HISTORIES OF THE PRESENT AND FUTURE: FEMINISM, POWER, BODIES

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I would like to use opportunity to raise some methodological questions about feminism, feminist theory, feminist history and politics. There is much about feminist theory that is in a state of flux right now, where major transformations are occurring regarding how feminist politics and its long and short– term goals and methods are conceived. I would like to look at some of the effects that theoretical and political changes – those emerging as we face the millennium – have on the ways in which feminist scholarship and theory have changed or should change We can then discuss how this may be relevant to the production of new methodologies appropriate for reading those wayward or non-mainstream texts, particularly within feminist histories.

I want to look at two paradigm shifts, shifts that have affected the ways we understand knowledge and power, which have occurred over the last decade or so, which have transformed, or hopefully will transform, the way feminist scholarship and politics is undertaken and what its basic goals are. The first consists in transformations in our understanding of knowledges, discourses, texts and histories, which politicizes them not only in terms of their contents, i.e. in terms of what they say, but also in terms of the positions from which they are articulated (their modes of address) – what they cannot say, and what their positions are within a network of other texts which constitute both their milieu and the means by which they become both comprehensible and tamed. The second involves transformations in the ways in which women and femininity are understood, which move away dramatically from the prevailing feminist models developed from the

1960s to the 1980s and beyond (approaches regarding questions of identity, and thus, in the literary arena, questions about 'women's writing', 'writing like a woman', 'reading as a women', or in the area of psychology, the question of women's psychologies, or in the area of history, the history of women, where, in short, it was necessary to understand women or femininity as self-contained, given identities, unique, different from men, oppressed and victimized subjects, subjects who are somehow *powerless*, robbed of agency, or denied access to power) to considering subjectivity in terms not of agents, but of *agencies*, the subject being seen as a series of disparate processes rather than a given form This dual politicization of knowledges, discourses and writing on the one hand, and of identity politics on the other hand, have come together to raise new feminist questions about knowledge, subjectivity and power. Subjects are not understood as powerless, oppressed, furtive or defeated, nor as self-contained and pregiven agents, but as operative *vectors*, points of force, lines of movement, resistance or complacency, subjects who function strategically, and actively, within power networks which are unable to 'rob' them of agency or activity. Knowledges and discourses are no longer considered to be megalithic representations of power interests that exclude women: to suggest that they are simply male dominated is to deny women the resources of prevailing knowledges as a mode of critique of those knowledges. In short, these knowledges, whether patriarchal or not, empower as much as they disempower: they provide the resources for their own undoing. Both these emerging tendencies, now beginning to have major impacts on feminist theory, owe an enormous debt to the radical anti-humanism and the postulation of the inherent entwinement of power and knowledges developed in the genealogical works of Michel Foucault, and other postmodern thinkers. I would like to divide my paper broadly into a discussion of these transformations. I want first to look at how these transformations may affect our understanding of history and historical research, I will then go on to discuss how they effect our understanding of power, and finally I will suggest how this provides us with more complex and subtle ways of understanding sexual difference, and thus, feminist questions.

I should state at the outset that I am no expert on the question of history! My disciplinary training comes from a tradition that tends to regard history as a peripheral concern. As a philosopher, I cannot answer the questions of history, historical research and textual interpretation. As a philosopher whose major focus is on the twentieth century, and especially contemporary French and feminist philosophy, what I can bring to you are some abstract principles and frameworks, which I hope can be used to challen-

ge not only the underlying assumptions governing the ways in which prevailing history, canonical history, functions, but also which can be used to challenge many dominant feminist assumptions about counter-histories as well. I want to use the philosophical writings of some late twentieth century French philosophers – Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray – to raise the question of what history is, how its readings, its reconstitution, functions politically, and how alternative histories remain to be written. In raising these questions (I don't dare claim to be able to answer them!) I hope to focus on the contemporary political context in which feminist history, the production of an alternative feminist canon, or the problematization of historiography, can take place.

Past, Present and Future

The status and place of temporality and of the past remains one of the elided ingredients in much current discussion about social change, upheaval, transformation or even revolution, that is, in speculation about the future. How we understand the past, and our link to it through memory, reconstruction and scholarship, prefigure and contain corresponding and unspoken conceptions regarding the present and future. Implicit in the very procedures of conventional historical research is the presumption that the past provides us with the means – or at least some of them – for understanding the present, a series of potential lessons to learn, an anticipation of events to come, a mode of repetition that revivifies and enlivens the past by linking its relevance, its sense, to the present (and by implication, the future). Rethinking the relations between past and present, reconstituting historical 'memory' as a form of production, may thus exert a powerful influence on reconsidering the ways in which the past is traditionally represented in both history in its various methodologies, as well as in dominant philosophical and feminist conceptions of time. The ways we rethink this relation will, of course, also have direct implications for whatever conceptions of the future, the new, creation and production we may develop.

Much historical and historiographic research is mired in a certain belief that human beings, or even life in its generality, are essentially functions of repetition. The same kinds of issues reappear over and over again, and if we know how to read history carefully enough, perhaps we can learn from the first or second replaying of historical forces what we need not live through again. In short, history as a discipline is in large part motivated by the belief that we can learn from the past, and by reflecting on it, can improve the present. The past is fundamentally like the present, the present is a mode of continuity of the past, and insofar as this similarity continues, the past will provide a preemi-

nent source for the solution of contemporary problems and the issues the future may throw up. The more and the better we understand the past, the more well-armed we are to face a future which is to a large extent a copy or reformulation – the variation on a theme – of historical events. It is for this reason we need to cultivate memory, as the art, and scholarship appropriate to memorialize the past. Such a view of history can at best understand the present in terms of a concretization of the past, the culmination or fruition what has been. It thus sees the future in terms of tendencies and features of the past and present. Where the past is a retrospective projection of a present real, on such an understanding, the future can only be understood in terms of the prospective projection or extrapolation of the present. The problem with such a model of time and history is that it inevitably produces a predictable future, a future in which the present can still recognize itself instead of a future open to contingency and the new. What is needed in place of such a monumental history is the idea of a history of singularity and particularly, a history that defies repeatability or generalization, and that welcomes the surprise of the future and the new as it makes clear the specificities and particularities, the events in the full sense of the word, of history.

This, as I understand it, must be one of the paradoxes of historical research in general: histories, stories and reconstructions of the past, are in fact illuminations of a present that would not be possible without this past. The time of the historian is strangely dislocated, somewhere between the past and the present, but not entirely occupying either. For the feminist historian, these paradoxes, the paradoxes of temporality, are particularly exacerbated: a feminist or radical historian (this point is of course not confined to feminists but could apply equally to the post-colonial or anti-racist historian) the task is not simply to openly acknowledge that the writing of past is more a story about the present, but also that it is the linking of the past and present to a possible future. The project of the feminist historian must be, in part at least, the forging of relations between the sexes, and of each sex, along lines that dramatically diverge from what is present. The past, a past no longer understood as inert or simply given, may help engender a productive future, a future beyond patriarchy. Time, the very matter and substance of history, entails the continual elaboration of the new, the openness of things (including life, texts, or matter) to what befalls them. This is what time *is* if it is anything at all, the indeterminate, the unfolding and emergence of the new.

The future is the domain of what endures. But what endures, what exists in time and has time as part of its being, whose being is dictated by time, is not what remains the sa-

me over time, what retains an identity between what it was and what it will be. Time involves the divergence between what was, (that is, what exists in virtuality) and that which is actualized or capable of actualization. The past is what endures, not in itself, but what is open to becoming, to something other. This becoming infects not only beings in/ as duration, but the world itself:

> The universe *endures*. The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new. It is true that in the universe itself two opposite movements are to be distinguished..., 'descent' and 'ascent'. The first only unwinds a roll ready prepared. In principle, it might be accomplished almost instantaneously, like releasing a spring. But the ascending movement, which corresponds to an inner work of ripening or creating, *endures* essentially and imposes its rhythm on the first, which is inseparable from it. (Bergson, 1944: 14)

It is with such an openness to futurity that I believe feminist theory needs, even if our primary orientation is to the past. The past is never adequately conceivable except insofar as it propels a new future, a future beyond the limit of the present. This is why feminist history is so crucial: not simply because it informs our present, but more so, because it enables other virtual futures to be conceived, other perspectives to be developed, than those which currently prevail. In this sense, the astute historian stands on the cusp of the folding of the past into the future, beyond the control or limit of the present.

The Past Lives into an Unknowable Future

I want to raise a series of hypotheses, some of them quite speculative, some of them meant to surprise more than to convince or aspire to truth, some meant to highlight rather than obscure social and political issues, which I hope will help to raise in relief the question of what feminist history might be, and what feminist theory must be in order to support feminist history, feminist writing, feminist knowledges (which for me are *not* about women's history, women's writing, women's knowledge but about writing *otherwise*). To write a history of the past from the point of view of the future: the task, at least one of the most urgent, is to think in the *future anterior*, the tense that Irigaray favors in her textual readings: what will have been, what the past and present will have been in the light of a future that is possible only because of them.

Three working hypotheses, then, about history, and its inherent binding of past to present and future:

1. Following Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*), I would suggest that history is always a history of the present, and that the best history is

not only one that is a history of the present, a reconstitution of the conditions of the present, but also a *history of the future*. In studying history, we are not simply gleaning texts, artifacts and events as they occurred in themselves: we are not unearthing 'facts' from the past, like little nuggets of gold which have their own intrinsic value. Rather, what *counts* as history, what is regarded as constituting the past is that which is deemed to be of relevance to concerns of the present. It is the present that writes the past rather than, as positivist historiography has it, the past that gives way to the present. This is not to say that the present is all that is left of the past; quite the contrary, the past contains the resources to much *more* than the present. Rather, it is only the interests of the present that serve to vivify, reinvigorate the past. The past is always propelled, in virtual form, in a state of compression or contraction, to futures beyond the present;

2. More than this, instead of the past being regarded as fixed, inert, given, unalterable, rock-solid even if not knowable in its entirety, it must be regarded as being inherently open to future rewritings, as never 'full' enough, or present enough, to retain itself as a full presence that propels itself intact into the future. This is Derrida's crucial claim about identity and iteration (Derrida, 1974). The identity of any statement, text, or event, is never given in itself. Neither texts, nor objects, nor subjects have the kind of self-presence that gives them a stable and abiding identity; rather, what time is, and what matter, text and life are, are becomings, openings to time, change, rewriting, recontextualization. The past is never exhausted in its virtualities, insofar as it is always capable of giving rise to *another* reading, another context, another framework which will animate it in different ways. What Derrida makes clear is that the significance, value or meaning of a text or an event is only given in the infinitely deferred future. So that when we are 'doing' history, not only are we writing the event, we are positively reinscribing it, producing it anew, writing it as an opening up to a life that is not exhausted in its pastness.

The historian, especially the radical or critical historian (such as a feminist or an anti-racist historian must be) is crucially poised at the intersection of two virtualities, to use the language of Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, 1991). The past is not a diminished or receded former present, a present that has faded into memory or carried in artifacts that intrude in the present. The past is the virtual which coexists with the present. The past, in other words, is always already contained in the present, not as its cause or its pattern but rather, as its latency, its virtuality, its potential for being otherwise. This is why the question of history remains a volatile one, not simply tied to getting the facts of the past sorted out and agreed upon. It is about the production of *conceivable futures,* the future here being understood not as that which is similarly conta-

ined in the present, but rather, that which diverges from the present, that which produces a new future, one uncontained by and unpredicted from within the present. This indeed is what I understand feminist politics – at least at its best – to be about: the production of futures for women that are uncontained by any of the models provided in the present. Rewriting, reinscribing the past is a way to activate these possible futures, and indeed is their only political rationale. The inventive historian is poised between a past that is not dead and a present as the place for the inauguration of new and unpredicted futures. We can call these futures modes of becoming, modes of becoming-other; and

3. The past is the virtuality that makes both history and memory possible. Neither history nor memory should be equated with the past itself. As latency or virtuality, the past, is larger, more complex, more laden, than any history can present – including feminist history. There can be no complete, or even partial, history, no objective reconstruction, no extraction of the truth of history. What I am getting at is that the past always and essentially gives rise to multiple histories, histories undertaken from different perspectives of the present. This multiplicity is not given through the complexity that the present adds to the past, the present layering or enriching, spotlighting, the details of the past. Such a picture is rendered more complex through the necessity of recognizing what the fissured and latent past enables, for the past is uncontainable within any one history, or even all cumulative histories.

This claim is based on Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference as the perspective which has yet to take place, yet when it occurs, it will transform the ways in which all knowledges, all practices, all relations can be understood, from perspectives whose positioning has never been occupied, or taken place before. There is another way of undertaking history – even feminist history– or another way of undertaking any activity or discipline, than that which is presently available. The past, in short, cannot be exhausted through its transcription in the present, because it is also the on-going possibility (or virtuality) that makes *future* histories, the continuous writing of histories, necessary. History is made an inexhaustible enterprise only because of the ongoing movement of time, the precession of futurity, and the multiplicity of positions from which this writing can and will occur.

Taken together, these hypotheses imply that history is always, whether archivally or textually based, whether it appears to offer a haven away from the present or a way into the problems of the present, is an intensely political matter, a matter of one's political interests and alignments in the present. This is *not* a limitation of the discipline of history (feminist or otherwise) but is the condition of all historical research, even the most traditional: it is always invested, and its investments dictate what counts as being historically relevant information. This is not really a new claim: history, like politics and philosophy, is always an invested framework, always wedded to paradigms that are involved in politi-

cal schemas. What I want to add to these claims is a feminist slant. In other words, I would like to take on one of the possible, future anterior, positions on the question of histories of the present and future, one articulated in terms of sexual difference. It is here that my work owes an immense debt to the writings of Luce Irigaray, who remains the most insistent and clear-sighted proponent of sexual difference and its ontological and epistemological implications. I don't want to talk directly about her work, but rather to use its insights to develop some of the implications of a sexually different understanding of history. But first, a brief detour through a Foucauldian and Deleuzian understanding of power.

Power and knowledges

Feminist history is a huge and growing enterprise. I don't really want to engage it in any direct kind of way because the debates and disagreements, critiques and methods developed there require an insider's purview to be adequately understood. Instead, I want to look at how feminist theory, inflected through the writings of those I have already mentioned as postmodern philosophers – Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze – provides us with new kinds of questions and new modes of utilizing existing intellectual frameworks for new ends. If these disparate thinkers share anything in common which is of direct relevance to feminist concerns, it is a broadly conceived understanding of power, and its productivity, one that I believe is implicitly assumed in the writings of Irigaray as well.

Until very recently (until the work of Irigaray, and Spivak in particular) power has been seen as the enemy of feminism, something to be abhorred, challenged, dismantled, or at best, something to be shared more equally. Power is not the enemy of feminism but its ally. The goal of feminism is no longer the dismantling of power, or its equal distribution, for power must be understood more carefully as that which administers, regulates, enables, that which flees and produces, as well as that which disqualifies and subordinates, limits and contains. If feminists believe that their goal is to abandon power, they have already lost in a game from which they cannot withdraw. Feminism must aim at the reordering of power not its elimination, at the expedient use of power and its infinite capacities for transformation and rewriting, its fundamentally open-ended character, its capacity to be worked upon and opened up to a future set of unpredictable uses and effects. Power is not something that feminism should disdain or rise above for it is its condition of existence and its medium of effectivity. To understand how this different, indeed positively affirmative, relation of power marks the present state, or rather, the cutting edge, of feminist theory, we must ask, then, what power is, and how it functions. This too can be summarized in a few terms:

1. Power is a fluid medium within which we are produced and function, within which we operate, have effects and are effected, act and are acted upon. It is not something we can deny, resist or dispense with except in the very terms that it provides. It is only

within power that power can be transformed, and only through its operations that change can be (and is) effected. It is not as if we can separate ourselves, our passions, our daily concerns, our intimate relations from power, because it is through pouer that we have effects and are acted upon, the field of our effectivity. Such an understanding of power implies that many preconceptions we hold, or have inherited, must be abandoned if we are to accept, to intervene into and be able to utilize power.

2. Power must no longer be conceived as a perfect, systematic, structural or homogeneous whole. It is heterogeneous, multiple, contradictory, sporadic, uneven, calculating but not predictable, viscous or thick with its capacity to absorb what it finds recuperable about its unpredictable permutations. Moreover, it has what might be called recoil effects, which transform or modify the intentionalities directed towards its subversions. This is what is both power's mode of effectivity, as well as its resistance to concerted manipulation.

Power is neither perfect nor ineffable, neither secure nor consciously manipulable by individuals or groups, churches or elites, however well placed or apparently lacking in strategic position or resources. Its functioning cannot be explained by universal laws or general rules, for it is haphazard, expedient, calculating (and thus also prone to miscalculation). Neither hidden nor clandestine, power always functions openly (if we know how to recognize it), through its modes of material constitution, arrangement, organization, distribution, administration and regulation of objects, subjects, practices, events and institutions. It produces sites of particularly intense investment, and correlatively, sites of relative underinvestment which vary historically, culturally and geographically.

3. Resistance is precisely a function of its haphazard operations (and not, as Marxism asserts, of power's internal contradictions – as if it were a system of logic: contradiction has never stopped practices from occurring, power from functioning), its modes of expediency and its necessarily excessive self-production (in particular, its fascinating capacity to generate more than it needs, to produce in excess of any functionality or systematicity), an excess that can be turned in on itself. These very excesses (the sites of over– or under-investment in power's uneven spread over culture) are what enable, indeed at times, insist on the conversion of power into its ever-newer forms, into its unpredictable future.

I have made no claims about individuals or groups 'having' power, or exerting it over others; I have not discussed the issue of more or less power, because none of this makes sense if power is understood as a set of material forces and effects. However, issues of oppression, subordination, domination, and control are not simply evaporated or defined out of existence (as some feminists, particularly those opposed to poststructuralism and anti-humanism, suggest) but must be reconceived beyond the model of woman as passive victim of male power who is robbed of agency and efficacy. This victimology continues to be the dominant rationale and presumption behind the establishment of most forms of

feminist politics and most feminist theoretical studies, which tend to presume an understanding of power and powerlessness, of power as systematically regulated enforcement of men's dominant, and women's subordinate positions. Such a model is ironically unable to explain the very possibility of feminism itself, women's capacity to move beyond *ressentiment* and anger, righteous indignation or moral outcries, to produce something new, women's capacities to move beyond what attempts to debilitate or contain them, to devise strategies, harnessing what they know about power, about their daily lives, their experiences, their positions.

This is a much more complicated and murkier understanding of power, power as a mode of negotiation, implication and complicity, that feminism must address if its theoretical projects – including those directed to the past – are to be more than a litany of the woes suffered by women, a position that I believe is inherently antithetical to feminism, for it cannot explain how feminism is itself possible. The task ahead, the challenge facing feminist theory will be that of taking power responsibly, of working with and through it, of producing and activating knowledge not against power, but against the prevailing assumptions which have regulated the production and use of knowledge against women's interests. The task ahead, then, is not to seize power (power has never been lacking) but to refigure knowledges so that they help position women to utilize power strategies, to regulate their lives, to produce differently and to recognize differently the kinds of production undertaken by women in the past.

Sexual Difference

I have thus far discussed how notions of temporality, relations between past, present and future, are always implicated in power relations; and also, how all knowledges and discourses – in this case, histories – are, in one way or another, bound up with power relations. I would now like to see what implications that has for the question of sexual difference. I would like to explain how I understand this phrase, as its definition seems crucial to the ways in which is it used and abused in feminist circles. Sexual difference, like the very notion of difference itself, can be understood in one of two ways. First, as a difference between two pre-existing entities (such as the difference between oranges and apples); and second, as a constitutive difference, a difference that preexists the entities that it produces. This second notion, shared by both Derrida and Deleuze, is also a constitutive ingredient in Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference. Sexual difference is not the differences between the sexes as we know them today, or as we know them from the past. This is because, as Irigaray has argued, the differences between the sexes have never taken place. (Irigaray, 1985). Here she is not claiming unique experiences that one sex has which the other does not: rather, she is arguing that there has never been a space in culture for women *as* women. Women have only ever been represented as a lack, the opposite, the same as, or the complement of the one subject, the unique human subject. In making the claim that sexual difference is yet to take place, she is arguing that there is

no space in culture, in representation, in exchange, in ethics, in politics, in history or in writing, for the existence of *two* sexes, only the one sex and its counterpart. Insofar as women are conceived as the afterthought, the reflection, the augmentation, the supplement, the partner of men, they are contained within a phallocentrism that refuses alternative positions and spaces, that refuses the right of any autonomous representations, that eradicates sexual difference, that refuses to accord women the possibility of being otherwise than defined in some necessary relation to men.

Phallocentrism is explicitly *not* the refusal of an identity for women (on the contrary, there seems to be a proliferation of identities – wife, mother, nun, secretary etc), but rather, the containment of that identity by other definitions and other identities. Thus Irigaray does not seek the 'real' woman somehow beyond her patriarchal containment: instead she aims to challenge conceptual systems which refuse to acknowledge their own limitations, and their own specific interests. This is a challenge less to do with harnessing the lives, experiences and energies of 'real' women than to do with challenging and undermining the legitimacy of modes of their representation, models and systems which represent, theorize and analyze the world and that help to produce them. Irigaray's questions are thus not questions about what to do, how to act, how to write in such a way as to be faithful to the lives and experiences of 'real women': her strategies instead are philosophical and methodological. She asks: how to develop conceptual schemas, frameworks, systems that reveal what is at stake in dominant representational systems, and how to develop different ways of theorizing, based on the recognition of what has been left out of these dominant models. In other words, how to think, write or read *not* as a woman, but more complexly and less clearly, how to think, write and read otherwise, whether one is a man or a woman, how to accommodate issues, qualities, concepts that have not had their time before.

It is this challenge that Irigaray issues to feminist thought -not to simply take women as the objects of intellectual investigation (though of course this is not to be very easily accomplished in some contexts), but rather to open up the position of knowing subject to the occupation of women. To enable women the position of knower so that knowing itself may be done differently, different questions be asked, different criteria of evaluation be developed, different intellectual standards and goals to emerge. Irigaray cannot specify in advance how women, and men, might occupy positions of knowing when sexual difference finally takes place: that would be to preempt the specificities of other women's positions and their specific modes of occupation of positions.

The lessons that history can teach us are only as profound and adventurous as our own intellectual mind-sets and political allegiances will allow: theirs is not a series of stories, texts, that only illuminate the past. Rather, they are in part an index of our present preoccupations but perhaps more interestingly,

they are as rich as our futures allow. Insofar as those futures come to approximate the minimal conditions for an understanding, recognition and celebration of sexual difference, what history, and the struggles of the past, have to teach us is still wide open, open to us, rather than them, to forge.

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Note

The texts of Elizabeth Grosz, "Histories of the Present and Future: Feminism, Power, Bodies," Miglena Nikolchina, "Strangers' Games. Julia Kristeva in a Utopian Perspective," Irina Savkina, "What does It Mean to Be a Woman Writer," and Peggy Kamuf, "Jealousy Wants Proof," are taken from the first issue of *Genngle,* a journal that was supposed to be published last spring by the Program on Gender and Culture of the Central European University in Budapest. Four students of the Program, Anca Ghaues, Dejan Ilić, Magdalena Vanya, Elena Vassilieva, came up with the idea to have a journal, and they also partly edited this issue of *Genngle.* Although originally envisioned as a student journal, *Genngle* soon started to receive texts of eminent authors, like Elizabeth Grosz and Miglena Nikolchina, in addition to texts written by students, which was the result of the international recognition of the Program by feminist theorists, and of the hard work of the editors.

Seeing the quality of the texts collected, the Program decided to institutionalize the journal by becoming its official publisher, symbolically confirming it by removing one "n" from the name *Genngle.* At the same time, the Program faculty members became the editors of the journal. One of them was Branka Arsić, whom Peggy Kamuf originally sent her text "Jealousy Wants Proof" for *Genngle*.

Owing to the long process of institutionalization, and later to the series of extraordinary circumstances (a conflict between the until recently Director of the Program, Miglena Nikolchina, and the current Rector of the University), the first issue of the journal has not appeared to this day, and will probably not appear at all – judging from the situation.

Out of respect for Anca's, Magdi's and Elena's enthusiasm, and following my editorial instinct, I decided – now as an editor of another journal, and with the (partially silent) approval of the initial editorial board, to "appropriate" and publish four representative texts out of the thirty we received and prepared for *Genngle.* By doing this, and also by posting the contents page of *Genngle* on the web, I hope to encourage the current Program heads to think again about the realization of project *Genngle.*