

# A REPORT ON THE 1982 NATIONAL WOMEN'S STUDIES ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

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In June, 1982 the Humboldt State University campus was the site of the Fourth Annual Conference of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA). Approximately 1000 people, 99 percent women, attended this conference, coming from all across the United States, with a few people from other countries. The theme of the conference, "Feminist Connections Throughout Education," was chosen to give some focus to individual sessions without excluding the great diversity of interests represented by members of N.W.S.A.

The five-day conference included a daily plenary session, 145 contributed sessions scheduled concurrently during the different time slots, business meetings for NWSA members and caucuses, continuous showings of feminist films, an extensive exhibit of books and educational materials, cultural events every noon and evening, recrea-

tional activities and tours, art exhibits, and formal and informal times to make connections with people having similar interests and concerns.

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Some of the conference participants had attended all of the previous conferences and used this as an opportunity to meet new people and renew old acquaintances, increase their awareness of current research in women's studies and take part in a continuing dialogue concerning appropriate directions

for women's studies education and research. The majority of people at the conference were attending their first women's studies conference, and many of them gained an awareness of the wide variety of topics which are included in women's studies, the rigor of research being done, and some of the problems that face feminist educators.

In terms of occupations, a majority of participants teach at colleges or universities, either in women's studies or in traditional academic disciplines with a special interest in women's issues. Others teach in community colleges, secondary or elementary schools. Some are involved in community organizations, publishing, libraries, women's health care, or computer technology. Academic disciplines represented included art, ethnic studies and area studies, engineering, history, literature, mathematics, political science, psychology, science, sociology, and theater arts.

Some of the major issues related to the conference theme were raised at the plenary sessions. The first of these was a panel discussion Wednesday evening, June 16, chaired by Florence Howe of the Feminist Press and editor of *Women's Studies Quarterly*. This session addressed the topic of "Feminist Scholarship and Feminist Connections." Panelists were Catherine Stimpson of the English Department at Rutgers University speaking on "Purity and Pragmatism: The Necessity of Reconciliation;" Vina Mazumdar,

Center for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi, India, on "Women's Research and Women's Lives;" and Dorothy Smith Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, on the topic "Towards a New Sociology for Women." Unable to attend due to illness was Yolanda George, Chair of Minority Women in Science for AAAS, who was scheduled to discuss "Expanding the Participation of Women in Math and Science." These feminist scholars, all of whom are also activists, described new directions for research in the 1980's and the impact of research on the lives of women around the globe. They spoke from the perspectives of the sciences, the humanities and the social sciences.

The second plenary session featured Angela Davis, Instructor in Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies at San Francisco State University, author of numerous essays in the area of Black Liberation, political prisoners and the penal/judicial system, the struggle for women's equality, and U.S. history. She has written two books, *Angela Davis; An Autobiography* and *Women, Race and Class*. Her topic was "Women, Race and Class: An Activist Perspective." She stated that women in the United States must cross over racial and class boundaries to find strength in numbers and change society. Her talk was designed as a keynote for another two panels sponsored by the NWSA Third World Women's Caucus. The first of these was chaired by Aziza al-

Hibri, Department of Philosophy, Washington University in St. Louis, with the theme "Sexism and Racism: An International Outlook." The second, chaired by Chela Sandoval, author, Third World Deconstructivist and PhD. candidate at U.C. Santa Cruz, explored "Race, Sex and Class Intersections: Perspectives by American Women of Color."

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A third plenary session was scheduled in an impromptu manner to discuss the ERA and other activist concerns. The major speaker was Berenice Carroll, a University of Illinois history and political science professor who was one of 17 women who chained themselves to the railing of the Illinois State Senate in early June in symbolic protest against the failure of the Illinois Legislature to pass the ERA. She spoke with a heavy steel chain around her waist, which she said symbolized the economic and legal bonds she hoped would have been removed by the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

The final plenary session was held Saturday afternoon, June 19th, chaired by NWSA National Coordinator Susan Gore on the theme of "Extending Our Connections Through the 1980's." Speakers were Barbara Grier,

Naiad Press, on "Coalitions: Beyond the Academy;" Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley Center for Research on Women on "Transformations within the Academy: Reconstructing the Liberal Arts Curriculum;" Yolanda Moses, Ethnic and Women's Studies, California State Polytechnic University on "Visions of the Future: Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies as Partners in Creating Social Change;" Nancy Reves, lawyer and visiting professor at the Program for the Study of Women and Man in Society, University of Southern California on "Women in the Social Matrix: Change and the Myth of Continuity."

As Susan Gore described the panel:

To many, feminist education represents the leading edge of genuine liberal arts scholarship and teaching, as well as social change. Yet it is sometimes unclear how the profound contributions Women's Studies has to offer can be made effectively in a period of economic recession and social backlash. How can we connect, both within the academy and beyond? What consequences can we foresee following the transformation of American education and knowledge, as we know them? What blind spots should

we guard against? This panel will attempt to respond to these and other questions with a feminist vision of the future.

Several Humboldt State University faculty and staff members as well as Humboldt County residents were among the 460 panelists and chairs of various sessions. Jane Abernathy, HSU Nursing, chaired a panel on "Feminist Careers in a Feminist World" with Public Health Nurse Toni Heyer, Dee Nason McBroome, HSU History, elementary teacher Marianne Rudebock, and Marlene Stum, HSU Home Economics. Carol Bright and several Humboldt County widows participated in a panel on "Widowhood: A Special Problem for Women." Paula Brown, HSU Nursing, gave a presentation on "Update: Recurrent Vaginitis, a Woman's Problem" as part of a series of presentations for which nurses could receive continuing education units. Professor Emeritus Katheryn Corbett chaired a panel on "Growing Older in America: A Woman's Problem" for which she also presented a talk entitled "Why Aging is a Woman's Problem: An Overview." Bettye Elmore, HSU Psychology, chaired a session on "Women and Aggression: Past and Present Perspectives" which included HSU graduate students Nancy Borge and Carol Korb. Judith Little, HSU Sociology, chaired a session on "Two Generations of Women in Academia" which also included

Karen Foss also presented a paper, "Origins of Contemporary Feminism: Source of Trouble for the ERA?" as part of the "The Equal Rights Amendment: Failure of Strategy" panel. Suzanne Larson of HSU Speech Communication chaired this panel and presented "Rescinding Ratification of the ERA: Coping with Acts of Invalidation."

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Joy Hardin, Y.E.S., chaired a session on "Wilderness as a Radical Learning Environment for Women" which included presentations by Counseling Center members Adrienne Behrstock and Barbara Wallace. Alice Harris, Sociology, chaired "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women" presenting "Women's Rights: An Investigation into the Delay of Extending Political Rights to Swiss Women" as well as talking about "Feminist Education in Community Organizations" for another session. Kathleen Preston, Psychology, and Dick LaForge conducted a session on "Women and Risk Taking." Preston also discussed "What Institutions Can Do to Give Students Academic Credit for Prior Learning" as part of a panel chaired by Pam Mendelsohn of Continuing Education. Karen Miller, Speech Com-

munication, chaired "Feminine Mythic Symbolism" along with giving a paper herself on "Symbols of Sexual Separation and Androgyny in Myth and Religion."

As co-coordinators of the conference, Rosalind Ribnick, Anthropology, and I chose to solicit several panels on Women in Science and Technology. These are areas Women's Studies movements have not paid much attention to in the past. These panels were well received, as was a hands-on computer workshop.

Another special panel was entitled "Higher Education in the Netherlands." The three participants were Helen Hootsman of the Dutch Women's Project, Christine Clason of the University of Groningen and Hanneke de Bruin of Eindhoven Teachers College. They attended the conference as ambassadors of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in celebration of the 200th year of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Netherlands.

One of the things I learned as one of the coordinators of this conference was how much work needs to be done by a large number of people to put on such a major conference. There were twenty-three major committees functioning during all or part of the year before the conference with anywhere between three and sixty people working on each one. Rosalind Ribnick and I often had no idea who to thank for the wonderful work that was done. A description of a few of these committees may give a further indication of the scope and nature of

the conference.

Once all the sessions were submitted, they needed to be scheduled into time slots with no conflicts where one person might need to be in two places at once, and a minimum of subject matter overlap. Dee McBroome, history department secretary and instructor, chaired the committee which performed this task.

Linda Pitelka chaired the entertainment committee. She and her assistants arranged special evening events: on Wednesday, June 16, a benefit poetry reading was held at Jambalaya; on Thursday, an evening of Women's Theater with Vicky Lewis, recipient of the 1982 California Governor's Media Scholarship, in a one-woman performance, local story teller Olga Loya, and the Mothertongue Reader's Theatre from San Francisco. Also on Thursday Tillie Olsen spoke at the Arcata Theater following a benefit showing of "Tell Me a Riddle," a Lee Grant film adapted from her novella of the same title. On Friday evening Meg Christian and Linda Tillery performed in concert; on Saturday, authors Shela Ortiz Taylor, Lilian Faderman and Valerie Miner read in a reading organized by Barbara Grier of Naiad Press. Also on Saturday was a women's classical music performance featuring Robin Miller, piano instructor at HSU, and a premiere performance of selections from "TROPOS: The Sacred Wheel," a mythic dance-opera written, directed and narrated by Arcata composer Urashan. In addition to these evening events,

there were noon performances every day featuring the Redwood Children's Chorus, Alternatiave Measures (a "beauty-shop" quartet from Berkeley), the Brown Bag Reader's Theater from Sonoma in an original production concerning women and alcoholism, and Marj Bly of San Francisco in original mimes portraying women in various roles and situations.

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Madeline Curry, HSU Media Center, arranged for film showings which ran from 8:30 AM to 7 PM each day of the conference. She selected many films from winners and commended entries in the 23rd Annual American Film Festival, held in New York City. Among the 57 outstanding films were "Soldier Girls," "Wilmar 8," "Mitsuye and Nellie," "Annapurva: A Woman's Place," "Battered Women: Violence Behind Closed Doors," "N! Ai, The Story of a !Kung Woman," Barbara Hammer "shorts" and "She's Nobody's Baby: A History of American Women."

Joyce Carroll, also of the HSU Media Center, chaired the media committee. In addition to distributing media equipment requested by presenters, she arranged

to have all of the plenary sessions and twelve other sessions tape recorded. Copies of these tapes can be purchased through the Media Center.

Martin Morgan, HSU Gallery Director, and his assistants arranged several art exhibits for this conference. The major display, "Art Connections," included works by sixteen members of the Northern California Chapter of Women's Caucus for the Arts.

Kay Chaffee, Physical Education, chaired the recreation committee which arranged athletic events along with guided walks in the woods, bird watching and jogging, as well as a folk dance exhibition.

The hospitality committee, chaired by Sheri Johnson, arranged a number of things to welcome our out-of-town guests, including extra hangers for rooms, flower bouquets, free samples of shampoo and glycerine soaps. The committee also assisted in transporting luggage to rooms. As another aspect of seeing to the needs of participants, Kathy Preston chaired the information booth committee. About 40 faculty and staff women spent hours answering questions and providing information.

You may have noticed new wooden signs on campus pointing out the directions to various buildings. They were made by student Mary Beth Hanrahan and her committee. They were so well done that the Conference Center decided to re-use them for future meetings.

The NWSA Conference was one of many held each summer at the

Jolly Giant Conference Center. Income produced by these summer conferences is used to reduce the cost of room and board for HSU students. The majority of the participants stayed in the dorms. Their food and housing needs were skillfully handled by the excellent staff of the Jolly Giant Conference Center. Especially helpful to us in planning the conference were Bill Israel, Jack Martin, Alice Hackett and Lois Barton. For anyone planning a conference on campus, their services are invaluable.

The NWSA is aware that its annual conference is expensive—in fact, it is used as its major fundraising activity of the year. One of the organization's policies is that free housing be available for some low-income conference participants. As part of the original agreement made by the Conference Center and NWSA, we agreed to find 100 free sleeping places in the community. Leslie Meriwether and Alex Stillman chaired this committee, and did an excellent job of fulfilling our promise. People in our community were very generous in opening their homes to unknown guests.

In any event as large as this one, there are bound to be some problems. This conference was no exception. One continuing problem arose from the fact that we had only thirteen months' notice that the conference would be held here. Most major national conferences are planned with two or three years of lead time. Rosalind and I estimated that we were a year behind in our planning when we began, about

two months behind by early spring, and only one week behind the day the conference began. The major effect of this lag was that *every* task all year was performed under time pressure. Since everyone involved in planning had other jobs, usually full-time, the pressure was considerable. A second category of problems arose at the conference itself, related to the expense and inaccessibility of this location for low income persons and women of color. In theory, at least, NWSA is committed to having the organization available to all women with interest in feminist education. Unfortunately there is a difference between the ideal and the financial realities of the conference and the organization. The summer 1983 NWSA Conference will be held at Ohio State University. This centrally-located urban site should overcome some of the objections to the setting here. Next year's theme is "Feminist Education: Quality and Equality."

On the positive side, almost all of the people who were able to attend this conference were enthralled by our campus, the program here and the wonderful people they met. No community has ever participated in the planning and execution of an NWSA Conference to the extent that our Humboldt County and Humboldt State University community did and the results were appreciated by everyone connected with the conference.

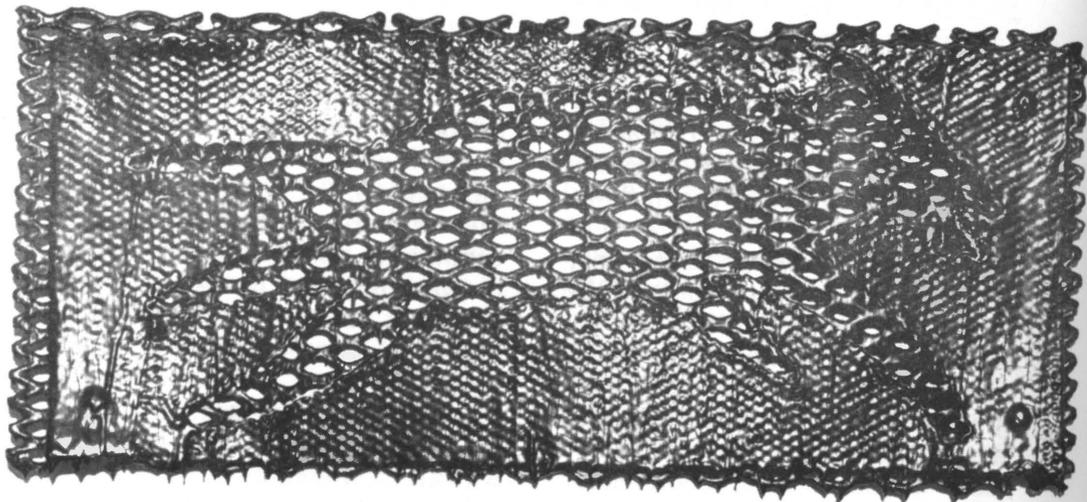
In addition to all the people mentioned above and all the others who assisted in putting on this conference, there are a few others who

deserve particular mention. Karen Miller, Speech Communication graduate student and instructor, served as executive assistant and publicity chair. Jill Paydon, HSU graduate, served as office manager as well as preparing an 88-page program book. Susanne Larson, who was chair of Women's Studies, served on our board of advisors and did all the tasks that needed doing and weren't assigned to anyone else. Stephen Littlejohn, Interdisciplinary Program Leader, served on our board of advisors and acted as our liaison to the campus administration as well as helping out wherever needed, and making sure we maintained a sense of humor and perspective. Two work-study students also worked exten-

sively for us: Theresa Jaquez took charge of all mailing lists and record keeping; Lore Snell served as our volunteer coordinator.

For many of us who worked on this conference, this was the biggest task we had ever undertaken. The months from May, 1981 to July, 1982 were a time of challenges, hard work, anxiety, joy, rewards. While I would not want to plan another conference of this scope under similar circumstance, I am delighted that I undertook this one and that I received so much support and assistance from so many wonderful people.

On behalf of Rosalind and myself, many thanks to all of you who helped make this conference a reality and a success.



James Crawford, *Running Dog*, 1982.