Women's Studies

1980-81 FALL LECTURE SERIES

WOMEN'S NETWORKS:
HISTORY AND FICTION

September 18
Thursday, 8 P.M.
304 EPB

October 16
Thursday, 8 P.M.
304 EPB

November 13
Thursday, 8 P.M.
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December 4
Thursday, 8 P.M.
304 EPB

Women's Studies Newsletter

University of Iowa

Women's Studies

FALL LECTURE SERIES

Women and Experimental Forms
in Painting, Film, Fiction, and Pedagogy

Special 25th Anniversary Issue

A Program of Their Own: Memories of Women's Studies at Iowa, 1973-1998

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Background:

Like many other early members of the late 1960's-early 1970's women's movement, I came to feminism through what might be called a conversion experience. During the period when I was a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin, a few rudimentary feminist ideas began to attract attention in books such as Caroline Bird's 1968 *Born Female*. These came together for me one spring evening in 1969, when I read a *College English* article in which Elaine Showalter described how Victorian reviewers had changed their view of the Brontes' novels, according to whether they believed them to be written by a man or woman, praising in a supposed male author what was later condemned in a female.

Something in Showalter's rhetoric converged with my own experiences, and focused a preternaturally sharp light on some of the biases of my supposed "education". For years I had piously accepted a number of distortions about literature and its priorities, and striven in vain to repress my own preferences and beliefs, in order to explore the lore of a literary culture developed by, about and for men--internalized, in effect, the truths of others, and denied my own. I decided I had taken a wrong road, and I would have to reverse or drastically modify some of my life-choices.

On the one hand, I saw extending before me the vision of a vast and lovely landscape of a new-found land---the history and thoughts of women since the beginning of the world---as of yet known only in shadow to me and others, and beckoning before me for a lifetime of exploration. On the other, for me as for many, a new conviction and a sense of mission also brought ambivalence and unease. I already knew how hard it was to obtain jobs or rise in the world with the wrong profile, and that "unwomanly" women were rejected misfits ("Don't you go agitating for women's jobs;

when they're forced to hire women they certainly won't hire you"---my father's words).

I wondered, for example, whether an article on Mary Wollstonecraft on my *vita* would provoke comment, and it did: one state university hiring committee member objected to the feminist topic, and remarked dismissively that my choice showed a lack of "low seriousness" (was I expected to ridicule her?). At a party associated with another job interview, a senior faculty member approached me assertively: "Of course you don't agree with Kate Millett that D. H. Lawrence was hostile to women?" If I wanted the position, of course, there was only one right answer. I didn't give it, and didn't get the job.

As everyone who lived through the rise of the women's movement in the early 1970's knew, this movement--and its academic daughter, Women's Studies---was not an isolated phenomenon. It flourished in complex interaction with socially critical movements of the late-Vietnam War era. At Wisconsin, along with my husband Bill, I witnessed or took part in assorted protests, rallies and strikes in support of what was then called Black Studies, and in opposition to the slaughter in Vietnam and Cambodia.

In rather genteelly 'radicalized' ways, for example, we learned what mace and pepper-gas looked and smelled like; denounced massive subventions of war-related research; protested clubbings of demonstrators, uneasily aware that in Mexico City (for example), student demonstrators were not clubbed but shot; sought more student control over the curriculum; walked picket lines to help establish a union of teaching assistants; demonstrated against the segregated and inferior position of women in the university; and called for the formation of a women's center. The tactics and ideals of the civil rights movement and some of its more radical offshoots were then seen as possible models for other emerging social movements--including the new resurgence of feminism, however 'white' and 'middle-class' the latter might be.

Since 1964 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had also linked racial and gender discrimination in officially recognized ways, and encouraged practical as well as ideological alliances of feminist and minority advocates behind the then-new push for "affirmative action." Feminists such as myself spent literally hundreds of hours in meetings with activist persons of color in common efforts to combat problems greater than our own. Models of egalitarian democracy and shared governance, finally, had flourished since the mid-to-late-60's. Radicals of the period debated the viability of communes, and courses on past revolutionary movements and utopias swiftly began to infiltrate the outer reaches of the curriculum.

In this context it should be self-evident that organized academic feminism provided only one of many possible expressions for an emergent set of values, in loose alliance with organizations such as NOW, the National Women's Political Caucus, the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the National Gay and Lesbian Caucus, the Women's Equity and Action League, and other, smaller organizations, many of them to the left of all-of-the-above. Tensions between different progressive political groups and different wings of feminism of course emerged. People debated who was more-radical-than-thou, disputed whether all middle-class professional aspirations were instruments of "cooptation," whether race, class, sexual orientation or "gender" (called "sex" at the time) oppressed women more severely, and whether "the system" should be opposed from "within" or "without."

Certain forms of pluralism are taken for granted in most academic subcultures in 1999. Few academics in humanist departments at a research university would now claim that there exists a uniform body of static knowledge which must be transmitted to a passive audience, or that learning is unbiased by the standpoints of those who claim to further it. When I came to Iowa in 1973, however, such notions were deeply suspect and controversial. Signs that women might wish to improve their collective position in the university or the 'real world' swiftly aroused personal hostility and charges of 'anti-intellectualism'. "Feminism" itself was a charged word only a few in that 'real world' chose to apply to themselves

("I'm not a feminist, but. . . ."). Claims that the stereotypes that divided men and women were arbitrary evoked active scorn---these categories were "natural," after all--and the neutral and slightly ambiguous term "women's studies" (like "affirmative action") was carefully chosen to deflect such reactions.

The care was needed. Most academics considered the formal study of women inherently separatist, and women who went out of their way to attack or distance themselves from the women's movement gained public credit for this. In the 1970's, I worked for four years to persuade the relevant steering committee in my department to introduce a General Education course in women's literature. I had to discard along the way titles such as "Women's Lives" and "Feminist Issues in Literature," and the committee packed the first accepted syllabus for the more blandly titled "Literary Presentation of Women" with a majority of male authors.

A final small scene survives in memory as capturing a certain tone. At one point in 1976 or thereabouts, I was conversing with Margaret McDowell and another woman in the hall near my office in the English-Philosophy Building, when a male colleague walked by, and loudly exclaimed, "A cabal of women plotting!"--sans irony, even with alarm. Was this the first time he'd seen three women faculty members talking to each other? Jolted, I reflected that he would vote on my tenure. . . .

Women's Studies at Iowa

In the mid-1980's, a Berkeley doctoral student of education came to Iowa to gather information for her dissertation on the origins of Women's Studies programs in the U. S. When she interviewed me, I responded for more than two hours with everything I could remember at the time--every vote, every decision, every personal idiosyncrasy, every public meeting, every failed struggle for a job line and every precious success.

"Thanks," she said at the end, matter-of-factly, "You've given me what I wanted." A bit let down, I asked, "Since you know so much about

other Women's Studies programs, can you tell me--are there some ways in which we were different? Was there anything unusual about our particular history?

"Oh no," she responded firmly, "there's nothing remarkable here! For a public institution of your type, your experience has been quite according to pattern!"

Here is some of what I can reconstruct or remember about the pattern.

Someone may someday publish a detailed history of women at the University of Iowa, which admitted a few women when it opened in 1855. According to Linda Kerber and Mary Bennett (manuscript curator of the State Historical Society) Benjamin Shambaugh and a colleague in the Political Science Department offered a course in "Women's Legal History" as early as 1914-1915, and Ruth Gallaher, one of his students, later wrote and published *The Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa* in 1918.

Much more recently, people in the "Free University" and an Action Studies Program made efforts to teach courses on women's subjects at Iowa in 1970, and perhaps even earlier. Local pioneers in this movement included Carol Ehrlich (at the Free University), Barb Wieser and Joan Pinkvoss (in Action Studies), and Mildred Lavin, who remembers that when Continuing Education hired her to run the predecessor of the "Saturday and Evening Program" in 1971, she introduced the term "University Studies for Women," arranged several departmental numbers for courses on women's topics, and began to convene conferences for and about university women a year later. WRAC, founded in 1972, provided a convenient meeting place for women in its old Market Street house (now demolished), and Margaret McDowell remembers other gatherings, convened in 1971 by Clara Oleson (now of the Labor Center) and others to discuss possible new curricula.

In the same year Margaret herself began to develop what became a

four-course sequence on women in literature, a stepchild of the English Department which drew record enrollments for years. Patricia Addis recalls that she was able to offer "Images of Women in American Literature" in 1971, as a teaching assistant in American Studies, then run by Alex Kern, Jean Kern's husband and an early and steady friend of such endeavors. Linda Kerber, who joined the History Department in 1971, began to offer "American Women's History" in 1972. Also in 1972, Cecilia Foxley and Gail McLure taught a course in "Sex Role Stereotyping and Socialization in Education," later characterised by the National Education Association as first offering of its kind in the country. Cecilia also managed to construct some passable bridges between wary activists and an unenthusiastic administration as the university's first affirmative action officer.

After I came to Iowa in the fall of 1973, I eagerly arranged to offer "British Literature Since Mary Wollstonecraft" as my first elective course in the spring of 1974. Eleanor Anstey in Social Work and Carol Whitehurst in Sociology taught comparable courses in their fields. I distinctly remember the meeting shortly after I arrived, convened by Cecelia Foxley in one of the upstairs conference rooms of the Memorial Union to discuss the feasibility of establishing an academic Women's Studies unit. Besides Cecelia and myself, those present included Margaret McDowell of Rhetoric, Linda Kerber, Pat Addis, Susan McQuinn (a doctoral student in American Studies who taught courses in women's literature for several years), Mildred Lavin, and perhaps representatives from WRAC as well.

We debated whether the program should be a department, a women's research and advocacy center, an "area studies" consortium, or a "program" after the model of American Studies and the new African-American Studies Program. Should we elect a governing board, a co-ordinator, co-chairs or a chairperson? Linda Kerber expressed concern that the program maintains procedures and standards comparable to those of other academic departments and programs. During two years of unemployment, I had taught without salary at the "Women's College" of SUNY Buffalo (part of its Alternative School), and had seen young women

run an effective academic organization in which secretaries, students and teachers had the same voting powers, sharing decisions and everyday tasks.

Moved by the example of such egalitarianism, I believed of course that organizers of women's studies programs could do as much as men did, but that they could also accomplish something substantively different, and had no need to emulate their male colleagues' social patterns. In the end, the group decided to organize itself as a more or less conventionally structured unit of the School of Liberal Arts, and selected Margaret to be our chairperson. We did, however, retain some of the digger- and leveler qualities of our origins, with a steering committee of the whole, and courses and committee work performed by "adjunct faculty" from other departments.

In addition to several meetings each week in my department, I therefore began to attend several each month in Women's Studies. Our son Eugene was about two at the time, and I was under some strain to finish each day's departmental work, but I attended the Program's many lectures, reading groups, receptions, potlucks and committee meetings without ambivalence or regret. I was certain that the preservation of Women's Studies was as important as anything I did, and never even considered easing my life--or that of my family--by letting a significant event pass.

Perhaps the fact that we were all volunteers gave us a sense of heightened solidarity--this was something we did from choice, and not for advancement, but for the future. Work for the Program may have also fulfilled an emotional need. When I arrived at a Women's Studies meeting, people greeted me cheerfully with "Hi Florence!" There were kind and helpful people in my department, but the atmosphere in most of its meetings was rather different, at least when I was around. It was, moreover, a pleasure as well as a relief to walk down the hall and talk with women whose frames of academic reference embraced anthropology, sociology, history, political science, nursing, literature and social work, and who shared an interest in women's and political issues, and a common programmatic goal.

Against the background of these memories, I was intrigued to read Sarah Hanley's account of the Program's early arguments: "To be sure, we had many *in-camera* conflicts hotly argued and therefore not reported, or underreported, in the official minutes. Nevertheless, as the fearless warred with the wise, and the beloved brokered peace . . . ." I am not quite sure about the passage's graceful trichotomy (Were there none who were both fearless and wise? Were the beloved neither?), but have no doubt that it is otherwise accurate.

What did these mostly-young women who wanted to remake (their part of) the world argue about?! In hindsight, it is easy to see that most of them would survive as individuals, and grow collectively into something between an area program and a department, whose internal structures and procedures would resemble those of other 'academic units'; or that the teaching of women's subjects would foster interdisciplinary interests in already-established departments, which would create new orthodoxies in their turn, and prompt once-'radical' feminists to seek new alliances and motivations for their ideals.

None of this was clear at the time, however, and we struggled with many questions. Were we a utopian egalitarian community dedicated to a populist view of knowledge? A group of potential careerists, treading softly lest we offend the established paradigms of our disciplines? Or something in between? Were we historians, literary critics, sociologists, or anthropologists, or were we investigators of a common realm of integrated women's experience? Was it our subject matter, our methodologies or the simple fact that we were women that most affronted our detractors? Should we alter our strategies? Should we care?

How close should our ties to kindred programs and/or groups be---to WRAC, to the African-American Studies Program, to Women in Development, to Affirmative Action? In these days when so many things are institutionalized into programs---from Aging Studies to Sexuality Studies to Global Studies---it may be hard to remember or reconstruct how open these questions and fluid those boundaries were. Should we keep to

"our own concerns," for example, when all concerns should potentially be ours? What was wisdom here, what fearlessness, and who deserved to be loved?

More concretely, how should we react to controversial issues in the 'real world' which surrounded us? In 1981, for example, some Women's Studies students picketed a movie they believed hostile to women, and the chair of the program forbade such "direct actions." Many students were angry, faculty members were forced to take sides, and the administration intervened. Women's Studies' place in its academic environment thus remained under negotiation for some time after its inception, and struggled with serious political issues.

In what directions, for example, should we evolve and expand--should we exclude men, or accept them as members and/or participants in the program's governance? Should we hold conferences, and sponsor feminist undergraduate and graduate student organizations? Should we cross-list only courses which satisfied certain criteria? If so, what were these criteria, and who was empowered to enforce them? Were the votes of graduate students and faculty to be given equal weight? Who could form committees? Who could join them? Who could vote on the selection of a chair? Should such a chair really run the Program, and give primary attention to faculty teaching and research, or should the Program answer to a steering committee with large student representation? What should be the role of its "associated faculty" from other departments, when the Program began to gain its own full or part-time members?

More generally, should the Program seek success as part of an administration-driven, credential-seeking, Regents-accountable research institution? Or should it aspire to be a somewhat-democratically run student-centered unit, home to many of the university's academically homeless women, expending much of its limited faculty time in advising and arranging for lecture series? Should we seek, in short, to advance ourselves by conforming or assimilating ourselves to the practices of other

departments? Or should we seek to transform our part of the world of knowledge into a parcel of Herland, and let others do what they would?

The answer, of course, was that aspects of all the above were desirable, in different times and seasons. Historians, literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists and others, of different ages and temperaments, brought their personal and political views and disciplinary paradigms to such questions, and debated what should come before what. Finite women on overload struggled to cope with them. Inevitably some things were lost and many saved.

One legacy that was saved, for me at least, was the memory of the people I met in this early period. Several older teachers, for example, took me aside and told me how glad they were that a women's program had begun. Margaret McDowell, already grey-haired, was friendly and indefatigable. Carol Whitehurst, one of the program's earliest teachers, had to leave the university largely for reasons of health, and Jane Weiss, her successor in the Sociology Department, left two sons when she died in an automobile accident. I remember her lack of pretension, her study of "working-class women," radical in the academic perspective of the time, and her efforts (with Susan Birrell and me) to help to draft the proposal for a never-realized master's program.

I remember when Florence Babb, jointly appointed in Anthropology, became Margaret McDowell's successor as chair. Enthusiastic about Women's Studies and international approaches to women's lives, she was fresh from graduate school. Nonetheless it fell to her to negotiate complex issues with the university administration as an untenured assistant professor, and to attend many, many meetings in the several units to which she belonged. Later I remember convivial reading groups and parties at the home of Margery Wolf, and Sarah Hanley's polished addresses and adroit negotiations with Deans Laster and Lowenberg and Vice-President Brodbeck (and her later services to women as Associate Dean of Liberal Arts). I remember May Brodbeck in her less sentimental moods--she tended to exclaim "No," for example, when she didn't like what people said at meetings--but I wept and felt shaken for days

when she committed suicide soon after her retirement (a year earlier, a friend had given me a copy of Carolyn Heilbrun's 1982 *Death in a Tenured Position*).

I also remember Cecilia Ridgeway, Nancy Hauserman, Martha Chamallas and Sally Kenney, among others. An activist lawyer, Nancy worked for the acceptance of policies on sexual harassment, and taught the Business School's first courses on discrimination. A law professor, Martha led the Council on the Status of Women's Affirmative Action Committee for a time, and authored an astute report on means of reversing indirect mechanisms of discrimination. A sociologist and natural speaker, Cecilia later left to take a job at Stanford, and I missed her sardonic comments in the sometimes soporific Faculty Senate. An authority in her field of dominance-enforcing behaviors within a social hierarchy, she once told me cheerfully that "my department is an ideal setting for my work--a perpetual living laboratory of the behavior I analyze." Sally Kenney, jointly appointed in Women's Studies and Political Science, was another good *raconteur* with a wryly experienced sense of humor, who was always willing to plan another project, work on another issue, and mentor another student.

Finally, I learned much from several cohorts of committed and idealistic graduate students. Many of those I can recall by name were literature students--Joyce Meier, JoAnn Castagna, Sharon Wood, Laura Mumford, Nancy Reincke, Bernice Hausman, Linda Yanney, Ilene Alexander. There were, of course, many others.

Some men also offered varying measures of background support for the Women's Studies program. As university president, for example, Sandy Boyd (1969-1978) attended a number of early conferences which had fairly clear feminist objectives. Sympathetic professors (Fred McDowell, for example) tended to be married to academic wives, or political activists of various sorts (Jean Lloyd-Jones, married to Jix Lloyd-Jones). Alex Kern, the husband of Jean Kern, a stoic hero of another academic generation, offered the shelter of his office space and course-numbers to African-American as well as Women's Studies, a tradition continued by his

successor Al Stone. Other men cross-listed courses in the Program, such as Kenneth Kuntz, who inaugurated a "Women in Religion" course in 1977---and still others attended meetings or receptions. Others provided indirect support; for example, my husband Bill deferred his career to mine when we came to Iowa, a decision more unusual then than it might be now.

Along with many women in my generation, I worked to help create a Women's Studies program in part at least from a perceived sense of "duty," but this "duty" was conditioned by desires too deep to analyze. I remember in moments of introspection the many interests, ideals and personalities I encountered in this period, and the opportunities to hear and test out certain ideas, all of which added immeasurably to my life.

Inevitably, perhaps, the changes mentioned above have long since taken place. Women's Studies is now a Program run by its own faculty, not by a steering committee in constant flux, and the members of this faculty no longer fear marginalization in their "home" departments for the subjects they teach. The Program's headquarters in the Jefferson Building give it quite a few rooms of its own, and a unit which began with one jointly-appointed faculty member now has seven, with various types of appointments. Permanent and visiting faculty members from non-European cultures realize Florence Babb and Margery Wolf's early internationalist vision, and the Program fosters a wide range of interdisciplinary research and teaching on issues of direct social relevance to the lives of contemporary women.

The Program's founders would have been particularly gratified to learn about the research interests of its end-of-millenium faculty: third-world women and economic development (Florence Babb); dance, movement and gender (Jane Desmond); North African women writers and colonialism (Anne Donadey); Native American and postcolonial women (Laura Donaldson); gay and lesbian lives, motherhood and reproduction (Ellen Lewin); reproductive rights and third-world women's issues (Jael Silliman); and women in China (Margery Wolf). The Program's most prominent need remains a permanent African-American faculty member, a

gap which may be remedied in the near future.

What else is there to say after twenty-five years? In many academic disciplines, the kinds of scholarship the Program represents have provided a wellspring of new ideas and subjects for study in the past two decades. What I called feminism in 1973 has been modulated in response to critiques of "old-style" feminism by assorted post-structuralists and third- and fourth--world feminists, and tempered by a number of broader political movements and societal shifts. Some things, however, do not change--ideology without action, for example, is empty, and action without ideology is blind. It is a source of considerable pride to me, therefore, as it is for thousands of women of my generation, that we wished for a great change, lived to see some of it, and evolved with it as we aged.

Each year I attend the university's "Celebration of Excellence for Women" ceremony, held in the spring, and for me as many others it is a source of peace and satisfaction to see women's professional and activist achievements honored with names I recognize. The Jean Jew, Distinguished Faculty Achievement, Wynonna Hubbard, Jane Weiss, Ada Johnson/Otilia Fernandez, Adele Kimm and other awards have particular meanings and associations for me, as they no doubt have for others who remember some of the people behind the names. At one time the ceremony was organized by the Women's Studies Program, and held in its lounge, but it has moved to the Memorial Union in recent years, and its prizes are awarded to women from all over the university.

Sitting in this year's audience, it struck me that these shifts may provide a partial metaphor for what has happened to the Women's Studies Program itself. As it ceased to be a marginal idea in the minds of a few women and moved to larger quarters, it also radiated outward to affect the futures of some thousands of students, many of whom hold fast to the Program's real-world insights and concern for the lives of contemporary women. Still, many of the chairs in that conspicuously large and impressive room were vacant---too many, I thought, for such a beautiful event.

The empty seats may serve as symbols for unfinished tasks. It is easy to be complacent about well-worn phrases ('equality of opportunity,' for example), and heedless of the ways in which many of the world's women are absent, subservient and ruthlessly humiliated, to the collective loss of all. The insights of the women's movement and women's studies have brought fulfillment and achievement to many women in our relatively privileged society and generation, but most of the world's women still face lives of grinding poverty, minimal literacy, chronic illness, heavy childbearing and brutal discrimination. We have only begun to deal with these things, and our successors will have to try to find new ways to relieve them.

I listened as I brooded, and took comfort in the social commitments of some of the younger award winners. I noted with interest the remarks of Sarah Freed, winner of the Adele Kimm Scholarship: "The Program has introduced me to a vast body of thought and literature, and I've acquired new heroes---women like Angela Davis, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde. . . . My professors who are activists have also inspired me. . . . Ultimately I think that my greatest acquisitions ... in the program are the tools to implement social change beyond college."

Wrong remains forever in the briefing room, and generals willing to bomb cities in order to "save them" care little about the ruthless oppression of women under regimes such as the Taliban. Feminist scholars and reformers of the next generation will therefore have many urgent tasks, but the future of women's studies at Iowa is in good hands.

I wish to thank all who have helped me with their recollections and other information, among them Patricia Addis, Sue Buckley, Anne Donadey, Linda Kerber, Kenneth Kuntz, Mildred Lavin, Margaret McDowell, Gail McLure and apologize for any inaccuracies or omissions.
Although she does not discuss the Women's Studies Program, per se, some background information about the period may be found in Linda Yanney's 1991 University of Iowa dissertation, "The Practical Revolution: An Oral History of the Iowa City Feminist Community, 1965-1975."

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