ in Massachusetts, because it is one of the most popular courses in the department); the importance of the Convention to my academic career as a graduate student in women's studies (our administration considers "professional development through courses and graduate programs" a high priority for teachers); the significance of the Convention's theme, Women Respond to Racism, for a teacher whose students rarely encounter a person of color (our ten-year state evaluation cited "minority literature" as one area in which our English Department needed improvement). All the while, I know, as surely as I know that my request will be refused, that no one but me has read a word of my statement.

We negotiate, and I am granted two days' leave to go to the NWSA Convention. . . .

sunday afternoon. May 31. I am sitting in Jorgensen Auditorium with hundreds of other women—black, brown, white, lesbian, straight, old, young, teachers and students, mothers and daughters, Jews, Catholics, and Witches. I feel like one of the feminist balloons I see bouncing above me all over the auditorium. I have felt this energy before, at women's events, but never before have I been in a room with so many women who, like me, have chosen to live the life of the mind and tried to place that life in a political context. My day-to-day life, feeling my way along the walls of the institution that is my high school, seems far away; somehow, someone forgot to lock one of the doors, and I've escaped, without a corridor pass.

Sunday evening. I find my way to the PreK-12 reception in the Student Union building. There are about ten other women, and more balloons. Like travelers meeting abroad, we feel an instant kinship: each of us knows the loneliness and the rewards of being a feminist in a high school or elementary school. In our eager conversations, there is the unspoken awareness of a shared struggle. For us there are no Women's Centers, no lesbian support groups, no freely chosen reading lists. Many of us live our lives as the only feminist in our entire building, a Women's Studies Department of one.

Monday morning. June 1. Adrienne Rich speaks about disobedience—"what the NWSA is potentially about"—and I think of how significant that word is for me as a high school teacher. Obedience is what high school is all about. Don't contradict the teacher. Be quiet in the halls. Do your homework. Disobedience. I think of one of my students, who was suspended from school because she walked out of a classroom to follow another girl who had threatened to kill herself. I think of two Black students at our almost-all-white school who were constantly "in trouble" for fighting, because they refused to let racist remarks pass unchallenged.

Audre Lorde speaks of "the empowerment of anger." Again, I am momentarily back in school, where anger is denied, perverted, channeled into hatred or self-destruction. Male teachers look fondly at adolescent girls giggling together, shake their heads, and smile. What, I would like to ask them, would those girls do if they stopped giggling for a moment? And what would you do if they faced you, unsmilng, and allowed themselves to feel their anger?

Tuesday morning, June 2. My CR group is meeting for the second day, and already we feel like friends. We share our pleasure at the way the women's movement, and this group in particular, brings together women of different ages. Again, I am back in school. Every year, in my women's studies class, I make a small ritual of announcing my birthday and my age; my students are always rather shocked by my willingness to admit that I am over thirty. School reinforces the separation between old and young that is inculcated by our society, with separate bathrooms, separate lunchrooms, separate lounges, so that we do not have a comfortable place to know each other outside the classroom.

I attend a workshop presented by women from the University of Pennsylvania Women's Studies Summer Institute for PreK-12 teachers. After an initial discussion of the Institute, we go around the room introducing ourselves and telling why we're here. I am interested in, and enriched by, learning about the other women in this workshop. Some are teachers, some are community workers, some are affiliated with federal or state agencies involved with sex equity in the public schools. Several former participants in the Institute describe their reasons for attending: "I was feeling so drained." (Is there any life that is quite so draining, that makes one feel burned out quite so quickly, as being a feminist in a public school?) We look at the curriculum that each teacher has had to
prepare as part of her work for the six-week program. Theory and practice reinforce one another—a strong remedy for burnout.

After lunch, I spend an hour watching the film "Union Maids" at the New Day Films screening room. At first, it seems like a good way to take a break from the "work" of the Convention. Now, as I sit here in this room with tears in my eyes, "Union Maids" becomes part of the experience of the Convention, every bit as intense as a lecture or a CR group. I think of my own parents, radicals and working people who fought in some of the same struggles I see in the film. And I think of my students—privileged, yet deprived, with so much material wealth and so little sense of their own history. What would they make of this film?

Tuesday afternoon. I am preparing to go home, and I do not want to leave. I make one final circuit of the book exhibit, looking for souvenirs to bring home to my own children. Among the books, stickers, T-shirts, and balloons, I find a large button that says "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." It seems just right.

Wednesday morning, June 3, 8:00 a.m. While workshops and roundtables are still going on at Storrs, I am back in my home room at school, taking attendance. It is painful to be here today. There are two or three people whom I can tell about the Convention; everyone else wonders where I've been for my two-day "vacation," and stares blankly at my Feminist Press T-shirt. (Teachers aren't supposed to wear T-shirts, anyway.)

Three days at the NWSA Convention have made me more uncomfortable in my high school. I am more conscious than ever that I work in and for a system that is racist, competitive, gynophbic, and destructive. Yet I am also more conscious than ever of why it is important for me to be here. I am here because, next year, as in every other year in the past, there will be a young woman in one of my classes who is discovering that she is a lesbian. Or a frightened sixteen-year-old girl apologetically seeking advice "for a friend" who "thinks she might be pregnant." Or a young woman whose parents want her to wear dresses and be docile when she knows that she is stronger and smarter than her brothers. Or a fifteen-year-old boy who writes poetry and has no one to turn to when other students call him a fag. Or a Black student who has no one to defend her when she is harassed by the white football players in the cafeteria.

All of these young people will be looking, half-hoping, for someone to care for them, someone who is as alienated from the institution as they are, but not quite as powerless. That will be the time when I know that my life as a feminist teacher has a purpose, and when the moments of insight and sharing that I found at the NWSA Convention will come back to make me strong.

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**IMPRESSIONS OF THE CONVENTION**

On the Representation of the Visual Arts at NWSA

**Estella Lauter**

What commitment is the Association prepared to make to women's studies in the visual arts? Judging from the 1981 Convention the question is not an easy one to answer. On the one hand, the program promised several exhibits and eight sessions involving visual materials; on the other, several of these plans were canceled or rendered ineffective by scheduling problems. The art gallery was closed, I was told, because the exhibit of tree-spirit masks failed to materialize and the space was too large for Brenda Verner's "Americana." Betty La Duke's etchings and drawings were displayed in the busy Women's Center lounge without adequate documentation. I never located the woodcuts by Blythe Follet-Colón. Six of the eight sessions were scheduled in conflict with each other. The only session on Asian women artists was canceled. I assume that all these problems were the result of unfortunate but unavoidable circumstances. But my real concern is this: only two (or at most three) of the 272 sessions actually discussed works of art created by minority women. Surely such works should have been closer to the center of our attention at a Convention devoted to the task of understanding the effects of racism. Surely the works are not so well known that we can afford to pass over them without comment.

The session entitled "The Black Women Artists Film Series: Creating Sistervisions" began with a quiz that demonstrated the degree of our need for education regarding women artists: Identify the first blakwoman sculptor. Name any blakwoman choreographer. Identify the first play written/produced by a blakwoman. Identify the blakwoman author who served as literary editor of Crisis during the Harlem Renaissance." Most of the audience was stumped by these questions.

Under the auspices of a FIPSE grant, Beverly A. Smith, Fahamisha Shariat Brown, and Denise Hinnant mounted five admission-free programs of films last year on Black women in music, literature, visual art, dance, and drama. The programs, called "Sistervisions," were designed for the general public as well as for Black and women's studies programs in Boston. The one on visual artists, for example, included the NET film on assemblage artist Betye Saar, a documentary by Black filmmaker Monica Freeman on the sculptor Valerie Maynard, and a profile of Varnette Honeywood by Carroll Blue in which the artist's paintings are juxtaposed with scenes from the community life that inspired them. Offered at a branch of the YWCA in Boston, with childcare provided, the program was accompanied by an exhibit and sale of works by Boston-area artists. Information packets prepared for each program include a brief historical essay on the role of Black women in the art form under discussion, a reading list, and a list of other media materials.