

## On Being a Pre-Feminist Feminist OR How I Came to Women's Studies and What I Did There

Evelyn Torton Beck

### The Embattled Years

One could say I was born 'ahead' of my time, or into the "wrong" time, but whichever it was, I didn't fit. Having seen how traditional expectations of women had kept my mother from developing her keen intellect and thwarted her creative impulses, I knew early on that I did not want to live my mother's life. Nor, when I came of age in the 1950s, did I want any part of the rigid gender-bound dating arrangements of the time. I therefore made sure that the man I married understood that I had no intention of becoming "just a housewife." He agreed. We married. I earned a Master's degree and accidentally became pregnant. For him, that was the end of our agreement, but I neither could nor would let it go. After the birth of our second child, I forged ahead, enrolling in a Ph.D. program at the large state university of Wisconsin where my husband was a young professor. When I hired a babysitter to stay with the children while I attended classes, the wives in faculty housing talked about me behind my back and to my husband's face, but I was beyond caring.

Without my work, I knew I might end up mad—like Edna in Chopin's *Awakening* or the narrator of Gilman's *Yellow Wallpaper* (texts that had yet to be rediscovered). And because I knew these

stories from inside myself long before I actually read them, I mustered a fierce driving force toward survival that gave me the courage to insist (over my husband's objection), on continuing toward my doctorate and a profession of my own.

In all the graduate seminars I ever took, we studied the novels of only one woman writer, Virginia Woolf, taught by the one woman in the department (Cyrena Pondrom), and even from her we learned nothing of Woolf's radical challenges to the patriarchy—*A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Because this lone woman professor believed in my seriousness of purpose and respected my intellect, I trusted her guidance. It was she who finally became my dissertation advisor, rescuing me from the patriarchs in the department who believed I was working on a doctorate “as a hobby.” This female mentor not only helped me find my scholarly voice, but also encouraged me to fight the university, when, after I had completed my Ph.D. and had a book to my name (*Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on his Work*, 1972), I was rejected by the Comparative Literature department for a teaching position that was being offered to a young male graduate student who had not even started his doctorate on the very subject of my book. Surprisingly, given the spirit of the times, an all-male committee found in my favor and I was offered a tenure track position. Although I won “my case,” it is clear to me that without my mentor's support I might never have completed my dissertation or succeeded in breaking into the university world (which is what it felt like when I finally did get the job offer of assistant professor).

I never shared this “victory” with my Women's Studies students until I was getting ready to retire in 2002. In several decades of teaching Women's Studies, I had never questioned my reticence to mention this subject even when it was appropriate to the material we were studying. On reflection, it seems to me that because I had to fight my way in, my victory was tinged with some shame, when I should have been proud of my willingness to challenge the patriarchs in the department. It was my students, who, when they finally heard the story, helped me feel good about this act when they strongly applauded my actions and took comfort from my audacity in having taken on the institution, and won.

### First Stirrings of Feminist Movement

But before I was on the job market, when I was entirely focused on finishing my dissertation while living abroad because of my husband's

work, I was not aware of the stirrings of feminist movement until I returned to the United States and was greeted by the cover of Ms. magazine that featured Woman as Goddess with a dozen arms, each holding a different tool. The opening essay, “Why I Want a Wife,” by Judy Syfers (later Brady) exposed the inequitable expectations of men and women within marriage and resonated with me so strongly I felt as if my world had just turned over. And indeed, it had.

The Women's Liberation Movement first took hold in my university as “Alice in Academe,” an informal, off-campus program that offered noncredit courses taught by the volunteer labor of graduate students and a few junior faculty. The official Women's Studies Program was finally put into place only in the wake of prolonged protests when students (and a few faculty) occupied the university president's office.

Even though I was still years away from the job security that tenure brings, as part of a movement I no longer felt isolated, and as a result was willing to risk working with others for the transformation of knowledge and the development of the new interdisciplinary field of Women's Studies. In those still-embattled years, when so many feminist scholars were being sacrificed, I was able to maintain an aura of “respectability” as a scholar (even after I came out as a lesbian in my life and work) because my (pre-feminist) work continued to be seen as an important contribution to Kafka scholarship. For a time, I focused all of my teaching and research on women writers and artists, but soon, and with a feminist eye, I reappraised works of male writers like Franz Kafka (1982a, 1986, 1995), Heinrich Boll (1976), Isaac Bashevis Singer (1975, 1980), and others, in my research and teaching, thus bringing Women's Studies into the disciplines of German, Comparative Literature, and Yiddish.

In the years of burgeoning feminist activism when I also participated in marches and rallies both on and off campus, I believed Women's Studies was the academic arm of the women's liberation movement, and that I was part of an army of scholars engaged in the “culture wars.” In the early years of its development, Women's Studies was denigrated and dismissed as trivial because of its foundational belief that “the personal was not only political,” it was “academic” as well. Against heavy opposition, we fought to institutionalize Women's Studies to assure its survival in the university. Although decades later, it has come to present less of a radical challenge than in the early years of its formation, Women's Studies continues to challenge impugnclassic assumptions and methods, and its existence remains essential

to the larger project of transforming knowledge and creating social change. Without Women's Studies and its allies in programs such as African American, Chicana/o, Asian American, Lesbian/gay/trans, the curriculum might well revert to its earlier versions and we could lose the gains we have attained. While I was director of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Maryland for nine years, I worked together closely with members of African-American Studies (the other programs had not yet come into being) in common cause. Later, many scholars from these programs also became affiliate faculty of what eventually became the Women's Studies Department that now offers an undergraduate major and minor, a graduate certificate, as well as a Ph.D.

### What's In a Name?

I feel fortunate never to have been in a position where I had to fight to keep the name Women's Studies, which, more accurately, should have been called Feminist Studies in the first place. In those early years of formation, only at Stanford University did the program get away with using the adjective "feminist" (and it is not at all clear why they succeeded in that conservative institution). Years later, Stanford refused to tenure to its most prominent professor of women's history, Estelle Friedman, but eventually capitulated to national pressure that was brought to bear. There is no doubt that if most of us had tried to institutionalize something called Feminist Studies (at a time when "feminist" was equated with bra-burning, lesbians, and other negative images), we would never have succeeded.

But, after Women's Studies proved to be successful and drew many women and only a very few men, some programs strategically and voluntarily changed their names from "Women's Studies" to "Gender Studies," in the hopes that more men would sign up for classes and they would be more successful; at other institutions programs were pressured to accept such a compromise. While an analysis of gender is clearly central to the conceptualization of Women's Studies, I believe this name change is a mistake. In Gender Studies, women are subsumed under a rubric that may make men more comfortable while women are once again made to disappear. For similar reasons, I believe that Lesbian Studies should not be subsumed under Queer Studies and should remain part of Women's Studies. However, if, because of university politics, relocation becomes inevitable, at the very least Lesbian Studies should keep its name within the larger unit

(whether it's called Queer or LGBT Studies) in order to maintain lesbian visibility.

### Unity in Diversity?

I had quickly gravitated to Women's Studies when it was being founded, because it seemed clear to me that the liberation of women could only come about if the position and function of women—historically, culturally, and psychologically—were deconstructed so that women would become active agents in their own behalf and men would become allies because they would understand that there "are no free women until there are free men," as an early feminist poster proclaimed. In those early heady days, when we were trying to break the hegemony of the male subject ("he" subsumed "she"), many of us naively believed that we could meaningfully speak about "women" as a large general category that needed no differentiation. At the time this was both comforting and exhilarating, because if our experiences were the same, we could organize ourselves into a powerful force against patriarchy. But it very quickly became clear that this was a vision that had little basis in reality, as differences of socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, geography, and nation, among others, divided women and had to be addressed in theory and practice, as well as in the curriculum. I came to understand that one could start by analyzing any form of oppression and if one followed it to its roots, one would see how all the oppressions were interlocking; for social change to come about, one could not simply focus on a single issue.

For me, coming to this realization meant I had to transform the new courses I had developed, such as *Women in the Arts* that at first had included only women writers and artists with whose work I was already somewhat familiar, not from formal education, but because of my own passionate interest in women writers and artists that predated feminist movement by many decades. Having been fortunate to grow up in New York City where museums were easily accessible, I had gravitated to the work of Kaethe Kollwitz (one of the very few women artists on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art) where I spent many Sunday afternoons. I had also been a passionate reader ever since I learned to read English at age seven (having escaped Vienna and the terrors of the Holocaust reading was a real refuge), and already as a high school student had, on my own, found, and eagerly devoured the works of Kristin Lavransdatter, Pearl Buck, Ayn Rand, Willa Cather,

and other women writers in and among Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Camus, Stendhal, Knut Hamsun, and Alan Paton.

But almost as soon as I had put my first syllabus together, I was shocked when it became evident that those artists whose work I knew well enough to teach, all turned out to be white, middle-class, European or U.S. women. At the time, those of us developing Women's Studies courses were often only a few steps ahead of the students, learning as we were teaching, which was actually intellectually very stimulating and pedagogically fruitful. Because we too were reading and looking with "fresh eyes," we didn't presume to "know" the answers to the many questions that these texts evoked, and discussion was often at a high pitch of excitement as teachers and students together "discovered" women's voices even as we were developing our own. Knowing no better, and because lesbian lives were as yet unspeakable, we assumed that the artists we were studying were all heterosexual even if, as for Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Emily Dickinson, Muriel Ruckeyser, H.D., among others, later scholarship challenged this notion.

With so much new material rapidly becoming available, I soon developed courses in *Minority Women in the Arts* and *Lesbian Cultures* that allowed in-depth focus on artists and writers whose work stood even further outside the mainstream. I also created courses in *Women and the Holocaust* and *Jewish Women's Studies in International Perspective*, and over time recognized that no minority was singular, that each group was itself complexly diverse, and that overlapping and intersecting differences across groups were more common than rare. This recognition made it more difficult to create a curriculum for any given topic, as there was no way that a single course could ever be fully representative. This recognition sometimes made producing a syllabus painful instead of pleasurable; because I felt I was always leaving someone out, especially as new material on women on an international scope was quickly becoming available.

### Balancing Sameness and Difference

Trying to balance women's sameness and difference proved to be a continuing challenge and one of the most difficult to address. The experience of trying to be inclusive led to the single most powerful insight I ever had as a teacher, one that transformed my teaching strategies, curriculum development, and choice of texts. I came to the realization that no single course I taught, no matter how "narrow" its focus,

could ever be completely inclusive of all the differences, overlaps, and intersections that exist in the real world. For example, a seminar in *Lesbian Cultures* could always only include a study of selected lesbian cultures from around the world, but could not be all inclusive even if I focused only on Lesbian Cultures within the United States. When the topic was broader, such as *Healing Women: Feminist Perspectives on Mental Health*, my curricular choices became even more agonizing since I was determined to include the work of shamans and *curanderas* (traditional Latina folk healers) as well as feminist relational theories being developed by the Stone Center in the United States.

After feeling deeply discouraged, I realized that the sheer complexity of the multiplicity offered a way out. If one could not ever literally be all-inclusive in content, perhaps the answer was to offer a perspective that would bring to consciousness those who were not literally represented in the material. I would begin each semester by developing this perspective, hoping to provide a strong foundation that students would take with them as a lens into any course or body of material they were studying, whether or not it was Women's Studies.

The relief I felt in developing this strategy was enormous. No longer did I have to agonize for weeks about what I was "leaving out." It became clear to me that my task was to help students understand that whatever I (or anyone else) chose to include in any syllabus was, and always would be, partial and I urged students to become aware of what was *not* there, much as we had, in the early days of feminist movement, encouraged Women's Studies students to ask in mainstream classes, "Where are the women?" Similarly, they could ask in Women's Studies. "Where are the lesbians? Lesbians of color? Women of color? Jewish women? Disabled women?" And so on—the possibilities and intersections seemingly endless.

Nonetheless, I did not stop trying to broaden the dimensions of my syllabi, and I encouraged students to make use of term papers and research projects to expand the horizons of the course and share their work with the class. I continued to feel that what was absent should be named or become a felt presence in students' minds.

### Digging Deep: Owning our own Assumptive Worlds

This strategy represented a kind of coming to consciousness that paralleled the consciousness-raising we did as women in the very

early days of feminist organizing. While standpoint theory had become a significant tool in revealing the masculinist biases of traditional scholarship and teaching, we had to go further and deepen the awareness of our own standpoints. For this reason, each semester, I started classes by asking students to bring to consciousness their own assumptive worlds, thus making visible the underlying assumptions they were bringing to the work. A few common examples that by 2007 may seem obvious (though still not to all students coming into Women's Studies for the first time): many students assumed that "woman" meant "white, heterosexual, middle-class, Christian female"; "mother" denoted a married (or at most divorced) heterosexual, biological female; "family" was constituted of biological parents and siblings. Until students became aware of their assumptions, they could not change their thinking. However, once the assumptions gave way, this awareness was eminently transferable to other concepts, and because it was not easily reversed, it usually was lasting.

However, this unearthing of assumptions was not limited to my work in the classroom. In order to help Women's Studies gain the professional credibility it needed in order to survive as a scholarly endeavor within the university, I became a founding member of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) and attended the founding convention in San Francisco. I was part of the team responsible for drafting the mission statement (of which we were very proud) and which included strong wording about the determination of NWSA to oppose sexism, racism, homophobia, class-bias, ageism, and looksism wherever it was found. Little did I know that several years later, after my own consciousness about anti-Semitism had been raised, the fact that we had not included anti-Semitism as part of our mission became a volatile issue, resulting in "difficult dialogues" and much unpleasant consciousness-raising within the organization.

Coming to consciousness has consequences we cannot foresee. I came out as a Jew in the lesbian feminist movement, after, to my shock and dismay, I discovered unacknowledged anti-Semitism within the movement. I was not willing to take risks on behalf of those lesbians who were denigrating my identity. As a child survivor of the Holocaust who had been helpless under the Nazis, I needed to take action. I joined with others to create both lesbian and Jewish caucuses within the NWSA. In an effort to work against the anti-Semitism I had discovered among lesbians and the homophobia I had found among Jews, I published *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, a work that brought together these two identities (in all

their complexity) and whose purpose was to educate both communities from inside (1982b/1984/rev.exp.ed.1989; update, 2007). A critical point of theory that grew out of this work was my recognition that "being a member of one minority did not necessarily keep anyone from being oppressive to others" and that "invisibility was itself a form of oppression."

From this theoretical basis, both caucuses worked to make NWSA's programming more inclusive. Over time, plenaries and sections on lesbians were added and became standard, but it was much more difficult to institutionalize programming, especially large plenaries on Jewish women. The Jewish caucus had constantly to remind NWSA leadership that we were invisible yet again. The most difficult, and for the Jewish caucus (most surprising), battle came when a proposal we had made to the governing assembly (including more than a hundred representatives), asking that anti-Semitism be added to the list of oppressions NWSA opposed, was met with harsh resistance and statements verging on blatant anti-Semitism that clearly elided Israeli foreign policy with all Jews. The caucus won that fight, but the stereotypes that emerged (some from Jewish women themselves) left us disappointed, with indelible scars and some mistrust of NWSA. This and other traumatic experiences in the women's studies world led me to write "The Politics of Jewish Invisibility" for the first issue of the *NWSA Journal* (1988), followed by "Jews and the Multicultural Curriculum" (1996), as well as a critique of the much used anti-Semitic and sexist epithet, "Jewish American Princess" (1991).

Over time, I firmly came to believe that oppressed groups must organize themselves before we could find the "unity in diversity" that was the goal of feminist organizing (1983b). But to this day, although only very partial unity has been achieved, some aspect of that initial vision—the "dream of a common language" among women across lines of difference—remains true: women do share some experiences based on gender, even while differences shape the specificity of those common experiences.

## Self-Disclosure and Transparency as Pedagogical Questions

I had come to developing the discipline of Women's Studies from Comparative Literature with a great sense of relief. Although I had been trained in the years of formalism, when it was touted,

*Pat Leish*

following the poet ~~Anders~~, that "A poem should not *mean*, but *be*," these approaches were never congruent with either my purpose or my way of teaching; my philosophy of teaching rooted the material in individual as well as social and psychological contexts; my pedagogical approach was interactive and relational. As a teacher, my purpose was to help students appreciate both the beauty of literature and its ways of helping us figure out our lives. Above all, like feminist poet Marge Piercy, I too wanted "to be of use." Women's Studies, with its foundational beliefs, "the personal is political," and the "academic is personal and political" offered me the opportunity to bring together the multiple dimensions of my life and work. The desire to be fully present and useful to the students' lives led me early on to consider how much of myself to share with the students, and when. This question became far more fraught once I came out as a lesbian and was teaching lesbian material in the classroom. It had not felt difficult to incorporate lesbian material into my classes when it was "they" and not "myself" I was talking about. Once I "was one," I no longer felt comfortable distancing myself from this denigrated minority, but was unsure of what it would mean to reveal myself. I wanted to serve as a role model, but was also fearful that I might lose my credibility. In contrast, and in spite of my work on anti-Semitism, which I knew still existed even on campuses, I was not uneasy in coming out as a Jew. It was a difficult, but not a "spoiled identity" in the sense that sociologist Erwing Goffman (1986) developed the term.

In addition to "coming out" in most of my classes, I also had developed a strategy that led to me make transparent, on the opening day of class, my intellectual history, how I came to develop the course, how I selected the material, what my approach was, and a quick overview of my life, past and present, which seemed most relevant to this class. However, over time, I began to worry that by offering students so much of myself, I wasn't in some way short-circuiting the development of their own perspectives.

I grappled with these issues in two essays written 12 years apart in two different teaching contexts. "Self-Disclosure and the Commitment to Social Change" (1983a) was the result of a small study in which I gave out questionnaires to students in my classes to see how they responded to my self-disclosure. I was pleased that most of the students, both in large lectures and small discussions, thought self-disclosure had positive effects: "it humanized the classroom, encouraged openness in students, created a good atmosphere, created unity in the groups, validated diversity and made the class more meaningful" (Beck, 1983a). I

was also impressed that students came up with their own caveats, for example, teachers should self-disclose only when it is relevant to the subject matter, only if it doesn't take up too much time, only if it feels comfortable to the teacher herself. As a result of my research (mainly in the literature for psychotherapists—the issue hadn't yet been addressed in feminist pedagogy), I modified the timing of my coming out and the depth with which I introduced myself, and concluded that more important even than the actual act of disclosing, was the readiness to disclose and the integrative work it took to get to that place:

.... such a stance toward ourselves, our students, and the material we teach creates a powerful synthesis where the point is not self-disclosure for its own sake, or for the sake of political correctness, but because telling seems important at a given moment, when it is most congruent with, and most organic to the act of teaching. (Beck, 1983a)

By the time I wrote "Out as a Lesbian, Out as a Jew: And Nothing Untoward Happened?" (1994), I had been visible for almost a decade as a very public representative of a Women's Studies Program intent on becoming a department (at the University of Maryland). To gain permission for new hires, new degrees (the major, the graduate certificate) and the approval of a Women's Studies Ph.D., I had been "out-spoken, persistent, persuasive and not afraid of authority figures." I had also succeeded in raising a good deal of money. In this essay I grappled with the personal cost to me, my sense of self, to achieve all of this, because I was always aware that being both a lesbian and a Jew could result in others seeing me as a living embodiment of stereotypes. While I never compromised on the inclusion of lesbian material in our classes, and worked to get colleagues to include material on Jewish women, I did sometimes try to downplay my own lesbian writings. In rereading this essay, and with the benefit of hindsight, I realize that whether or not I included the subtitle to my book, *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, everyone, even on so large a campus, knew anyway. Here, my memory of the difficulty we had in getting the NWSA to include anti-Semitism in its platform may have played a role in my discomfort in putting Jewish and lesbian together.

## The Past is Not Dead

Faulkner was right when he said, "The past it is not dead. In fact, it is not even past." The building of Women's Studies not only remains

amazingly vivid in my mind, but the basic principles of feminist consciousness continue to affect what I choose to do with my time, now that I have retired from university teaching.

About a decade before I retired, I decided to start work on a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology (another early passion) through the Fielding Graduate University, and I was surprised to discover that although psychology had been one of the first disciplines subject to feminist critique and transformation, there was a great separation between feminist psychology and mainstream psychology. Although Fielding had as enlightened a faculty as I could realistically imagine, with many women professors, I found myself in a position vis-à-vis many of my professors uncannily similar to the one I had been in as an untenured feminist among masculinist scholars in comparative literature. The psychology of women was not included, Jews were not part of their multicultural curriculum, and heterosexist assumptions were rife, especially among the male faculty. Because I could not keep silent, I helped to bring these omissions into consciousness, and what I hope will be a lasting contribution to the field grew out of these efforts. In collaboration with Julie Greenberg and L. Lee Knefelkamp, I coauthored an essay on "Integrating Jewish Material into the Teaching of Psychology" (2003) that gave a complex picture of Jewish identity across multiple lines of within-group differences.

But there was one area that I had unconsciously shied away from, even while I was expanding my awareness of what groups were still omitted from the curriculum—I always seemed to "forget" aging. Now, several years later, when I am about to turn 75, I find that I have finally brought together this theme with the realities of my life. After I completed this second doctorate (which had focused on the healing power of art in the life and work of Kafka and Kahlo, 2004), I realized that I did not wish to practice as a psychotherapist working with the troubled, but wanted instead to focus on developing well-being and creativity in the second half of life. I found myself gravitating to dance as a sacred practice, studying ancient women's dances from Eastern Europe that researchers believe contain messages from the grandmothers. The patterns our feet make resemble the patterns of these women's embroidery that I used to include in my earliest women's studies classes. What I saw in these patterns then (images of women's bodies), my teachers are seeing now.

Relying on my years of teaching, I began to offer workshops in sacred circle dances old and new—meditative movement to music from cultures around the world. Combining my training in

group therapy, with my love of poetry, dance, and art, I am also offering workshops in Creative Aging and other inner journeys focusing on joy, peace, the seasons, health and healing, and women's development from maiden to crone. Once again I am learning as I am teaching, and feel thoroughly enlivened. Once again, as in the early years of Women's Studies, I find myself in a world of women, since very few men seem drawn to this dance practice or these workshops. My journey with women's studies has indeed brought me full circle.

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