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from left to right, Diane James, Marcia Inhorn, and Bonnie Rose Schulman at Yale. Photo by Amaar Al-Hayder
JMEWS Moves to Yale after Four Years at UCLA

BY DIANE JAMES

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cicture the ballroom of a big hotel in a major American city, where the plenary session of an international academic conference on the Middle East has just concluded its formal business. Egyptian strings cast an Orientalist spell and finger cymbals foretell the entrance of a belly dancer. As she makes the rounds of the room, the boldest of those she approaches tuck legal tender into her bra and girdle. Some of the women in the audience, dismayed by the choice of entertainment, gather at the back of the hall and somehow disrupt the proceedings.

This was in 1984, I believe, and though I was not there I have been told that it was a seminal moment for the Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies, a leading scholarly research journal that is now entering its seventh year of publication. JMEWS is the result of grassroots organizing by feminist scholars who founded the Association for Middle East Women’s Studies (http://www.amews.org) in 1985 in the wake of the belly dance incident. The founding president was Suad Joseph, then Associate Professor of Anthropology at UC Davis where she later developed the Middle East/South Asia Studies Program and launched the Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures.

With a mission to advance the study of women in the Middle East, stimulate scientific research in the field and facilitate communication among scholars, an early and primary goal was to establish a research journal. The AMEWS Review was the first step. Self-published and distributed to AMEWS members two or three times a year, the 12–30 page newsletter was edited by Eleanor Doumato (1997–1999) and Jennifer Olmsted (1999–2004) until JMEWS was launched in 2005. The project was interdisciplinary from the start and pedagogy was a recurring focus, as teachers and graduate students collaborated to develop curricula for the burgeoning fields of Women’s and Middle East Studies. The Review was a place to network too. AMEWS formed connections with women’s research organizations overseas, such as the Women and Memory Forum in Cairo and the Women’s Library and Information Center in Istanbul. In this environment much knowledge and many good works were generated.

Around 2000, AMEWS began to focus on realizing JMEWS. The publication committee (Miriam Cooke, Sondra Hale and Sherifa Zuhur) drafted a proposal, made
contacts, and started negotiating with prospective publishers. The organization contracted with Indiana University Press to publish JMEWS three times a year, and the first issue appeared in Winter 2005. The business plan reinforces the journal’s independence. JMEWS maintains ownership of JMEWS and appoints the editors. The press handles distribution and makes the articles accessible to students via Project Muse and ProQuest. The editorial office is itinerant, hosted by academic deans and departments for a specified term and then moving on to a new host-site in a relay sustained by faculty grant-writing and networking.

JMEWS was supported by the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor during its first two years. At UCLA for four years, it was supported by the Dean of Social Sciences, the International Institute, the Center for the Study of Women, the Center for Near Eastern Studies, and the Women’s Studies Department, plus the Divisions of the Humanities and Fine Arts and the Social Sciences at UC Santa Barbara.

The journal came to UCLA in 2006 under co-editors Sondra Hale, Departments of Anthropology and Women’s Studies at UCLA and Nancy Gallagher, Department of History at UC Santa Barbara. A research associate at the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA, I joined the team as managing editor. Lara Deeb, then at UC Irvine and now at Scripps College, was recruited as reviews editor. UCLA graduate students Rana Sharif, Fiaz Shuayb and Naazneen Diwan were hired as editorial assistants.

The Center for Near Eastern Studies hosted a conference to welcome JMEWS to the UCLA campus in July 2006. JMEWS followed up with a Research Roundtable in February 2008, where Southern California faculty and grad students from UCSs Irvine, LA, Riverside and Santa Barbara and CSUs Long Beach, San Bernardino and Northridge discussed their research trajectories and took questions from the audience (see Azza Basarudin’s report in JMEWS 4:2).

JMEWS also collaborated with Duke University and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill to organize an East Coast conference on “Marketing Muslim Women” in April 2008. A special issue focusing on mass media, fashion and advertising geared toward Muslim women emerged from that conference (JMEWS 6:3).

The editors inaugurated the JMEWS Distinguished Lecture series at UC Santa Barbara in April 2007, with UCLA Professor Susan Slyomovics addressing the topic of communal memory through the trope of “Mary’s Well in Nazareth.” Professor Lila Abu-Lughod of Columbia University presented the second Distinguished Lecture, speaking on “The Social Life of Muslim Women’s Rights” at UCSB in February 2009. (Her paper, expanded with case studies of Egypt and Palestine, was published in JMEWS 6:1). Professor Suad Joseph presented the third Distinguished Lecture in May 2010, this time at UCLA. Joseph, whose long-term research program focuses on the interface of gender, family, and state in the Middle East, discussed “Rethinking Arab Women as Subjects.” She surveyed and assessed the productivity of various theoretical approaches and proposed a new conceptualization of the subject at the center of a network or a web of claims. Her lecture, like most JMEWS events, was followed by a lovely reception with all in attendance breaking bread together and sharing conversation.
In order to encourage graduate research and writing, the editors organized a biannual JMEWS Graduate Student Essay Competition. The first one in 2007 attracted 20 manuscript submissions, of which the reviewers recommended two for publication, and these appeared in JMEWS 4:2. Entries doubled in 2009, with 40 submissions from 30 different universities in Armenia, Canada, Egypt, Iran, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, the UK and the US. The winning paper by Sunny Daly of the American University in Cairo, “Young Women as Activists in Contemporary Egypt: Anxiety, Leadership, and the Next Generation,” was published in JMEWS 6:2.

I’ve been told that it was a real challenge to launch JMEWS back in 2005, as the founding editors scrambled to recruit papers and then to recruit scholars to critique the papers in the journal’s rigorous double-blind peer-review process. But as its reputation spreads, JMEWS receives more and more manuscripts. Last year the ratio of articles published to articles submitted was 25 percent, and now it’s approaching 20 percent. Over 150 authors have contributed articles, reviews, field studies and brief communications. The material is extremely diverse, covering women from Morocco to Indonesia and from Turkey to Sudan, and in their diasporas as well. Special issues have focused on “Women’s Activism and the Public Sphere” (2:2); “Transnational Theory, National Politics, and Gender” (3:1); “Early Twentieth-Century Middle Eastern Feminisms” (4:1); “War and Transnational Arab Families” (5:3), which is being translated into Arabic for online publication by the Women and Memory Forum; and “Marketing Muslim Women” (6:3), which just dropped at http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/mew.

Managing a journal is like riding a bike without breaks. It takes nine months to a year to produce a print issue, and the production stages of each one overlap those of the next. Articles are coming in at about one a week, being sent for review, critiqued, rejected or accepted, revised, copyedited, queried and finally finalized; books and films are coming in and going out to reviewers; issues are being sent for composition, returned for proofing, printed, and finally distributed, and on to the next one. The editors rely on hundreds of people who voluntarily contribute their time, energy, research, writing and critical skills to produce JMEWS. The managing editor interacts with them all. It’s intense — and I’m so grateful to new managing editor Bonnie Rose Schulman who took over the bike at speed when JMEWS moved to Yale University in June under new editor (and founding editor) Marcia Inhorn.

Schulman is a recent graduate of the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs where she was an editor of SIPA’s Journal of International Affairs. Inhorn is Professor of Anthropology and International Affairs and Chair of the Council on Middle East Studies in the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale. A medical anthropologist specializing in the social impact of infertility and assisted reproductive technologies in the Middle East and Arab America, she has conducted multi-sited research here and abroad and has also taught at the American University of Beirut and the American University of Sharjah.

This fall, the Association for Middle East Women’s Studies celebrates its 25th anniversary in San Diego at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA, of which AMEWS is an affiliate organization). Another cause for celebration is the fact that Suad Joseph, the original president of AMEWS, will be introduced as the president-elect of MESA.

From the back of the hall to the podium. From a shared idea to a journal, to research programs, academic departments, new ideas, and the next generation of scholars. These are the accomplishments of a generation of activists, organizers, researchers, teachers, and students. I thank all who joined hands to manifest these prodigies.

Diane James was the managing editor of JMEWS from 2006 to 2010.