

# Highlighting Women's Issues

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Mansfield University's Women's Studies Newsletter

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## Interview with Linda Rashidi, Dept. of Languages and Literature

**By Dr. Andrea Harris**

*Dr. Linda Rashidi received her Ph.D. in theoretical linguistics from Michigan State University. She joined Mansfield's Department of Languages and Literature in 1999.*

### ***What's the nature of your research project in Morocco?***

I am investigating the oral narratives of the Berber (indigenous) women of the Anti Atlas mountains of Morocco. My goal is to record and analyze--and preserve--the narratives produced by these illiterate village women as they go about their daily tasks and socialize with each other. For cultural reasons, these villages are populated almost entirely by women; the men have all left to work in the cities or abroad. This leaves this marvelous female culture where the women spend their days in self-directed activity, from common chores such as grinding olives into oil to celebratory feasts to everyday casual 'ahawaj' sessions where they play their drums and sing their song cycles. I have now spent two consecutive summers living in the village of Dousderm in the home of one of the women. My academic goal is to learn the language and collect their narratives, but I basically live as they do and get to know the women as individuals. It is a life like no other I have ever known. My research last summer was funded in part by a Faculty Development Grant from Mansfield University, and I would like to thank them publicly. On November 9 I gave a presentation of my work with the Berber women as part of the Faculty Lecture Series. There were pictures along with some of the actual music of the women of Dousderm. Finally, this work will also become part of a large project of the Feminist Press called "Women Writing Africa", a history of Africa as seen through the works of the women themselves.

### ***Would you share an unusual travel story with us?***

You should never ask me to tell a travel story! How much space do we have? I am going to *briefly* tell you about my most disconcerting travel. I spent the 1994-1995 academic year as a visiting professor in China. For a number of reasons, I was totally unprepared for my entry into China: I knew nothing about the people, the country, or their language. I arrived alone at the Beijing airport at midnight on a very hot and humid August night, not at all certain that anyone would meet my plane; I had been travelling for over 24 hours by the time we landed. At the airport was Yuan Gui Ping, a foreign affairs assistant from the provincial college where I was to teach in Jilin Province in Northeast China just above the Korea border. He was supposed to be my 'translator', but he spoke little English and had never even been out of Jilin before, let alone to a city as overwhelming as Beijing. As I would later find out, he was as confused as I was, with no concept of what to do with me. He loaded my luggage into a rickety ancient minivan; I sat on a wooden bench in the back among my bags. After an hour's drive through a still crowded city, we arrived at Jilin's "guest house", a place I can only describe as a hovel. It was a single room off a dirt courtyard with no running water and no toilet; the four beds were filthy dirty and the window opened onto a noisy public thoroughfare. After much back and forth, I managed to make Gui Ping understand that I needed a toilet. He led me down the alley to a public and communal lavatory, a large room with a line of squat holes in an open space; at 2:00am, the place was empty but the stench was overwhelming and I had

to watch where I stepped. I stayed in this "guest house" for two days until we finally booked train passage for the 26-hour ride to Jilin; I had not been able to shower and had barely eaten because I simply did not know what a restaurant looked like and could not read Chinese characters (and besides I had no Chinese money). For most of this time, Gui Ping disappeared. I would say I finally escaped for the journey to Jilin, but that train ride was one of pure terror for me, or would have been had I not been by that time so sleep deprived that I was only vaguely conscious of what was going on around me. The entire trip was made squeezed into a space of about 12 inches on a wooden bench, my luggage at my feet, and the train car filled in every nook and cranny with people: on the floor, under the seats, on the back on my bench (I at least had a 'reserved seat'), overhead on the luggage racks, in the aisles, and even in the toilet. Had I wanted to use the toilet, I would not have been able to get through the mass of people to get there. When we arrived in Jilin the next day, I swore that I would never get on another Chinese train, even if I had to live out my days in Jilin. Jilin turned out to be a lovely city and I spent an amazing year there teaching bright and eager students--and I did leave again by train, but this time I bought my own ticket and went first class.

***Why did you decide to study Berber women?***

'My' language, that is the language of my PhD dissertation, is Afghan Persian. As the war in Afghanistan wore on and on, it became impossible to continue research. In the Spring of 1993, I travelled to Spain and Morocco as the 'second' professor with a group of students from Alma College, where I was teaching. My entry into Morocco was one of rediscovery of Islam, and I immediately fell in love with the place and the people. In the course of that trip, I spent a night in an isolated village in the Anti Atlas mountains and there discovered the all-female culture that exists there, the daily singing and conversational narrative, and the outgoing friendliness of the women, who kept constantly urging me, a complete stranger, to "come live with us; you can work." I pledged then and there that I would return to this area and do just that.

***What are social conditions for Berber women?***

Berber women live a 'hard' life. This is a culture where the women do all the hard manual labor: they cultivate the fields, carry heavy loads of firewood on their backs, haul daily water from the well, and generally work tirelessly from dawn to dusk. But they are also fun-loving and have a bawdy and raucous sense of humor; there is a communal spirit that we American individualists find hard to fathom. *Every* evening at dusk, the women all head out to the rocks or the foothills of the surrounding mountains where they sit and gossip, tell stories and sometimes have spontaneous 'ahawaj', the singing of song cycles accompanied by drums and dancing. None of the women over the age of 30 are literate; Habiba, the woman with whom I live cannot even dial a telephone! These are very religious women: they pray five times a day, as prescribed by Islam. Their lives are prescribed by the laws of Islam and, as such, are highly predictable and routine. Last summer when I was in Dousderm, there was drought and there was no running water; there was also much concern about the meager crops, or lack thereof. It will be a hard winter for them.

***Would you describe the women's studies course that you're teaching this semester?***

In addition to linguistics classes, I also teach non-Western literature. Fall 1999, I taught a general Literature of the Non-Western world, a course that my students at a previous institution had dubbed "Strange Lit". This semester, I am doing a more specialized, upper division course called Women Writing the non-Western World (WWnWW). This is cross-listed as a Women's Studies course. We are reading original works by and about women in the Islamic/Arab world (specifically Morocco and Tunisia), Nigeria, India, and China. Because so much of the literature we, as Americans, read is

constructed from a male Western point of view, this course opens up new ways of thinking and being that we seldom consider when constructing our own world view. The essential question we have been addressing is: what is feminism? And we are slowly beginning to see that there are many feminisms, each valid and important in its own way. We are also recognizing the contribution that women have made to indigenous cultures through oral literature, that it is not just the concepts that are Western-male constructs, but also the very modes of conceptualization.

***What kinds of linguistics classes will you teach at Mansfield? What are your plans for a linguistics program?***

I have taught the courses in linguistics that are now listed in the MU catalogue: History of the English Language, English Grammar, and Intro to Linguistics. Both History of English (fondly known as HEL!) and English Grammar (which is a concept course on the structure of English, not a 'where to put your commas' prescriptive grammar course) are required courses for English majors, but Intro to Linguistics is a 'free-floating' course which I taught Spring 2000 to a terrific group of students from nearly every discipline. Spring 2001, I will be offering a Special Topics course in Dialects of American English (ENG 220-06). I am excited about doing this course here at Mansfield. We will look at the dimensions along which English varies here in the US, including region, status, ethnicity (especially African-American), style, and gender. This course should be particularly relevant to students of English, education, criminal justice, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, and women's studies. Unlike English Grammar and Intro to Linguistics, Dialects will take a non-technical approach, discussing various myths of language and language usage. In all of my language courses I like to get students involved in language as it occurs around them by observing and analyzing actual spoken and written language. So we'll be 'out in the field', so to speak.

I am in the initial stages of putting together a Minor in Linguistics. Though the material above would all be covered, I have in mind a restructuring of the various courses now in our catalogue to include more non-technical material with an emphasis on the way language influences who we are and how we view the world around us. In the past, I have taught a wonderful course called *The Nature of Language* which looks at various sociolinguistic topics in English; the favorite unit has always been Language and Gender. Perhaps down the road, an entire course could be developed in this area; few topics in linguistic study have witnessed an explosion of interest as dramatic as that found for language and gender.

***Are there other WS courses you'd like to teach in the future?***

As I intimated above, I would really enjoy teaching a course in Language and Gender, or more broadly, Language and Prejudice, looking at how language conspires to construct our biases. Our single most important identifying characteristic is that of gender; this is true of all cultures. While our sex is biologically determined, the ways in which we construct gender identity are socially determined, and a major factor in the construction of our selves is language, both the language we use and the language others use to define us. I would also like to try my hand at a literature course that would specifically focus on Arab/Islamic women. Another idea I am toying with is a course in women's oral indigenous literature, or orature. My own research in this area has been so enlightening in terms of the (often unrecognized) contributions of women to both cultural maintenance and literary production.

## **Kris Falk: Advocate for Student Athletes**

**By Kath Thompson**

There's a new car in the Decker Gym parking lot these days--one with a kayak riding on top and a mountain bike stashed in the back. The owner is Kris Falk, MU's newest addition to the Health and Physical Education Department and its first senior woman administrator.

Originally from Cass Lake, Minnesota, and educated at the University of Wisconsin, Superior, Kris arrived in Mansfield in August and has been busy exploring the local waterways, trails, as well as the lay of the land of her new job.

Her experience as a triathlete will surely come in handy. Kris is not only the first senior woman administrator in Decker, but she functions as the assistant athletic director and is on the Health and Physical Education faculty as well, teaching Health and Health Methods and two sections of bowling this semester.

"I see myself as an advocate for all the athletes on campus, but especially the women athletes," she said recently. "I have been spending my time since I arrived trying to learn the MU system and make myself available to the students and the athletes. I really like the collegiality of this campus; the way people help each other."

As a lover of the outdoors, one of the more enjoyable aspects of her job these days is getting out to the field hockey games where she has been doing game management. She will be working in a similar capacity with softball and baseball in the spring. "I promote the MU teams in all my classes, reminding the students of game days and times," she said. "Some students in my class the other day didn't even know where the field hockey field was!"

If Kris Falk has anything to do with it, that will surely change in the near future.

*Welcome, Kris!*

## **Women's Health Issues: Talking About Tofu**

**By Dr. Denise Seigart**

**Department of Health Sciences**

A recent trend in dietary habits is the consumption of soy products. Whether it is soy milk, tofu burritos, or soy supplements, many women are searching for soy in their diets. This includes "old" women who are menopausal, as well as "young" college students. The benefits of soy are being advertised widely, yet what we know about soy through research is still fairly limited. According to many scientists, soy has been shown to reduce hot flashes, protect bone density, lower LDL (bad) cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer. According to one of my favorite texts,

"Scientists have found that certain foods--most notably soybeans--contain hormone-like compounds that function like estrogen in postmenopausal women. Some researchers believe that the presence of

these phytoestrogens, as the compounds are called, in soybeans may explain why so few Japanese women—only about 10 percent—report problems with hot flashes at menopause. The traditional Japanese diet contains a great deal of soy products, including tofu and soymilk.”(Perry & O’Hanlan, 1997, p. 35)

In addition, phytoestrogens appear to have some anti-estrogenic qualities that may help protect against endometrial cancer. Scientists think phytoestrogens may protect against cancer either by inhibiting cancer cells from growing or by taking up space in the breast tissue or uterus normally occupied by human estrogen, which is believed to stimulate growth of certain cancers.

If we examine other cultures where the consumption of soy foods is much more common, diseases that are correlated with menopause in western cultures are nearly absent. For example, medical anthropologists have found that osteoporosis is twenty-four times higher in the United States than in some other countries. People living in Singapore, for example, have very low rates of osteoporotic fractures, as do the Maori of New Zealand. Anthropologist Susan Brown has described some Africans living traditional lifestyles as being nearly “immune” to the disease ( Perry & O’Hanlan, 1997)

Although a diet rich in soy would seem to protect women from such ailments as osteoporosis, heart disease, and cancer, we must keep in mind that many other factors are involved in determining our health. Environmental exposures, exercise, and genetic susceptibility are but a few of these. Going “wild” with soy would seem to be an unreasonable response to the risk women in western culture face, in light of what we currently know.

There are some concerns expressed in the literature regarding soy consumption. Perry & O’Hanlan (1997) caution that women who are trying to get pregnant may want to be careful as a phytoestrogen-rich diet may make pregnancy more difficult. Since nutrition is not my area of expertise, I consulted with Dr. Kathy Wright (Nutrition and Dietetics Program) regarding the effects of too much soy in the pre-menopausal woman. Dr. Wright directed me to several studies that seem to discount the effect of soy foods on ovarian function, although the research samples were very small. (Department of Preventative Medicine, University of Southern California, 2000; Martini et al, 2000) Another article suggested by Dr. Wright examined the effect of soy products on plasma lipids in pre-menopausal women. This research also utilized a very small sample (n= 13), but did seem to show promising evidence that soy products can lower cholesterol and thus the risk for heart disease in healthy people who consume soy over many years. (Department of Food Sciences and Nutrition, University of Minnesota, 2000)

If I were to make a recommendation to young women regarding soy products, I think I would play it safe by saying “All things in moderation!” One or two servings of soy products per day is unlikely to cause harm, and more likely to cause health. There is some evidence that soy foods are more beneficial than soy supplements, and keep in mind that foods other than soy also contain phytoestrogens. These include: alfalfa, apples, barley, carrots, garlic, green beans, hops, licorice, oats, parsley, peas, pomegranate, potatoes, red beans, rice, sesame seeds, wheat, yams, and yeast.

Soy foods as part of a balanced diet, accompanied by exercise, avoidance of too much caffeine, alcohol and animal protein, can lead us all to better health, "young and old".

*This is the first appearance of a regular column by Denise on Women's Health Issues. If you have a question on women's health you would like her to answer in the newsletter, please send it to Priscilla Older at [womenstu@mansfield.edu](mailto:womenstu@mansfield.edu).*

## Day Care At Last

**By Lynn Pifer**

I've been writing updates on the Quest for Day Care at M.U. for the last three years. There were times when I thought "The Dream" would never become a reality, and I can't tell you how happy I am that people like former Associate Provost Sandra Linck kept up the struggle that turned into quality child care for M.U. students and staff.

In the last week a new sign appeared which labels the white house with sage green shutters as the Day Care facility, but most people knew what that building was as soon as they put in the slide, sandbox, and big plastic dinosaurs in the fenced-in play area. The inside of the building is more spacious than it looks from the outside, and is equipped with plenty of new toys, furniture, play stations, and computers in the preschool room.

The university decided to "outsource" campus day care, so the facility is run by Kathy Scott of Scott's Day Care. She has employed Joyce Fleming, an M.U. graduate with a B.S.E. in elementary education and early childhood development, to direct the facility. Amy Kibbe, an M.U. graduate with a B.S. in exceptional persons, teaches in the preschool room, and Tori Guibord, who owned her own child care for two years, teaches in the toddler room. Suzanne Sieberson, Valerie Thomas, and Shawna Tighe, all M.U. students, are also employed at the day care center.

I can tell you from my family's first hand experience that these women provide quality day care for children ages 13 months to five years. I know, because my three year old daughter gets up every morning and asks to go to the "new day care." She's quite a dawdler in the mornings, but we can usually get her going by mentioning that she might be missing that morning's art project. And, when we pick her up in the afternoons, *we can't get her to leave*. We've seen her put on ferocious dinosaur plays with Katie Grace, dress up as doctors with Hailie, play the triangle in parades with Jazzmyn, and sing the ABC song at the top of her lungs when one of her friends successfully places all the letters into the appropriate honeypots in the Winnie the Pooh alphabet computer game. We know she's safe and happy when we take her there each day.

But the struggle isn't over yet. Many students can't afford to use the facility. M.U.'s Student Affairs Committee is working with Scott's to allow more flexible hours for student parents. The committee is also trying to work with Student Government to find funding for student stipends to help offset the cost

of day care. Because the service has been outsourced to a private company, the university cannot determine the prices. We should, however, keep working to find ways to subsidize day care tuition for children of M.U. students.