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Review of We Become New: Poems by Contemporary American Women

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Since the end of spring term 1975, Michigan State University has had a formal undergraduate program in women's studies. The program is called a "thematic concentration," a new device at M.S.U. for facilitating interdisciplinary work in selected areas at no extra cost to the university (there are also thematic concentrations in Jewish, Islamic and film studies). For the student, this entails completing a minimum of 20 credits, or five to seven courses, chosen from at least three disciplines from an official list of women's studies courses approved by the university curriculum committee. Upon the student's graduation, the assistant dean in the college where the student has a major certifies completion of the program, noting on the student's transcript: "Undergraduate Program in Women's Studies completed."

Approval of this program culminated several years of discussion among faculty and students interested in women's studies. We are a program fairly rich in offerings; 14 different courses taught in 11 different departments are included in the official thematic concentration list. In addition, there is a popular women's studies track (with at least 400 enrolled each term) in the required writing program for first-year students; courses with temporary numbers are taught from time to time; and there are several graduate level seminars in women's studies. Among our offerings are two which, from our knowledge of programs around the country, seem fairly unique: a biology course on human sexual dimorphism and a philosophy course involving analysis of concepts central to feminist theory.

From the standpoint of a budget-pressed university administration, the genius of the thematic concentration arrangement is that it involves no additional budget or administrative personnel. Regular advisers and assistant deans are supposed to guide students through the program. Courses are developed and taught within departments, and the faculty teaching women's studies courses are officially admonished to "develop devices to maintain and nurture communication with each other," but are given no released time or budget support to facilitate this.

From the perspective of faculty and students committed to women's studies, this program is better than nothing, but is riddled with problems. We have gone ahead and functioned as a committee, meeting regularly, making information on women's studies courses widely available, sponsoring a regular, well-attended colloquium series and working to strengthen library and film resources. But we lack official legitimacy in these efforts, and administrators have hassled us in various ways, implying that we are stepping beyond our proper sphere and that we should fade away beyond simply teaching our separate courses. Their main worry seems to be that we will press for resources in an economically-strained time. The thematic concentration legislation has catch-22 elements: for example, there is no official provision for experts in a given field (such as our group in women's studies) to put forward or screen new courses to be added to the official list. The program relies heavily on advisers scattered throughout the university (which is one of the largest in the country) and it will be a monumental task—which we have no official mandate to undertake—to keep them well-informed.

Our greatest resources are the women's movement and ourselves. Women's studies courses are increasingly visible on campus, and are well enrolled. Our colloquium series has had widespread publicity and has enhanced intellectual contact across disciplines (it has included presentations of new research on women and psychology, literature, economics, history, linguistics; a large public

discussion on how to end sexism in everyday academic life; a poetry reading; speakers on feminist medical and financial self-help). We have close ties with the Women's Resource Center, which is funded through the Vice-President for Student Services and with other campus women's groups. We value our contacts with women's studies programs in other places—through the Michigan Women's Studies Association, a statewide group which has thus far held three conferences; through this newsletter; and—we hope—through a national conference.

In the long run our staying power may well depend on our getting a firmer foothold within the university structure. We are also concerned about the large number of our faculty who are untenured and in temporary jobs. Three years of effort toward creating a women's studies program at M.S.U. have borne some fruits, but we see much struggle ahead.

Barrie Thorne

BOOKS: NEW AND RECOMMENDED

The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters by Annette Kolodny. The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

Kolodny, a colonial American literature specialist with extensive training in psycholinguistics, examines the recurring personification of the American landscape as both mother and mistress. Hers is an insightful and provocative analysis of the concept of "the land-as-woman" and a warning that the continued acting out of this image and metaphor-making use of language may lead to ecological destruction.

Early documents and pastoral literature portray the colonialization of America as a return to the womb, a new birth, a nurturing experience. When the frontiers wore out, settlers pushed into new ones, resulting in a rape of the land. When America ran out of frontiers, the pastoral literature of the period revealed frustration and anger. In American culture, Kolodny asserts, these emotions are reflected in careless or even wanton destruction of the environment. Documents and literature by Philip Freneau, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, John James Audubon, James Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms are treated in depth. Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Bellow and Mailer are discussed more briefly.

The Lay of the Land is bold, innovative, and rigorously researched. It is a valuable resource for scholars and advanced students of American literature and/or history, and for those interested in ecology or linguistics. *Jeannine Dobbs*

We Become New: Poems by Contemporary American Women edited by Lucille Iverson and Kathryn Ruby. Bantam, 1975.

An anthology of 43 contemporary poets, this one is frankly "feminist" in its orientation. The editors chose poems that define "those themes at the core or root of the new and vital image of woman emerging from our present women's movement." They do not label those "themes" but discuss some of them in two brief, useful introductions. The anthology makes its point, further, by arranging its poems neither chronologically nor its poets alphabetically. Instead, older and/or well-known poets appear alongside the young or rarely published. The effect: you concentrate on the poem—and you are not disappointed.

Florence Howe.