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Gender, Art, and Social Movements in the Middle East and Global South

A conference and reception in honor of
Professor Sandra Hale, UCLA

Sondra Hale Honored

CONFERENCE SALUTES AN EXTRAORDINARY PROFESSOR WHO IS RETIRING FROM TEACHING TO WORK ON OTHER PROJECTS

by Susan McKibben

CARING, BOLDNESS, SELF-CRITIQUE, INTEGRITY, HUMOR. Over and over again, students, colleagues, and friends used these words to describe Sondra Hale at the “Gender, Art, and Social Movements in the Middle East and Global South” conference at UCLA on October 28th, which honored her upon the occasion of her retirement from full-time teaching.¹ “She embodies theory and practice,” said Women’s Studies Ph.D. student Rana Sharif. Unlike some scholars, Hale has always viewed theory and practice, academics and activism, as inextricably connected and mutually informing, and the con-

ference offerings themselves moved seamlessly between these two poles.

Hale was initially a co-organizer of the conference herself, along with Susan Slyomovics and Carole Browner of UCLA, and Sherine Hafez of UC Riverside. When she announced her retirement, however, the other co-organizers decided the conference would be the perfect opportunity to honor their colleague with panels addressing some of the specialties to which she has made substantial contributions: Sudan Studies, Middle East Women’s Studies, and Transnational Gender Studies. Initially the conference was to address emerging issues and the work of younger scholars. By combining these objectives with a theme of tribute to Sondra Hale, however, the conference

demonstrated not only Hale’s longtime presence on the leading edge of numerous scholarly fields, but also her continuing influence on today’s new scholars.

The conference began not with Hale’s best-known accomplishments in academia but with an overview of some of her lesser-known activities. Attendees enjoyed an opening slide show depicting Hale playing competitive tennis, performing as a ventriloquist and stand-up comic, and participating in marches and street demonstration as an activist for many social justice causes. The presentation also highlighted her work in the arts as a poet, a critic, and a curator of Sudanese art as far back as the 1960s. It was this work in the arts that Susan Slyomovics asserted was among Hale’s most

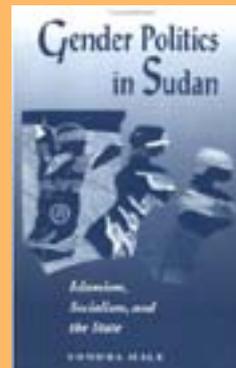
1. The conference was organized by the UCLA G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies and was cosponsored by Dean of Social Sciences Alessandro Duranti, Department of Anthropology, Center for the Study of Women, Department of Women’s Studies, African Studies Center, and the UC Riverside Department of Women’s Studies.



During her long and distinguished career, Sondra Hale has been an important figure in fields from genocide and women's rights to social movements. Before retiring, Hale had taught at UCLA in various capacities since 1986. Her Westwood roots, however, stretch back to her undergraduate days, when she graduated from UCLA with a B.A. in English. Hale spent several years abroad after graduating, teaching English at the University of Khartoum. Inspired by her experiences in Sudan, Hale returned to UCLA, where she earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in African Studies and Anthropology, respectively. Over the next few decades, Hale taught at several institutions, including a brief return to the University of Khartoum as a lecturer in the anthropology department. Hale also published prolifically on a variety of topics related to issues in human rights and gender, particularly in Sudan and the Middle East. In addition to teaching, Hale has chaired the Women's Studies programs at California State University, Long Beach; California State University, Northridge; and UCLA. An outspoken activist during her career, Hale founded or cofounded the UCLA African Activist Association, Feminists in Support of Palestinian Women, the Darfur Task Force, California Scholars for Academic Freedom, and the U.S. Committee for the

Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. She also contributed to causes ranging from protests against the war in Vietnam to last year's Occupy UCLA movement.

Hale has received many accolades in recognition of her work. In 1993, she was given the Luckman Distinguished Teaching Award, UCLA's highest honor for teaching. Hale has also received awards from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Association of University Women. More recently, in 2011 Hale was given lifetime achievement awards from the Association for Middle East Women's Studies and the Salmamah Women's Resource Center, Sudan's foremost women's organization. The latter of these, recognizing Hale's devotion to the Sudanese women's movement, is especially notable, as the organization usually does not honor foreigners.



The Salmamah award was timed with the release in Arabic of her book, *Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism, and the State* (1996). The first study of Sudanese gender studies to be translated from English to Arabic, it details the position of women in Sudanese culture in terms of the relationship between gender and state, Sudanese women using Islam to construct their identity, and the barriers women face in Sudan.

– Josh Olejarz

...all spoke of Hale as a caring mentor who helped her students navigate graduate school while nurturing their intellectual work and their commitments to community and to justice

important academic contributions. At the time Hale began studying Sudanese art and art history, visual anthropology was hardly recognized, though it has since become better appreciated as an important subfield of the discipline. Moreover, Hale's studies of the production of specifically modern Sudanese art helped non-Sudanese scholars understand this production beyond the easy categorizations of national/nationalist or "folk" art to which it had previously been relegated.

The challenges of representation to which Slyomovics gestured were raised repeatedly throughout the conference. For example, Lara Deeb explored the contours of "representational paralysis" in her paper on temporary marriage in Lebanon, asking how scholars can do honestly critical work on sexuality and gender without contributing to racist stereotypes of the Middle East. Nadine Naber's paper wrestled with the desire to do critical feminist work in Arab countries without

reifying either Orientalism or the false dichotomy between the masculine/public and the feminine/private.² Her proposed methodology, which, she asserted, was derived in part from Hale's work, included critical feminist ethnography, community accountability, and transnational feminism.

The final session of the conference was a roundtable by Hale's graduate students. Some presented briefly on their work, some focused exclusively about their advisor's influence on them, but all spoke of Hale as a caring mentor who helped her students navigate graduate school while nurturing their intellectual work and their commitments to community and to justice. Esha Momeni described Hale's office as a "transnational, inviting space" in which Momeni can be comfortable as a person, an activist, and an emerging scholar. "Her classes are places where knowledge is actively produced, and process is just as important as out-

come," commented Rana Sharif.

With plans to continue much of her activism, research, and artistic activity, Hale's retirement promises to look much the same as her intensely active and productive professional life. When asked what she would be giving up, she laughed and admitted that she had given up tennis.³

Something had to go.

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2. Since Naber was unable to attend, her paper was read by panel Chair Sherna Berger Gluck

3. Oral history interview with Susan McKibben, 25 August 2011.