

"I [have] learned that it is not only dangerous to dismiss as 'not feminist' another culture's or country's conception of women's studies; it is equally dangerous to think that you've seen it all when you've seen one example."

Helene V. Wenzel\*

### **"The Tide Cannot Be Reversed"**

What you are about to read in the following papers on "Women's Studies and Higher Education" has the potential to raise your eyebrows, lower your expectations, and/or probably wreak mild havoc with any preconceived notions you may have, from direct or indirect contact with women's studies about the nature or the experience of women's studies as a defined set of educational features or goals, with single, specific paradigms for implementation, content, growth, or structure. Indeed, as these papers show, and my own experience corroborates, the women's studies experience, even limited to a consideration of the English speaking world including the U.S.A., England, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada (including French-speaking Canada as well), is in its essence a heterogeneous one. Its pluralism of forms are determined, modified, constrained and/or enhanced by factors as obvious as geographical, national and local site, and as subtle as individual women's participation and their definitions of "feminism", "women's studies", "politics", and "scholarship".

I have been asked to "synthesize and comment on, in light of the Yale experience, the substance of these articles." Because the women's studies experiences are so essentially heterogeneous, and because these articles speak in different ways about different aspects of women's studies, any synthesis runs the risk of placing a different emphasis on the particular factors than do the individual authors, just as, in a like fashion, each of these articles reflects the implicit experiences and biases of their authors. Moreover, a good synthesis should maintain the indelible imprint of these differences, and not seek to homogenize them into a unique "exportable" definition of "the women's studies experience". In this overview, then, I shall briefly highlight some of the most salient factors of the programs described in these papers, focusing on their sometimes overlapping, sometimes similar, oftentimes very different aspects.

One of the most tangible differences to emerge from this collection of essays is in the scope of, and the approach to issues concerning women in higher education. In this vein, the article "University Women Teachers in Great Britain" by Margaret Sutherland presents quite a different focus from the others. University women *in* Great Britain is not about women's studies *per se*; but the questions she raises about the discrimination against women from the institutions themselves, and the very basic problems of the multiple (and often contradictory or incompatible) roles of women who teach at this level, form core consideration at the base of any successes of women's studies in all areas of higher education. Focusing on this broader issue in all areas of higher education, Sutherland dismisses the more particular questions about women's studies in a very brief discussion of the involvement of women who are already in the system with feminism and feminist organizations. Their reactions, as she documents from two separate studies, reveal a sense

\*Editor's Note: Dr. Wenzel's comments are based on the original and full length versions of the following papers sadly cut for reasons of economy.

of feminism as belonging to the past, of feminism encountered with no great enthusiasm, of feminism responded to with feelings of guilt over non-involvement, or, and I fear this is more prevalent everywhere than not, feelings of mistrust towards feminist groups. Such responses are happily not universal; but they do make aspects of some of the other papers more intelligible: antagonism to women's studies and feminism is widespread, and looked at truthfully, it is a more complex response than merely a gender-specific (i.e. male) reaction. Sutherland's conjecture, that there is a possibility for numbers of women in the university to increase proportionately as the attraction of university teaching decreases, is not an optimistic one; but it is borne out by the discussions in the other papers of what happens to newly emerged programs and to teachers who teach in them in the face of shrinking economic resources in higher education, and shifting priorities. Such problems beset all women's studies programs, it would seem from these papers, and this phenomenon is more intimately discussed in Helling's "Personal Reflections" where she describes her own precarious position in Women's Studies and Philosophy at Flinders University, Australia. These questions raised by Sutherland are at the very foundation of any discussion of women's studies: the presence and absence of women directly affect the size, strength, and longevity of any women's studies enterprise, anywhere in the world.

The other papers in this collection by-and-large focus more specifically on the women's studies phenomena, but do so in very different contexts. Admittedly, the most familiar discussion for me is Sandra Coyner's overview of the situation in the United States which I found to be a very thorough and important contribution to a comprehensive documentation of the many epi-phenomena in the States. Her article focuses on no particular women's studies programs, but gives instead an overall historical appreciation and discussion of the important stages and organizations of women's studies; a broad, up-to-date description of the current status of women's studies; and an excellent, impassioned examination of the "ideas of women's studies" as they have manifested and evolved in the States. In fact, anyone in the States who has experienced first-hand the growth of women's studies can find her place(s) along the synchronic and diachronic axes of the study.

My own individual and institutional experiences dating back to my earliest work with women's studies as it developed at University of California, Berkeley, and then as Chair of Women's Studies at San Francisco State University, up to the present at Yale University, have been informed by many of the historical, political, philosophical, and structural developments described by Coyner; her article reads much like my own professional/personal journal, writ large. Of special interest to me in her article, as to anyone working in women's studies in the USA today, is her very comprehensive and convincing discussion of the "autonomy *versus* integration" debate overarching all of women's studies in the States in these early 1980's (as they were implicit in the 1970's). From the other articles in this collection, it is apparent that this is not an ideological or structural debate limited to the States, but has emerged, implicitly or explicitly, into all the women's studies programs described. I think that this debate is a crucial one, one which is a potential watershed for women's studies in the 80's, at least as I see the situation in the States. As such, it deserves special treatment as an issue unto itself, a discussion I shall defer until the final section of this paper.

Much like Coyner's article, Veronica Strong-Boag's "Mapping Women's Studies in Canada: Some Sign-posts" focuses on women's studies in Canada showing the developments of feminism in Canada, and its concomitant developments of a women's studies

philosophy, programs, journals, and associations, to be, as in the U.S.A., a multiple response to the very complex immediate historical, political and social changes in the country. The rise of feminism in the universities can be seen as more directly proportionate and related to the increasing numbers of women students, and the greater diversity of university students brought about by these socio-political changes. Underlining some of the clear differences between the USA and Canada, Strong-Boag focuses more specifically on the four major (and seven lesser) women's studies programs, thus mapping the signposts of the phenomena and giving their historical and contemporary developments. In order to guide the reader through what she sees as the "contradictory and obscure landscape" of women's studies in Canada, the author deals extensively with who's who in Canadian women's studies, and with their various and different individual and institutional stances. Again, resonant with the situation in the U.S.A., Strong-Boag's articles closes with a discussion of the threat of the New Right in Canada (not unlike the New Right in the U.S.A.) to feminism and women's studies. She cautions us that the strength of women's studies is only as strong as its next generation of academic women's studies students, and feminists.

Strong-Boag mentions the 1982 international conference at Concordia only briefly, in the context of a broader discussion of the politics of women's studies at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute. Since this is to appear in a Canadian journal, I believe that it is relevant for me to recapitulate my own experience of that conference which I attended, representing Yale University's Women's Studies Program. As my knowledge of Canadian women's studies barely existed when I went, the conference strongly informed the ways in which I saw the women's studies phenomena in Canada (even given my understanding that all of Canada is *not* bilingual!). While I learned a great deal about the different lives of women the world over, and gained a very healthy respect for the dangers of thinking that feminism could be exported from one country or culture to another, and while I met some very interesting women from many lands I may never have the opportunity to visit, I found the overall conference to be a disappointing gathering of women constrained by their institutions, and by local, national and global masculist politics. This is not a naive statement about "elitist" representation: all of us were, or were supposed to be, involved in research and teaching related to women. This distinction had already divided and determined the representative pie. In this light it is very interesting to read Strong-Boag's discussion of who was who and who did what at Concordia.

Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* speaks of the society of outsiders; and I see feminism, and women's studies in particular, as having to be, out of necessity, an 'enclave of outsiders' on the inside, working constantly toward the transformation of that very inside space.<sup>1</sup> Of the university and government women who did come to this conference, I spoke to and heard very few who questioned their places in their educational institutions, or their roles or political stances in relation to women's studies. When I presented my paper on "Facing Difference" which dealt with the questions of racism, classism, and homophobia in women's studies classes in the States, the vocal reaction from several women, including women from the States, was dominated by an implicit argument which I find to be very prevalent: that we must focus not on differences that divide (sic) women, either within one country or among countries, but rather on the dream of a united front, a global sisterhood.<sup>2</sup> I do not argue with the impulse for such an argument; however, more than a decade since the beginnings of this "second wave" of feminist movements and women's studies on an international scope, I see this argument to be a very insidious and dangerous

protest against the appreciation of real, material and ideological differences and divisions among women. It is furthermore a protest which I believe characterizes women who feel and believe themselves to be on the inside, "making it" in the "man's world". I have experienced such reactions from many university women in many different contexts, from classroom to international convention, and presently in the extended women's studies context at Yale University. I have come to think of these women who think that all women, or that they at least, are truly "on the inside", are suffering from "delusions of gender".<sup>3</sup> It is now my conviction that, at least in the U.S.A., any women who can regard the present state of women's studies here sanguinely, and there are many, must be suffering from this new malaise — a kind of confusing chromosomal aberration of feminism.

It was in this light that I felt the conference at Concordia to be, in its very conception, and in its actual unfolding, another unhappy example of the many ways in which feminism and women's studies has been, and continues to be contained, or worse, to be coopted. Fortunately, Strong-Boag makes it clear that there is a much broader spectrum of women's studies experiences in Canada. *In addition, I learned that it is not only dangerous to dismiss as "not feminist" another culture's or country's conception of women's studies; it is equally dangerous to think that you've seen it all when you've seen one example.*

Both Susan Magarey and Rita Helling deal with women's studies in Australia, albeit from quite different perspectives. Helling's personal account tells the very mixed story of "Women's Studies in Australia, Especially at Flinders University in South Australia", and of her participation and particular experiences in that program. In this account we can see in detail much more of the general situations which Magarey discusses amply and carefully in her comprehensive article "Women's Studies in Australia — Towards Trans-disciplinary Learning". In fact, Magarey focuses more on the philosophy of a women's studies approach to learning and knowledge than on the structure or development of programs. Her study contains an excellent and convincing discussion of the crucial, oftentimes ignored or underaddressed problem of the very definitions and working definitions of what women's studies is and is not, is and should be. Calling finally for a trans-disciplinary women's studies, and pointing out the dangers of "compensatory" programs, Magarey's study is a programmatic one rather than a descriptive one. In addressing the basic issue of the conceptual and actual structure of women's studies programs and their philosophical foundations, Magarey implicitly raises the "autonomy vs integration" issue.

Like Coyner and Strong-Boag, Magarey deals with the entire spectrum of women's studies in Australia, and focuses specifically on the *kinds* of women's studies which have emerged, describing and defining all the less than ideal forms. I was particularly taken with the discussion of the situation at Flinders. Through the presence of two views of women's studies in Australia, Magarey's "objective" and Helling's more "subjective" discussions, the reader is provided with an additional privileged perspective on the different ways in which a women's studies phenomenon has been experienced and described even within one small country. Magarey's two paragraph discussion, and Helling's article do not contradict each other at all; but the different positions from which each writes and which each holds in the women's studies experience in Australia put into bold relief the pluralistic nature of women's studies. Such a comparison helps us to appreciate, too, the very different styles in which these articles are written, styles which depend in great part upon the stance or status of the particular author vis-a-vis women's studies.

Finally, Rosemary Seymour's "Learning Ourselves: Women's Studies in New Zealand" offers us yet another paradigm for appreciating the development of women's studies phenomena. By means of "an overview, of the many areas of activities . . . that come under the term 'women's studies': any form of teaching and research about, or significantly related to, women . . .", a small but thorough set of case studies, and a set of fifty returned questionnaires, Seymour presents her research on women's studies in New Zealand, research which dates back to 1974 when she began to travel New Zealand in search of information on women's studies. The very title of this paper, "Learning Ourselves", as indeed the methodology used to gather opinions and facts about women's studies, underlines the very personal and self-reflective nature of women's studies. No one but someone engaged in women's studies activities can hold forth a definition of women's studies; and such a person must be "feminist (in a range of definition) and energetically dedicated." Women's studies *is not*, perhaps *cannot*, and probably *should not* be taught by anyone else, a problem which these papers discuss directly and indirectly.

From this overview of the collection of papers, actually an "overview of overviews", it should be clear that women's studies is, as it has been conceived and actualized in a small but significant segment of the world, not to be defined, or confined, within narrow definitions or parameters provided by the eternal and ubiquitous "men's studies" it seeks to "correct". Each of these papers also describes the trials and tribulations that women's studies programs have confronted up against their own post-secondary and university (generally male) institutions. And each ends on a cautious note of strength and optimism.

But in spite of this optimism, there lurks in these pages, as in the material reality of these and other women's studies programs globally, the spectre of a women's studies very different from the one(s) some of us first envisaged in the last decade: the vision of an autonomous women's studies as an inter- or trans-disciplinary and epistemological revolution within the hallowed halls of higher education, one which would both reflect the changing/changed condition of women's lives outside the universities, and one which would, by virtue of committed research and teaching, and the creation of a continuum between the campuses and the communities, contribute to that outside world, to the changes in the social reality and materiality of women's lives. Coyner speaks to this danger eloquently in her discussion of the phenomenon of 'mainstreaming' in the States, another term for the process of integrating women's studies into the mainstream curriculum. Her follow-up consideration of 'Autonomy as Discipline and Department' is which she shows the structural and philosophical disadvantages of an interdisciplinary structure over the advantages, is one of the first coherent and convincing arguments I have seen in print. Strong-Boag's discussion of the "essential division between the integrationists and the separatists" speaks to this same situation, but she adds that "cooperation and sympathy have largely replaced the suspicion, even competition . . .". Magarey's study of the Australia's women's studies experience addresses the issue by calling for a trans-disciplinary model of women's studies, regardless of its housing structure.

That the issue is an important one cannot be overlooked. That the outcome of such debates is separate from the changes in women's studies programs imposed from the holding or parent institutions is also clear. My experience has partaken of each of these paradigms: an autonomous women's studies program at SFSU, one which has the power to make faculty appointments, albeit not on tenure track; and the experience at Yale University, where all the faculty (with the exception of myself who has a split appointment

with half of my time paid for by the French Department) is hired by, and must teach courses first (and be judged for reappointment and tenure) in their standard disciplinary departments<sup>4</sup>. The merits and the problems inherent in each of these structures are apparent to me; I can appreciate the discussion in each of these papers; and along with their authors, I can appreciate the inherent contradictions in each of their provisional solutions. It is not at all a coincidence that this year's annual National Women's Studies Association convention in Ohio has a one of its major themes and foci the overarching question of "Autonomy/Integration: The Future of Women's Studies", scheduled as a major plenary session of the first full day of the conference.<sup>5</sup>

At this conference, I shall give a talk on a panel called "Whatever Happened to Autonomous Women's Studies Programs?". In this talk I shall focus on two recent experiences in my own personal/professional life which have been informed by that growing trend toward the mainstreaming or integrationist model/structure of women's studies. The first of these is my experience in the Women's Studies Program at Yale, where the extramural award of a National Endowment for the Humanities Pilot Grant in 1981, and a recent (1983) NEH Implementation grant have ensured the establishment and growth of a program which falls squarely under the mainstreaming model.<sup>6</sup> Under the guidelines of this grant, to be administered by Women's Studies, the presence of women's studies on the campus will become more visible as it develops curriculum offerings in two distinct directions: new courses will be introduced into standard departments with a specific focus on women; and standard courses will be revised to incorporate women's studies materials, perspectives and foci. A total of eleven new courses, and eleven revised courses are in various planning stages, and are expected to emerge over the next three years. Awesome as this respectability and financial backing appears (especially in light of severe budget restrictions and shifting priorities at institutions of higher education), there are already some students — women's studies majors — and some faculty (including myself), who are experiencing anxiety about its implications for the future of women's studies: comfort, complacency and acceptability spell out a women's studies that is "safe" for academia, rather than challenging the very "systems of thought it seeks to transform".<sup>7</sup>

The title of my talk is "The Changer or the Changed: Feminism in the University". It is a title which has, for the past year and half, been the title of a book in progress, an anthology I have been co-editing with a colleague, and which we have just, after much self-searching and deliberation, decided to abandon.<sup>8</sup> In great part, this decision comes on the heels of the proliferations of "autonomy vs integration" debates throughout the U.S.A., culminating in the upcoming NWSA conference mentioned above. Given this new turn of events, and all the many reasons leading to its emergence — economic cutbacks, political repression, backlash to feminism, and their concomitant manifestations on campuses — the very title for the proposed anthology, *The Changer or the Changed*, no longer suggests a focus on the *teacher* of women's studies and how she has become actively *empowered to change*, but rather how *women's studies*, the only potentially active and empowered arm of feminism on the campus, *has itself been changed* by the very process of its establishment within higher education.

While we see the need for a proliferation of women's studies courses and perspectives throughout the curricula, the spectre of an essentially "add women and stir" women's studies presence on campus is a frightening one, and one which we feel ultimately contains and betrays women's studies, and women. In the best of all possible patriarchal worlds, one

could envisage the coexistence, on a single campus, of an autonomous women's studies program, with women's studies foci integrated, or mainstreamed, throughout the curriculum. An autonomous program would ideally have its own budget allowing for its own hiring of faculty, and a core of inter- or trans-disciplinary women's studies courses, feminist in their conceptions, and provocative in their impulse, at the same time having revolutionary effects on standard curriculum and epistemology in general. Standard departmental courses with an integrated women's studies perspective would be informed by the active presence of and interaction with this autonomous program. They would not be, as is rapidly becoming the case, the stronger of the two; nor would they be, as in all too many instances, the only women's studies presence on campus. As feminists committed to changing the material reality of women's lives and to empowering all women, we cannot look happily on as women's studies, a potentially radical rupture with patriarchal discourse and methodology, enters instead into respectable marriages with standard disciplines and traditional university curricula. Strong-Boag can help us shed some reason on these "autonomy vs integration" debates by reminding us that, whatever our internal differences and splits are, and whatever form they take, "The only legitimate fear is the end of the debate."

These profiles of several different programs reveal many of the same situations encountered at other institutions described in other papers. First and foremost, the impossibility of generalizing from one situation to another, both within a given country and certainly among countries, regardless of the commonality of language. Then, too, the problems encountered with the language one uses to describe and discuss the phenomena: the confusion evoked by the term "feminist" for example. Questions of pedagogy, content, philosophical foundations; of structures of the program; of who teaches in these programs and why, and how; the political or a-political nature of a commitment to women's studies and its ties to or separation from feminist politics; the hospitality vs hostility of larger institutions housing, or refusing to house, women's studies; the dangers in these houses of containment, cooptation, compromise; the threats, finally, to the persons involved in women's studies programs. In the face of these however, each author ends with a statement of optimism and strength, a deep sense of continuing commitment, and a strong belief that, as Seymour states, "the tide cannot be reversed . . ."

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of the concept of the 'outsider', see Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, London: Hogarth Press, 1952.

<sup>2</sup> The paper I delivered at the conference in Montreal, "Facing Difference" did provoke much negative commentary in the session itself; however, in several encounters afterwards, women present at the session expressed their gratitude for my difficult, dissenting and disruptive statements. It was apparent then that some kind of self-censoring was going on in the formal sessions.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks for this newly-coined expression goes to Professor Saj-nicole A. Joni, Chair for Computer Science at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. As my colleague and friend, Professor Joni came up with this echo of "delusions of grandeur" while listening to me discourse at length about "insiders" and "outsiders." The emphasis on gender in a world split apart by questions of gender, echoes the emphasis on wealth and class which first gave rise to the original expression.

<sup>4</sup> The Women's Studies Program at S.F.S.U. began in 1976. For a more detailed study of its earliest years, see Florence Howe, *Seven Years Later: Women's Studies Programs in 1976*, Report of the National Advisory Council on women's Educational Programs, June 1977. San Francisco State's Women's Studies Programs is listed among fifteen programs in what Howe defines as "phase two" programs in the States. By the time I left in 1980 there were approximately sixty majors in Women's

Studies. In a very different setting and time, the Women's Studies Program at Yale University began in skeletal form in 1979-80; and the new interdisciplinary major granting a B.A. was approved by the faculty in 1981. To date, Yale has graduated three persons in Women's Studies; and there are about ten students majoring in the interdisciplinary program. In fact, these two Women's Studies Programs represent perhaps the two extremes of structural and philosophical possibilities on the women's studies continuum; and as such, they are really rather incomparable.

<sup>5</sup> The National Women's Studies Convention this year takes place at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio between June 26-30. The open plenary scheduled for the first day is entitled "After the Leap: Feminism and the Fears of the Eighties"; day two opens with the plenary "Autonomy/Integration: The Future of Women's Studies"; on the third day, the plenary addresses "Racism and Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement"; and the last day plenary session focuses on "The International Feminization of Poverty." Clearly, NWSA is not trying to hide from or dismiss the internal dissensions which criss-cross feminism and women's studies, any more than it "covers up" the external threats to women's lives.

<sup>6</sup> These grants for piloting and implementing the Women's Studies Program at Yale University have been awarded to the program; the Principal Investigator for the grants is Professor Nancy F. Cott, Chair of Women's Studies and Associate Professor of History and American Studies. The pilot grant extended from 1981-1982; the present grant began in January 1983, and extends for a three year period.

<sup>7</sup> In an ongoing, informal series of articles on feminism and women's studies which appeared over a period of about two weeks in the *Yale Daily News*, many different and contradictory views appeared. These views express the opinions of one Women's Studies major, Allison Coleman, a junior in Morse College, and a student on the Women's Advisory Committee who has worked extensively with the Women's Studies Program. *Yale Daily News*, March 8, 1983 (International Women's Day).

<sup>8</sup> This proposed anthology was being co-edited by myself and Professor S.A. Joni.