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### Introduction

Leonore Hoffman

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# REGIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY AND LITERATURE: NEW APPROACHES TO NEW MATERIALS

## Introduction

The project "Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective" was developed in 1976 by the Modern Language Association Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession and has been supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The major goal of the project is to improve the teaching of literature through involving students directly in conducting research on the letters, diaries, journals, oral testimonies, and "lost" published literature of the women of their region. Courses have been developed in a number of colleges and universities throughout the country in which students have explored local archives in public libraries and historical societies or have interviewed local women. Although each student had an individual project, classes met as a whole to learn research skills, to analyze findings, and generally to offer mutual support and encouragement. Finally, each student presented her or his findings to an audience outside the classroom. Some went into the community with dramatic readings from diaries and letters; some prepared slide-tape shows; others invited faculty, community people, and family to "celebrations" at which they read excerpts from their research; still others published their work in booklets funded by the project or in local journals.

The most obvious accomplishment of the project has been its own growth and the number of women's literature courses it has facilitated—from three in 1976 to 15 in 1977 to 24 in 1978. At least ten other courses are being taught outside the project. Thus, the project has helped make some modest breakthroughs in departmental bias against women's literature generally and regional women's letters, diaries, and oral testimonies in particular. One of the purposes of this year's project is to provide a structure to support the continuation of such courses, to consolidate faculty within four regional clusters—in Appalachia, the Great Plains, the Deep South, and Cali-

fornia—so that they can help one another in both substantive and political ways.

A second accomplishment is the development of a broad variety of courses: there is no one model course. Teachers worked independently, although they shared progress reports and met in three planning sessions. We expect that their syllabi, bibliographies, research exercises, and essays on their experiences will be available soon. One of the major goals of the project was to develop a student-centered course, in which students might conduct original research on women's letters, diaries, oral testimonies, and "lost" published literature, and then present the results to others. In this process, students moved from the thrill of discovery to the pride of ownership. In practical terms, they learned research, analytical, and communication skills transferable to other courses.

The third accomplishment of the project is the discovery of materials which are valuable not only in their regional settings but in other settings as well. We know that working with these documents has engaged students affectively. We are also making intellectual claims for the materials—that they are significant to scholars. Teachers and students have believed enough in the worth of these materials to make at least a selection of their findings public.

In the broadest sense the project has been building a body of knowledge. Apart from discovering the new materials, teachers and students have had to ask *why* these materials have been lost, ignored, or neglected. Why have such materials been excluded from the literary canon? This project has led to an examination of the biases which have shaped traditional definitions of knowledge. Some of these questions will be investigated in an NEH Humanities Institute to be held this summer at the University of Alabama.

—Leonore Hoffman, Director of the MLA Project on  
"Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective"

## Finding New Forms: Student Autonomy in a Patriarchal University

By Barbara Hillyer Davis

*"Oklahoma Women" was a year-long experimental seminar at the University of Oklahoma designed to teach research skills and to discover what a few women could learn in a short time about the literature and history of the women of our region. In the first semester, we did research on Oklahoma women, and in the second, public programming based on that research.*

*Students learned directly how to do research in the humanities and did individual work on research projects and group work on the public programs. A photographic exhibit for a local conference on women's work, a community-wide series of programs in women's history in the Lawton area, and a booklet on the seminar's own group process were some of*