Reflections on Recent Women's Studies Conferences; Or, *Watch Out We Don't Sell The Farm!*

Greta Hofmann Nemiroff

L'auteure est professeure d'anglais et des études de la femme à la Nouvelle École du Collège Dawson à Montréal. Au cours des dix dernières années, elle a assisté, tant aux États-Unis qu'au Canada, à plusieurs conférences sur les études da la femme. Dans cet article, elle discute de plusieurs courants importants dont elle a pris conscience lors de ces conférences, mettant l'accent surtout sur trois conférences récentes. Ces courants contemporains son placés dans le contexte, plus positif, du "bon vieux temps" des années 70, lorsque les études de la femme étaient un domaine tout nouveau.

Reflecting on the subject matter of this article, I found myself musing about the "good old days" in the '70s when Women's Studies was starting in Canadian colleges and universities. I realised that during those early years, I met many of the feminist scholars from across the country whom I now know; we met at conferences at Queens (the Learneds in 1973), at York University in 1974, and at the University of Toronto in 1975. The atmosphere of those meetings was conducive to meeting other feminist educators and/or researchers: time and space were made available to meet the affiliative needs of feminist academic women who were atomized throughout so many Canadian post-secondary institutions and were often the lone voices in their work-places.

We were all avid for information because there was so little available to us in print or other media. What there was came from the United States and Europe; and the Canadian feminist periodical press was only about to get started. While papers were delivered and there were the usual panel discussions, there was also a rather informal setting; the ambiance was quite democratic with all tiers of faculty from all types of institutions, as well as a wide sprinkling of students, freely exchanging with one another. There was not only a need for networking and affiliation, but there was also a need for "fun." The "fun" needs were often met by "cultural" events in the evenings as well as through shared meals, banquets, and coffee breaks. Sometimes we'd all be put up in university dormitories where we'd sit up late discussing ideas and attitudes. Or else, some of us would go out drinking and do the same. Now I am not trying to indicate that we were one happy pyjama party: I am underlining the fact that there was a clear desire to discuss our work and that time and opportunity for these informal and essential meetings were made available for such discourse.

Feminist educators needed the active confirmation of these conferences in order to continue the often solitary battle for validation in our "home" institutions. Even those of us lucky enough to have a group of supportive colleagues needed to hear how other women strategized in similar situations.

Very often we would discuss our pedagogical methodology, our resources and reading lists, our ways of reaching the students. We were often amazed at the "life stories" we heard from our students in those days before we had vocabulary at our disposal succinctly to describe "sexual harrassment" or "wife battering." It seemed to us at the time that we had much to teach one another – professors and students – and we were determined to obliterate some of those patriarchal structures which had divided women in the past, especially those few privileged academic women from the majority of women in the society. This must also be mentioned: in our tenuous positions at work, the students were often the only reliable and potent support group we had; they were the troops which could cause pressure. We needed them.

We were quite aware that our way of doing things was different from that of academic men. We talked about the gender bias in everything from hiring to qualitative terms like "hard" and "soft" data and research. We were adamant about establishing our own terms of reference, our own criteria and pedagogy, when those of the patriarchal academy did not fit either the contents of our teaching and research, or the style of discourse we preferred. We were anxious to empower our students (although the term "empower" in its present sense was not then in the feminist vocabulary), and often we were on first-name bases with them.

While there was a clear desire to demysitify the academy, we were also interested in maintaining high academic standards by our own criteria. We did not want Women's Studies to be perceived as "Minnie Mouse" courses. University and Community College women would exchange pedagogy and research with little vying for status, and it was only towards the end of the '70s that feminist scholars from the colleges were less likely to appear on the mailing lists of university Women's Studies programs.

Over the intervening decade, I have attended several Women's Studies conferences in both Canada and the United States. I have also attended myriad women's conferences devoted to general issues of advocacy, many of which included education. While the general advocacy conferences explore new and exciting ways to get women together, it has been my observation that the strictly "academic" conferences increasingly replicate those too often sponsored and dominated by male academics: they are frequently stuffy, hierarchical, elitist, boring, competitive or decreasingly open to discussions about pedagogy.

In this article, then, I will discuss some of the trends I have observed in the processes of Women's Studies conferences in Canada. While there is no doubt that I have heard stimulating and original presentations and papers, I will not comment on those matters of content. Rather I would like to comment on the somewhat disquieting "sub-texts" I perceive in these gatherings: their structure and ambiance; the nature of discussion; the evasion of certain glaring issues regarding the environment in which not only the conferences themselves, but the teaching of Women's Studies, are taking place. I will focus most of all on three recent conferences which I have had the privilege of attending: "Women's Studies in Canada: Researching, Teaching and Publishing" (York University, Toronto, April, 1985); "Approches et méthodes de la recherche féministe" (Laval University, Québec

City, May, 1985); the Canadian Women's Studies Association Programme at the 1985 Learned Societies (Université de Montréal, Montréal, May-June, 1985).

WOMEN'S PROCESSES?

Conferences are expensive to run and are usually at least partially financed through government grants. This raises the question of whether we spend the money wisely. In a country as wide and under-populated as ours, they afford singular opportunities for women to get together. They are particularly important to minority interest groups, like Women's Studies faculty, because they encourage formal discourse and exchange, but also because through them national and international networks can be formed. It is characteristic of academic life in general that whatever small perquisites are available are more accessible through appropriate contacts. Contacts are best made on a face-to-face basis; conferences often facilitate this in the great big world of (male) academia. For conferences to succeed, rigorous attention must be paid to process and structure, ambiance and to pre-conference information being made available to prospective participants.

While it is somewhat ill-natured to carp at the quality of information available preceding the three conferences I am citing, let it suffice to say that information prior to the conferences was not easy to get, was not always entirely accurate, and that this exclusivity precluded the participation of many women. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that, since conference mailing lists are often confected from the attendance at previous conferences, and since the attendance is predicated at least partially on previous adequate information, many potentially interested feminist educators and/or scholars are excluded at the outset. While it is possible to advertise in the feminist periodical press, often journals are quarterly and their deadlines are missed. In my experience it usually takes at least a year's lead time to mount a successful conference. Do academic women's conferences really get scrambled together at the last minute? If so, why? Could it be that they are not considered as important as other academic conferences? To be sure, they do not offer the same "points" within the regular departmentalized university and college system as conferences devoted to the established disciplines.

The basic format in each of these three conferences followed the familiar lecture-hall approach: the auditorium with the platform in front and tiers of observers, misnamed "participants." While in the "old days" some effort was made to draw upon the accumulated expertise of the participants, we have apparently descended to the tried and true academic habit whereby only a few are "called." While at CWSA, panels were followed by rather informal and often interesting discussions moderated by able women in the Chair, the modes at Laval and York were different.

At York, I had been invited to chair the first session of the conference which was on the "Chairs" in Women's Studies across Canada. I was advised just before we began that there was to be no discussion from the floor – rather, after all the four presentations were completed, I was to facilitate intra-panel discussion for the edification of the audience. There were no microphones in the auditorium except on stage. I was somewhat dispirited when I noticed so many interesting and experienced Women's Studies professors in the room. There was so much expertise present; it seemed wasteful not to call upon it. Well, the panel gave its presentations and I did, in fact, start a discussion going with some questions I had formulated during the presentations. However, the situation was anomalous: each presenter had emphasized the central part played by inter-university cooperation in establishing the Chair in her region. Yet the session was structured on the most authoritarian of models . . . that only the appointed "talking heads" should be heard. Eventually, so many hands were raised in requests to speak, that I simply encouraged the speakers and questioners from the audience to use the stage microphones. A rather interesting discussion and exchange of information was thus instigated. Later sessions of the conference did install microphones for the audience, although we seem to have been impaled on the "talking head" model. While it is true that those who have prepared to give a talk certainly deserve to be heard and usually have much to offer, it is also essential to offer other participants air space for two reasons: their participation can enrich us all with either critical thought or further information; it models exemplary and equal forms of exchange.

At Laval, we were sentenced to the fate of endless sitting. On the first day of the conference, talks were scheduled from 9:30 through 12:30 and again from 2:00 through 5:00 p.m.; that is, six hours of sitting and listening to "talking heads" presenting the results of their research in fifteen-minute packages. Counting the short presentations of the "animatrices," thirteen presentations were offered that day on subjects as diverse as "Law and Feminism" and "The Artistic Production of Quebec Women from 1975 – 1980." These talks, one after the other, were unbroken by questions or discussion, taking place in a high-ceilinged chilly hall with the speakers on a dais. Unlike York, which at least offered the respite of rather cosy coffee breaks, Laval offered none. True, one could have coffee from an urn in the huge hall outside the auditorium, but there was virtually no possibility of meeting or chatting with people except at lunch. After six or seven presenters had held forth at Laval, there were three "resource persons" who responded from the microphones in the hall. Then the subject(s) were open to discussion. Since many of the presentations were very detailed, and since they were all piled up on top of one another, very few questions were raised relating to them. The microphones were often commandeered by women who made rather confessional speeches or who raised unrelated topics of interest only to themselves. While I, along with much of the audience, felt some irritation at these interventions, I understood them as well. It was frustrating to be talked at for so many hours in such an alienating environment. These unsolicited dissertations, it seemed to me, were efforts to validate oneself in an environment which was actively disconfirming of everyone . . . even the presenters, who had to compress important and interesting research into assembly line slices.

As for "fun," there wasn't much to be had. True, York had a banquet with a witty and charming talk by Thelma McCormack; CWSA had an informal dinner in a restaurant in downtown Montreal; at Laval one had to fend for oneself. There all meals were of that nature, except for a rather select and catered luncheon offered to about twenty professors from Laval, Université de Montréal and L'Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM) with one or two "honoured guests." I myself simply stumbled into one of these events by accident and stayed there, assuring myself that our "hostesses" would certainly *not* shut themselves away like that. Evidently they would. So at Laval, an opportunity –

Illustration: Greta Hofmann Nemiroff

and the first one of its kind – to get Québecoises women teaching Women's Studies in post-secondary institutions together was lost. Indeed women from the CEGEP's, where most Women's Studies is taught, were not even invited to the conference.[1] At both Laval and York, the participants were housed in various buildings spread across those huge tundra-like campuses. There was very little opportunity for informal inter-change.

Where in the past, students often would take a lively part in Women's Studies conferences, their presence at York and Laval was limited mainly to the function of the traditional female "helpmates." At Laval there were graduate students presenting with their professors, but they were certainly excluded from the elitist luncheons, and in most cases outtalked by their "superiors." Indeed, when some students gave a paper on "Some Methodological Problems of Student Feminist Research," they mentioned the difficulty 'ordinary' women had in understanding the language of academics and in relating to them.[2] This was hotly contradicted by various professors in authoritarian tones and the kind of language inaccessible to most women in Quebec society. At another conference not discussed here (CRIAW in Montreal in November 1984) the student registration fee was $40.00 – a cost far beyond the means of many students who exist on minuscule government grants and whatever money they can pick up *if* they can find part-time work. One of our largest losses is our increasing distance from students in the fifteen years since Women's Studies started in Canadian universities and colleges. If there were any students at the Learneds/CWSA, they must have been so advanced in graduate work as to have been Teaching Assistants or Sessional Lecturers. The absence of students deprives them, of course, of important opportunities to see Women's Studies being taken seriously beyond the confines of their own institutions. If we want Women's Studies to continue after we retire from our jobs or from life itself, we would be well advised to make it visible as a viable choice for our students.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf bemoaned the poverty of women scholars and the women's colleges of her time in England. As a metaphor she used the comparison of two meals, one at a men's college reminiscent of Oxbridge, and one at a women's college reminiscent of Newnham. Predictably the men had multiple courses of *haute cuisine* washed down with exquisite wines, while the women dined on rumps of beef and prunes and custard. However, Woolf at least was able to retire to the rooms of her friend, a woman don, and share a drink from her friend's private cache. They were even able to have a discussion in peace and intimacy. That was more than half a century ago. What would she say, I wonder, about us . . . Canadian feminist academics . . . who "do it to ourselves?" It was *ourselves*, not even poverty, which initiated structures so chilling and discouraging of discourse; it was *we* who chose the rubber chickens, who sentenced ourselves to tustling with more nimble students for luncheon places in over-crowded, steamy cafeterias.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WOMEN'S STUDIES

Women's Studies as a discipline, or the equivalent of one, was hardly discussed at York or at Laval. At Laval it was not discussed, I imagine, because it has made few inroads in the French institutions.

'Feminist research' describes an attitude which can be imposed upon any discipline, and a desirable one at that. However, there is little evidence that the notion of Women's Studies programs has taken hold in Québecois universities; in the French CEGEP's (and to a lesser degree in the English ones as well) Women's Studies do exist as internal programs, but are taught under the rubrics of other disciplines.

At York, there was very little direct discussion about Women's Studies *per se.* Indeed, on the first afternoon we were supposed to break into smaller groups for discussion of the pedagogy within our disciplines: there was no group for Women's Studies! Naturally what this implies is that, notwithstanding its title, "Women's Studies in Canada," notwithstanding the existence of Women's Studies programs in many Canadian post-secondary institutions, it is not considered a "real" discipline , or accorded the respect of one. "Real Disciplines," it would seem, are those in which we got graduate degrees . . . those invented by men. Of course this attitude reinforces the marginality of Women's Studies and almost pre-ordains that it will be impossible to get graduate degrees in that subject. While I can respect (if disagree with) the arguments against Women's Studies as a discipline, its virtual invisibility in a conference ostensibly dedicated to it is more than questionable.

The problem with this ambivalence to Women's Studies (that is, that we can have programs in Women's Studies but they are not, somehow, "real" or truly valid) is that it permeates the teaching of the subject and eventually ends in acts of bad faith with students in our institutions. If we do not struggle to have Women's Studies seen as a valid field or discipline, then there is no future in it for people with a burning interest in the subject. No future jobs will ever open up, and students would be well advised simply to dabble in it, thus reinforcing the conservative notion that Women's Studies is "Minnie Mouse." At CWSA I was struck by the fact that in many universities, most of the Women's Studies courses are taught by part-timers, while the decisions and co-ordination of them are under-taken solely by full-time faculty. In fact, Simon Fraser University and Mount St. Vincent University were the only places mentioned where one could get a tenured position in Women's Studies. In other universities the practice seems to be to tenure or hire full time faculty in the disciplines and then *release* them to Women's Studies. This creates a generally transient teaching corps in the subject, and one where the decisions are made by those who have the least contact with the students. That, of course, is the model of all patriarchal bureaucracies.

It also emerged at CWSA that increasing numbers of courses listed in university calendars as "Women's Studies" are being given under the aegis of other departments, and that there is little effort on the part of the Women's Studies programs to ensure that these courses, given year after year by faculty often chosen by individual departments, contain feminist content, or even content about women. The Women's Studies progams are often, it appears, afraid to ask for course outlines or for a hand in interviewing (and refusing) potential faculty in other disciplines. No wonder: their hold in the university is tenuous and rendered more so by the ease with which they give up their justifiable jurisdiction. Of course, the *real* victims here are the students who innocently sign up for the courses and then are put in the position of dropping out (and prolonging academic careers they cannot afford) or putting up and shutting up. The latter has been women's fate since the Patriarchy began: but should it be done in the name of Women's Studies?

No wonder, then, that the presenters in the session at CWSA devoted to teaching Women's Studies did not willingly bring up the issues of the patriarchal context in which they are trying to survive. I think this silence is a dangerous one, because it is a way of rendering tolerable that which we should never again tolerate: becoming institutionally invisible or, at best, tokenised.

Looking around me at CWSA, York and Laval, I was struck by the fact that many of us who have found our berths are getting on and are perhaps a bit jaded. Right behind us are younger women, many of whom did not go through the struggles of the "good old days" when it all began. I am not sure that we have fulfilled our obligations to them as feminist educators. We have not acquainted them with the early visions and critiques of the male academy; we speak of "consciousness-raising" with near contempt. Process is sacrificed to lists of books and assignments. I was surprised to hear two presenters individually saying that they would no longer "accept" papers on anorexia or rape. Why not? Because the professor is tired of it? Would one refuse to accept a paper on *Hamlet* for this reason? Of course not. We are convinced that there are subjects worth learning about and we know that one of the fates of a teacher is to have to initiate generations of students to these subjects. We, the first and second generation of Women's Studies scholars, must take care to pass on to our students the notion and examples of feminist processes as well as the validation of their own interests. Body Image and Rape are still major issues facing women today . . . and perhaps young women especially. We can leave active disconfirmation of our students' preoccupations to the rest of society.

Before we thoughtlessly mortgage off the farm to support our own little projects of self-interest, then, we academic women have an obligation to pass along our feminist alphabet. Each generation of women should not be sentenced to discover for itself the magnitude and methodology of misogyny before it can progress. Consciousness-raising, the notion of non-hierarchical process, and the concept of an on-going stuggle worth undertaking are all central to feminist education. Before we resign ourselves to an individually self-serving fatalism about current "trends of conservatism" and the weakness of individuals in the face of History, we owe ourselves and others another look at our original vision. "Where there is no vision," the Bible tells us, "the people perish." Our efforts will slowly trickle to a stop, becoming simply a "phenomenon" for future generations to study, if we do not question our standards and practices. If we are unwilling to ensure that our work is not only *about* women, but *for* them, we should at least develop the integrity to move over and make room, to give a chance to that other sessional-fractional-soon-to-beterminated tier of feminist academics to surpass us. Some of them might still have vision.

[1]CEGEP's are Québec's Collèges de l'enseignement collégial et professionel . . . or the community colleges.

[2]Julie Boivin, Martine Mercier, et Aline Vézina, "Quelques problèmes méthodologiques particuliers à la recherche étudiante féministe."

Greta Hofmann Nemiroff is Director of the New School of Dawson College in Montreal, where she teaches English and Women's Studies. She has published articles and fiction in French and English.