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Women at Rutgers College: Remembering 1970-1977

Nancy Topping Bazin

My story is about developing women's studies from 1970 to 1977 at Rutgers College, which was then one of the five separate colleges that made up Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Rutgers College was all-male, but it did not stay that way long. Because it was part of a state university, the Board of Governors decided that the college had to go co-ed the following year to avoid being sued for discrimination. In order not to displace male students, the integration would proceed very slowly by adding a few females to each freshman class. After four years of letting the resistant males become accustomed to having women on campus, the admissions office would begin taking students solely on the basis of merit. But, when shocked administrators learned that the criterion of merit would result in accepting more females than males, they quickly put in place a 50-50 quota system.

Witnessing and contributing to the process of change from 1970-1977 gradually opened the eyes of many faculty, students, and administrators on the Rutgers College campus. Never again would the more feminist among us accept sexist attitudes and behavior as "normal." On campuses across the country, a feminist perspective was revolutionizing ways of seeing and judging human

behavior. Whether one was conservative, liberal, or radical, life after 1977 would never be the same. The decade of the seventies was a key period for the development of the women's movement and women's studies.

I was appointed to the Dean's committee to determine what should be done before the arrival of the freshmen "girls" -as they were then called. Problems ranged from the way dorms were constructed--urinals in bedrooms, no walls between showers--to the erroneous beliefs of physical education teachers who had been taught that females could not roll on their stomachs or catch balls because they might hurt their breasts. A graduate student in history suggested that maybe the curriculum should also be changed because she could find no reference to the suffrage movement in any of the American history textbooks. Incensed, the Dean leaped up, slammed his hand on the table, and exclaimed: "If the curriculum has been good enough for the boys, it is good enough for the girls."

Rereading my essay about Rutgers College in the context of the other memoirs in The Politics of Women's Studies (edited by Florence Howe and published by The Feminist Press in 2000), I found that we were recording simultaneous eruptions of similar feminist ideas and activities all over the United States. The reactions to these ideas were predictable. For instance, in 1974 the Rutgers College newspaper reported that male spectators at

the latest women's basketball game had shouted: "Get out of our gym and go home. Whatever happened to motherhood?"(1) Women were also pointing out that faculty contracts provided "compensation of all diseases except those specifically related to women." Women staff members complained that they were fired in their seventh month of pregnancy and allowed to return only if their positions were "still available." A male professor declared that the obvious discrimination against women was as it should be.(2)

The movement of American conservatives to the extreme right began in response to the turmoil of the '60s and '70s. In the '60s, public radio covered in detail (with on-the-spot reporters) the Civil Rights Movement in the South. But how did this new racial awareness affect Rutgers College? A few black faculty had been hired, but little had been done to integrate the student body of that college. If I recall correctly, I had only two black students during my seven years at Rutgers. However, our women's studies program did have a course, taught by La Frances Rose, called "The Black Woman," and the first speaker I brought to campus was Toni Morrison, who had just published The Bluest Eye. Nationally, the Civil Rights Movement and budding African-American Studies programs were inspiring women and providing models for the women's movement and women's studies.

The anti-Vietnam War movement had a very strong presence on the Rutgers College campus. Students for a Democratic Society were active. Yippies raised the American flag upside down in front of the police station. Non-activists suddenly took the lead in creating a sit-in in the President's office. Bomb threats to our building were so frequent that people quit vacating it. Wearing ski masks, nude boys streaked up and down the aisles of the 200-student Shakespeare class. We feminists worked in this dramatic atmosphere of rebellion and change. As Annette Kolodny said of the prevailing attitude on many American campuses: "Nothing, it seemed, was impossible." (3) In our enthusiasm, I and many other women faculty were eager to develop women's studies programs while idealistically ignoring risks to our careers.

Like so many others who became "mothers of women's studies," I had been deeply influenced by the anti-war and civil rights movements. Since 1954, I had considered myself a pacifist and a believer in "non-violent direct action." During the 1960s in a community seminar I had been reading Richard B. Gregg's The Power of Nonviolence (4) and works by Mahatma Gandhi, A. J. Muste, Martin Luther King, Gene Sharp, and others. These readings helped shape the philosophy behind my approach to raising consciousness about women's studies on the Rutgers College campus.

I approached people in non-confrontational ways, using persuasion rather than accusation. Like Myra Dinnerstein, (5) I spent hours and hours talking with faculty and department chairs. I never attributed mean or evil purposes to men. All male or almost all male environments on campuses and at conferences had simply left male scholars unaware that women were not included in research, textbooks, and courses. I explained to department chairs what women's studies was and why they should encourage faculty to create women's studies courses. I wanted them to realize that women's studies was in their best interest, both professionally and personally. I suggested to faculty what kinds of courses they might develop, what the content could be. I pointed out how few of the many women artists, writers, and historical figures were in textbooks. I described the results of research in psychology and anthropology that used only men as subjects. Furthermore, the Rutgers Medical School students studied only the male body except for two days when a special teacher came in to talk about the female body. In that male-dominated college, I emphasized that the courses would benefit men as well as women. I carefully explained the difference between being against the patriarchy (which I was) and being against men (which I was not).

I worked in a quiet way, but with great persistence, creating the program and acting as coordinator of it without

asking any authority's permission. I mimeographed handouts describing the courses each semester. When we were ready to offer women's studies certificates, I went to the Faculty Senate and asked for approval to do officially what we already had in place. I did not, at that time, ask for money. I did my administrative work with no budget, no released time, no special office, and no secretary but with the help of an increasing number of feminist faculty. We could not yet win battles for resources, because we did not yet have a sufficient consensus on that campus.

I had expected many of the Rutgers men to disagree with me and even feel threatened. I erred somewhat in not realizing that male fears would be not just political but sexual. For example, after giving a speech about changing male roles at a Rotary Club meeting, I was startled to hear those in the audience making jokes about homosexuality!

Despite my assertive but non-aggressive way of advocating and designing women's studies courses, I knew many of my colleagues in the English Department were looking at me as if I had Women's Lib in red neon across my chest. Ultimately, I did not get tenure. Some of my older colleagues treated me as if I were invisible. One day the most powerful man in the department was walking down the steps. As he came near, I said joyously, "My book just came out from Rutgers University Press." He did

not even turn his head toward me but kept walking. The woman standing with me, Nancy Edwards, the wife of another senior colleague, exclaimed to him, "She said her book just came out!" He ignored her, too. Evidently he was not pleased that I had a published book, because it qualified me for tenure. Junior faculty had been clearly told that a scholarly book was what was required. In addition to two articles and a long bibliography, I had a book, but even the title of the book--Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision(6)--was a threat to them. To illustrate the injustice, when the next man came up for tenure, they called university presses all over the country to try to get his book published. That did not work, so they took the name of a colleague out of the book's Acknowledgments and made him a reader over the weekend to get Rutgers Press to accept it. I knew what was going on but had no way to prove it. After some pain and considerable stress, I decided not to file a grievance to fight for tenure at Rutgers College. I would go on with my career elsewhere.

Like other feminists, I was successful in developing a women's studies program in the early '70s because of strong student support. The graduate students in English created a women writers course, drew up the reading list, and asked me to teach it. The faculty advisor for the graduate students tried to discourage each one from signing up for it. Thirty of them

enrolled anyway. Meanwhile, the demonstrations, bomb scares, meetings, sit-ins, and teach-ins continued almost daily. In today's conservative atmosphere--with the apolitical students many of us have in the classroom--this kind of brashness on the part of the masses seems unbelievable. "Uppity women" was a popular pin worn by feminists.

The memoirs collected in The Politics of Women's Studies have special value as a record of the atmosphere of the 1970s. Deans reported on students to the FBI, telephones of activists were tapped, and the CIA and FBI were compiling files on many students and faculty. Despite all this, the power seemed on the side of the rebels. People were not afraid to speak up.

Yet most white liberals, black activists, and white male radicals did not see feminism as political. Perhaps they could not imagine women taking action to improve their own lives. For example, in keeping with the dominant literary criticism of that time, my liberal dissertation advisor considered feminist writer Virginia Woolf to be totally non-political. Some African-American males tried to protect their hold on black power and privilege by angrily attacking African-American females who identified with the women's movement. These men claimed that such women were guilty of undermining the unity of the black struggle. Yet, as Stokeley Carmichael's public remark in 1964 indicated, women had too often been denied an equal role in that

movement. Carmichael, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), answered a question about women's role in SNCC by declaring that "the only position for women in SNCC is prone." (7) In both the civil rights and New Left organizations, female activists found themselves excluded from decision making and assigned to traditional female tasks like typing, taking minutes, filing, and answering telephones. These women were "faced with the self-evident contradiction of working in a 'freedom movement' but not being very free." (8) In 1971, Jo Freeman wrote of "the unremitting hostility of most of the New Left men at the prospect of an independent women's movement." (9) Even when an exodus of women from the radical movement forced the males to abandon their original opposition, they failed to relinquish many of their "sexist practices." (10) Consequently, Stokeley Carmichael's infamous remark was a rallying point for both black and white feminists well into the '70s. Furthermore, many white male radicals seemed reluctant to think in new ways about blacks or women. Still focused on the traditional white "working class," they gradually recognized the dynamics of racism but neglected for a long time any serious analysis of sexism. In meetings of the radical caucus of the Modern Language Association, I witnessed how feminist academics' comments could be ignored as if they had not spoken. Consequently, we feminists had to educate not only the conservative establishment but also

the liberals and radicals whose causes we had supported. This struggle, too, is documented in the collective memories of the "mothers of women's studies."

Accounts of the '70s often omit stories that would reveal the high degree of student curiosity and eagerness to learn. In contrast, the memoirs in The Politics of Women's Studies document the hunger to learn among both women's studies students and faculty. From women's studies, I gained a life of intellectual excitement. I gained a desire to publish, because I had something I wanted to communicate urgently to others. Like many other founding mothers, I enjoyed the bonding among women--the closeness and trust we recall today with nostalgia. Annis Pratt observed in her essay that today women seem too success-driven and overworked at their jobs to be mutually supportive. When I retired I felt somewhat like Annis Pratt when she wrote: "It was as if many wires were going out from me, with no fresh voltage from what Mary Daly used to call 'the cosmosis of sisterhood' coming in." (11)

Although I was denied tenure at Rutgers College, I gained all of the intellectual excitement and emotional support to be had from women's studies. In addition, my personal life, my way of seeing the world, and especially my career changed because of women's studies. It even enabled me and my two children to survive financially. In 1977, almost no jobs in English were

available because of massive budget cuts. However, I obtained two jobs in women's studies. Initially, I took a three-year, although half-time, position as Women's Studies Director at the University of Pittsburgh. The next year, Mary Louise Briscoe, the coordinator at Pittsburgh whom I had replaced--who was by then Chair of the English Department--recommended me for a new director-of-women's-studies position at Old Dominion University. I was hired as an associate professor. Beyond my dreams, I have thrived at Old Dominion.

Never again did I have to suffer the extremely patriarchal atmosphere that existed at Rutgers College in the 1970s. Nevertheless, at Rutgers and elsewhere, I certainly gained more from women's studies than I ever lost. I benefited from the feminist bonding and had the thrill of witnessing and participating in the cutting-edge feminist research and teaching by the faculty. By 1977, feminism had radically altered the way in which I saw and judged human behavior personally, politically, and professionally. Like many of my students and colleagues, I was permanently transformed by my experiences at Rutgers. As a result, Women's Studies has remained at the core of my life.

NOTES

¹ Jaynee LaVecchia and Beth Ludwig, "Women Add New Element to B-Ball Program," Rutgers Daily Targum 5 December 1974, as quoted in Melanie Janis Cooper, "Resolved That I Should Be a Man': A Comprehensive Study of Coeducation at Rutgers College," Henry Rutgers honors thesis submitted to the Department of History and the Department of American Studies (Rutgers University-New Brunswick, 1997) 100 (available in Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries).

² Irene Ronciglione, "Discriminatory Employment Patterns Uncovered at R.U.," Rutgers Daily Targum 10 May 1971: 7.

³ Annette Kolodny, "A Sense of Discovery, Mixed with a Sense of Justice," The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers, ed. Florence Howe. The Women's Studies History Series: Volume One (New York: The Feminist P, 2000), 278.

⁴ Nyack, New York: Fellowship Publications, 1959.

⁵ Myra Dinnerstein, "A Political Education," The Politics of Women's Studies, 300.

⁶ New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1973.

⁷ Jo Freeman, "The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins,

Structures, and Ideas," 1971 manuscript version, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, page 2 of 9, 13 January 2002 <<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/womlib/>>. A different version of this essay, under a similar title ("The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structure, Activities, and Ideas") was later published in Women: A Feminist Perspective, ed. Jo Freeman, 3rd Edition (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1984), 543-56. Not all material quoted from the manuscript is in the published version. The 1971 version was originally made available by Pittsburgh KNOW, INC.

⁸ Jo Freeman, "The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structures and Ideas," 1971 manuscript version, page 2 of 9. See also women's complaints in "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: Women in the Movement," pages 1-2 of 2 (made available by The Sixties Project at the University of Virginia), 13 January 2002 <<http://www.assumption.edu/dept/hi.../SNCC%20Position%20Paper%20%20Women%20in%20>>.

⁹ Jo Freeman, "The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structures and Ideas," 1971 manuscript version, page 4 of 9.

¹⁰ Jo Freeman, "The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structures and Ideas," 1971 manuscript version, page 5 of 9.

¹¹ Annis Pratt, "Imploding Marginality," The Politics of Women's Studies, 91.
