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Women's Studies in Canada

During the 1970s Women's Studies emerged as an important new area of scholarship. In Canada, Waterloo University and Loyola College pioneered in the field by offering Women's Studies courses in 1971-72. By 1978 over forty Canadian universities had developed courses specifically relating to women, and one university granted undergraduate degrees in Women's Studies.¹ Meanwhile, women's caucuses were established in various disciplines; the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) was founded; and journals such as *Atlantis*, *Canadian Women's Studies*, and the *International Journal of Women's Studies* commenced publication.

Women's Studies, as an academic direction of the Women's Movement, is designed to achieve two goals: to generate research aimed at providing a feminist perspective on all areas of knowledge, and to raise the consciousness of students, especially women students, about their past and present identity and future options.² Studies of university hierarchies and curricula indicate that the role and needs of women have been systematically undervalued by Canadian institutions of higher learning just as they have been in society as a whole.³ If women and men are to understand the needs of women in modern society, careful analysis of the traditional role of women and how that role is changing is necessary. Although some people have claimed otherwise, universities are appropriate institutions for the conduct of such investigation.

Feminist scholarship over the past decade indicates that there are enough unanswered questions to keep scholars busy for at least a century. Florence Howe, editor of the *Women's Studies Newsletter*, which monitors developments in Women's Studies in the United States, isolates the following concerns which have become the focus of the discipline:

- 1) patriarchy in historical perspective;
- 2) biological/psychological sex differences;
- 3) socialization, sex roles and sex-stereotyping; and relationships among gender, race and class—all from a cross-cultural perspective;
- 4) women in history and women's culture;
- 5) women's art and women in the arts, including the image of women in the media;
- 6) post-Freudian psychology's impact on women's destiny and new women-centred theories of female development;
- 7) female sexuality, including perspectives on both heterosexuality and lesbianism; birth control and reproduction;
- 8) the history and function of education as support and codifier of sex-segregation and of limited opportunities for women;
- 9) the family;
- 10) women in the paid and unpaid labour force and the economy in relation to women;
- 11) the relationship between laws affecting women and social change, and the history of women and social movements.⁴

Women's experiences, Howe points out, must be studied not only in comparison with the experiences of men but also approached from a purely female perspective. This will enable women's culture to be understood and appreciated for its own sake and for what it can offer to the larger context of humanity. Women historically have been identified with caring roles, sensitivity to human relationships, peace and cooperation. These values must be balanced against the masculine traditions of authority, achievement, aggressiveness, war and instrumental action if the human race is to avoid an ethical lopsidedness that will threaten its very existence.

The rich outpouring of research in Women's Studies in recent years testifies to the validity of the field and the dedication of its practitioners. Few scholars in the humanities and social services can honestly argue in 1980 that feminist scholarship has not influenced their disciplines. Everything from linguistics to sex role studies have been transformed by the critical perspective posed by those publishing in Women's Studies. The field is especially exciting because of the international exchange among scholars and the interdisciplinary approach that characterizes Women's Studies scholarship. In Canada, *Resources for Feminist Research* (formerly *The Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women*) provides an invaluable service by publishing bibliographies and abstracts of research conducted all over the world as well as special issues devoted to specific themes and conference proceedings.⁵ Toronto and York universities have recently established

interdisciplinary degrees in Women's Studies while Concordia, Mount Saint Vincent, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and Simon Fraser permit students to focus their research on women's issues by coordinating departmental offerings in the field. The publications emanating from scholars in these new programs augur well for these important institutional bases for Women's Studies.

In my own field, Canadian History, Women's Studies has already made a significant impact. Works by Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown on women in the fur trade have altered the perspective on that important topic,⁶ while books and articles on women's work have had a major influence on working class and labour history.⁷ A recent bibliography of Canadian women's history publications, *The True North Strong and Free* edited by Veronica Strong-Boag of Simon Fraser University and Beth Light of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, documents the extent to which women's history has expanded the frontiers of subjects as diverse as education, medical history, social reform and state policy.⁸ The energy of scholars pursuing Women's History is further documented in the Canadian Historical Association where the women's caucus is one of the most active and its sessions are among the best attended.

Despite the obvious value of Women's Studies, the field is still regarded with suspicion in many university circles. In the early 1970s courses focusing on women were accepted only after protracted battles with department heads, curriculum committees and university senates and boards. Often Women's Studies courses had to be smuggled in through the back door of Continuing Education departments whose directors were anxious to attract a wider student community. Once established, Women's Studies courses were rarely fully endorsed by university administrations. Few universities provided adequate budgets for hiring staff or granted the area full status in the form of departmental autonomy. Job-related fields such as Computer Science, Business Administration and Military Studies might be perceived as legitimate areas for expansion in the university; Women's Studies was more likely to be considered an aberration, an unavoidable but temporary evil that would eventually wither on the vine if left to its own meagre resources.

The resistance to Women's Studies in the Canadian university environment is a curious phenomenon, explained partly by the general anxiety produced by the Women's Movement, partly by the conspicuous lack of women at all levels of the university hierarchy and partly by the fact that it falls within the area of the arts which are ex-

perienicing a general decline. Frequently, too, criticisms levelled against the field mask the real basis for opposition. A common criticism of Women's Studies is its inter-disciplinary approach, which pains those suffering from hardening of the categories. Placing a course on women's history into the calendar may now produce little more than a passing joke on the necessity of creating a complementary course on the history of men, but an interdisciplinary proposal provides an easy means whereby courses with such titles as *Women in the Modern World* can be scuttled by endless wrangling in committees designed to "supervise" interdisciplinary studies. The fact that an interdisciplinary approach may be the most satisfactory means of introducing a student to the wide range of scholarship in the field carries little weight in institutions where budget committees are ill-equipped to deal with courses not sponsored by departments and where general surveys are restricted to such 'specialized' topics as World History, Introduction to Psychology and Military Studies.

Another familiar charge is that Women's Studies courses are not scholarly. This attack was a lethal one in the early 1970s when the field was still in its infancy and professors scrambled to find texts and supplementary readings for their students. Margret Andersen of Loyola College echoed the feelings of many pioneers in the field when she confessed that the repeated insinuation that the subject matter was trivial made her feel insecure and defensive.⁹ One positive result of this criticism is that few courses in the university are more carefully organized and supervised than Women's Studies offerings. A glance at the course syllabi should dispel any notion that Women's Studies courses are superficial and trivial. Moreover, the research resulting from Women's Studies courses soon produced a spate of publications. Volumes of essays edited by Margret Andersen and Marylee Stephenson became required reading in introductory courses,¹⁰ while the Canadian Women's Educational Press offered a wide range of materials for feminist scholars. By International Women's Year in 1975, the research appearing in many special periodical issues of learned and popular journals indicated that Women's Studies had come of age.¹¹

Another charge against Women's Studies is that such courses are ideology masking as scholarship. It should be obvious that all scholarship is pursued within an ideological context, conscious or unconscious. Women's Studies simply attempts to confront an all pervasive patriarchal ideology which so completely infiltrates society that it is all but invisible. The cultural balance must be redressed so

that knowledge truly reflects the human as opposed to the male experience hitherto declared to be "universal." It should also be obvious that as the field expands, ideological perspectives on Women's Studies will be as diverse as the people researching in the field.

Women's Studies courses, once established, are still not immune from attack. They are often sabotaged by counsellors, deans and department heads who discourage students from enrolling on the ground that Women's Studies courses are useless to students facing the present job market. While the job market may or may not be the ideal goal of a university education, this attack is unfounded in very practical terms. First, policy making bodies including government departments, research institutes and boards of education need people who are specialized in women's issues, and in recent years these bodies have been hiring Women's Studies experts. More importantly, courses in Women's Studies are useful for both men and women facing the sexist work world in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Women, both married and unmarried, are entering the paid labour force in unprecedented numbers so that their participation rate is rapidly approaching that of men. Unfortunately, women are channeled into low-paying service jobs where salaries are low and opportunities for advancement few.¹² Women need to understand what they are facing in the job market, and men need to understand women's changing roles if our society is to adjust at all successfully to the employment crisis looming on the horizon. In view of this situation, a survey in Women's Studies may well be one of the most practical courses any student can take at the undergraduate level.

Given the enrollment and funding crises facing universities in the next two decades, it is unlikely that Women's Studies in Canada will advance much beyond their present state without a struggle. It may even be the case that layoff and funding cutbacks will be most damaging to Women's Studies scholars who are often the "last hired and first fired" and to Women's Studies courses which are established on such a tenuous footing. The recent firing of Dr. Marylee Stephenson from McMaster University is only the most glaring example of how the legitimacy of Women's Studies can be challenged while the precarious funding situations experienced by CRIAW and various Women's Studies publications suggest that it will be a long time before the field is safely ensconced in the halls of academe and a longer time still before our educational institutions provide equal opportunity for both male and female students to develop their full potential. On the other hand, the crises of the

universities may be used to the advantage of those promoting the cause of Women's Studies. Departments in the humanities and social sciences, facing declining enrollments, may see advantages in offering Women's Studies courses, while administrators beating the bushes for the elusive student dollar may find it appropriate to encourage female students to pursue undergraduate and graduate studies. Since the Women's Movement is larger than Women's Studies and the university system, it may well be the case that universities in the future will be forced to accommodate the new woman or become obsolete.

NOTES

1. See the *Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women*, Vol. VII, No. 4 (1978) for information on Women's Studies courses offered in Canadian universities. In the United States Women's Studies experienced an even more impressive growth rate in the 1970s. There, scores of undergraduate and over twenty-five graduate programmes in Women's Studies were offered by 1980. See *Women's Studies Newsletter*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (Winter 1980), pp. 19-26.
2. Dana V. Hiller, "The Emergence of Women's Studies," *Journal of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors*, Vol. XLI (Fall 1977), pp. 3-6; Sheila Tobias, "Women's Studies: Its Origins, Its Organization and Its Prospects," *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1978), pp. 85-97; Gayle Graham Yates, "Women's Studies in its Second Phase," *Women's Studies Newsletter*, Vol. V (Winter/Spring 1977), pp. 4-5. See also *Canadian Women's Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall 1978) for perspectives on Women's Studies.
3. Jill McCalla Vickers and June Adam, *But Can You Type? Canadian Universities and the Status of Women* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd./Canadian Association of University Teachers, 1977).
4. Florence Howe, "Introduction: The First Decade of Women's Studies," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (November 1979), pp. 413-421.
5. *The Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women* commenced publication in the Spring of 1972 under the editorship of Marylee Stephenson and Margrit Eichler, two scholars who pioneered the field of Women's Studies in Canada.
6. Sylvia Van Kirk, "The Impact of White Women on Fur Trade Society," *The Beaver* (Winter 1972), pp. 4-21, and her book *Women in the Fur Trade* forthcoming from the University of Toronto Press. Jennifer Brown, *Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980).
7. See, for example, *Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930* (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974).
8. Beth Light and Veronica Strong-Boag, *True Daughters of the North, Canadian Women's History: An Annotated Bibliography* (Toronto: OISE Press, 1980). Excellent examples of recent scholarship in Women's history can be found in Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice (eds.), *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), and Linda Kealey (ed.), *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979).
9. Margret Andersen, "A New Subject: Women's Studies," *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 67-76.

10. Margret Andersen (ed.), *Mother Was Not a Person* (Montreal: Content Publishing Limited and Black Rose Books, 1972); Marylee Stephenson (ed.), *Women in Canada* (Don Mills: General Publishing Co. Ltd., 1973).
11. See, for example, the *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1975).
12. Pat and Hugh Arrastrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and their Segregated Work* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978); Patricia Connelly, *Last Hired, First Fired: Women and the Canadian Work Force* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1978).