

# Highlighting Women's Issues

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*Andrea Harris presented the following paper at the Mid-Atlantic Women's Studies Association Annual Conference in February. As Mansfield's Women's Studies Program approaches its 10th anniversary, her paper reminds us of reasons to celebrate 10 years of Women's Studies at Mansfield.*

## **Bridging the Gap: Teaching Introduction to Women's Studies at Mansfield University**

By Andrea Harris  
Department of English

First, I'd like to give you a bit of background about Mansfield's Introduction to Women's Studies course at Mansfield. The course was first taught in 1991 as Judith Sornberger was developing the Women's Studies program. I first taught the course in 1994 and have gone on to teach it once or twice a year for the past eight years. I structure my course as an introduction to American feminism, with a focus on the second and third waves (the women's movement of the last 40 years). I use the textbook *Women: Images and Realities*, which contains a good deal of feminist research in the disciplines, classic texts by Friedan, Rich, Lorde, and others, as well as a scattering of personal essays, poetry, and short stories. In this discussion-based course of twenty-five students, I assign journals, collaborative projects, and consciousness-raising groups in order to engage students directly with the subject matter. What I'd like to do here is to discuss the challenges of teaching this course in our institutional setting, with an emphasis on our student body and what they bring to the classroom in the way of resistance, insight, and struggle. I'll do this by comparing my first Women's Studies class in 1994 with a recent class in the spring of 2001—what I think of as my most challenging Women's Studies class and my most rewarding Women's Studies class.

Who takes Introduction to Women's Studies at Mansfield? The class usually reflects the make-up of the student body as a whole. That is to say, in my sections I have a majority of white students from the region with a handful of Black and Hispanic students, who are usually from various Pennsylvania cities. I have had only one international student in all of the sections I've taught. While most of the students are female, I have always had between one and five male students per section. There are some quite apparent conflicts between these various groups of students, as is true at many schools, based on race, age difference, and sheer lack of familiarity with each other. And classroom conflict also flourishes in a course that touches on so many issues that push buttons: sexuality, class, racism, ethnicity, religion, reproductive choice, etc. To take racial difference as an example, not infrequently my white students will talk about their complete lack of contact with anyone from another race until reaching college. "Oriental" and "colored" are still in the vocabulary of some of these

students from the area, largely because they've probably never known a non-white person very well. At the same time, I have students of color who will speak of their familiarity with people from a huge range of cultures. For them, someone is Cambodian or Thai, not simply "Asian" and they'll talk to the class about the differences between growing up in a Puerto Rican vs. a Chicana household, for example, when we read an essay that discusses "latina" culture as if it's a homogeneous entity.

There's a good deal of otherness in the air in this course about difference and tolerance. And I'm there, presumably, to bridge the gap between students as they encounter the other. I'm also there to bridge whatever other gap happens to loom large in the classroom. These can be gaps between one student's experience/culture/belief and that of another; gaps between their experience and the experiences represented in the text; gaps in their knowledge as they read about feminism, to which few of them have had much access prior to this course. Despite these gaps and differences, the one common factor that unites Mansfield students virtually across the board is social class. Whether from small villages in the Pennsylvania mountains, or from Philly, our students are mostly working class. Many of my non-traditional female students work in heavy manufacturing; many male students have just left the service and attend on the GI bill; many of the city kids come from poor neighborhoods. Nearly all the students contribute significantly to their college expenses. But since class is so difficult to talk about, so little understood especially among the young, and so obscured in American culture, this crucial connection is quite hard to foreground. Other differences tend to make it invisible. What I hope to have shown you with this composite sketch is that the specific makeup of our student body creates very specific challenges for me as a Women's Studies professor, more in fact than I face teaching literature or composition.

But I've found of late that these gaps are closing. In 1994, in my first Introduction to Women's Studies course, my students rebelled and refused to read an article on lesbian parenting about midway through the semester, because, as the self-elected spokeswoman claimed, "All of our assignments are about lesbians, and we can't relate. We thought this class was supposed to be about **women**." Despite being completely astonished, I challenged her back. "Lesbians are women, aren't they?" was my reply. I then proceeded to count the number of "lesbian" articles I'd assigned: five out of forty readings, which is, needless to say, a rather modest number. The class and I struggled over this for a while. They grumbled; I stuck to the syllabus. They made homophobic remarks; I reminded them that since one in ten people in the general population was gay or lesbian, we might well have two or three gays or lesbians in our very classroom, which was an alarming prospect for some! This warning had little effect: students continued to make homophobic remarks and to resist the insights of the articles we were reading. I continued to counter their homophobia. And I had to do a lot of bridging the gap that semester.

Move ahead eight years to this past spring. After a bit of a break from teaching the intro course, I agreed to teach it again, with great trepidation, since I'd had some difficult classes in the interim and rather frustrating moments with them as well, but no out-and-out rebellion to contend with. My new students surprise me. After a few weeks of lively discussion, and after reading their first batch of journals, I learn that I have an out lesbian student, another student who grew up in public housing with

a single mom, and other students who have budding feminist consciousnesses. A student from Africa, who is articulate and sophisticated beyond her years, raises the bar every time she makes a comment on the reading. I am awestruck. Most importantly, I have students who will discuss **in the classroom** their experiences with dating violence, lesbian baiting, and racism. Nothing goes undercover in this class. And the students are compassionate as they listen to each other's stories. Most crucial for me, students volunteer to bridge some of the gaps—it's no longer exclusively my role to do so. Teaching Women's Studies now seems like the reason I became a professor.

And yet, I wonder what happened. How could this class be taking place at the same institution where students once refused to read about lesbians because, as far as they were concerned, lesbians weren't real women? I've thought a great deal about how this came to be. First, I got lucky—I had a fantastic group of students who represented a broad range of experiences and backgrounds. They also brought a great deal of curiosity and commitment to the course and grappled with themselves and their reactions in their journals. But something more must have caused such a change, and I believe that cause is dual. The very fact of the presence of the Women's Studies Program at Mansfield for a decade has had an impact on students who have not even taken the course—Women's Studies is now part of their world. Rather than wonder, as they peruse the master schedule in search of courses, *what is* women's studies, most students now know someone who has taken the course and many of them have heard that it's a very different course because you get to talk about your life and because it helps you to understand yourself. We've raised consciousness in the student body, essentially, and it pays off for us as professors. The second reason for this dramatic change is that, although the town of Mansfield is relatively isolated, as is the entire region, I'd say that, in many ways, our regional students have caught up with their peers elsewhere, although their issues may still be different and their reactions to feminism different as well. These regional students somehow seem younger to me than they did ten years ago, because they have a more global outlook. The youth culture of their urban peers has drifted their way. And with this youth culture comes a greater awareness of difference—whether that be racial, sexual, or class difference. So, as much as I question the homogenization of American culture through popular culture, big box retailers, and the internet, I also see that it's had some good effects. It does bring the wider world to rural outposts, and that, in some ways, is a good thing, at least for me as a professor of Women's Studies. I have to do less bridging of gaps and I can take my work as a feminist professor much further. In short, Introduction to Women's Studies has begun to seem less introductory in the past year or so.

To wrap up, I want to make one last remark. In a time of uncertainty and rapid change, both outside our campus and on our campus, Women's Studies is something that we should hold onto. I say this because my experience as a professor who teaches in three subject areas—literature, composition, and women's studies—has shown me again and again that women's studies courses have an unusual and a tremendous impact on students' personal lives as well as their intellectual lives. Just a few days ago, I received an email message from a former student I'd had almost three years ago. She wrote to thank me for inspiring her and for being a role model, for teaching her that her opinion mattered. She also told me that she had come out as a lesbian after graduation and that our readings had helped her to find her way. I hear from such students regularly—students whose lives have changed as a result of

women's studies--and these are often students with whom I never had a single conversation outside of class. I don't take this as a testament to my work as a professor, but as a testament to the rare nature of women's studies pedagogy and feminist thinking in its capacity to reach young women and to give them a sense that they matter. It's vital that we keep offering this opportunity to our students at Mansfield, students who in general have not experienced privileged lives. I would hate to see them lose this opportunity for self-discovery, an opportunity that they deserve and need a great deal.

## **Women's Studies Elects New Director**

*By Priscilla Older*

Denise Seigart follows Judith Sornberger, Andrea Harris, Lynn Pifer, and Priscilla Older as the fifth director of the program and the first director from the sciences. As Associate Professor of Health Sciences/Nursing, Denise teaches Women's Health Issues (a WS distribution course), Obstetric/Pediatric Nursing, Nursing Research and she assists with the Medical-Surgical Nursing course in the fall.

Denise writes that she is "particularly interested in women's health, the history of women's health, and the feminist movement with regard to the effects it has had on women's health care." She likes teaching in the Women's Studies Program "because it is transdisciplinary, it approaches students from a feminist perspective and encourages the use of a feminist pedagogy."

I asked Denise why she was interested in directing the Women's Studies program. She replied: "I believe it will help me build a stronger connection to the other Women's Studies professors and students outside of nursing. Being based in Sayre has its disadvantages and one of these is the lack of opportunities to develop strong connections with faculty and students in other departments. I am also interested in expanding my skills and have never been a Director before. In addition, I think I bring a different perspective to the Program which may help it grow, change, etc. Everyone works to find a place where they feel a comfortable fit within the University, and I feel very comfortable (excited even) to be a part of the Women's Studies Program at Mansfield. I am also the Chair of the Feminist Issues Topical Interest Group for the American Evaluation Association and the Women's Studies program ties in nicely with my interests in this area. Most people don't think of nurses as feminists, but there are plenty of us, and I would like to be involved in helping to educate a few more feminists."

Denise brings many strengths to the program, and we look forward to an exciting three years under her leadership.

## **Susan Douglas: *Growing Up Female With the Mass Media***

*By Emilee Danielson*

*The writer is a WS Minor, with a double major in Journalism and English.*

On March 13, 2002, in the multi-purpose room of Alumni Hall, Susan J. Douglas, an author and Communications professor at the University of Michigan, gave a talk on “Growing Up Female” in today’s media based society. In a very crisp, witty, and intelligently sarcastic manner that I am told is her trademark, Douglas reviewed the media influence on girls and women focusing on the 1960s and today.

Douglas first addressed the idea of feminism as a dirty word. Feminism is a word that was taken from the movement, marginalized and criticized by the media until the connotation to the word that exists now is seen as the only meaning. That is, a hairy-legged, man-hating, lesbian with control issues. Douglas then addressed the role of mass media in shaping the love/hate views that women have of themselves. She discussed how the media must build up our collective self-esteem to make us believe that we are Goddess-like creatures, but at the same time we can never be thin enough or gorgeous enough. This conflicting message not only confuses girls and women, but it also helps stabilize the economy of the beauty and diet industries. In addition to that, the media also works toward building a love-hate relationship with those same women, creating issues of feminism vs. femininity.

The baby boom years (1946 – 1964) gave conflicting images in media to women. In one ear young women heard “I Will Follow Him,” while in the other they heard “You Don’t Own Me.” Equally confusing were the media images of game shows like “Queen For a Day” and McCall’s, while President Kennedy was passing the torch to a new generation. He wasn’t passing the torch to a new generation of *men*, but simply to a new generation.

Fast forward to the present and to the media expectations of women as SUPERWOMAN! The media ideals we are faced with include being as intelligent and career driven as Star Jones, as in-shape as Lucy Lawless, and as sexually expressive as Britney Spears. We are shown every day on the cover of a million frivolous magazines that we aren’t good enough and we need to try harder, but no matter how hard you try you can never be as good as the ubermodel we are conditioned to idolize. And medical experts wonder why 75% of women have a poor self-image?

Douglas concluded her talk by asking the question “what can we do?” The answer? Be a public nuisance! Ask questions, demand answers, take back feminism on your own and re-create its image to what the original feminists wanted it to be. In addition to that, own the word feminism in all of its glory. Do not be afraid to embrace or express publicly your feminist ideals. Contrary to what the media may want you to think, feminism is *not* a four-letter word!

## **Seneca Falls and the Women Who Dared**

By Emilee Danielson

In a small town in upstate New York in 1848, a group of three hundred men and women gathered to discuss the social, civil, and religious rights of women. On March 14, 2002, a group of about twenty women traveled to that small town to see the Wesleyan Chapel that was the site of the first women’s right convention and the home of its organizer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Seneca Falls is known as the

birthplace of the women's movement, and the daylong trip, sponsored by the Women's Center, Women's Studies Program, President's Commission on the Status of Women, and Office of the Vice-President of Student Affairs, gave all the participants a look at what happened there 150 years ago.

After a two-hour bus ride from Mansfield we arrived at the Women's Rights National Historic Park. We were met by a park ranger who spoke to us about the convention and showed us a movie in the museum's theater. After touring the museum, the Wesleyan Chapel where the convention took place, and a brief break for lunch we went to the Elizabeth Cady Stanton house. The Elizabeth Cady Stanton House was bought by the parks service in 1985, restored, and opened to the public 1995. The house contains items owned by Stanton, including the writing desk where she wrote the "Declaration of Sentiments" that was read at the convention. That declaration put a clear voice to the demands of, and the need for, a women's rights movement. The day in Seneca Falls was concluded by a stop at the Women's Hall of Fame, which was opened in the 1970's and has inducted over 150 women of the past 30 years.

The trip to Seneca Falls was well worth the time spent going. It was great to see something dedicated to the great women who started the push for equality so many years ago. Even though Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the rest of the men and women involved in the convention never got to see their dreams of equality between the sexes realized, their legacy lives on in Seneca Falls.

## **The Vagina Monologues**

*By Denise Seigart*

*Robert Packer Dept. of Health Sciences*

I recently attended a Women's Studies conference at Bucknell University. It was a first for me as I have never attended a women's studies conference before, nor have I ever been to Bucknell University. It a beautiful campus, set along the Susquehanna river, and the buildings have an old, ivory tower character to them. The women I met there had come from Universities throughout Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and other mid-eastern states. They had come to present their ideas regarding women's studies, feminist research, feminist literature, and other wild radical things. I found a presentation by Penn State Professor Carolyn Sachs particularly intriguing. She studies the agricultural practices of rural women in places like Peru and Bangladesh. She talked about how women there are the "keepers of the seeds", and I thought about what a wonderful metaphor that was for women in general. There were other interesting presentations by many other interesting women (including our own Lynn Pifer, Andrea Harris and Priscilla Older), and I would encourage any Mansfield faculty member and students to attend a similar conference. However, for me, the most engaging event was not the presentations by the learned faculty and students, but the evening presentation of the *Vagina Monologues* put on by the Bucknell students.

I have not seen the New York City version of Eve Ensler's play, nor do I feel the need, after watching the twelve Bucknell women that Saturday night. You may ask what are the *Vagina*

*Monologues*? I can try and tell you, but to truly understand, you must experience it. The web page dedicated to the play describes it this way:

Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* is a compelling work that has given a voice to women of all ages all over the world. An astonishing balance of the incredibly intimate and the amazingly universal, Eve's words have so inspired and empowered people and transformed consciousness about women's bodies and experiences that we at V-Day have been inundated with requests to obtain permission to perform the play.

<http://www.vaginamonologues.com/perfrights.htm>

*The Vagina Monologues* play is based on interviews that were done with hundreds of women. This play is being presented at the Westside Theatre in New York City, and each year around Valentine's day, it is also enacted all over the country by college women to raise money for women's programs. As noted on the college program web page:

The V-Day College Campaign invites colleges and universities around the world to mount benefit productions of *The Vagina Monologues* on their campuses on or around V-Day (Valentine's Day) to raise money and awareness to stop violence against women. The proceeds from these events are donated to local organizations in the schools' communities that are working to stop sexual violence. One of the goals of the College Campaign is to empower young people – the leaders, shapers and messengers of the future.

<http://www.vaginamonologues.com/perfrights.htm>

The monologues reflect the attitudes of women towards their bodies, their vaginas, their inner selves. *The Vagina Monologues* have a lot to say about "down there", but the play is not just about vaginas, it is about being a woman: today, yesterday, and tomorrow. It is joyous, it is outrageous, it is horrifying. It is about being a woman, here in the good old US of A, and in Afghanistan, and throughout the world. It is a dark, warm tunnel, in which you immerse yourself, sometimes with fear, sometimes with surprise, and ultimately, with an incredible sense of release. You will come out of the *Vagina Monologues* changed. I would like more people at Mansfield to experience the *Vagina Monologues*, thus, as the newly elected Program Director of Women's Studies for next year, it is my goal to bring the play to Mansfield in February of 2003 or 2004. I know we have students just as talented as those I watched at Bucknell. I would love to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Women's Studies at Mansfield with a celebratory weekend of events, including the *Vagina Monologues* experience. If you would like to help, contact me at X89-4610 in Sayre. To read more about Eve Ensler and the *Vagina Monologues*, go to:

<http://www.vaginamonologues.com/perfrights.htm>

You can also find *The Vagina Monologues* in North Hall Library, call number PS3555. N75 V3 2001.

# **A Reflection on the Intercultural Relations Conference “Indigenous Peoples: The Demise of Original Populations and Cultures”**

By Linda Rashidi  
Department of English

On March 15-16, 2002, Mansfield University hosted an Intercultural Relations Conference on Indigenous Peoples. The conference was organized by Annie Cooper, Director of Multicultural Affairs and International Student Services and sponsored by: the Black Students Union, President’s Advisory Board for Diversity, Anthropology Club, SSHE Social Equity Office, and MU Student Activities Office. Friday afternoon and all day Saturday was filled with a variety of events and presentations, all highlighting the struggle of indigenous people to survive and flourish. Present throughout the weekend was Adam Fortunate Eagle Nordwall, a Chippewa Indian who has spent his adult life fighting for the rights of Native Americans. His recently published book, *Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz*, recounts the Indian occupation of Alcatraz from 1969-1970.

While Dr. Fortunate Eagle was definitely the centerpiece of the conference, one aspect of indigenous cultures became apparent as the conference progressed: many, if not most, indigenous peoples are surviving today because of the strong presence of their women. Fortunate Eagle himself emphasized the matriarchical nature of American Indian Nations, and tribal status is established through the maternal line. This was borne out in the various presentations. Saturday’s afternoon session began with “Totem Rhythms,” a collaborative project that is the brainchild of Marietta Dantonio Dream Walker Fryer, Professor of Art at Cheyney University. She took us through her journey in conceiving and creating this project that fosters awareness of cultural roots and heritage by the merging of art and traditional storytelling onto carved and painted story *totem poles*.

On display were the poles that have been created by two local Native American groups: the Thunder Mountain Lenape Nation and the Eastern Delaware Nation. Each pole is from a tree that grew on the land of the people creating it. After the pole was prepared, the people themselves painted story pictures on the pole. Most of those involved in the projects are women. Accompanying Dream Walker was Evelyn Firewalker Hayden, a visiting Professor at Lycoming College and a mixed-blood Lanape. She described her involvement in the creation of the Lenape pole.

Both of these articulate and creative women were accompanied by their husbands, who have contributed to this project in important supporting roles. I was struck throughout by the female-centeredness of this project and by the femininity of these women. They have accomplished much, not by emulating Western, masculine modes of power and hierarchical organization, but through more feminine negotiation and a truly gentle, persuasive style. Likewise, the men accompanying them were comfortable in their masculine, yet supportive roles. Like many indigenous cultures, the roles of men and women are quite distinct—but always complementary. We had a chance to see that in action at this conference.

On Saturday morning, I presented my own work on female roles in indigenous cultures, my focus being the life and music of the Berber women of southern Morocco. Like the American Indian women, the Berber women lead separate but parallel lives from those of the men; male and female roles are distinct but complementary. Watching the Native American women dance later in the afternoon to the beat of the drum, I was transported back to my summers spent in a small village in the Anti Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Like the Berber women, the Indian women have dances distinct from the men and their own style of dancing, and while there are differences in who participates and with whom, these two indigenous groups of women both show the vibrancy of their particularly female cultural ways. We can, of course, learn much from Indigenous People, but perhaps the dignification and value of gender roles, both female and male, is the most important lesson to take away. Mansfield University was truly blessed to have among us such articulate and creative members of America's Indigenous People.

## Celebrations

At its February meeting the Women's Studies Steering Committee elected **Dr. Denise Seigart**, Associate Professor in the Department of Health Sciences/Nursing, as its new director for a three-year term. (See a lengthier introduction our new director after "Celebrations.") Denise will be traveling to Volgograd, Russia, in fall 2002 where she will teach a course in History of Women's Health in the Volgograd/Mansfield exchange program, but she'll be back to direct the program in December. (Students interested in accompanying her should contact her at [dseigart@inet.guthrie.org](mailto:dseigart@inet.guthrie.org), phone X894610).

**Priscilla Older** ends her term as director of WS in May, and she will also be retiring after 14 years at Mansfield.

In February **Andrea Harris, Priscilla Older, Lynn Pifer, and Denise Seigart** attended the 2002 Mid-Atlantic Women's Studies Association Conference at Bucknell University. The conference theme was *Locating Women's Studies*. They led a roundtable discussion on "Siting Women's Studies at Mansfield University."

Minor **Gretchen Biscardi** will graduate in May. Congratulations, Gretchen!

Three students have declared the Women's Studies minor during this academic year: **Kimberly Cady, August Oister, and Katie Fotta**. We welcome them to the program.

In observance of National Library Week, North Hall Library is honoring Mansfield University faculty scholars and writers with a reception and book signing on April 15. Five of the scholars—almost one-quarter of the total number being honored—are Women's Studies faculty: **Andrea Harris, Bonnie Kutbay, Judith Sornberger, Louise Sullivan-Blum, and Sue Young**.

**Denise Seigart** will be the co-editor of the Winter 2002 issue of *New Directions in Evaluation* discussing Feminist Approaches to Evaluation.

**Linda Rashidi** gave a talk on “Berber Women: Culture and Language” at MU’s Intercultural Relations Conference, “Indigenous Peoples: The Demise of Original Populations and Cultures” on March 16. Her reflections on the conference are on p. 6.

## Names to Honor

*By Priscilla Older*

Did you know that *four* campus buildings are named after women? The Sandra B. Linck Childcare Center, of course. And you may be aware that Steadman Theater is named for Grace Steadman, Music Department Chair from 1921-1939. But there are two more. Recently LesErik Achey, librarian and University Archivist, told me that Beecher House and Richards House (now called Alumni House) were both named after women pioneers in the field of home economics, Catharine Beecher (1800-1878), educator and social reformer, and Ellen Swallow Richards (1842-1911), chemist and home economist. (Richards House began to be called Alumni House in 1986. Les said he has found no evidence that this was an official name change.) The houses were moved from other locations to their present sites at the south end of campus in the 1960s. They were used by the Home Management program for many years as model homes where home economics students lived and practiced what they learned in classes.

Catharine Beecher was the daughter of a prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century clergyman and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Independent from an early age, she first taught school and then founded one of the country’s most distinguished schools for women, the Hartford Female Seminary. Beecher’s first published writings advocated rigorous education for women. Later she wrote many works on domestic economy, including *Treatise on Domestic Economy* and *The American Women’s Home*. In her writings she urged married women to value their work in the home as an “honorable calling with great significance for the future of American democracy.” Beecher believed passionately in the “social importance of women’s domestic work and their labor as teachers.” Her writings were widely read before the Civil War because they provided new ideas about women’s roles in a changing society.

Ellen Richards first attended Vassar where she studied astronomy and chemistry, then MIT where she earned her B.S. She was the first woman to receive a degree from MIT, but the institute discouraged her from seeking a doctorate because it did not want to grant its first Chemistry Ph.D. to a woman. Richards stayed at MIT as a laboratory assistant and eventually was given an appointment as instructor of sanitary chemistry. As a sanitary chemist she conducted the first scientific testing of American water supplies. She served women at MIT as an unofficial dean of women and mentor to women students. Through her efforts women gained equal admission with men. Later in her career Richards’ research and writing focused on domestic science or home economics. She sought to apply

scientific principles to domestic labor and to professionalize the field of home economics. A founder of the American Home Economics Association, she served as its first president.

Mansfield University is rich in women's history! We need to learn more so we can honor our predecessors.

Thanks to Les Achey for calling my attention to the history of Beecher and Richards Houses. Biographical information is from *American National Biography*.