

From NYWAC to IWAC to Nairobi and Beyond: A Personal Reflection on Connie Sutton and the International Women's Movement

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Connie Sutton was a force; she stands among the forward-looking thinkers of her generation of anthropologists. Her work, which was wide-ranging, opened pathways for research that continue to have important salience today. In this brief reflection I want to highlight one aspect of Connie's anthropological curiosity and visionary perspective ... her engagement with global feminisms and the international women's movement and the shape she gave to intellectual inquiry in this space. I've been asked to comment especially on Connie's edited volume *Feminism, Nationalism and Militarism*. To do justice to that volume we must also reflect on Connie's evolving ideas about transnational processes, her longstanding interest in Africa and her belief in and commitment to collaboration across disciplines, nations, races, and ethnicities.

Connie was a true ethnographer with a sharp ear and eye for people's thinking and behavior, upon which she theorized, leading to such conceptualizations as collective consciousness and action, transnational connections, and international feminisms. And because Connie was Connie ... enveloping and generous, ever eager for collaborations ... she spawned generations of anthropologists who are working in a variety of ways in multiple collaborations along the trajectories she identified and problematized, as we see in this volume. When Connie was conducting research in Barbados, and in the ensuing years when she continued to visit her field site, she wasn't situating her analysis in the village of Ellerton only as was the anthropological tendency of the day. She was probing and theorizing about the global connections of thought and the human interactions those from Ellerton sustained with then such far flung places as New York, London and Toronto and also their cultural antecedents in Africa. These interconnections of culture, ideology and action continued to frame her analyses throughout her life.

From NYWAC to IWAC to Nairobi

Connie's imagination was ignited when it was announced that the Third World Conference on Women sponsored by the United Nations would take place in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985, and that Dame Nita Barrow from Barbados, a good friend of Connie's, would be the convener of the Forum for Nongovernmental Organizations (the NGO Forum), the organizations of civil society that would parallel the formal United Nations Conference. As Don Robotham has pointed out, Connie was a white woman who had the trust of intellectuals, and working people, throughout the Caribbean.

Working with Happy Leacock, and also with Helen Safa, June Nash, and Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, Connie urged the transformation of NYWAC, the New York Women's Anthropology Conference, to which these women collectively had given birth in the 1970s with Connie, into IWAC, the International Women's Anthropology Conference. The impetus for NYWAC in the 1970s had been to give women anthropologists in the metropolitan New York area a safe space to reflect critically

on gender hierarchies in anthropology and society more broadly and to foster a consciousness and comparative analysis of the oppressions women were confronting in different spheres of their lives and in various global contexts, even though gender may not initially have been the focus of their anthropological research,

With IWAC, Connie saw the opportunity to deepen research on the challenges women confront globally, but also to examine women's agency, which she was committed to uncovering, and to problematize the changing dynamics of women's power in face of colonialism, independence, the broadening and deepening penetration of global capitalism world-wide, the Black power movement, and now, the women's movement, which in large part because of the UN Global Conferences, was becoming internationalized.

The Nairobi Conference was significant in that it was the first UN Conference to attract women from the so-called Global South ... from various countries in Africa, Asia and South America. Of the then 159 member states of the UN, 157 were represented in Nairobi, which included 12,000 women from around the world who attended the parallel NGO Forum ... double the number that had participated in the NGO Forum in 1975. This meeting was far different from the more elite, white-dominated earlier UN global meetings, which more closely reflected the interests of second wave feminists, where Connie did not see herself belonging. Women from all social and economic strata, many walking barefoot for hundreds of miles, made it to the Nairobi Conference to share both their experiences of subordination and their aspirations with global sisters.

With her intellectual curiosity peaked by the possibilities for new knowledge and collective activism for women that could result from the Nairobi Conference, Connie convened a number of small meetings during the year preceding the Conference with women anthropologists, including those from different countries passing through New York City, to hear how women from diverse countries and regions were preparing for the Conference and the NGO Forum and to learn about the issues they wanted to bring forth. As one of Connie's early PhD students, I had the privilege of being a partner with Connie in some of these efforts. I was also working at the UN at the time, and Connie, always looking out for her students, arranged for me to analyze a survey distributed to women's NGOs that signed up for the Forum, focused on the challenges these organizations were confronting. Connie and I attended the Nairobi Conference together and organized sessions on behalf of IWAC for women anthropologists world-wide to explore similarities and differences in our experiences and work, and to examine the research ramifications of the survey.

Following on the Nairobi Conference, I joined with Connie in organizing a number of panels on behalf of IWAC at international women's meetings, probing issues raised in Nairobi, at which several of the anthropologists and other social scientists we had met in Nairobi and had known previously participated; for example, Mary Castro from Brazil, Vivienne Ong from Singapore, Rosina Wiltshire and Rhoda Reddock from Trinidad, and Yolanda Moses, Eva Friedlander, Saskia Sassen, Lynn Bolles and fohnnetta Cole from the US. Connie used to refer to us as

scholar-activists: the notion of scholar as change agent fit well with Connie's vision for the role she believed academics could and should play.

Feminism, Militarism and Nationalism and Yoruba Women

Connie's experience with the international women's movement following the Nairobi Conference, and her experience in Africa doing research among Yoruba women, provided fertile underpinnings for what culminated in a panel at the American Anthropological Association in 1991 and a volume titled *Feminism, Militarism and Nationalism*, produced in 1995.

In Nairobi, women from several parts of the world had brought into focus the increased militarism their countries were experiencing and the negative, victimizing and silencing impacts these phenomena had on women. What became clear in different sessions in Nairobi and other global meetings we participated in was the common plight women faced *vis-à-vis* growing military nationalisms: there was a glaring divergence between women's concerns with health, safety, education and social and community services and state militaristic policies promoted by global leaders. It was against this backdrop as well as the increasing militaristic ventures taking place globally, including the war the US waged in Iraq, which disturbed Connie greatly, that Connie began thinking about the connections between feminism, militarism and nationalism. She especially wanted to understand and theorize, using a feminist lens, the seemingly contradictory and ambivalent positions **men** [?] take on in specific nationalistic and militarized contexts.

Connie, always open to new ways of thinking about issues and problems, was interested throughout her professional life in participating with other disciplines besides anthropology in the pursuit and production of knowledge. So she was quick to respond to the 1991 AAA Meetings focused on "Anthropology and its Interlocutors," which encouraged interdisciplinary conversations on issues of theoretical import to anthropology, Connie created a panel wrapped around political scientist Cynthia Enloe's then recent explorations of the gendered aspects of nationalism and militarism and the complex and paradoxical ways women have become implicated in sustaining both of these "isms,"

In developing the panel, Connie asked women anthropologists whose research experiences encompassed observations of various militarized situations, of ethnic conflict, and of the nationalisms associated with newly emergent postcolonial nation states, to respond to Enloe from their ethnographic observations of the ways women were inserted in these processes. These papers became the basis of the edited volume. The examples included Malaysia, Palestine, Liberia, India, Yugoslavia, Nigeria and the United States.

Connie's own contribution, based on her field research among Yoruba women in Nigeria in the late 1970s, reflects her understandings, grounded in her Barbadian and West Indian experience, of how changing regimes of power with their consequent shifts in gender roles conspire to alter women's status and bases of power. She traced the fortunes of Yoruba women, from somewhat autonomous market traders and owners of wealth and even decision-makers regarding warfare in pre-colonial times, through the British colonial period, when their sources of

political and economic power were stripped away, to the current military regimes that have further curbed and circumscribed the authority and rights of women.

Today

International or global feminism has become robust since Connie's initial engagement with it in the 1980s and '90s. Links made through the UN-sponsored World Conferences, which enabled women to learn from each other and share strategies to hold their nation states accountable to women, have continued to flourish beyond the boundaries of UN sponsorship, But in reflecting on how prescient Connie was as a thinker and activist, as localized conflicts and wars ignite and continue, we need to mull,over some of the questions and analyses raised for women in this volume.

Enloe mused in this volume whether in situations of conflict "women would be left ever choosing between the roles of patriotic mother/wife/lover/widow, with loyalty to the male-defined nation state required as a condition of their citizenship," on the one hand, and "that of the marginalized feminist shunted to the fringes of national citizenship on the other." Alternatively, she asked whether a demilitarized nationalism in which women take a more active role in defining the shape of the state is possible.

We've seen cracks in this dichotomy in the more recent situation in Liberia in which Ellen Johnson Sirleaf came to power backed by strategizing and activism promulgated by local women working across ethnic and religious identities who, at least for an important moment, played an active role in defining the shape of the nation state. We need to understand these processes better. What differencee does women's leadership of the nation state make?

This volume came out 25 years ago. Yet in the continuing localized wars occurring throughout the world, many instigated by US interests, it would seem that Connie's call to examine the gendered workings of power impacted by militarized nationalism are as urgent now as then. In reflecting on my friend and mentor, I think of the many arenas of social and political life in which Connie foresaw important social processes and asymmetries of power that need to be probed and theorized. I deeply miss Connie for her persistence in probing and trying to theorize these continuing inequities, and for her desire and efforts to bring together the worlds of theory and action and actors from diverse arenas and global locations to address them.

References

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