

Ti-Grace on Feminism/ Ellensburg

by Debra Dragovich

No definition of the ideology and tactics of radical feminism would be complete without citing its principal founder, Ti-Grace Atkinson.

Amazon Odyssey, a collection of Atkinson's essays and speeches between 1967-1972, was published in 1974. It could be called the original textbook of radical theory on women as an oppressed class.

Atkinson has been in the Northwest the past year teaching women studies at Fairhaven College in Bellingham and the University of Washington, where she will resume teaching this fall.

In a recent interview she gave her opinions on the Ellensburg conference, East and West Coast feminism, and the current challenges to the women's movement.

The mention of Ellensburg brought an immediate, almost emotional, reaction from Atkinson. Of the happenings at the Ellensburg conference this past July she said, "It taught me an awful lot about the West Coast."

To Atkinson it is apparent that the East and West Coasts are "coming from different places." East Coast feminists, she said, are more experienced in confrontation, or action, politics. The strength of West Coast feminists, it seems to Atkinson, is in women's cultural expression, especially art and music; which are two of Atkinson's main personal interests.

However, at Ellensburg, even though there may have been foreknowledge of a Mormon invasion, Washington women seemed ill-equipped to deal with the emergency. "The Mormons," she said, "should teach a class here. They were organized."

Atkinson saw the problem at Ellensburg not only as inexperience in action politics, but number one, as a lack of communication among feminists in this state. Women simply do not know each other. "Now, we may know each other in New York, and often hate each other, but if there's an emergency we can spot each other and caucus fast. . . . The only people who knew each other in Ellensburg were the Mormons."

Atkinson questioned the tactics used against the Mormon force. She suggested that feminist strength should have been used in the lesbian and abortion caucuses rather than for the ERA. "That's what they (Mormons) want. They want the sexual issues. Because that's how they hang on to the women. Through the sex. If I had been doing strategy for that I would have let the ERA go."

Though she realizes that the issues of abortion and lesbianism make the more conservative women in the movement itch, Atkinson believes it is by confronting these controversial issues, and not avoiding reality, that ERA or any movement goals will be won.

But how are the different interest groups to be unified? "You get down and you bargain. But you face that your loving sister may sell you out on an issue that makes her nervous. . . . and that until in her gut she realizes that all of these things are inseparable, then you've got to say, 'My first priority, if this is the case, is lesbianism. . . . unless I have some guarantees of clarification that you are going to do what is primary to me.' But we've got to trade."

The desire for communication and plain honest talk among feminists kept coming up in Atkinson's conversation. She would like to set up a network of regional cultural exchanges to be routed through the women studies departments of universities nationwide. This, she hopes, will help to facilitate better communication and support.

Atkinson believes the main difficulty in communication between feminists on the two coasts is mainly stylistic—in language and political behavior—not in any deep ideological differences. It is difficult for feminists on either side of the country to get stories and facts straight, as if something is lost in the translation with different language and political behavior modes.

Overall, Atkinson is "fascinated" by this part of the country, and is looking forward to another year of learning about the West Coast. She feels a strong sense of individualism among West Coast feminists, which is contrary to the East Coast's style of working collectively.

Though Atkinson was one of the founders of cadre-oriented feminism (collectives) she feels that in New York it is often a "need" and feminists should not "clutch so fast to group together."

She often finds that collectives break down because women who rush to work collectively tend to lose themselves in the group; and seeing themselves as "micro-organisms" they fail to take equal responsibility in the group's work.

Any changes in Atkinson's thinking since **Amazon Odyssey** seems mainly dependent on the realization that those were different, more energized days for the movement. Today, she says, we are "retreating to non-action." It's a dangerous place. "We're going to get out of shape."

"It's a fight. We must recognize that," and we must "refine ideas and try to understand each other better," which is why she is excited about the idea of regional exchanges.

Since the early days of the movement, when Atkinson describes herself as "terribly driven to seize the time," emotional changes have preceded any changes in thought. "Life was much more simple in **Amazon Odyssey**."

Today, she says, she is "definitely reflective" about the movement. "Sometimes I feel like we're in the process of the long march. We have a tactical retreat, and we must regroup."

Next month: Ti-Grace Atkinson discusses her ideas on the importance of lesbianism in the women's movement.

VICTORY/DEFEAT cont. from page 2

"What happened at Ellensburg that was a defeat: the opposition is feeling its strength—we see it on abortion, busing and gay rights. But they are not yet coming forth with a positive platform for social change.

"What might come out of the Houston conference, hopefully, will be an incredibly good strong feminist platform. What happens to that platform remains to be seen. It could be filed on a shelf somewhere in Washington, D.C., or it could be a perfectly good strong propaganda weapon for feminism."

"As for Ellensburg, we do not yet know whether we had a victory or a defeat."

Mimi Keiffer, Lesbian Caucus, Director of the Gay Community Center: "The Lesbian Caucus did get two openly gay women on the delegate slate. We were not able to get the rest of the delegates to agree that they would be pro-gay rights, but we did manage to get a modified resolution passed that these people would not be anti-gay.

"The issue of lesbianism is rarely brought to the attention of conferences. People usually say they don't want to bring it up as an issue because it is divisive, not politically expedient, it creates a political backlash, or it will split the movement. I think that is really hogwash! The opposition sees us all as lesbians so we might as well be united.

"One good thing that came out of Ellensburg was that this was the first time some of these women (the Mormons) had gotten together with a large group of women and heard the issues. Whether they agreed with them or not, something may have gotten through.

"We need to find out what the bottom line for each woman is, never mind that her church doesn't support gay rights or that she fears being ostracized by her family and friends if she comes out for gay rights.

"For mutual education, we need to go to honest dialogue and from there to unified action with each other."

Dolores Sibonga, Asian & Pacific Women's Caucus, Deputy Director of State Human Rights Commission: "Many people think that Asian and Pacific women have no problems; but we're concerned about equal opportunity in employment, child-care, in all areas as are other women.

"We will continue the momentum that formed at Ellensburg to work with other women on the issues that concern us all."

Betty Barone, M.D., Seattle Women's Commission: "The Mormons are women, too. Their thinking is of 20 years ago. We have had the opportunity to change and they haven't. Three defectors in one conference is a big thing for us, and we should look upon it as a very beginning.

"We are living examples of the ERA in this state, and we have shown that the dignity of the person is respected and privacy is maintained. I think that is something that came across to these people.

"It is important to get women into elective offices. We need them in appointed positions and in the federal government to decide where money for women is going. I think only women can make these decisions."

Lile Aguilar, Hispanic Caucus, IWY Coordinating Committee for Ellensburg Conference: "If the Conference did nothing else than unite Washington women, we've started something. But how do we capitalize on that?

"We can respect each other as human beings and not create enemies just because we don't agree on certain things. To try to conform individuals to your particular values or morals is wrong.

"We need to educate ourselves of our own diversities, to work together on those issues that affect all of us, and learn to support each other on those needs that may not affect each and every one of us."

All speakers agreed on one general principal: All women must work together to attain their common goals. But few concrete and concise proposals for direct action were heard.

What was heard, from speakers and floor participants alike, was an inordinate amount of name-calling, and criticism on picyune details—the very behavior characteristics feminists are supposedly trying to eliminate.

Few of the speakers addressed themselves directly to the subject of the forum and as a consequence, little was accomplished.

Now is the time for definitive plans of action to be formulated before the "opposition" (whomever they may be) gain in strength and organization. Hopefully, superficiality can be set aside. We must be less concerned about each other's techniques, but applaud each other's accomplishments.

Fall Classes

Upcoming fall classes are now scheduled at the following institutions:

The Writing Shop, Seattle, professional writing school. Begins Tuesday, Sept. 27 with day and evening classes. Fee. For more information, call 365-2779.

Centralia College Women's Studies Program. Begins Tuesday, Sept. 20, evening classes. In Olympia and Centralia. Fee. More information, call 736-9391 (753-3433 toll free from Olympia).

Seattle-King County YWCA. Begins Monday, Sept. 19 with day and evening classes. Fee. For more information, call the Program Office, 447-4865.

World for Women in Edmonds. Ongoing with day and evening classes. Fee. For more information, call 774-9843.

ARC Seminars (Awareness, Responsibility and Communication). Ongoing seminars and events beginning Friday, Sept. 9, day and evenings. Fee. Call 783-6695 for information.

The Individual Development Center, Seattle. Begins Thursday, Sept. 15 with evening or weekend sessions. Fee. Call

329-0600 for information.

Seattle Movement Therapy Center. Evening classes begin Tuesday, Sept. 13. Fee. Call 367-0500 for information.

Women's Institute of the Northwest, Seattle. Begins October 1 with evening or weekend sessions. Fee. Call 522-7039 for information.

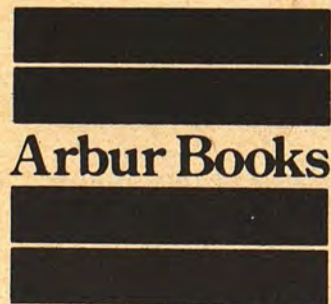
Toastmistress Club of the Pacific Northwest Region. "Leadership Improvement" begins Thursday, Sept. 15, evening sessions. Free. Call 722-2298 for information.

The Black Experience, telecourse for University credit. Enrollment begins Thursday, Sept. 15 with afternoon or Saturday television viewings. Fee. Call Western Washington State College, in Bellingham, 532-3320; University of Washington, 543-2350 or Seattle Pacific College, 281-2124 for information.

The Factory of Visual Art, Seattle. Classes begin Monday, Sept. 26 with day and evening classes. Fee. Call 632-8177 for information.

Second Growth Holistic Health Institute, Seattle, presenting "Alternatives to the Nuclear Family, Myth and Reality." Two-day symposium Oct. 8 and 9. Fee. Call 226-8420 for information.

Shoreline Community College, Seattle. "Upward Mobility of Women: How, When and Where?." Begins Saturday, Oct. 1 for five weeks. Credit available. Call 546-4596 or 546-4540 for information.



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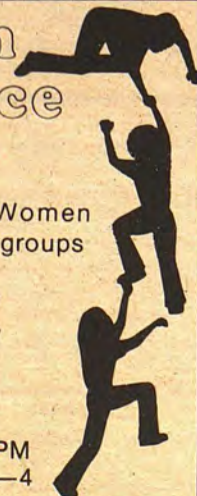
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