

# 1975 and All That

by Andrea Lebowitz

*Cet article traite de la croissance du programme d'Étude de la femme à l'Université Simon Fraser ainsi que du rôle de Margaret Benston dans la mise sur pied de ce programme.*

On a hot, humid July night in 1975, Maggie Benston and I were called into the Senate Chambers of Simon Fraser University to defend the proposal to establish a Women's Studies Program. Outside, one of Vancouver's rare electrical storms was raging. Inside, sound and fury echoed the thunder. Accusations of academic incompetence and political bias joined assertions that there was absolutely no need for women's studies since women were already studied. There's little need to reiterate the rhetoric. We all know it. On that night, the most arresting declaration against us came from a critic who suggested that to let 'those women' establish a program would be akin to allowing prisoners to start a prison education course. This same worthy critic stated that all we had to offer was enthusiasm.

Well it's now all history. The vote was a substantial majority in favour of Women's Studies and the first chapter closed. Maggie was part of the story from the earliest planning meetings to her death. During my last visits to her she continued to inquire about and offer suggestions for the future of the program.

In the early days of the 1970s, Women's Studies at SFU was fostered by a rag tag group of students, staff, and faculty. We were inclusive in our planning as well as our program, but since Maggie and I were the only (very junior) faculty, we had the task of defending the program at university committees. Maggie, as was her wont, presented the case with charm as well as persuasion. I was the 'just give me the facts' side-kick.

Maggie was the most intelligent person I have ever known. She was also someone genuinely interested in people. Both of these things sound, perhaps, like pious platitudes. But they are simple literal truths. She had the ability to look at issues in ways that escaped the usual paradigms and hence offered new ideas and possibilities. It was not surprising that she had a different way of tackling intellectual questions, since she had been trained as a scientist and most of the rest of us were from the humanities and social sciences. But what was surprising is that she was not locked into scientific models and myths, and could use analytical tools without having to repeat the same patterns. And she liked people. She was intrigued by and interested in all and sundry—simple enough to say but actually quite a rare quality. It's little wonder that her friends remained loyal despite her foibles.

Her ability to escape intellectual straitjackets is nowhere so evident as in her conception of Women's Studies. It is now quite trendy to eschew binaries and reject either/or thinking. But in the 1970s, pundits had it that Women's Studies must either be integrated into existing departments or separated into alternative organizations. Much hot air was expended in arguing these opposites. From the start, she thought this was a useless way of conceptualizing the endeavour. To begin with, as long as Women's Studies was to be housed within existing institutions, it could not be totally separate. Rather she looked for the ways to use the structures of the university to protect Women's Studies without conceding its autonomy and critical nature.

This was a difficult task and yet obviously necessary. hindsight has shown that programs that tried to remain totally separate fell by the wayside during the financial crises of the early eighties. As well, examples of the 'professionalization' of Women's Studies and the severing of its ties to the community and to its social critique abound. It seems to me (although I'm a biased reporter) that the SFU program has managed (sometimes not by much) to avoid the monster of annihilation by assimilation, as well as the watery depths of elimination. Much of this success is due to the way the program was established, which, in turn, is due to Maggie.

From the first planning meetings, Maggie's social critique and commitments and her materialist analysis led our thinking. To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, Women's Studies, like individual women, needed a place of its own and a budget. Maggie saw that without a structural location and control of funds we would be sitting ducks for any political backlash or financial crises. Also she argued that reform of existing disciplines would be fostered by the existence of a separate, integrated and interdisciplinary program. She coined the phrase 'corrective and complementary' which is still permanently engraved in my memory—probably because I used it thousands of times at all those meetings. By the hot and steamy night of the senate debate, we could not look at each other when we used the 'C words' for fear of collapsing into gales of laughter.

Put another way, she saw that the challenge wasn't either/or but how to do both: create a coherent separate program and reform existing departments. Maggie also convinced us that it would be foolish to put forward only one or two courses. Rather we should go for a full program, offer a degree and hire faculty into the program, rather than relying on secondments. Looking back, I

can see that we didn't suffer from modesty (a useless 'female virtue' in any event). Perhaps some of the fireworks we inspired stemmed from this daring. But this is exactly where Maggie's charm was so useful. She could say the most outrageous things, yet charm her listener into agreement. Her critics became her admirers.

In these days of restraint and limited resources, it's pleasant to remember that it was by being daring and demanding that we established Women's Studies. But it was also made possible by the moral and emotional support of a community of women, many of whom never attended university. Again Maggie was adamant that we were linked to that community and had a responsibility to it. She rejected the opposition between political commitment and intellectual pursuits. And she never got frightened off by the old fashioned notion of moral responsibility.

After the first chapter closed, Maggie taught in the program and was a permanent member of the co-ordinating committee. Eventually she changed her appointment to a joint appointment

nothing civil that I can say to such critics.

Maggie remained faithful to her original conception of Women's Studies as a place where we could discover new knowledge and correct previous ways of knowing. But above all, she remained committed to the vision of a better world for women and men. I am angry that she had to suffer for such principles, but I am invigorated that she kept that faith.

And her work goes on. In October of 1991, Meredith Kimball and I were called into the Senate Chambers to defend the proposal to change Women's Studies from a program into a department. Although we had been doing the work of a department for many years, the change was of enormous symbolic importance, for now Women's Studies would be acknowledged as having full rank among the academic units of the university. Our old friend of the prisoner analogy was there. (Some things never change). Although he allowed that Women's Studies faculty and students had excelled themselves, that the field was now an internationally respected one, and that the faculty were known for their achieve-



Maggie at The Female Constituency Seminar on Women in Politics, Spring 1988

with Women's Studies and before she became ill was considering moving into it full time. She had helped to create a program which went from a minor degree at the undergraduate level, to a graduate, masters degree, to the receipt of a federally endowed chair, to a joint major with English and Psychology. As her tolerance for the 'mainstream' university faculties lessened, she maintained her hope in the reforming possibilities of Women's Studies.

Although she worried, at times, that we would be the victim of our own success and become just another university unit cut off from the original goals of the women's movement, she continued to live out her own commitment by contributing her academic talents and expertise to various community research projects. She suffered professionally for this, and some scorned her for not throwing all of her efforts into her academic pursuits. There is

ments as well as their ability to attract large grants, it really wasn't necessary to change the program to a department. Before Meredith or I could speak, his remarks were rejected by the Dean of Arts as an affront to the basic principle of justice.

I wish Maggie had lived to be there that night. She had helped to bring it about, and she would have enjoyed the irony of the speech against us. But she would have enjoyed the overwhelming vote of support even more! Unlike the hot, steamy night in July 1975, Meredith and I walked out into the cool, clear air of a starry autumn evening. It was a moment of satisfaction and reflection. It was a moment when we both spoke of Maggie.

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