

# Remembering Mary O'Brien

BY GRETA HOFMANN NEMIROFF

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The first time I saw Mary O'Brien must have been in the early 1970s at a Women's Studies gathering in Toronto. She was speaking about the personal history in which her own study of women was rooted. At the time and thereafter, I thought of her presentation as an educational model for approaching Women's Studies: inquiry beginning with the articulation of personal voice; the search for the systematic attributes of personal experience; the development of an understanding and the explanation of relevant phenomena; the formulation of theoretical perspectives from these conclusions. While the content of her speech interested

me, it is her honesty and openness of manner, her sense of humour, and the power of her glance which stay with me whenever I think of her.

Over the next few years I was to hear her again, to sit on panels with her, and of course to read *The Politics of Reproduction*, which was a major contribution to our understanding of the scope and political economy of women's work; it was to inspire much further research. In the early 1990s, during my times as a Joint Chair of Women's Studies at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, I used the French translation of this book, *La dialectique de la reproduction* (translated by Claudine Vivier) in "Les femmes, la connaissance et le pouvoir," a seminar course at the University of Ottawa. The students found the ideas both interesting and relevant.

The last time I saw Mary was in 1984 at her home in Toronto where I interviewed her for my contribution on Canada to Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global*.<sup>1</sup> We spoke about her work in the group Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW—founded in 1977). We also spoke about the short-lived Feminist Party of Canada (1979–1982), of which she was a founding member. She cogently described the reasoning behind the formation of the Feminist Party. When I asked her why the Party, which seemed such a good idea, lasted such a short time, she smiled and responded: "Well then spring

came and everyone fell in love." She would say no more. I always remember her smile: it was deeply knowing and somewhat wistful. To me that smile exemplified the hope feminists in Canada had during the UN Decade of Women. I seem to remember feeling at the time that feminism had infinite hope and endless resources of time and energy at its disposal. Of course this was before backlash became formalized as governmental policy and people were no longer ashamed to misunderstand and ridicule the concept of political correctness in defense of the systemic oppression against which feminists were struggling.

That was the last time I saw Mary; since then and with tremendous regret I would periodically hear bad news about her failing health and capacities. What remains with me, however, is the memory of her personal and intellectual courage, her command of the language, and her glance which was at once compassionate and ironic.

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<sup>1</sup>It must be said that since brevity was essential for Robin Morgan's huge volume, none of the interview material was directly used, although it informed my understanding and ultimately what I wrote.

